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ABSTRACT

FROM SELF-AUTHORSHIP TO SELF-DEFINITION: REMAPPING THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS THROUGH BLACK FEMINISM

by

Wilson Kwamogi Okello

Due to the limitations of meaning making theory that absolve history of its dynamic and lasting effects on minoritized existence in the present and rely on an organizing principle that formulates the subject-object relationship as synonymous with a more complex and evolving self (a trajectory that leads to self-authorship), this research study proposed that educators consider an alternative approach to theory construction. What would happen if educators and researchers squarely centered the [Black] body in a sociopolitical (Okello, 2018) context that considers the historical, social, political, affective, and physiological tenets of one's existence?

I deployed a Black feminist literary criticism to analyze four decades of Black existentialism and three critical scenes in the development of my artistry. This methodology enabled me to clarify what Lisa Anderson (2008) calls a Black feminist aesthetic, or “the elements of the text/performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a ‘community’ (broadly construed)” (p. 115). Moreover, this methodology instructs my analysis to key into themes and strategies theorized through Joy James’ (1999) concept of limbos, which considers the various ways Black bodies progressively move forward despite the vulnerability of their positions. This approach responds directly to my purpose and research questions that seek to discern how Black bodies make meaning and decisions inside their social worlds, given the precarity of their allotment by asking two guiding research questions: How has the [Black] body been schooled?; and How might examining the present-day condition of Black bodies in conversation with literary records of Black existentialism contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction of self-authorship theory? Situating the present day Black body in conversation with classical theorists—classical by definition, “relates to the most highly developed stage of an earlier civilization and its culture” (Brown, 2009, xvii)—of Black existentialism, assisted me in bringing attention a theoretical canon that has long been ignored in canonical meaning making literature. By sitting with the textual teachings of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, in conversation with my performance archive/memories, I demonstrate the ways in which Black existential discourse contributes to the deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning-making theory, specifically self-authorship. *Self-definition* (Okello, 2018) emerges as a theory in the flesh (Hurtado, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) and departure from self-authorship, moving away from the embrace of the subject-object principle of theorizing.

Self-definition was pieced together bone by bone, from the thoughts, labor, and genius of Black *creatives*, as to hold a Black body in a Western, United States context and survive, is to be creative. The aesthetics of self-definition, which I have outlined as *validating standpoint knowledge, prioritizing self-love, emphasizing agency, foregrounding identity as performative, and dreaming/imagining futures*, limbo in and against the shifting rules in society, across history, demonstrating the jointed agility and creativity of black meaning making structures. Ever

moving forward, this was recovery work and the first mapping of its kind, laying the groundwork for the third-wave of student development theory.

FROM SELF-AUTHORSHIP TO SELF-DEFINITION: REMAPPING THEORETICAL
ASSUMPTIONS THROUGH BLACK FEMINISM
AN AUTO/ETHNOGRAPHIC SERMON ON SUBJECTIVITY IN THE WAKE OF CRISIS

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Dedication

For

Cadence

Cara

Christian

Eden

Geno

Justice

Karter

Noemí

Rose

and Winston

and all of the babies who will one day move through this world wrapped in Blacknessⁱ

this is for you

so that you don't have to fight as hard

may you be unafraid.

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Finally, to James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, you are the force and soul of this work. Thank you for showing me the way.

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No. they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up" (Morrison, 1987, p. 89).

Prelude: A Verse for those Bearing Witness

My Body as Theory

Raquel: What is it that compels you to speak the way you do? You speak with such force and conviction.

She wants me to explain how I speak; why my cadence and tone sound the way they do?

Raquel's eyes were wide, curious, and inquisitive. Here I was, in the middle of Iowa, in late September. I just completed a keynote/talk and was preparing to head to lunch with some students who wanted some personal time with their guest artist-scholar. I am there for the institution's annual scholars convocation, an event with a longstanding tradition, arranged by a faculty committee, that invites scholars from across the country to discuss varying topics. The title of my talk was *Troubled on Every Side, but not in Despair: Leading, Living, and the Pursuit of Education in the Wake of Crisis*. I chose this title as a way to place the long arc of historical traumas experienced by minoritized bodies in conversation with the troubling sociopolitical climate, in the United States, in 2017. Raquel is a Black woman. She carried powerful presence and fiery spirit. Her eyes, her gaze told a story that her lips did not have to. I have seen this look before and felt it many times more. She hugged her books tightly, never taking her eyes off mine, anxiously awaiting my response to her loaded question. These are always delicate moments for me. *These* as in the encounters I have with people as it relates to my artistic-scholarly work. Typically, I receive a myriad questions and feedback, solicited and unsolicited, about my delivery, and the content of the work. *Breathe, Wilson. Listen to the spirit of the question*, I repeat to myself. *They trust you; trust yourself*. I do not want to disappoint those who have been moved to words by what they felt in/on or because of me. *What if I steer her wrong? What if she is unmoved by my reply? What does she need here, and is that competing with what I want to tell her?*

The body is communicative and possesses the power to theorize possibilities, despite the many conflicting narratives that are often waged against it. In the midst of denigration and historical misconceptions (Sharpe, 2016), the body can resituate, reconfigure, and reimagine dignity and personhood. That is, the body as a dynamic entity, comprised of mental, emotional, social, and spiritual components, has within it, the capacity to make and remake itself and

thereby the contexts wherein it is located. Butressing this notion, Black feminist bell hooks (1990) states, “spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice” (p. 152). Administering a performance studies lens, Tami Spry (2011) supports this claim noting that “the body is a text to be read and understood within context (p. 28). We can take from this that as the body gives meaning to a space, it is simultaneously given meaning by what it *does* [how it moves and behaves] in a particular context. How a body behaves is also inclusive of the body’s wake (Sharpe, 2016), or the full range of things it has been made to mean historically.

I heard Raquel’s question. Perhaps, there is part of her that desires an answer that focuses on the techniques of my speech performance. *Control. Projection. Cadence. Tone. Enunciation. Gestures. Persona. Repetition. Stylin’. Call and Response. Mythication. Soundin’*. The invocation of *nommo* (Walker & Kuykendall, 2005), distinct from Eurocentric styles of speaking, is not lost on me. Nommo refers to rhetoric of African oratory, rooted in African philosophies, that are designed to bring a story to life; “it gives the story a heart, lungs, and hands to help the listener interact and understand” (Walker & Kuykendall, 2005, p. 234). Jahn (1958) connected nommo to the performer, declaring that “the word of the poet has not only called the 'things', it has produced them, it is Nommo, word seed— the word itself is force. If there were no word, all forces would be frozen...no change, no life” (p. 158). This rhetorical power of the spoken word can be seen throughout ancestral practice in sermons, speeches, gospel songs, and hip-hop. *Every word has consequence*. Raquel could sense this, and she was not wrong. I am convinced, however, that her question desired more. Her question was one of disruption. More pointedly, I believe she was asking how I embodied a theory of living that allowed me to move through these white walls with my chin up. With my shoulders back. With authority. I told her the following:

Take all of the images, all of the pain, all of the memories of those [Black bodies, voices, and spirits] I just talked about. Huddle them together and place them in your voice box. I assure you, my sister, you won’t sound the same either.

If readers take hooks’ (1990) thesis to be true, then the (re)presentation of my body opened up new possibilities for Raquel and how she thought about her body and voice moving through the world. My body was then, and is now, a curator and arbiter of theory, the most complete manifestation of which is on display during my poetic performance. While I have written poetry

for most of my life, my performances have taken on new meaning in the last five years. Within time frame, I have developed a heightened awareness, and subsequently new relationship with anti-blackness.

The disease of anti-black racism killed Trayvon Martin. This is a fact of life I have become quite familiar with. The story of Trayvon Martin, however, is not the story of George Zimmerman and the reckless degree by which this world measures Black bodies. No, for me, the story of Trayvon Martin is the story of July 13, 2013, when jurors deemed it unlawful for Black bodies to move through the world freely, establishing a revised precedence. Seating myself in the archive of my performing body, through Black feminist performance auto/ethnography, I ask larger questions of student development theory in this text, principally, how has the [Black] body been schooled by the curricula of development theory? More specifically, I endeavor, through my body, to produce *good fruit* from the query: how can Black performance assist in deconstructing and reconstructing self-authorship theory?

It is in this spirit that I move and have my being...

...he hath anointed me

to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty them that are bruised

Luke 4:18

For this reason, we have gathered...on yet another stage....to tarry with possibilities of embodiment in theoretical praxis. Across history, Black performance has been able to turn podiums into pulpits, in the service of liberation, under the gaze of whiteness. My mission here is the same. Though my guiding metaphors are steeped in the Christian tradition, I hold out hope that the essence of the message is applicable for all those willing to witness it. This is a dissertation only inasmuch as it meets the criterion call for proficiency in designing and carrying out an empirical research project. I wrote this with the hopes of it being much more. In order for it to be more, I could not rely on the formality of academic style. There is no safety in producing work that conforms to standards of acceptability. We live in unsafe times, where bodies are subject to plunder and sanity is dispossessed. A dissertation that is anything less than a political intervention is not something that I can be proud of, nor is it useful. Voice is central to my work

as an artist and orator of the spoken word, and as such, this project will reflect that value. As I consulted the memory spaces where I learned of the authority and potential of voice— where one could testify and bear witness to impassioned pleas, emotional appeals, and unapologetic resolve—I am drawn, most immediately, to the capacity of the sermon as an instrument enlivened with the agility to teach the world open. While it can be easy to dismiss this pathway as one of indoctrination, brainwashing, and proselytizing, I believe in a preaching tradition that is first, and foremost an opportunity for public insubordination.

It is a tradition that dates back to insurrection politics harbored in antebellum Black bodies. A praxis of genius hinged on pragmatic futurism, the sermon situated the enslaved in the Biblical narrative, providing a social analysis inextricably connected with slave's *existential situations*. It is how Black bodies confronted the bad theology that justified their enslavement. As a trumpet of *public* insurrection, I submit that the sermon was an affront to plantation politics (assimilation), it assisted in the reconstitution of Black subjectivity, it ruptured surveillance practices, and created new images of Black existence, thereby, charting new territory for Black bodies. An outgrowth of this insurrection legacy, this dissertation turned worship service and sermon are an act of insurrection designed to expose and reverse the irrationality projected onto Black and minoritized bodies.

This framing is necessary precisely because it functions in the public commons. Consider Maria Stewart, a Black woman in the 1850s, who was the first American to speak in public about political issues. There was a message in the wells of her spirit that simply could not reach the constituency that needed it most had it been formalized in letters. King's mountain top exegesis is another example of how monstrous times call for a deliberateness of speech that cannot flow from academically styled meanderings. Preachers, as carriers of the spoken word, understood the need to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world so that oppressed people would understand that their internal longings for liberation were not only consistent with the gospel, but was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Fundamentally, the task and purpose of theology for Black bodies was about explicating God's liberating activity and revealing the failure of white religiosity to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of oppression. My use of the sermon as a rhetorical strategy, in place of a traditional research writing, has a similarly clarifying agenda as it relates to student development, that is, to explicate theory that has boxed, and survived, in the shadows of white theoretical constructs.

This framing seeks to unravel new meanings in old tales by walking the reader/listener through a worship service that entails several features: a) *Invocation*: This will replace what traditionally introduces readers to the problem statement and research questions. The invocation is a petition/prayer that opens the worship service. Here, I give voice to what feels like an insurmountable task—the responsibility of normalizing terror for minoritized bodies, for as I have come to know well, it is not a matter of *if* we will encounter the disquiet of wavering waters, but *when*. In conversation with God, the congregants, and myself, I lay bare my doubts and the inadequacy I feel with the task at hand. I openly seek guidance and resolution from a power much greater than I. Doing so, I model a pragmatic futurism that, I hope, might instruct how congregants (re)situate themselves in relation to the fears that bind them. b) *Scripture Reading(s)*: This chapter 2 reviews pertinent literature to the dissertation project. Scripture readings are sermon related. It is the portion of service where a congregation collectively reviews passages that will connect to the sermon. The readings reinforce the central message of the sermon. In this worship service I read from the *Old Testament* and broach conversations about a *New Testament*. Bookending these readings are short testimonies from Black college students of the 1960s and 70s along with a conversation between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, who respond to the Old Testament and New Testament readings. c) *Song of Preparation*: This portion of service will stand in for Chapter 3, which typically discusses the methods a project will undertake. Songs of preparation are elevated to lead the congregation into the presence of God. In this worship service, I endeavor to lead readers/witnesses to a place where they can engage the sermon with an open heart with hopes that they might parse out a message that speaks to their situation. d) *Sermon*: The climax of a worship experience is often located in the sermon—an address typically motivated by scriptures in a religious text. Sermons take up the inherent power of story to annotate a moral or ethical issue in public. Importantly, this examination is not, not intended to be, a religious text or an attempt to convince readers/listeners to a particular spiritual position. I orient myself to the sermon structure because of my inclination to speak publically on the silences wrapped up in rationality, and in this way it is deeply moral and raises questions of ethical practice. Tying myself intimately into this work, sermons have always been a carriage for hope, inspiration, critique and possibility. The sermon, as the data analysis, will put me in conversation with James and Audre Lorde, clarifying how I examined their work, and what I learned from sitting with them. I also provide an autoethnographic tracing of my coming to

performance poetry and how that process informs my understandings of development theory. e) *Benediction*: Finally, I end with a parting coda, an offering, for the annunciation of self-definition in the student development canon, and thoughts on how to take up Black feminist theorizing in education.

Pointedly, this worship experience is for those of us who create theory and lifetimes, not out of thin air, but out of sweat dripped, fear confronted, heels swollen, and futures imagined. It is for those who exist in spite of logic and lift their heads in spite of reason. It is a living text, revived from the words and passages of those who have gone before, laboring in the present for the birth of a new nation. It is their testimony, resurfaced in the ink that spilled over this offering and, even now, rains from my lips. For those you who live absence as a form of human presence, I wrote this for you. This is spiritual work, dedicated to those passing time troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; for those who are cast down but not destroyed, I will not forsake your sacrifice.

The reader will encounter a call to worship in what follows. The call to worship is traditionally the space where the congregation is invited into reverence. Here, a particular tone is set for the service and experience that will follow. This was the autoethnographic excavation that I needed to write if I was ever going to have something to say as it relates to development theory. Findings uncovered here assist in contextualizing my use of history and Black feminism, which anchor this service in the labor of theorizing. In doing so, I hope to model an approach to thinking about theory that considers who one is, the context of their *situation*, and how they have come to the work of theory construction. The call to worship (re) presents my internal reckoning with an external world and ultimately, my transfiguration at the altar, that is, my Black feminist awakening and decision to rewrite my story in a way that honors a new understanding.

The altar, historically, has been the site of earnest, and genuine, confession. A roaring and respite place, between life's distress and a peace that passes all understanding, the altar is the conflict of past, present, and desired futures. At this altar, with my head bowed and a sound mind, I apologize. My inaction should have written me off as an accomplice to the physical, psychological, and spiritual murder that has kept women of color in Egypt. I should have responded sooner. To my grandmother, who was my first introduction to intergenerational praxis, I offer this writing as a portal to forgotten meetings, words, and strategies that survived

despite the haunting that encompassed your living. I celebrate you, your daughter, my sister, and the scores of erased warriors, just as mother Lucille Clifton (1991/2012) charged me to do so:

won't you celebrate with me

what i have shaped into a kind of life?

i had no model.

born in babylon both nonwhite and woman

what did i see to be except myself?

i made it up here on this bridge between starshine and clay, my one hand holding tight my other hand;

come celebrate with me

that everyday something has tried to kill me and has failed

Grandma, as I am here in this text, your dreams, sacrifice, theory, and archive are here also. I am determined to teach the world open. If not for those reading, then for those who must learn it. To my God-children, and all of the babies who will inherit this world, may this worship experience from a servant's heart, endarkened hands, and survived meanings, be instructive as you make sense of your living.

Call to Worship: Each Day this World has tried to Kill Me and Failed

Hi Wilson,

...I wanted to ask you another question. How do you feel about being black in this country?

Let me explain what exactly I mean. I am extremely proud of my heritage. My parents are hardworking immigrants that came from Haiti, a country that had many problems. Despite their challenges, they were able to carve a path for themselves, and have successful careers. I have learned that many of my ancestors, both from the US and Haiti, had to stand up against terrible things such as slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of racial discrimination. And they prevailed, and made it better for the next generation. I am honestly proud to be black.

But, at the same time, I'm scared. Ever since Trayvon Martin's death, I've been scared. Whenever I walk alone in the street, I shy away from others, and try to look as nice as possible, just in hopes that something like that won't happen to me. Now, I might be overreacting, and my fears and solutions to combatting them might be a little misguided, but no one has been able to abate my fears. I can only pray that God protects me, and I get home safe and sound. Sometimes, I feel like that being black might just be the thing that puts me in danger, and I'm afraid of that.

I don't usually voice my concerns to anyone outside my family, but after our short discussion, I feel like I can get some valuable insight from you, in how I should see my skin color.

Sorry for the long email, and thank you in advance for your answer.

Sincerely,

Winstonⁱⁱ

How would you respond to Winston's conundrum? What theory would you reference to alleviate the complexity of Winston's existence? I received the above email following a keynote I delivered at a university's convocation, and as one might imagine, I was deeply honored by Winston's show of vulnerability. As it relates to the pressing questions raised by this student, I

was unsurprised, for I, too, have warred with this existential monster many times before. Students live with hard questions. As educators tasked with the obligation of helping them negotiate the power and politics of this world, our theorizing ought to responsibly consider what they are truly up against, determined largely by the bodies that they hold and how they come to understand themselves within it. Student development theory as it currently exists is incomplete as a viable technology to make sense of broader representations of knowing and being, that is., those beyond neoliberal versions that center whiteness.

The Situation

Part of challenging white/Eurocentric paradigms, foregrounded in Western thought and reinforced in and through higher education, is naming restrictive theoretical underpinnings and working to decolonize them (Semali and Kincheloe, 1999). This project confronts one such framework, recognized as self-authorship. Self-authorship, or the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and relations with others, stands at the core of contemporary college learning outcomes (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). The emphasis of this developmental framework is on the interconnectedness of epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of development and one's capacity to heed an internal voice with regard to these dimensions, severed from authority dependence. Self-authorship as a developmental framework, building on the work of Kegan (1982), is the result of a seventeen-year longitudinal study of young adult, White men's learning and development (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). This theoretical reality, which serves as the basis for teaching and instruction across higher education, foregrounds the necessity of this worship service. Anzaldúa (1990) imagines a departure from poorly tailored dressings of theory for minoritized bodies. She urges: "If we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosened and empowered by theories" (p. xxvi). With this understanding, I return to and employ knowledge constructed by minoritized bodies, with the intent of bringing to the fore how basic assumptions of students (and people outside of higher education), informed by student development theory, dampen the capacity of minoritized bodies to move through the world with authority and authenticity.

Retracing our Steps: History in Review

*I tried it on.
one sleeve at a time like my Black mother taught me
it was white, neatly pressed, starched/ one-size fits all tag*

which is why Mama bought it, I suppose./ I could not wrap my arms around it

Winston was on to something. To understand the predicament of the moment, and precarity of Winston's present cultural memory, I have to start from the beginning. Black bodies have been defining personhood, what it means to be fully human, for much longer than the American project has had ears to hear them. Following the genealogy of African American literature back to slave narratives (Hartman, 1997; Sharpe, 2016), readers who would notice are made aware of the present, deplorable realities of slavery, and a consistent presence of mind to both document the atrocities being experienced and advocate abolitionists' efforts of a Black humanity as opposed to the three-fifths inscriptions that systematically coded them. An appropriate argument could thus be that Black bodies in Western culture have had a verifiable scholarly and literary canon that has paralleled the existence of the white theoretical canon.

Higher education takes up the responsibility of molding citizens (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006), the governing of which is influenced by student development theory. This next section will begin unpacking the limitations of development theory, specifically self-authorship, and how its paradigmatic framing and construction uphold precarious notions of knowing and being in culture and in higher education.

(Mis)education of the Body: Critique of the Subject-Object Principle

How the body has been schooled is called into question throughout this section. According to Hill (2014), schooling is an overarching system of thinking that functions through prevalent and covert curricular and conditioning technologies such as pedagogical practices. Within higher education, development theory undergirds the larger schooling enterprise. Called into question in the preceding poem, for the purposes of imagining new modes of agency and citizenship, is the presumption of generalizable applicability. Literature suggests that self-authorship is fundamental to 21st century learning outcomes (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Berger, 2012) and thus the determined goal of higher education. Baxter Magolda's (2008) concludes that the advancement of a self-authored system—which includes developing an internal voice to employ in decision making, using the internal voice actively to build one's internal belief system, and solidifying that internal system as it becomes the core of one's existence—should be central to the goal of higher education, “because it is a capacity that allows young adults to better meet the challenges of adult life” (p. 282). I argue, however, that self-authorship, recognized as an integrative development model in student development theory,

is limited in its scope with respect to minoritized bodies broadly and Black bodies specifically. My departure is anchored in the theoretical construction of self-authorship. Foundationally, self-authorship curtails its potential to meditate on, take up, or theorize about the Black body because its authority is predicated on the *subject–object principle*. This dichotomous relationship omits epistemic and ontological knowing that minoritized bodies broadly and Black bodies in particular have made distinct, namely theory in the flesh (Johnson, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981).

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

-John 1:14

I think, therefore I am. While I am in agreement with Kegan (1994), that the ability to maneuver one's thinking from and between the subject-object relationship, can be a functional tool of circumstantial decision-making, scholars ought to be suspicious of how self-authorship has become the central legitimizing factor of a meaning-making model. Self-authorship literature attributes meaning-making complexity to subject–object reflection (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kegan, 1982, 1994). Offering insight into the subject–object relationship, Kegan (1994) notes, that *object* represents “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate on” (p. 32). This explication articulates that *what we know* may not be the same as *what we can do with what we know*. *Subject* refers to “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in” (p. 32). Kegan, and proponents of self-authorship, posit that the transformation that takes place between these dichotomous positions liberates us from “that in which we are embedded, making what was subject into object so that we can ‘have it’ rather than ‘be had by it’” (p. 32). Furthering his point, Kegan logs the achievement of the object position as the definition of *consciousness*, understood as self-authorship.

This connotation of conscious knowing, as tied to the object position, is a reiteration of 17th and 18th century Enlightenment idealists, particularly the work of René Descartes, the French philosopher credited as a central figure in the establishment of Western notions of reason and science. His most famous assertion, “I think, therefore I am,” reflects the developmental orientation conveyed by Kegan (1982). The proposition put forth in this statement is that the mind and the body are two distinct entities, with the mind being the only true certainty: “Essence

or nature consists only in thinking. . . . That it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that ‘I’ . . . the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body” (Descartes, 1637/1909, pp. 19–20). Such absolute thinking implied that one was free from the bounds of subjectivity (e.g., affective, physiological, sense perception, temporality), calling for a mind and body split (Bristow, 2010). Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001) distinguish this thought as analytical versus holistic; the latter is dialectical and emphasizes contradiction, as opposed to analytic which involves detachment and “a tendency to preference rules about categories to explain and predict behavior” (p. 293). This logic is consistent with Baxter Magolda’s (2008) second and third elements of self-authorship, building an internal foundation and securing internal commitments, which describe “setting about creating a philosophy or framework—an internal foundation—to guide reactions” (p. 281) and living these convictions as natural. Rooted in rationalist systems of philosophy, such as Descartes, doubt is cast on subjectivity as an authoritative source of knowledge.

Talking back (hooks, 1989) to these enlightenment ideals, and the preeminence of the subject–object dichotomy, theories in the flesh envisage the self as human, capable of being articulated and speaking, not “floating signifiers” or “incoherent subjects” (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1981, p. 221). The choice not to deny or elide fragmentation for the minoritized body is a decision to build a multidimensional and multilayered epistemology, which grants space for the emotional, embodied, concrete, intuitive, and the explicit attention to standpoint knowledge (E. Anderson, 2015; Collins, 1990). This rebuttal challenges the notion that *to know* occurs detached from—and independently of—the knower, and subsequently challenges rationalist claims of objectivity masked in constructivist ideals of reflection. Relatedly, the acknowledgment of alternative epistemologies that theorize about the capacity of endarkened bodies (Dillard, 2000) with a double soul/consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), a triple soul/consciousness (Fanon, 1952; May, 2007), and a quadruple soul/consciousness (Davis, 1981) reference the complex, multivariate possibilities ascribed from and through theory in the flesh. The body, as argued in Black existential literature, is said to possess every possibility from freedom to perspective to meaning, vis-à-vis an embodied consciousness (Gordon, 1997). These epistemic and ontological creations, largely dismissed in contemporary student development literature, signal a missed opportunity to consider and enlarge understandings of the subject–object relationship that have defined human development. Thus, while subject–object theorists

may ask to divorce the affective from the cognitive, a theory in the flesh would call for an embodied politic that understands the body as a site of trauma (e.g., racialized, sexualized, beaten, starved, cursed). To theorize from this place describes not only the ways in which the body is brought into being but also what it *does* once it is constituted as well as the relationship between it and the other bodies around it (Johnson, 2001), distinct from Baxter Magolda's cognitive (How do I know?), intrapersonal (Who am I?), and interpersonal dimensions (What relationships do I want with others?) lines of questioning.

Pizzolato (2010) seemingly agrees: "Cognition is always embodied—meaning making . . . situated in people with pasts, cultures, and relationships that influence how meaning is made" (p. 191). The subject–object framework suggests that to create meaning, or to know, occurs through acts of discovery and interpretation of one's unique experience. One can trace this line of thinking to the work of Progressive Era educators like Dewey (1916), who discussed education as "the reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, or increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (pp. 89–90). Foundational in college student development, Piaget (1950) employed similar approaches to knowing in his conceptualization of cognition, linking mental processes to rationality and logic.

Relatedly, pronounced in descriptions of self-authorship is an insistence on the autonomous self (Pizzolato, 2010). Implied in this focused discourse on the individual is that Western notions of citizenship—synonymous with conformity to neoliberal politics—are desirable (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). Giroux (2015) described how democracy has become linked to the rise of neoliberal politics in higher education, warning: "Anyone with an interest in democracy's survival must likewise be aware of education's political role as it shapes how people think, desire, and dream" (p. 109). Neoliberal politics as consistent with citizenship and outcomes of development theory calls for autonomous thinking, change as the dominant feature of everyday life, and most importantly to this project, the assumption that tradition/intergenerational knowledge, diverse epistemologies, the use of experience-based knowledge, an embrace of contradictions, and the centrality of history, that are the basis of different cultures, are irrelevant (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule 1986; Nisbett et al., 2001). Overwhelmingly, student development theories have placed an emphasis on complexity, animated by the subject–object relationship (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kegan 1982, 1994; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970), as the primary indicator of development. Such a framework steeps these models in rational,

scientific approaches to knowledge, which has limitations when trying to cultivate meaning in what are the indomitably irrational presses on minoritized bodies. Black feminism will allow me to challenge these Western notions of rationality that are predicated on the subject–object principle.

The complexity of minoritized bodies. My second reason for caution with respect to self-authorship is located in the samples that have made up the study of student development, and the root theories of self-authorship, that primarily studied White students at selective institutions and relied on patterns of knowledge and theory construction that emerged through the study of White samples. Although Baxter Magolda has repeatedly cautioned against generalizability of self-authorship, it continues to be a framework by which educators consider experiences of diverse students. Consequently, the norm for understanding development in college students appears “to be based on socially shaped information regarding how one organizes and solves problems, and the degree to which these practices are individual” (Pizzolato, 2010, p. 198).

While it is possible to find oneself in the framework, I would argue that this ability is less a function of the trustworthiness of self-authorship and more an indicator of how whiteness is pursued, desired, and taken on by minoritized bodies as a consequence of existence in an oppressive state. If scholars understand Whiteness as the fundamental organizing principle that structures Western society, and imperialism globally, grounded in the need to explain and define the boundaries of existence (Okello, 2018), then it makes sense then that “existential deviation” is the result of rational organizing principles (see Kendi, 2017), ego collapse, and psychic reorganization that enables one to identify with whiteness (Fanon, 1967, p. 110). As a viable, some might call tangibly beneficial option for existence and meaning making, alignment with whiteness, or principles undergirded by whiteness, for Black and minoritized life-worlds can be understood as useful and perhaps appropriate. I am suggesting that agreement with self-authorship is to arrange oneself with particular ways of being—those that are most relevant to rational, Western ontology. My aim here is to complicate self-authorship, not to imply that those who subscribe to it have assumed a misguided pathway. Self-authorship reflects a reasoned and reflective commitment to meaning making. Black and minoritized lives have long weighed, and must perpetually measure themselves against the world (Du Bois, 1903). Oversimplified readings of the decisions made by Black and minoritized lives could lead to conclusions that

adopting postures and models rooted in whiteness, and/or respectability politics, are not reflective of complex identity negotiation (Cooper, 1896; Cooper, 2017). Inhering a Black feminist framing, Black bodies, and in particular Black women's bodies, "mark possibilities, and generative tensions" (Cooper, 2017, p. 8), despite the violence's acted upon them. As a consequence of living in a Western, United States context, at the very least, some adoption is necessary, if not required.

Turning back to Spillers (1987), the diasporic plight of Black people marked a theft of the body in which the "materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh 'ungendered' created an indeterminate social terrain for the articulation of Black gender identity" (Cooper, 2017, p. 20). Relatedly, McKittrick (2006) argues that the ownership and exploitation of Black women during slavery served to territorialize the body, that is, it was publically and financially claimed, owned, and controlled by an outsider. Against this backdrop, the project of reconstructing Black humanity had, first, to be preoccupied with creating legible categories of personhood within the same sociopolitical terrain that marked Black bodies as undecipherable. How does one make an unknown entity known? They do this by engaging in the cultural social and political discourses to demonstrate (prove) legibility, value, and social worth (Cooper, 2017). Given this, I understand self-authorship as an appropriate option for Black and minoritized lives.

In articulating this tension, I recognize that I am raising questions about the functionality of critical alternative pathways within the parameters of rationality. To be clear, critical incorporation of postures aligned with whiteness ought to consider both the personal and collective goals of doing so, as the achievement of an *undisputed dignity* (Cooper, 1896; Cooper, 2017) is all together different from simple adoption. For the purposes of this critique, I expound on the limitations (and misapplications) of self-authorship, which cannot fully consider the complex intersections of minoritized bodies, and how those intersections are acted upon by larger systems of power and oppression. Attempts for it to do so advance the following assumptions.

Assumption 1- Desirability of citizenship. Society is a stage, a complex performance of actors mediating power relations. Scott (1990) captures this sentiment, observing "relations between dominant and subordinate groups represent the encounter of the public transcript of the dominant with the public transcript of the subordinate" (Scott, 1990, p. 13). It is misguided to take what is seen in socially agreed upon standards of citizenship, as the desired outcomes for all

persons. To honestly pursue the questions of citizenship is to openly examine power, hegemony, resistance, and subordination. My conceptualization of citizenship is grounded in markers of dignity and autonomy, which manifest differently depending on one's standpoint.

Citizenship in a Western U.S context is intimately connected to hegemonic public conduct, performance, and appearance, in that one is generally awarded privileges the closer they are to the status quo. By this account, citizenship applauds the degree to which one can align themselves with what are ultimately tenets of employability, whereby, raising a general self-interest in collusion with the hegemonic appearance (Scott, 1990; Harris, 1998). Contemporary college learning outcomes are not free from capitalist and neoliberal logic, submitting themselves largely to the revised economic, turned social political strategy recognized as neoliberalism; the corporate elite now control the commanding cultural apparatuses that produce and disseminate ideas, values, and ideologies that work to normalize market ideologies, policies, and practices (Giroux, 2015). This investigation of the ideological workings of neoliberalism in higher education must confront the ways in which the model of self-authorship commits to this agenda, by supposing a self that fits neatly within it.

Assumption 2-All bodies have access to power. There is an implicit assumption within self-authorship that all people, in Western context, have access to the privileges of whiteness, which is to say, that they are inscribed with the social, cultural, and political power to simply author their lives the way they choose. Harris (1998) argues that whiteness meets both theoretical and functional criterion for property. She makes a case that holders of "whiteness" are afforded the same privileges and benefits afforded to holders of other types of property. To draw a sharp distinction between the experiences of bodies of color, white bodies in higher education are granted the exclusive rights of possession, use, and disposition. The idea of bodies of color as property is not a spontaneous idea, rather, it was a deliberate rendering from the architects of the American State. According to Baldwin (1985), these architects decided that the priority for property took precedence over the possibility of some bodies being seen as human. With this extrapolation, one is able to identify the benefits of securing whiteness, and the racism that engenders its reproduction.

Another form of domination that shapes the experiences and futures of systemically minoritized bodies is the notion of epistemic violence, which interrupts opportunities to take hold of ways of knowing and being that would otherwise engender power. Shahid (2015) discusses

the term as “numerous projects in history, philosophy, and literature that endorsed claims to knowledge that identified colonized communities as other” (p. 63). Teo (2008) states that epistemic violence can “range from misrepresentations and distortions, to a neglect of the voices of the *Other*, to statements of inferiority, and to the recommendations of adverse practices or infringements concerning the *Other*” (p. 58). This displacement has the intended effect of sustaining hegemony in its many forms.

Assumption 3-Movement away from external formulas is permissible. As a manifestation of white supremacy, minoritized bodies are understood through the concept of sub-personhood, where sub-persons are “humanoid entities who, because of racial/phenotype/genealogy/culture, are not fully human” (Mills, 1997, p. 56). The propensity to be dominated, for sub-persons, is justified by their lack of basic rights and considerations. Sub-humans “lack the essential rationality that would make one fully human” (Mills, 1997, p. 59). Butler (1990) supports this premise, providing an argument against the assumption that all bodies are permitted to transgress the pressures of external formulas, submitting that minoritized people have been sealed into a particular image in the western historical imagination. The evidence of slavery, racism, caste systems, and colonization, scattered and reborn throughout the American project, has generated practices that are wholly incongruent with what it means for all to have access to a dignified citizenry. The transition out of those historical moments does not mean that its influence has not been embedded, incentivized, and made to be permanent in the current cultural makeup. As these forms of domination have existed, and reverberated, albeit in different forms, those subaltern groups victimized by repressive logic must conceive of the world differently because of oppressive and controlling images.

The nuances that surface for minoritized bodies as a consequence of living in a Western, United States context requires reimagining theory, which does more than emphasize the psychological and/or the sociological. It necessitates a cross-disciplinary and historical analysis that deeply considers the political.

Vulnerable Disclosureⁱⁱⁱ: An Autoethnographic Revelation

Walker (1983) noted: “We inherit a great responsibility—for we must give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighborly kindness and sustaining love” (p. 21). With this in mind, I have covered the walls of my office space, situated within academe, with images of a prophetic tradition. Directly behind me, Malcolm X is sermonizing. The voices my spirit hears with acuity and deep resonance blare from Black women. Mounted next to brother Malcolm, sister Audre Lorde (1984) declares: “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 110). Positioned on my right, lending advice to the academic manifestos I write on behalf of my community, Angela Davis (1981) advises me to no longer accept the things I cannot change, rather change the things I cannot accept. This is the tradition I come from, this tradition of scholars who spoke eloquently to the condition of minoritized bodies in Western culture. They were privy to a way of living that necessitates a process different than the offerings drawn up by self-authorship. What did their experiences as marginalized bodies teach them about existing in this world?

Their expressions are an indication of their life’s works in pursuit of self-definition. Within self-definition, these public scholars could define themselves within a larger, oppressively resistant culture that did not value their humanity. The collegiate environment is a microcosm of this public culture and is charged with the preparing students with the “values and skills necessary to take part in public life” (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006, p. 664). If higher education was a mirror of public culture, it would stand then that those who are marginalized and oppressed outside of the ivory walls will be the subjects of the same experiences within. The public intellectuals mentioned above had a vested interest in the development of people, but cogently understood that development could not mirror the uncontested dominant logic that prevails in the world we occupy.

to inhabit this body/ with no room to escape/ you must survive

Minoritized bodies in Western schooling contexts live theory in the flesh (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) daily as a by-product of existence. The poem’s negotiation of survival answers the sobering reality that waits, short of disappearing ourselves into assimilation. If we, as educators and researchers, are to account for the depth and range, and authentic yearnings of the bodies we study, our methodological analysis must give language to the multiple ways of

speaking, valuing, and behaving, breaking us free from parochial methods that limit these translations. As such, this project is qualitative in nature, drawing from the rich history of Black feminism, autoethnography, and performance theory. This approach “seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2015). Endeavoring to push beyond understanding and description of experiences, I am employing Black feminist performance autoethnography toward the directed aim of theoretical development, refinement, and extension (Durham, 2014; Hill, 2014).

Across this service, Black feminist performance auto/ethnography announces itself by taking an *insider’s perspective* in the recounting of a pivotal moments in my life, as well as a personal, digital exchanges with those I have come into contact with in various performance sites. Braiding my experiences together with Winston, I analyze them both through a Black feminist lens that centers historical and corporeal realities, in an effort to gain insight into a broader social phenomena. The broader phenomena under investigation is bounded in the overarching question: *How does one live, in the body they hold, in their historical moment?* This question exists at the intersection of biography and society, that is, “our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by—and in turn helping to constitute—the sociocultural contexts in which we live,” legitimating the use of this approach (L. Anderson, 2006, p. 390).

Situating my Body

To pursue this political terrain, I borrow from and advocate for Black feminism. Who can be a Black feminist? Who can embody this consciousness? I am a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied man. What does it mean for me to work with (in) Black feminisms. Literature is rife with questions and ambiguity about current perspectives on who can be or do Black feminism. Conscientious of these abiding tensions, heightened all the more as cisgender, heterosexual, Black man, I move forward on the winds of Black feminist scholars’ suppositions that Black feminist thought has relevance for everyone, and need not be confined to, although built upon, the analysis of only Black women (hooks, 1981, 1990; Collins, 1990). Thus under the lens of Black feminism, I offer up my body to critique the accessibility and desirability of self-authorship, for the purpose of interrupting incongruent developmental frameworks that have been used to theorize about the promise and potential of minoritized bodies.

In response to the email that I received above, I time travel back to the evening when a Florida jury decided that Trayvon Martin's death was justified. In doing so, I wrestle with my sociopolitical existence and how I came to make meaning of this event and the days that followed. The burden and mantle of internalizing positive self-definitions, in the wake of crisis, is central to Black feminist theorizing (Collins, 1990; Spillers, 2000; Sharpe, 2016). A term actively used in Black feminism, I borrow, and introduce the concept of *self-definition* to student development literature as a means of advancing a theoretical construct that will speak acutely to the lives of minoritized bodies, validating their knowledge production and establishing a framework by which they might cultivate an embodied sense of self.

The precondition to systemic change, stipulated by Black feminism and centered in this manuscript, is the rejection of internalized oppression toward a transformed self (Guy-Sheftal, 1995; May, 2007). This does not presume that this process is solely individual. Quite the opposite, Black feminism conceptualizes the self as inherently connected to others, calling for inter-subjectivity and collective accountability (Collins, 1990; Guy-Sheftal, 1995; hooks, 1981, 1990; May, 2007) as I will demonstrate in my engagement with Winston toward the conclusion of this manuscript. That self-authorship wields similar language, should not be read as a sameness of meaning, as Black feminism operates, distinctly, from a critical paradigm not evidenced in student development theory (Collins, 1990; Henderson, 1982; hooks, 1990; Smith, 1979; Wall, 1989). Believing in the promise put forth by Collins (1986), if some knowledges have been used to silence, marginalize and render minoritized bodies invisible, then *outsider* knowledge can value the presence and voices of minoritized bodies and can re-envision the margins as places empowered by transformative resistance (hooks, 1990; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

To make legible my autoethnographic experiences, as I have already done above, I will star the text (Nicolazzo, 2014) with poetic transcriptions I have written. Barthes (1974) discusses the value of arbitrarily *cutting up* discourse as it prioritizes the naturalness of ordinary language and flow of narration. Poetry, articulated by the right-justified passages in this worship service, (re)present my starring of text. The decision to star the text across this project is three-fold. First, while it is a surgical *cutting up* of the naturalness, purposefully breaching norms of academic paragraph, it is principally a means of exploring the complexities of my experiences as a *marked* body that desires a different way of psychosocial being in a Western, United States context. Such

a method is valuable in autoethnographic work as a manner of valuation of the subjective experiences of the researcher as it stresses the importance of reflexivity and researcher awareness (Brew, 2001; Furman, 2005).

Secondly, the vehicle of poetry in this text offers the pivotal reminder that who I am informs how I come to research, guiding readers in my sense making at various points through my young adult life. This reflexive and disruptive methodological instrument supports the premise of this worship service, calling for validation of the affective, the emotional and embodied, and thoughtful integration of critical theoretical frameworks and inventions. Finally, the implementation of poetry is intended to dialogue with the research and narrative text across this project, offering alternative forums to engage the themes presented (Lahman, Geist, Rodriguez, Graglia, Richard, & Schendel, 2010).

when and where I go/ I bring galaxies with me/ stories past and now

Methodologically, this piece honors the Black feminist tradition for its persistent validation of the corporeal, creative, and cognitive knowledge-producing power of minoritized bodies. Evans-Winters (2015) supports this approach, suggesting, “the mosaic of Black feminism brings forth an aesthetically distinct alternative to widely accepted notions of how knowledge production and acquisition should transpire in educational research” (p. 131). The following section, ushered in by a haiku, is an offering up of my subjectivities through poetry and narrative as I come to terms with the piercing truth of what my body represents.

what is honesty/ migrating subjects expressed/ let the body speak

Between the World and Me^{iv}: July 13, 2013.

I recall the scent and sensibility of linen incense burning late into the evening, its aromatic opulence lingering as if it too was bracing itself for the news to come. Smoke raised itself from the controlled flame like ancestors coming to bear witness, to signal devastation or cast warning in the belief of rainbows, either way there was a message on the way and I/we should start preparing ourselves for it. I pressed my eyes on CNN, with distrust and every bit of hope I could dig up

The day itself seemed to be dressed in fatigue, bearing a weight just beyond its ability to carry. We have seen this song and dance before. It is the type of exercise that made us strong; the type of longsuffering that is borne in resilient imagination. Justice is judged differently in my world. I learned that I was scary, that my body was threatening, before I could articulate love.

When you pose a danger to someone in my world, there is the chance that you could be punished for it, consequences of which may include your life. *Protect your body at all costs. Protect the lives of your brother and sister at all cost.* These maxims leafed with others, constituted *the talk*, a survival manual issued by my parents and enforced by streetlight regulations are still vivid memories, shifting, and repositioning themselves in my consciousness over time, always present.

we are born on the defensive
the commandments of twice as hard/ to be just as good/ there is something about the blistering
chill of oppression/ that will make your heart beat faster

In learning how to protect my body, I gave in to versions of respectability and playing the game that would make chess masters glow with pride. The quicker you can disappear, erase the spectacle that is your intersecting body, the more likely you are to attain success, the more likely one will be to survive. On this particular night, I was reminded of the fallacious nature of those assumptions. When a black boy stands trial for his own death, tasked with impossibility of proving that he did not deserve plunder, one learns that there is no veneer, no amount of good behavior, no passive leaning, or soft spoken tone that can escape the historical, social, and political caricature that comes wrapped in this Black body. The established precedent unfolding in front of me was that the state, the police, vigilantes, and all those who decided that my body represents a fictional fear are endowed with the authority to reprimand it.

The Promise of Self-Definition: Finding[s] Me

In the aftermath of court proceedings involving the death of Black and Brown bodies at the hands of the state, Ta-Nehisi Coates charges his teenage son with the weighted obligation of coordinating *some way* of living in precarity. “The question” he notes, “of how one should live in a black body within a country lost in the *dream*, is the question of my life” (Coates, 2015, p. 11). Responding to this profession, and building on recent critiques and extensions of self-authorship (Pizzolato 2003; Torres & Hernandez, 2007; Jones & Abes, 2013; Hernandez, 2016; Patton, Harper, Harris, 2015), this paper proposes an alternative to self-authorship that centers the experiences of those historically marginalized.

I posit that *self-definition* more accurately captures those experiences. This *existential practice*, as an embodied praxis and standpoint, is steeped in Black feminist literature (Shange, 1975; Walker, 1983; Collins, 1990; Banks-Wallace, 2000; Boylorn, 2013) and Black existentialism (Gordon, 1997). Translating critical standpoint politics in Black feminist literature

to an existential practice and departure from self-authorship specifically, self-definition calls into question the logic of constructivist meaning making principles and uplifts a sociopolitical paradigm concerning minoritized bodies. Black existentialism, which I define as epistemological and ontological theorizing in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of crisis, has a storied tradition globally. Black existentialism requires that educators and theorists appropriately take up *the situation* of questioning or inquiry itself. Doing so would center concerns of “freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (Gordon, 1997, p. 3).

Grappling with *the situation* as a question of existence, Coates sets the table for the recurring question of self-definition being, *how do we exist in the bodies that we hold, at this particular historical moment?* By revisiting, omitted, intellectual traditions of minoritized bodies, which center *theory in the flesh*, I conceptualize self-definition as a liminal space. Liminality can be understood as “a third space between cultures and social systems that leads to coherence by embracing ambiguity and holding contradictory perceptions without conflict” (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hurtado & Sinha, 2016). In this liminal space, agency is possible against a sociopolitical context that does not allow for the achievement of authoring power to minoritized bodies. It is both affirming of the possible self and tragically realistic about the functions of power in relation to others. More to the point, several themes emerged in my autoethnographic retracing and immersion into Black feminisms.

The tenets of self-definition (re) present my internal and external reckoning with my own *situation*, and ultimately my transfiguration, that is, my Black feminist revision and decision to reconstruct my living with a logic that honors a new understanding. The tenets are as follows: (1) *validating and integrating standpoint knowledge of minoritized bodies*; (2) *prioritizing self-love*; (3) *emphasizing agency in a matrix of domination* (4) *foregrounding identity as performative*; (5) *and dreaming and imagining futures not yet known*. An existential practice, self-definition is a process; a deliberate warring of deconstruction and reconstruction, vis-à-vis, translating needs into demands. Collins (1990) submits, “the journey to self-definition has political significance as minoritized bodies struggle to forge an identity larger than the one society forces upon them” (p. 106). It is in consciousness that they depart from conventionality and achieve a different standard for living, predicated on self-definition. Consciousness, as it relates to self-definition, is a questioning and embodied critique of dominant paradigms. Building on the legacy of Black women intellectuals, it is a posture that refuses to be hemmed in by exclusionary norms. It

(re)presents a multifaceted self that is socially and politically located, and signals a shift in thinking about history, power, and liberation.

Self-definition rejects the dominant ideology engrained in development literatures that celebrates privileged expressions of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development. Bodies at the intersection of race, gender, and class domination lack social and political power in society. As such, self-definition names the performativity with which these minoritized bodies maneuver in, through, and against their personal landscapes and does not rely on conservative psychological values that can have deleterious affects on personal well-being. There is a genius at work as minoritized bodies reclaim their sensibilities and enact performances within the larger structures of domination.

As I survey the pictures and posters on the walls of my office, I read individuals who defined a way of being and knowing that was convinced of a certain type of suffering, yet unbridled hope. In harmony with Bell's critical race thesis above, one has to be realistic but not despairing, tempering romanticized utopianism for a cautious optimism. They, like I, learn to instruct our hands and feet to move, while knowing we are never in complete control of how we see ourselves and move through the world. When survival is a primary task, authorship is improbable. This experience is different from those who hold dominant identities and some degree of authority of how they move through the world. Regardless of the actual content of our definitions, the act of insisting on self-definition, as Collins (1990) postulates, validates our own power. Power in this statement should be read as agency, distinctly different in definition and in cultural performance from power as conceptualized by dominant bodies. Agency does not assume the possession of sociopolitical capital. Rather it is the capacity to act upon the world and not just give personal inter-subjective meaning to it. Further it retains the capacity to act purposively and reflectively in the service of reiterating and remaking the world. (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). It is through self-definition that minoritized bodies quicken the energies of their souls, negotiating the dehumanizing advances of Western designations of citizenship, toward a dignity not afforded by self-authorship.

A Theory in the Flesh

How would you respond to Winston's email through the lens of self-definition? I offer my response for consideration:

Hello Winston!

It is so good to hear from you. I truly enjoyed connecting with you this past week while at your university. Thank you for attending the talk, and I am so humbled that you found it to be beneficial. I must admit that I have been reflecting on our conversation and the content of this email for some time. You asked a profound question that is deeply poignant for the world we are currently engaged and I wanted to give you an appropriately layered response. "How do I feel about being black in this country?" This is a question I have shouldered, if not asked, daily for years. I have spent countless hours meditating on the ways in which my pigmentation has been criminalized, problematized, and presumed to be disposable. I, too, have wrestled with the conundrum of pride and beauty alongside fear and dispossession. This country has a shamefully weak will to justice when it comes to Black people. I want desperately to tell you that there is an arrival, while on this earth, that is overflowing with honey. Unfortunately, I do not know this to be true. I myself am not in paradise--it rains here, too. I do want you to know, my dear brother, that you are not overreacting. Your fears and solutions are not misguided; they are brilliant maneuvers to contend with a society that has made the cause of living while black a project of unimaginable resolve. There is no singular truth to escape this reality, and I cannot issue you advice that will release you of your fears. How does one live in this black body, has been the question of my life, a question that answers itself as we come to understand who we want to be. That you have named and can trace your history is a source of tremendous strength and insight. Continue to explore this. I find myself reading about the "theory in flesh" that people of Color, [Black people across the diaspora] have thought into being; there is power here. I would encourage you to revisit our rich and troubled history and take note of how people wrapped in darkness forced light to adjust to them. White Supremacy has tried to intimidate your hope- to tell you that you are trapped in a maze. In whatever ways that make sense for you, courageously exemplify what it is and means to be 'unafraid.' Unlearning fear begins with a conscious effort to affirm your existence. In a world where your body and presence have been made to be disruptions, affirming yourself is not only an act of love, it is an act of revolution. This will not be easy. This curriculum does not show up in your coursework, but it is possible. My dear brother, do not feel as if you have to sit with these questions alone. We were not made to do life alone and being in community with others who are also negotiating these 'big

questions,' can sometimes be the thing that sustains us. I appreciate you trusting me with your thoughts and want you to know that I will journey with you for as long as you need me.
In solidarity,

Wilson

As a curator of freedom, Harriet Tubman compassionately notes, “I had seen their tears and sighs, and I heard their groans, and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them” (James, 1999, p. 15). Part of the labor of Tubman was in helping those who recognized their decree as *slaves* negotiate the innocuous road to their lot of *freedom*. For Tubman, there were no easy answers along the Underground railroad fraught with distress, discouragement, and material danger, but part of her brilliance was in listening for the indomitable spirit of the *oppressed*, who desired to be free. Educators will all be called upon to render answers to questions mired in the complexity of sociopolitical thought. I am keenly aware that my response did not absolve Winston from the realities of systemic threat. What I am confident in, however, is that there is more to living than simply conceding to it. As educators, *we* are capable of helping minoritized bodies cultivate a voice to talk back, by naming and centering the influence of the sociopolitical, by introducing them to the creative and alternative knowledge producing power of Black feminism, and assisting them, as they become arbiters of self-definition.

Guided by the question, “*how do we exist in the bodies that we hold at this particular historical moment?*,” I offer self-definition to Winston as a way to make meaning of his *situation* and as an example to educators of one way they can affirm ways of knowing and being grounded in the temporality of living in a minoritized body. The email response reflects this beckoning, and thus, materializes self-definition in the following ways. While not located in the same, specific, sociocultural history as Winston, I uphold his experience and interpretation of it, seeking to *validate and integrate standpoint knowledge* by conveying: “I would encourage you to revisit our rich and troubled history and take note of how people wrapped in darkness forced light to adjust to them.” In an effort to *prioritize self-love*, I point to the living legacy of White supremacy as a way to let Winston know that his fears are legitimate and tied to a long history of terror and intimidation that has manifested itself anew in the corporeal violence of black bodies

to which he is bearing witness. I suggest to him, “unlearning fear begins with a conscious effort to affirm your existence.”

Concomitantly, there is an effort in my response to *emphasize agency in a matrix of domination*: “I want desperately to tell you that there is an arrival, while on this earth, that is overflowing with honey. Unfortunately, I do not know this to be true. I myself am not in paradise--it rains here, too...In whatever ways that make sense for you, courageously exemplify what it is and means to be *unafraid*.” I do not escape into idealism with this point. Educators ought to be cautious about the type of outcomes they propose for those they serve, yet not forfeit students’ ability to act upon the world. As a helping practice, educators trained in student affairs in higher education seek to offer best practices to students. On some occasions this praxis replicates banking education (Freire, 1970), that is, it treat students as passive receptacles to be poured into by experts. How might educators, alternatively, shrink the power distance between themselves and their students by offering them a picture of transparency? This would mean taking my comments, above, a step further, past “it rains here, too,” into an explanation of the contents, risks, and effects of that rain in my particular context. For example, I might write the following—

Winston, as a Black man, in my role as an educator on a predominately White campus, I have been the target of racist epithets. I stand in front of a sea of whiteness everyday—bearing the weight of White students curiosity, anxiety, and distrust— and oftentimes, I do not feel like I have the endurance to make it from bell to bell. How and why do I persist? Well, in many ways I have accepted it...and I refuse to accept it.

The response also sought to *foreground identity as performative*. To do this, I shared, “Your fears and solutions are not misguided; they are brilliant maneuvers to contend with a society that has made the cause of living while black a project of unimaginable resolve.” Students are no less *complex* because they do not hold a singular identity to negotiate multiple spaces; rather, how can educators come to value the multi-vocal and varied literacies that students employ as mechanisms for survival? Finally, I endeavored to *dream and imagine futures not yet known* alongside Winston. New futures are probable once a process of deconstruction has broken down a former one. It is in this spirit that I assert, “In a world where your body and presence have been made to be disruptions, affirming yourself is not only an act of love, it is an act of revolution.”

Over my Head, I See Freedom in the Air

Delineating itself from self-authorship by grounding analysis in criticality, there is no arrival as it pertains to self-definition; the concept is more aptly understood as *self-defining*. The process, alternatively, is similar to that of a contracting and expanding spring. When pressed up by various forces and oppressions, the spring compresses, each coil a tenet of self-definition, receiving some tension. As an individual makes sense of their particular situation, the spring [made up of the coils of self-definition] responds to the load and pushes back on the various forces, exemplifying agency. An existential practice that centers this praxis holds out hope for an authentication and dignified living that all people deserve, for a fully human body is not easily exploited.

The effort to resolve the contradictions inherent for Black women, and other minoritized bodies takes considerable strength, as one must be willing to release themselves from the expectations of hegemonic ideology and continuously bout with controlling images. One is never truly free from the prevalent idea that our living must constitute some measure of worthiness in the eyes of hegemonic order. The quest, while elusive, can assist us in speaking, as Belenky (1986) describes, as “unique and authentic voices”, engendering a revolution of the soul (p. 134). The variety of revolution that moves the stone away, restoring self-respect and personhood:

don't you know these bones be built from iron columns

this spine the alchemy of adamantium

the magic of angels with stolen wings

proclaiming a gospel of living...a renewed testament for the present

More than an *internal voice*, the achievement of recaptured dignity and political agency, signaled by self-definition, poses a threat to White/European standards of knowing and being and rational sense-making. Importantly, this posture models an alternative way of being and knowing in a Western, United States context. A sociopolitical framing of development demands a vigilant attention to how the minoritized body is situated historically, socially, politically and affectively, and physiologically. This recognition inspires a *second sight* that will give those with whom we work alongside the opportunity to see epistemic violence, or behaviors that bring harm to one's understanding of knowledge or knowledge making processes, projected by various institutions (Shahid, 2015). It is only in learning what these patterns look like and how they function, that we might be able to buffer their advance. Self-definition compels us to think differently about how

we approach our practice and pedagogy, ensuring that we are cognizant of how power and oppression engender cramped possibilities and limited choices.

Self-definition obligates us to question hegemonic authority and the cultural text that serves a backdrop to instruments of death, both physical and spiritual, arousing for others and the self a way of knowing, moving, and acting upon the world that values and preserves life. A motion for living, with these elements as fixtures, insists that we lay bare the power dynamics underlying the process of definition itself, critiquing specifically the notion that those in positions of authority are entitled to interpret our reality. Self-definition calls forth a critical citizenship, indicative of a broader understanding of reality and democracy, as we know it. If the outcomes of higher education support the interests' of neoliberalism, and subsequently self-authorship endorses claims of citizenship derived from matriculation through the enterprise of higher education, then a conclusion could be that the manifestations of self-authorship on minoritized bodies leaves a grim prognosis.

As a body, historically rendered fugitive, I am aware, in my process toward self-definition, of what it means for me to take up space. To differentiate between *place* and *space*, place signifies schools, museums, religious institutions, the government, corporations, and other ideological apparatuses (Garoian, 1999). These institutions prescribe and code bodies with agendas, engendering cultural performances. There is a script, and we are tasked with its reading. Dialogically, space is polemical, a site from whence a body resists domination and achieves political agency. For bodies like Trayvon, and Winston, and other social deviations, they are taught to occupy their seat, to *stay in their place*, and enticed away from themselves as it were. Self-definition, mediated through vigilant (re)membering and persistent reinterpretation of our life worlds and lived experiences, makes possible the construction and acting out of identity, or what Black feminist Lucille Clifton and bell hooks (1990) might call a *radical subjectivity*.

I should be celebrated/ for each day, this world has tried to kill some piece of me/ and failed.^v

Invocation: All Who Labor and are Heavy Laden

Almighty God,

We need you right now. I need you. Thank you for the opportunity to be here, in this time, and in this place. I pray that you would pour out your spirit over this world. Empower me, for you see, like Winston I, too, am scared. This young man, your child, trusts me with a terror that is beyond reason. By myself, I cannot mediate his distress—a distress that has haunted our presence on this earth. How would you have me[us] to respond to this? What do you require of us? What words do I summon to make sense of living...what patterns should I follow to contemplate the possibility of nonbeing with the full intention of affirming a possibility of life. How do I make surviving attainable in a world that deems endarkened humanity as an illegitimate form of existence? We, your people, trust that you are not neutral concerning our condition and it is this certainty that makes physical existence bearable and indefinite. We affirm ourselves this day, with all deliberate speed, as you did on the faithful day in gethsemane. Though not the same, I reminded of your angst in the middle of the garden. On tired knees and blood dripping like sweat, you asked of the Father, “if thou be willing, remove this cup from Me.” In that moment, however, you offered us a picture of your love and grace for an undeserving people.

“Nevertheless,” your surmised, “not as I will, but thy will be done.” We lean on your promises today, and evermore and cast our anxieties on you. In our labor O Lord, we are, indeed, heavy laden, but may you be rest for our souls...if not now, we know it is not because you are unable, but because you are perfecting our faith. Hear our petition, Oh, God, and meet us as we wonder through the wilderness of whiteness that grows more shameless and cruel by the day. I am persuaded, this day, as your word explicitly proclaims, that when we pass through the waters, you will be with us; and when we pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over us. Our prayer, O Lord...our earnest supplication is that our faith would not fail...that we would have the mind of the ocean in the midst of a hurricane, for though it may cause distress in the moment, it can do nothing to change who we are. We are persuaded...

Use me, your servant, as a vessel to do you what you have called me to do...to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly. Now may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer--

Brothers and sisters,

Like Winston, I exist in the *in between*. Scholars refer to this as a “third space” (Hurtado & Sinha, 2016, p. 30), or the place after we have shredded the insufficient coding of binary representations. This third space is a location of swinging constellations, colliding with each other, yielding splashes of color against a stainless dark canvas. I know what it means to be a problem. It means, as Du Bois (1903) surmises, I am approached “in a half- hesitant sort of way,” surveyed and eyed curiously, instead of being asked directly “how does it feel to be a problem” (p. 1)? I have moved through the world attempting to negotiate DuBois’ timeless question, not because I prefer this resonant narrative of black bodies in the Western world, but because the question is written into my diasporan history within this American project, both domestically and internationally. I have tried to ignore the complexity of the conundrum with ballads of grace, peace, and forgiveness. Whether I like it or not, my body possesses a memory, and because of it, I share in the dialogue of *our spiritual strivings* knowing that few alternatives exist for holistic living outside of surrendering your humanity to an authority out of touch with our sensibilities. My use of *our* refers to those who are also negotiating the complexity of this third space, at the intersection of race, gender, and class.

This third space alleviates the challenge of having to choose alliances. Existing betwixt and between gives credence to interlocking systems of oppression, which refers to the macro-level connections linking systems of oppression, and the micro-level processes—namely how each group occupies a social position with interlocking structures of oppression. Minoritized bodies become a problem because of “controlling images” (Collins, 2004, p. 55), which have their origins in slavery, and “lead to the objectification and commodification of black bodies” (Collins, 2004, p. 51). While these hard truths are inescapable, I believe in a calling higher than to exist simply as a burden. I am finding, in liminality, an ownership of who I am personally and socially—race, gender, sexuality, spirituality—but more than that, I am assuming a responsibility for my presence in each of these positions. I enter knowing that these positions have long been established, and with them a specific history. I owe something to the tradition of survival and resistance that came before me and travel back to their theory with intention to ensure that it is not forgotten or lost in this contemporary world. I value the foremothers of this tradition and the theory they produced in thought and flesh, generated in their habitation of the borderlands. It is because of them that I am able and resolved to imagine a new course of living, filled with milk and honey.

I submit that the presentation of endarkened bodies does carry with it a constructed meaning in the Western world that we must account for in our theorizing. This is the aperture that draws me to the academic tower. I am convinced of a way of being in this world that does more than just indulge freedom dreams, but actively pursues them. Evolving from a first and second wave of theorizing about adult development bounded by rationality and rewarded by the degree to which one aligns itself with neoliberal agendas, I want to contribute to a new charting. A thoughtful tracing of the intellectual history of minoritized bodies at the intersection of race, gender, and class records transformative potential for confronting the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal American project that envelopes this Western world. Intellectually histories are largely context dependent, but should not be ignored in the devastating manner that it has been. I intend to do more than offer cursory fixations with a narrative of struggle, rather, I intend to revive its power, reconsider its theoretical possibility, and extend their work as conditions of marginality, censure, omission, and erasure have enveloped a canon yet to be adequately considered, or fully theorized. Such omission could lead some to believe that there has not been a substantive or significant body of work available.

Speaking back to this inaccuracy Joy James notes makes note of Barbara Christian's (1987) rejoinder, citing "People of color have always theorized...our theorizing is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create...[in] dynamic rather than fixed ideas...How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies...our very humanity?" (James, 1999, p. x). Led by Black feminist sensibilities and a critical paradigm, this worship service endeavors to decolonize what has been traditional student developmental theory, departing toward an existential practice that centers the experiences of bodies at the intersection of race, gender, and class. At stake in this study, thus, is not the daunting question of whether intellectuals of Color have made significant contributions, but rather, how should these contributions inform how academics theorize about adult development? I am seeking to disrupt and decolonize development theories by revisiting overlooked intellectual traditions, bringing to the center *theory in the flesh* of people of Color, with an eye toward the ways this tradition should inform contemporary projects of human agency.

We have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant to survive.- Audre Lorde

Purpose Statement

Due to the limitations of self-authorship mentioned above that absolve history of its dynamic and lasting effects on minoritized existence in the present, mistreat the complexities of minoritized bodies broadly, and Black bodies in particular, and relies on an organizing principle that formulates the subject-object relationship as synonymous with a more complex self and evolving self (a trajectory that leads to self-authorship), this research study proposes that educators consider an alternative approach to theory construction. What would happen if educators and researchers squarely centered the [Black] body in a sociopolitical (Okello, 2018) context that considers the historical, social, political, affective, and physiological tenets of one's existence? I am interested in how Black bodies discern meaning, and make sense of their social worlds, given the precarity of their allotment. This project seeks to reconcile what appears to be a taken-for-granted question lodged in development theories and the evolving self, which answers, *what does it mean to be human?*, in an artificial and speculative manner. That is, it seems as if the assumption is that being alive is synonymous with humanity. My read of self-authorship presupposes that this question, while not indicative of similar life experiences, assumes a similarly viable life chance. This research will reveal how that assumption is a gross overstatement.

Employing a Black feminist performance autoethnographic methodology, I examine my artistic performance archive across multiple sites, with attention to 3 critical scenes in the development of my artistry. *Scene 1* will listen in on an impromptu intervention by two colleagues that forced me to see myself more fully; *Scene 2* travels back to an open-mic and my first public performance, detailing the importance of this moment in the development of my art. *Scene 3* is routed through a mentor-mentee relationship, my introduction and commitment to Black feminist theorizing, and my first embodied performance. The decision to focus on this archive endorses Audre Lorde's (1984) claim that "poetry is not luxury" (p. 36), it is a vital and crucial form of existence. Performance poetry captures the theatrical embodiment of what I argue are the real world black aesthetics of self-definition (Okello, 2018). I bring my performance archive/memories into conversation with the literary texts of Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, who theorized and embodied praxis for Black and minoritized bodies at the intersection of race, gender, and class. Lorde and Baldwin, decidedly, emphasized several themes in their work, which make them appropriate and necessary theorists for this study, and ultimately, my decision

to underscore them. I look to them and their work because of their *resistance to temporality and spatiality*, their *ability to maneuver in limbo*, their *queer sensibilities*, their *ethical and intellectual imaginations*, and their concentrated *attention on the interior life*, for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Research questions. By sitting with the textual teachings of Baldwin and Lorde, in conversation with my performance archive/memories, I demonstrate the ways in which Black existential discourse, contributes to the deconstruction and reconstruction of student development theory, specifically self-authorship. By bringing the traditions into critical discursive dialogue, self-definition (Okello, 2018) emerges as a theory in the flesh (Hurtado, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldua, 1981) and begins moving us away from an embrace of a subject-object principle of theorizing. Employing Black feminism as a theoretical framework, purposefully, and necessarily bringing an heir of criticality to what has been a methodologically constructivist framing of self-authorship and adult development broadly, I ask:

- How has the Black body been schooled?
- How might examining the present-day condition of Black bodies in conversation with literary records of Black existentialism contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction of self-authorship theory?

Corollary questions that surface in response to this study are:

- What possibilities emerge regarding representations of Black students' lived and educational experiences?
- How does this study assist educators in reimagining, reassessing, and repurposing student development theory?

To marshal my analysis, I will rely on 4 fundamental themes throughout this worship service. Those themes include importance of history writ large, the conflicting inscription(s) of (non) being, the evolution and future of adult development theory, and the promise of Black existentialism. These themes are inextricably tied to the purpose of this project, embedded and expounded upon to add density, criticality, and urgency to the praxis of meaning making in the here and now for Black bodies specifically, and minoritized bodies broadly. I will respond briefly to two of the themes, *history* and *(non)-being*, and take up the remaining two themes during the *Scripture Reading(s)* that follow.

Lest we forget: The importance of history. History is always and already active, therefore, this study unapologetically, will consult historical records. It is tempting to place our tools of analysis and attention in/on the present (e.g., phenomenology, case study, ethnography) as a way to chaperon our understandings of meaning making. I think there is value focusing on the present. What has been missing, however, is a layered analysis of meaning making that reaches into the quandaries of our past and fidgets with the coding of our deepest assumptions. Researchers might suggest that this approach is already, inherently, occurring. On a cursory level, I do not disagree; inevitably, new questions are critiques of former conclusions. I believe the relationship to historical context could be more explicit, and dare to ask what a holistic, critical approach to theory could look like if educators and researchers brought the present condition into a dialectic conversation with history. It is no longer enough to say that Black and/or minoritized bodies do not fit into existing models of student development theory. Educators and researchers must discover those precise mechanisms that have served to hold conventions in place, and for that type of inquiry, an adequate past to dismantle is necessary.

Imago of the Negro: (Non)being. Decolonization is a historical process as Black bodies are the subjects of projected determination. As Fanon (1967) counsels, “In the remotest depth of the European consciousness, an inordinately black hollow has been made... as every man climbs toward whiteness and light, the European has tried to repudiate this uncivilized self...Negros were the principle evil” (p. 190). Attempting to define oneself means little if it is not done against the backdrop of historicity. Against the backdrop of White, European discourses, Black bodies engage in a Sisyphean struggle that associates/symbolizes blackness with everything that is non-white. This marking as a “phobogenic object” (Gordon, 1997, p. 27), or an object that stimulates anxiety, takes the position of the colonizer/exploiter, functioning to scapegoat, and repress the Black body into (non) being. The confrontation with these distortions poses problems for the achievement of personhood and agency. Post 1954, however, that was supposed to change. The assumptions, chartered in on the wings of the Brown v. Board of Education decision, were idealistic and ruthlessly simplistic in its efforts to forward a new version of existence for minoritized bodies. It was this country’s most recent attempt to holistically engage the question of being. My attention to this time period is an attempt to showcase what was missed when legal *rights* expansion occurred without an equally necessary redressing and reconstitution of what it meant to exist in this country. The Scripture Reading(s) will continue

this effort by drawing out the roots of student development theory. This mapping will make plain the roots of the canon and the reasoning behind it.

But first, an exhortation from Malcolm's Children.

Exhortation I: A Few Words from Malcolm's Children:

Like Malcolm...
they refuse to accept the old expression, "You can't fight the system." They operate on
Malcolm's conviction that "if the system wishes to remain, it must voluntarily change or be
changed
anything made can be unmade
-Betty Shabazz

A purpose of this worship service's aim in bringing to bear an overlooked intellectual history is, part and parcel, a response to the students of the 1960s and 70s who made clear their desires to experience a knowledge they were being kept from at institutions of higher education. The voices of *Malcolm's children* in this exhortation should be recognized as a qualitative intervention in the broader purpose of this worship service, whom along with the Black intellectuals to be discussed, are critical subjects in the advisement of theory taking place across this project.

The Call for a Black intellectual Canon

A martyred hero, Malcolm X was perhaps the single most important influence on Black students during the 1960s and 70s (Turner, 1969). Assessing his impact, Grier and Cobbs (1968) state that his "recordings and speeches became treasured things...out of his belated admiration came the philosophical basis for Black activism and indeed the thrust for Black Power itself" (p. 169). Following his lead as judicious, vigilant, and uncompromising, cadres of Black college students voiced a politic that mirrored the ruminations of a larger political front occurring off-campus, in the streets. "We didn't feel like we had a choice; the implication was plain that we were being let into the university on the condition that we become white men with dark skins" (Biondi, 2012, p. 14). There was widespread belief following the Brown decision that Black bodies would, graciously, accept the gift proffered by the American legal system, and quietly disappear into the background of White America. The formal dismantling of racial segregation, in the estimation of the widespread liberalism of the 1950s, was an accommodation and ought to have generated an automatic assimilation for the *underprivileged* Negro (Biondi, 2012; Rojas, 2007). This was a faulty premise. Black, young people in the United States were inheriting a

burden, that regardless of their moral, social, or political orientation as conservative, moderate, or liberal, situated their bodies as marked, the very absence of humanness (Holland, 2000); an inheritance, while heavy, menacing, and egregious, has been carted for generations. Due to the nature of this inscribed inheritance, in a culture that demands acquiescence, respectability, and assimilation, the marked body has a decision to make.

My focus here is to corroborate my larger critique on the limitation of student development theory in the present, by siding with the polity of “Malcolm’s children” of the 1960s and 70s (Biondi, 2012, p. 2). Doing so adds further significance to my period of examination, between 1950-1992, revealing the importance of a Black intellectual canon to students who were frequenting the college landscape and witnessing the void firsthand. The compulsion, exhibited by Black college-age students, pushes my hypothesis past mere speculation, as students demanded alternatives by which they could situate themselves and their existential location. Students talked about the university being relevant to the needs of the Black community. Relevance in their minds meant that university would be a place where Black students would do more than just come in, receive a degree, and complete a severing with their neighborhoods and communities. More specifically, I will demonstrate how students’ activist postures combined with the intellectual history of the era gave birth to Black studies as an academic discipline. Accordingly, this would be a pragmatic space accountable to, and married to, the interest of community, where new ideas and techniques would make contributions to the political and economic trust of Black enterprise; this university could be a place of social reform, if not revolution. Black studies, as an academic discipline, was a concrete manifestation of students’ desire to understand themselves and their place in the world; it would represent a site *inside* that could help to transform theory to practice.

The genesis of the Black student movement was indigenous, finding its root of life in the gardens of Black Nationalism. Black power, its most seasoned fruit, was a sociopolitical text whose rhetoric, strategic analysis, and tactics were a break from the politics of civil disobedience, non-violence, and integration that directed much of the civil rights movement of the times. “Non-violence” for those advocating Black power, was an approach to civil rights that “Black people could not afford and a luxury white people did not deserve” (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 53). Alternatively, Black power summoned a revised, critical consciousness that was deconstructive and reconstructive in nature. The goal of Black Power, as communicated

by Stokley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (1967), was “full participation in the decision making processes affecting the lives of Black people, recognition of the virtues in the themselves” (p. 47). Black Power would name, with consistency and vigor, the contradictions of American values.

Given the turmoil of the 50s and 60s that included deaths of Emmett Till (1955), Addie Mae Collins (1963), Denies McNair (1963), Carol Robertson (1963), Cynthia Wesley (1963), Medgar Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1965), and Martin Luther King (1968), there was profound questioning of integrationist philosophies that counseled patience and long suffering. Black Power was reconstructive in the sense that there would be an emphasis placed on self-reliance and self-determination, which would manifest itself in the creation of institutions and the management of economics in the community. It was Malcolm, prominently, who convinced students of *the failure of old modes of change*, and that if there were to be a critical rise in masse, a new one could be demanded. Black students heard him. With the moderate gains of Black student enrollment into historically white universities in the mid to late 60s, higher education was set to become an extension of the broader movement.

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

-Frederick Douglas (1857)

Assimilation. Instructed by their parents in many instances to the concede identifiers associated with blackness, for safety, security, and the possibility of mobility, students began to question these standards and their fidelity to them. “The false concept of basic Negro inferiority is one of the curses that still lingers...we were taught a pretty lie—excel and the whole world lies open before you. I obeyed the injunction and found it to be wishful thinking” (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 52). Budding in their activism, students began to narrate their objections, resolving, “they wanted us to pretend we were just like them...we began to see that whites weren’t supermen. They were ordinary...that’s when we stopped assimilating” (Biondi, 2012, p. 17). At Amherst College, for example, students described standards of marginalization that banned them to the periphery of college community and curriculum. Interestingly, the stated goal of the institution was the “preparation of the whole man,” the mirror of a cultural ideology that upheld paternalistic versions of manhood and piety (Williams, 2014, p. 21). Acute in their analysis, Black students at Amherst found the “whole man” ideology uncomfortable because it sought to “produce men who were analytical...and believed in very little except themselves and

their...position in a world of privilege created by their forefathers and mothers” (Williams, 2014, p. 91). When encouraged by Deans to “be your own man”, Horace Porter, a student at the college, asked rhetorically, “how could we be our own men in a system that is racially and politically rigged? How could we be our own men when the courses we took were basically the same ones taken by the men who sat in our nation’s highest councils of power?” (Porter, 2003, p. 67). Implied in this redress is an argument that university curricula and climates were threatening the self-concept of Black students by waging what, preeminent scholar Harold Cruse and Black Power advocates called, *domestic colonialism* (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Cruse, 1967). Domestic colonialism, as noted by historian Kabria Baumgartner (2016), “characterized the exploitative relationship of white (domination) to black (subjugation)” (p. 299). Language like this armored Black students with a vocabulary for understanding their experiences under Eurocentric curriculum, at a predominantly white liberal arts institution. Another student of the era, Rusan Wilson, added “we were these nice little Southern girls, who had probably even brought white gloves with us. This was a period where, literally, you started off as a colored girl and ended up four years later a Black woman” (Biondi, 2012, p. 18). Apparent in these testimonies, and many others like them, was a natural politicization being brought to the fore through the insurrection of Black Power to the Black college student ethos. Coming to understand that the state was lacking in integrity, while simultaneously recognizing the dignity deserved, students surmised no one can be “healthy, complete and mature” if they are being asked to deny a part of themselves— this denial they believed was simmering under the banner of colonialism and concession of integration (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 55). Black Power was a rejoinder to the logic that reinforced a sense of pride and self-acceptance, a language long elusive to students.

Accentuated in these reorientations of personhood was the question of humanness. More to the point, there was a burgeoning public solicitation by Malcolm’s students to be seen and recognized for their humanity, a task that the American establishment was considerably sidestepping. Resentment to this ideal induced general suspicion and distrust for the objectives of the university structure and society. Actively reframing a Blackness that would enable them to push back against the deceit of whiteness, A Berkeley student aptly noted “they never let us forget we were Black...so we decided to remember we were black.” Another student resolved,

“we refuse...to jeopardize four years of our lives becoming socialized to fit a white dominant cultural pattern” (Biondi, 2012, p. 22).

This general disposition raises questions about the expectations that Black and minoritized students had for higher education institutions. One could assume from their displeasures that there was, at one time, a sense of optimism that propelled students’ ambitions into the annals of higher education following the Brown decision. Worth mentioning is that students came to associate higher education as the replication of white citizenship, propped up Eurocentric conceptions. An outcome of this worship service seeks to address this revelation and envisage what an alternative citizenship could look like that is rooted, not in idealism of American democracy, but a criticality inextricably connected to the body and one’s existential location—these themes which will be expounded upon during the *Scripture Reading(s)* portion of this sermon.

“Fanon is our fire.” In step with the social frustration engulfing the nation was the press to uncover new ideologies that would undergird, guide, and propel Black students’ emerging ethos. The current structuring of society, and too, the ideologies the held it up, were no longer viable. Coinciding with the Black Power movement, a host of revolutionary leaders were engaged in liberation struggles both domestically, and abroad, that captured students’ attention. Black students, in their search to explain society, read, debated, and engaged in endless hours of ideological discussion, weighing the merits and positions of thought leaders like Fidel Castro, the socialist president of Cuba and supporter of the African American freedom struggle, Robert F. Williams, Harold Cruse, Nathan Hare, W.E.B Du Bois, Karl Marx, E. Franklin Frazier, and Franz Fanon (Biondi, 2012; Joseph, 2003; Rojas, 2007). Black Power was establishing an intellectual dimension, and it was made possible through the Black students’ veracity to make sense of their existential situation.

Remembering students’ gravitation to, and identification with, colonized peoples internally, faculty mentor George Henderson recalls, “Fanon was our fire.” (Henderson, 2010, p. 37). Fanon’s strategies for achieving solidarity and the manner in which he promoted positive self-images were appealing to Black students at the University of Oklahoma, and across the United States. Here we see students’ desire for and attachment to not just the rhetorical/textual fervor of Fanon, but what the writings might be able to show them about themselves and the world around them that was specific to their condition. The strength of Fanon, thus, was in how

his writings captured the *psycho-affective* realm (Fanon, 1961, p. xviii). In advancing this realm, Fanon is signaling a place that privileges neither the subjective nor objective, but instead, a location that meditates between the multiple domains of the self.

Using the context of the colonization, Fanon adds to the developmental conversation on moral, ethical judgment, and political sense-making, contextualizing the psycho-affective as “the body, dreams, psychic inversions and displacements...it involves the emotions, the imagination or psychic life, but is only ever mobilized into social meaning and historical effect through an embodied and embedded action...a performance of agency in the present tense” (Fanon, 1961, p. xix). Fanon maneuvers between the psychic body and body politic, suggesting that confronting colonialism “is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints. It is not discourse on the universal, but the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different” (p. 6). In a language of incredulity, Fanon put forth an analysis of the colonial mentality and its ability to devalue consciousness. Seeing this sort of psycho-affective rumination as critical, he discussed it as “the focal point where citizen and individual develop and grow” (Fanon, 1961, p. 40). This theory to practice resonated with the evolving sensibilities of students as reflected above and generations of students to follow. As an example of the influence of Fanon on students, historians note that Bobby Seale and Huey Newton both read *The Wretched of Earth*. Supplemented by their engagement with the Afro American study group meetings on campus at Berkeley, they would lay the groundwork for what would become known as the Black Panther Party.

The reflections of students’ experiences and desires in this section assist this worship service in several ways. While they did not use the academic language of human/student/adult development, the clarion overtone was that the *theory we are being exposed to is limiting and insufficient*. As a qualitative arm of this study, these students point toward the missing elements involved in theoretical constructions of meaning making and how educators and scholars might approach the topic going forward. In their speaking, they also allude to a significant gap in theoretical construction that this worship service also seeks to address, that being the reliance on the masculine consciousness.

Limitations of a Black Nationalist consciousness. If variations of white ideology were responsible for assigning inhuman status, the hope was that a revised intellectual canon would provide a new frame of reference. Reframing, however, had its own set of issues. In Black

students' quest for curricular representation and consciousness-raising, there remained the all-too-familiar narrative of the absence of Black women. The difficulties in dislodging from a paradigm are subtle in that there are the remnants and old habits that do not easily wash away. In no way do I seek to dismiss the viability, power, and one could argue, the necessity, of the Black consciousness that became the curriculum for a revolutionary standpoint—*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Manchild in the Promise Land*, *The Man who Cried I Am*, *Native Son*, *Invisible Man*—the reading list has a rightful place in the praxis of living for minoritized bodies. These books, while they do reflect in many ways a conservative masculine consciousness that rightly deserves scrutiny, their instructive potential should not be overlooked. In an era where the Black body was still deeply historicized—the corporeal image, engrained in the inescapability non-being (i.e., the subject of terror, mutilation, lynching, subservience), writing was a method of reclamation. Textual embodiment was the procedure for agency. That said, something was missed with the absence of a Black feminist analysis. A question worth asking is: What was lost when Black women's texts were not lifted up with the same sort of intellectual consideration as Black nationalist texts? Biondi (2012), in agreement, notes, "At this moment we know far too little...to be able to assess its [Black feminisms] potential impact. The best guess is that it will have a profound balancing effect on what has been an almost exclusively male-oriented vision of human reality" (p. 179). This worship service will begin filling that void.

Black studies as the redemption of western society. According to Wisdom and Shaw (1969), Black students' protest demands were often consistent with the inequities and oppression of the dominant culture that met them off campus. They advocated for "the elimination of institutional racism, the recruitment of Black students to equal their proportion in the college age population, the recruitment of Black faculty and administrators, and autonomous Black studies programs" (Harper, 1970, p. 9). Demanded, and earned in Black student advocacy, was an assertion of dignity in the curriculum. Black studies anchored this restoration serving three wide purposes, according to Manning Marble (2000), as descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive. Descriptive, that is, it attempts to provide detail into the materiality of Black life. It is corrective, such that it challenges normative interpretations and assumptions of Black peoples, "raising fundamental questions with regard to objectivity of social knowledge" (Biondi, 2012, p. 177), troubling the universal applicability of Western theory. And prescriptive, in that it presents theoretical and pragmatic models for the purpose of empowering Black bodies in the real world.

Historians would cite this emergence as “the refusal to give over our lives, our creativity, our history, our future into the hands of white America, for they proved themselves totally inadequate” (Biondi, 2012, p. 178). Articulating a broad condemnation of old perspectives, Black studies sought to create a viable ideological alternative to the imperialist constructs in place.

The plea of Black students following the Brown decision of 1954, unheard in the annals of theory construction, was that “we cannot think now because we have no intellectual instrument...save those designed to keep us from seeing...we must abandon the partial frame of reference of our oppressors and create new concepts which will release our reality” (Biondi, 2012, p. 178). While Black studies did evolve, its capacity has been relegated to the silo of its academic department, as opposed to its interdisciplinary potential to examine and expand our understandings of the human experience. Educators and researchers ignored the plea and the plausible canon, as I will explain in the Scripture Reading(s) that follow.

Scripture Reading(s): Historicizing the Old Testament

Let us begin reading together:

Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old.

Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert- Isaiah 43:18-19

This is the word, for us the people. Thanks be to God.

*Isaiah, throughout this chapter, is reminding the children of Israel of God's faithfulness. The writings here are as much a tracing of history as they are prophetic. I am struck, however, by the peculiar use of language in this text. Specifically, the use of the words "remember ye not." As an intellectual historian and student of the whispers that fall from the mouth of my elders, I am taken aback by this dispensation. Surely, there is much to be gained by coursing through the miraculous, albeit sometimes painful memories of our yesterdays. As I continued reading, however, I was greeted by another understanding. Brothers and Sisters, the charge proclaimed by Isaiah was not a call for the absence of history or memory, rather, it was a repositioning of it. Allow me to explain, further. "The former things" that Isaiah mentions is the manner in which the Israelites have carried history with them. Said differently, while there was a physical exit from Egypt, Egypt was still **in** them and accordingly hindered the prospect of imagining themselves as a free people. Skillfully, we see how Isaiah separated "former things" from the memories of liberation. Invoking their redeemer, he professes "I will make a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert." These images were fresh memories for a people who encountered and surpassed a red sea and experienced water in the desert. Our framing of history can provide insight into the things we need to reposition. Malcolm's children reminded themselves of that, and behold, a new thing sprang forth. What "new thing" awaits us with a repositioning of the former precepts of adult development theory?*

Student development theory in its present rendering is incomplete as a tool to both analyze and make sense of the lives of minoritized students in higher education. A fundamental goal of this project is to engage dialectically with student development theory, specifically its

historical origins, as a way to rethink how development could look when we center the lives and experiences of those systemically minoritized. Anzaldúa (1990) fiercely responds to this nudging, citing a need for theory to rewrite history “using race, class, gender and ethnicity as categories of analysis, theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries” (p. xxv). She further contends, pointing to a lack of practical application in the conceptualization of modern theory, this “new kind of theory” would need to work explicitly to reconnect the community to academy. To begin this work, this section provides a close read of the foundations of adult development theory. I intend to highlight the underpinnings of adult development theory, specifically, the logic behind the integrative model of development recognized as self-authorship theory, which includes aspects of psychosocial theory and cognitive structural theory. I intend to broach the possibilities of what has been named the *third wave* of development theory as it pertains to adult development by establishing a new category for thinking about theory I name as the *sociopolitical*.

First Wave of Student Development

A historical rendering of the field of student affairs reveals a decidedly developmental ethos that emphasizes the importance of serving the whole person. This focus ensures that individual differences and developmental levels are taken into account when working with students (Jones & Abes, 2013). The question of “who am I,” has been integral in the general construction of theory pertaining to college student development. Embedded in this question of “who am I” is the primacy of identity and individualism.

How educators come to understand students and how they make sense of their experiences in the higher education context has largely become a question of how students are making meaning of their identities. Development presumes that there is movement along a continuum, typically toward a more complex position. Jones and Abes (2013) charting the various identity development projects in higher education show that there have been several strands to the work of development theory such as achievement, core self-image, individuation or becoming an individual, student learning, and intercultural learning and diversity. Given the multitude of projects, aims, orientations, and paradigms that undergird them, identity development theory has shifted and changed over time.

Theory in social science research is understood as “a unified systematic causal explanation of a diverse range of social phenomena” (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 5).

This definition is an important dissemblance from alternative, non-western, and critical notions of theory, as they seek differing objectives. Gramsci (1971) as cited in Brookfield (2005) for example would suggest that all people are theorists and that we all theorize, breaking hold of the concealed notions of theory prevalent in academe. Further, “each person is a theorist because he or she participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is to bring into being new modes of thought” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 3). This is a sharp distinction from its utility in social science research as conceptually it is a set of ideas that attempt to offer an explanation of something to the world. Accordingly, theory varies in its complexity, having the capacity for broad application in review of social phenomena or micro-level practicality.

When applied to student affairs and adult development, theory finds its primary use “in answering the question of ‘why’ and is beneficial when it helps to explain a piece of the world to us” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 5). Brookfield (2005) denotes theory as a form of “meaning making, born of desire to create explanations that impose conceptual order on reality, however artificial this order might later turn out to be” (p. 5). Patton et al. (2016) purport that social science research has employed theory as “ways to make decisions and think about how to interpret individuals, environments, and organizations” (p. 5). In step with this traditional form of theorizing, Patton et al. (2016) determined theory to be a structure and formulated from deductive reasoning and singular understandings, calling it a “set of definitions and statements specifying a relationship between concepts” (p. 6). Generating new knowledge and research have become the more recent derivatives of theory, implemented by theorists as a way to predict, explain, and assess outcomes (Patton et al., 2016).

Student development theorists began organizing theories into what were originally called *theory clusters* or *families of theories* (Knefelcamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978; Jones & Abes, 2013). Among the clusters organized, these theories represented those that focused on “the individual, including social identities; those that examine students in the collegiate context such as student success and engagement, and learning; theories that explain the relationship of the campus environment to student development and success...organizations and institutions” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 6).

Development theory as a core component of student affairs practice stems from macro and micro forces brought on by the social resistance and unrest of the 1960s in the United States

that sought to understand how students were making sense of their inner and external commitments. Colleges and universities, not unlike our contemporary moment, were the active grounds for students' development as they came to understand themselves in relation to external movements. The interdisciplinary lean of student affairs/college student personnel first began to establish itself as the educators in the field looked to psychology and sociology for insight. The already noted work of Erikson (1950, 1968) in psychology, Piaget (1952) in sociology, and social psychologists, such as Lewin (1936), contributed, albeit indirectly, to the field's early negotiation of who the college student was and could be (Jones & Abes, 2013). These theorists provided information about human development, group dynamics, and the effect context had on interaction.

Foundational theories represent what have come to be known as the *first wave* of theory. First wave theories were based largely on samples of white men from middle to upper class socioeconomic backgrounds (Jones & Stewart, 2016). Further, Jones and Stewart (2016) establish that "these theories were also grounded in a positivist epistemological tradition that elevated quantifiable, measurable truths to be discovered, predicted, and generalized to all students" (p. 19). The core ideas of progression and additional complexity being associated with the developed self are found in these models. Along with Nevitt Sanford's (1967) thesis of development as *the organization of increasing complexity*, King (1994) paints a picture of complexity and its relevance to college student populations positing, "it may be helpful to think of students' growth and development as a kaleidoscope or mosaic of changing skills, attitudes, beliefs, and understandings, acknowledging that each student represents a slightly different set of shapes, colors, and textures" (p. 21).

According to King, growth was fundamental to development and finds parallels with Sanford's (1967) juxtaposition of change and growth. Change, by Sanford's estimation signaled an altered condition that may be positive or negative, progressive or regressive. Growth, on the other hand, points to expansion but may be either favorable or unfavorable to overall functioning (Patton et al., 2016). Growth for Sanford could be summarized by an individual's ability to synthesize and respond positively to influences. Other descriptions of student development have defined it as "the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities and as a positive change that occurs in the student (Jones & Abes, 2011, p. ?). Student development theorists have agreed with Miller and Prince's (1976) claim that "student

development is the application of human development concepts in postsecondary settings” (p. 3). It endeavors to map how students’ master increasingly complex developmental tasks, achieve self-direction, and become interdependent” (p. 3). These definitions make explicit the individualistic nature of student development in the first wave.

Knefelcamp, Widick, and Parker (1978), mindful of Sanford’s (1966) notion of challenge and support and central role of the institutional responsibility, surmised that educators “must know what development is—what changes can, do, and should take place in students and what particular factors serve to challenge and support them” (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 23). When creating development theory, Knefelcamp et al. (1978) maintained that a theoretical knowledge base was required. This basis, they argued, should firmly grasp the psychological and social process that facilitate development, mindful of who the college student is and what changes are occurring for the student. Moreover, they asked how the college environment encouraged or inhibited growth, and what the ends of development should entail. Given these considerations of how development has been cultivated, I move from here to discuss in greater detail the clusters of development that fall within this first wave, namely, psychosocial theory and cognitive structural theory.

Psychosocial development. Psychosocial theory, broadly, is an examination of “the *content* of development; that is, the important issues people face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others, and what to do with their lives” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 283). Important in this framing of the life span and decisions taken on within it, is that each stage of life presents a different developmental task. Typically, these tasks are viewed as age-linked, follow a linear trajectory, and are accompanied by compelling questions that press for resolution before one can move out of the present or into the subsequent stage. Movement from one stage to another is deliberated by one’s psychological and biological interaction with environmental and social demands that present. Culture in these instances becomes a defining factor as norms and roles are closely associated with the location one finds themselves at a socially expected time. A limitation of psychosocial theory, to be explicated by this study, is how it understands progress for the individual. The basis of successful negotiation is predicated on the individual’s ability to foster appropriate coping skills, or risk regression to earlier stages of development; “this tends to happen when individuals are placed in new and stressful situations” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 287). In attempts to understand the issues facing individuals at particular

points in their lives, Erikson, Marcia, Josselson, and Chickering and Reisser offered theoretical grounding.

Erikson was the first clinical psychologist to, formally, address the identity development journey from adolescence through adulthood. According to Erikson (1980) identity “connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others” (p. 109). Formally is an important discontinuance, for, as I will delineate later, theorists have thought about what it means to journey through this world, existentially, for many years and offered important insights into how that traversing could be negotiated for bodies systemically minoritized. In this sense, however, Erikson located the developing person in a social and historical moment, examining the social and institutional forces that might influence development across the life span. Conceptualizing development around the epigenetic principle, Erikson purported: “Anything that grows has a ground plan, and... out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole” (Erikson, 1968, p. 92). Erikson props up this ideal with his eight stages model of development. Each stage is distinguished by what Erikson called a crisis, or turning point, which he pointed to as a set of experiences that catalyzed movement from one stage to another. The fifth stage represents the posture by which identity development stands. It is here where individuals begin to cultivate a core sense of self, becoming more independent and seeking, perhaps for the first time, answers to some of the complex questions posed by life, such as: *who am I?* Responding to Erikson’s work, Cote and Levine (1987) as cited in Patton et al., (2016) defined identity crisis as: (1) Individuals should have reached a certain point in their cognitive development; (2) they should have experienced puberty; (3) they should be physically presenting adult characteristics; (4) they should feel a mounting pressure to define their identity. Erikson posited that individuals might struggle with delineating between how others seem and how they seem themselves. Erikson labeled this state of complexity “identity diffusion” to capture the notion that individuals lack clear sense of self or purpose. Identity should be understood, in this sense, as an ever-evolving process. As each crisis is mediated, a stronger sense of identity is taken on in stages six through eight where adults are establishing committed relationships (stage six), concerned with generativity (stage seven), and reflective and accepting of their life (stage eight).

Building on the work of Erikson, Marcia (1966) focused on stage five's questions of identity versus identity diffusion. Primarily based on the experiences of white men, Marcia outlined two important variables for identity formation: *exploration* (crisis) and *commitment*. Exploration, Marcia (1980) explains, involves questioning values and goals defined by parents or other authority figures and weighing various identity alternatives. The notion of commitment "refers to attaching ownership to pronounced choices, values, and goals, about which individuals are confident and optimistic" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 291). Marcia (1966) put forth the idea of identity statuses, which offered a richer understanding of how individuals make sense of the identity versus identity diffusion stage. These statuses consisted of: foreclosure, moratorium, achievement, and diffusion.

Foreclosure is directed largely by those regarded as authority figures in an individual's life. In this status, individuals do not stray from this wisdom for fear of engendering dangerous prospects for their life. Moratorium represents the time when individuals begin questioning the values of their authorities, in an effort to distinguish how they might look upon the world. Notably, however, this exploration occurs without any real sense of commitment. Individuals are expected to vacillate between positions as they wrestle with resistance and conforming to authority. Identity Achievement captures the formation a secure identity as "individuals sort through alternatives and make crucial choices that lead to strong commitments" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 292). Diffusion, thus, describes the placement where one either refuses to, or is willing to, commit to an internal authority. Seeking to understand the internal and developmental roots of identity formation in women, Josselson (1978/1991) explored the internal differences among the identity statuses proposed by Marcia (1966) "to explain why some women resolve their identity crisis while others avoid creating identity or fail to move beyond crisis" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 293).

Chickering (1969) took up the work of addressing the developmental issues faced by college students with respect to environmental conditions that could influence development. Viewing the establishment of identity as a core developmental issue, Chickering proposed seven vectors to add to the identity formation discourse. He used the term *vector* with intention, believing "that each seemed to have direction and magnitude—even though the direction may be expressed more appropriately by a spiral or steps than by a straight line" (p. 8). This conceptualization gets at the notion that development is not necessarily linear. The vectors as

articulated, while not rigid, are consistent with linearity in how they build on one another. This work takes into account several ontological aspects, specifically considering the emotional, interpersonal, ethical, and intellectual aspects of development. The seven vectors, espoused by Chickering and Reisser (1993) are: 1) *Developing competence*: this vector is likened to a pitchfork, with tines being intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence; 2) *Managing emotions*: this aspect reflects the ability to recognize and accept emotions, as well as to appropriately express and control them; 3) *Moving Through Autonomy toward Independence*: this vector is defined by its movement away from external desires for reassurance, affection, or approval; 4) *Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*: this vector includes the development of intercultural and interpersonal tolerance, along with the cultivation of intimate relationships; 5) *Establishing Identity*: here, there is the development of a sense of self, especially as it relates to social identities and one's body and appearance; 6) *Developing Purpose*: this vector seeks to develop clarity around an individual's vocational goals and interests; 7) *Developing Integrity*: this vector calls for humanizing values and congruence with one's personal values.

Cognitive structural development. Cognitive structural theories assist educators in understanding epistemological and intellectual development during the college years. Structure refers to the organizing filters for determining how people evaluate and make sense of events and experiences. Commonly conceptualized as stages, each one is thought to build upon and incorporate the position of the previous stages. Early theorists decided, thus, that successive stages should be more complex than previous ones. The individual's encounter with new information or experiences creates cognitive dissonance, which is succeeded by attempts to incorporate the ideas into their way of thinking (Patton et al., 2016). The thinking here is that when the information no longer fits into the current frame of thinking, that the individual must generate a new, more complex stage of reasoning (Patton et al., 2016).

An overview of cognitive-structural theories as it relates to student development theory introduces Perry's (1968/1970) theory of intellectual and ethical development. His concept is represented by three fundamental stages: a) *duality*: dualism signals a mode of meaning making in which individuals view the world in extremes: good v. bad, right v. wrong, black v. white. Learning in this stage tends to occur like a transaction because knowledge holders are seen as authorities; b) *multiplicity*: is represented by honoring of diverse views and positions, when *right*

answers are still being negotiated. This learning reflects individuals who are becoming more independent in their thinking; c) *relativism* relativistic positions are ones where individuals are viewing knowledge qualitatively, contextually defined, and based on strong support arguments; *commitment to relativism*: this process involves choices, decisions, and affirmations made from a relativistic standpoint (Patton et al., 2016).

In an effort to address what they perceived as women's lack of confidence in their own ability to think, Belenky et al. (1986) conducted research they hoped would help to liberate women's voices. Referring to the different ways of knowing as *perspectives*, Belenky et al. (1986) established five epistemological perspectives from which women view the world: *silence*; within this perspective women were coerced or came to be silenced by external authorities and ultimately viewed as voiceless; *received knowledge*; this perspective is characterized by listening to the voices of others and reproducing that knowledge as their own; *subjective knowledge*; knowledge is seen as residing in the self in this perspective; *procedural knowledge*; this perspective is distinguishing by two approaches to taking in new information—separate knowing and connected knowing. Separate knowing is denoted by its commitment to critical thinking and reason. Connected knowing is defined by its empathy and care (Belenky et al., 1986); *constructed knowing*; constructed knowledge develops “in the process of sorting out the pieces of the self and of searching for a unique and authentic voice” (p. 137).

Describing how individuals understand the nature of knowledge and use that wisdom to guide their thinking and behaviors, King and Kitchener (1994) developed the reflective judgment model. The model consists of seven stages that reflect assumptions about knowledge and the process of taking on new knowledge; each stage consists of different strategies for mediating ill-structured problems. The stages are discussed as: 1) *pre-reflective thinking* (stages 1-3), individuals have no concept that the knowledge they are holding on to is uncertain. Thinking in these stages is unsupported by evidence; 2) *quasi-reflective thinking* (stages 4-5), in these stages there is a sense that ill structured problems exist in and knowledge about such claims may be uncertain; and 3) *reflective thinking* (stages 6-7), in these stages knowledge is actively constructed and claims must be contextually situated (Patton et al., 2016).

Focusing on how individuals make moral judgments, not necessarily the content of those decisions, Kohlberg (1976) devised his theory of moral development. According to Kohlberg, two domains of cognition are related to moral reasoning and growth in both of these areas could

create a state of readiness for the development to occur. He noted these domains as: more general cognitive structures and social perspective taking. Kohlberg saw moral development as facilitated by the condition of exposure, suggesting that access to engagement with conflict in both reasoning and opinions, could stir the disequilibrium necessary for growth. Kohlberg's theory was encased by three levels, with two stages each: 1) *pre-conventional*, individuals' perspective is concrete and individually focused; 2) *conventional*, individuals in this stage identify with the rule of society; 3) *post-conventional/principled*, individuals based their decisions on principles that are consistent with their values, breaking from societies ear-marked patterns (Patton, et al., 1986).

Rest (1979) offered a more complex read of Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Specifically, "he examined how expectations about rules are known and shared and how interests are balanced" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 341). Rest questioned whether content and structure could be viewed as mutually exclusive. Building on the framework proposed by Kohlberg, Rest (1979) depicted the following: stage 1 *obedience*; stage 2 *instrumental egoism and simple exchange*; stage 3 *interpersonal concordance*; stage 4 *law and duty to the social order*; stage 5 *societal consensus*; stage 6 *non-arbitrary social cooperation* (pp. 22-23).

Gilligan (1977) conceptualized moral development differently from Kohlberg. In her framing, there was specific attention given to the notion of care, reflecting a concerted relational aspect in moral decision-making. She noted that women demonstrated care and responsibility, as opposed to the justice orientation characterized by Kohlberg. Gilligan "formed the basis for describing a developmental sequence that traces progressive differentiations in how women understand and judge" (Patton et al., 2016, p. 347). Outlining three levels and two transition points, Gilligan framed the theory as the following: Level 1 *orientation to individual and survival*; *First transition- from selfishness to responsibility*; Level 2 *goodness as self-sacrifice*; *Second transition from goodness to truth*; Level 3 *the morality of non-violence*.

Theory is not inherently liberatory (hooks, 1994) but has the potential to be if educators direct theorizing toward these ends. First wave theories functioned and accomplished what they set out to do in many respects, in the tracing of adult development. The *second wave* of theoretical evolution stretches the conversation to consider diverse populations.

Second Wave of Student Development

The second wave of theoretical perspectives on development sought to place the voices of marginalized students at the forefront more intentionally than first wave theories. What became necessary were theories that would speak to the unique developmental experiences and pathways of students' diverse and intersecting identities. Though still grounded in psychological origins, there was increased recognition of structures of inequality and the effects it would have on development (Jones & Stewart, 2016). The work of scholars on racial identity such as Cross (1978) and Helms (1993); ethnic identity development with Phinney (1990); and sexuality with Cass (1979) made visible in theory what were previously unread bodies and experiences. This pioneering work would draw upon the perspectives of other disciplines such as women and gender studies and ethnic studies, infusing into student development the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as "systems of oppression" that are "complex, pervasive, variable, persistent, severe, and power based" (Weber, 2010, p. 23). The attempt to foreground social identities in this wave required that theorists see identity as socially constructed, "because social identities are anchored in group memberships that are influenced and mutually constructed by larger societal contexts" (Jones & Stewart, 2016, p. 20). This distinction moved theory squarely into the constructivist paradigm. Abes (2016) notes "constructivism is the belief that multiple realities exist and that knowledge is co-constructed between individuals" (p. 11).

Integrated models of development. Self-authorship as a constructivist-development theory finds its genesis in the work of Robert Kegan (1982), who explained that constructivism is "the notion that we constitute reality, rather than somehow happen upon it" (Abes & Hernandez, 2016, p. 98). Jones and Stewart (2016) outline three assumptions made by Baxter Magolda and King (2012) as it pertains to constructivist development: The first precept is based on the notion of constructivism, that is, understanding that the self is shaped by community with others. Secondly, increasing complexity is a marker of development or movement along a continuum. Third, "individuals are assumed to be reliable witnesses of and articulate about their knowledge of self and others (that is, capable of making meaning of their own lives)" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 23).

As determined by Kegan (1982), developmentalism is the evolution of self toward increased complexity. This focus on the self is an explicit approach of constructivism as it proposes to co-construct meaning with the self at the center of analysis. According to Abes and Hernandez (2016), "self-authorship is a holistic theory because it integrates development in ways

of making meaning of knowledge (cognitive development), relationships with others (interpersonal development), and sense of self (intrapersonal development)” (p. 98). Within the concept, cognitive maturity requires viewing knowledge as contextual or as constructed. Increasing maturity happens as knowledge construction yields an internal belief system that guides thinking and behavior. With regard to the intrapersonal dimension, the concept requires coordinating various characteristics to form a coherent and enduring identity that is internally constructed and gains stability over time. In the interpersonal dimension, mature relationships are characterized by respect for both one’s own and others’ particular identities and cultures as well as by productive collaboration to negotiate and integrate multiple perspectives and needs (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004). Individuals, are thus, “situated within a developmental continuum that spans from an external orientation, referred to as following external formulas, to an internal orientation, which is self-authorship” (Abes & Hernandez, 2016, p. 99). Between the external and internal orientations is a place referred to as the *crossroads* that contains traces of external and internal formulas (Baxter Magolda, 2004, 2008; Berger, 2012). Exiting the crossroads is exemplified by the cultivation of an internal voice, which characterizes self-authorship.

These dimensions intertwine to form self-authorship, the capacity to internally define a coherent belief system and identity that coordinates mutual relations with others. According to Kegan (1994), “this new whole is an ideology, an internal identity, a self-authorship that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states” (p. 185). Drago-Severson (2004) put forth that, “self-authored knowers have the capacity to take responsibility for and ownership of their internal authority and to make up their own system of beliefs rather than being made up by someone or something outside themselves” (p. 27). These knowers are capable of identifying with abstract values and ideals, and longer term purposes, but also to prioritize and integrate competing values, applying the expectations of others to their own internal bench of judgment, and subsequently, an overarching personal system of belief.

Scholars have sought to apply self-authorship to diverse populations, namely high-risk students, Latina/o, and lesbian students. This research has remained consistent with the second wave theorizing and theory construction, rooting their methods in constructivism. In doing so, the studies have closely examined the individual and while focusing less on external, social forces. Pizzolato (2003) described how high-risk college students (e.g., poor academic

background, first-generation status, low socioeconomic status) possessed self-authored ways of knowing and internalized those values prior to college. These students, who encountered provocative experiences and challenges to their abilities developed self-authoring ways of knowing earlier than many participants in Baxter Magolda's (2001) longitudinal study. Abes and Jones (2004) applied self-authorship to a study on sexual orientation identity. This study determined that the maturation of an internal voice was central in how they made meaning of their lesbian identity and its relationship to other social identities. Torres and Hernandez (2007) facilitated a longitudinal study that aimed to understand Latina/o college student experience through the lens of self-authorship. This study showed a similar self-authoring movement, but submitted that making meaning of racism was an additional developmental task to be negotiated by Latina/o students (Torres & Hernandez, 2007). The authors concluded that this developmental task resulted in interruptions in development, namely stagnation.

Abes and Kasch (2007), employing a constructivist developmental approach, re-conceptualized self-authorship utilizing queer theory. Explicated through this examination was the notion "that student development theory did not yet adequately account for how heteronormativity contributes to lesbian students' negotiation of their multiple identities" (p. 18). Evidenced by this approach, there is a relationship between power and student development. Poststructural in nature, a queer theory approach deconstructed how heteronormativity shaped the development of self-authorship for lesbian college students. (Abes and Hernandez, 2016). Incorporating tenets of queer theory, specifically, performativity and liminality, into a reconceptualization of self-authorship, the authors proposed queer authorship as an alternative (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

Hernandez (2016), in an effort to understand how social forces influenced the journey toward self-authorship for Latina/os, incorporated Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical perspective in a study on meaning making of student activists. The study offered a revised conceptualization of the dimensions of self-authorship. This reframe resulted in a new developmental standpoint that sought to understand the individual in relation to her political, racialized, environment. The questions that emerged for the author shifted from (*Intrapersonal*) Who am I to How does my social world shape my sense of self as a racialized being?; (*Cognitive*) How do I know to How do I make meaning of my social world?; How does my social world shape my sense of self as a racialized being?; and (*Interpersonal*) What

relationships do I want with others? to What relationship do I want with others for the benefit of my social world? These questions are useful in showing how a theoretical perspective can reassign the focus of a study to consider social forces.

While the concept of self-authorship purports acknowledgement of diversity, and systems of oppression, specifically racism (Torres & Hernandez, 2007), it also makes several assumptions about the capacity of diverse learners that move me to question not only the attainability of self-authorship but also the desirability. As Pizzolato (2010) explains, merely including diverse participants, or being a researcher who holds diverse identities “does not negate the fact the existing research on diverse populations has largely failed to examine whether it is even appropriate to use existing constructs, measures, or methods to understand culture diverse students” (p. 190).

As mentioned, self-authorship is ill-prepared to take up the complex intersections of minoritized bodies and how those intersections are acted upon by larger systems of power and oppression. Adding to this claim, Abes and Hernandez (2016) note, “systems of oppression are influential in their shaping of context” (p. 100). Students who hold oppressed identities are engaged in the dual struggle of resisting systems and developing an internal voice by which to make meaning. Systems of oppression, unrelenting in their press, often render impossible the ability to act on the internal voice. Drawing on critical and poststructural theories, Abes and Hernandez (2016) outline several themes to reconsider the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of self-authorship: (a) *validating students with oppressed identities as knowers*: When people are systematically dismissed as sources of knowledge, viewing themselves as knowers is often not a possibility, making self-authorship also not a possibility; (b) *valuing communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self*: This approach respects cultural values rather than concluding that students who consider the maintenance of relationships in decision making (cognitive development) and relationships (interpersonal development) are less developed because they do not exemplify autonomy; (c) *acknowledging the difficulty and risks associated with agency and authenticity*: When situated within systems of oppression, both agency and authenticity are also dangerous and risky, and to some extent impossible, for students with marginalized identities; and (d) *recognizing the performativity of identity*: With no fixed categories toward which to progress, there is not a continuum of developmental complexity

that culminates in a complex notion of self. Development is redefined as the performance itself with no complexity or category attached.

Alongside the assumptions named, these themes illustrate limitations and necessitate a re-imagination of theory that views and responds to the world through bodies of minoritized people. Too often, their experiences exist only as the derivative; this worship service is an attempt to chart a new way forward. Abes and Hernandez (2016) submit, “critical and poststructural perspectives can be applied to rethink the nature of development, self-authorship, and resistance” (p. 100). Further critical approaches, which foreground context, systems of oppression, and identity standpoints, can be applied to developmental outcomes as a way to reimagine what dignity and personhood could look like in this United States context.

New Testament: Assembling a Third Wave

For our New Testament reading, let us turn to the book Galatians chapter two. Beginning at verse twenty, let us recite:

I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith. - Galatians 2:20

In the gospel as it written by James Baldwin (1963), whom you will hear from shortly, he sets up an unsettling ultimatum. He notes, “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him” (p. 47). This tension seems distant from the place of unquestionable submission to Christ as denoted by Paul, the writer of this passage in Galatians. Baldwin, like many of us, has questions of and about God, and the ways “the concept” has been wielded in the American imagination. Perhaps bolder than many, Baldwin...

James Baldwin (JB)- (lifts his head and smiles) Freer!

*Indeed, **Freer** than many, he publicly tests this passage Galatians, calls it to the fire and demands a serious interrogation of what it means to “live this life in the flesh by the faith.” Paul seems to be hinting at an expectant grief associated with living within a knowledge of Christ. Resolved, he has made the decision that because of this knowledge he is chosen to accept whatever may come from his commitment to Christ. Baldwin’s plea, feels almost like the burden of heartache and disappointment, for the hell he has been through does not speak to a God deserving of Paul’s (our) submission. Holding these two gospels in conversation, I am persuaded that Paul and Baldwin are calling for the same thing—an accountable and actionable faith that is not predicated on a God out of touch with the oppressed (whitewashed) nor abstract revelations of a shallow faith. As such, our “theories of the flesh” must invoke a dissolution with accumulated definitions that ease our understandings of knowledge and being and test our assumptions about humanity now and in a (un)predictable future.*

How do we repel and/or reverse the constructivist logic that encased theory construction? “For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde, 1984, p. 12). Theoretical contributions that push the envelope and seek to critique and

dismantle systems of oppression constitute what is emerging as the *third wave* of development theory. How do we know what we know? What is the nature of my reality? How have I been made and how do I choose to be in this reality? As introduced above, and will be expounded up further, these fundamental questions lie at the foundation of what I believe should be the sociopolitical turn in adult development theory and this third wave moment.

Sociopolitical

A primary aim of this worship service is to give language to what I propose should be a sociopolitical turn in development theorizing. The treatment of this foundational element here is intended to keep the reader abreast of this developing dimension. This categorization, while not fully defined, is taking shape in this worship service governed by several defining features. Engineering the sociopolitical turn, I argue, is the “existential situation” (Gordon, 1997, p. 70). Secondly, as alluded to above, the sociopolitical cannot be absent of the ramifications of history. Embodied in every situation are sediments, assumptions, and prescriptions about what an individual is. Third, the concept of agency is central to sociopolitical theorizing. The capacity for self-definition points to our existence as subjects who “are capable of experiencing the self as finite sites of agency in relation to the surrounding world” (Henry, 1997, p. 15). Through one’s presumed sense of agency, they make estimates about the potential outcomes of their self-assertion. Specifically, they measure how the success or failure of such will instruct attitudes toward existence. Historically, to control agency in the face an external world, theory has relied on empirical, scientific reasoning. This logic seemingly believed if one could decode inscriptions governing the material world, they could then rewrite them in codes that increase agency (Henry, 1997). The difference is that the *non-being* I intend to confront is not natural, but a process of reified power structures that demand decoding and (re) coding capabilities; this, as I will discuss, is possible as theory in the flesh. One example of a theory in the flesh is the notion of *Black existentialism*, which is emblematic of sociopolitical theorizing.

*Sit no longer blind, Lord God,
deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering.
Surely Thou, too are not white...but whisper—
speak—call, Great God, for Thy silence is white terror to our hearts!
—W.E.B Du Bois*

Black existentialism. In the excerpted poem preceding this section, Du Bois (1920) is raising questions about the silence and inactivity of God. This theological picture would be an enduring leitmotif of Black resistance literature, namely a white God, alongside white ways of knowing and being, innately incapable of responding to the plight of Black bodies (Morrison, 1997). As it relates to this worship service, the exemplar of chronic absenteeism invites a radical reinterpretation of classical modes of thought and practice. Reinterpretation must stretch the questions that have traditionally guided our understandings of meaning-making. One specific shift is moving from the query, *who am I*, to *what have I been made to be*? The latter question pushes constructivist subjectivity to a place of criticality as it forces one to contend with the history and historicity, stories and assumptions, the ephemerality of Black bodies always in motion across time—palimpsest. Callier (2018) calling upon M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2014) denotes palimpsest as “time and history collapsed, rewritten upon itself, effaced, and revealing in the present time glimpses of a still/here, present past” (p. 17). Of interest in this turn is a desire to understand minoritized bodies in their markedly different situations and to articulate a “liberation project that does not lead to the estrangement of humanity from itself” (Gordon, 1997, p. 70).

I can’t read this: An illegible humanity. I remember going to grammar school as a boy. I, too, remember coming home to school. I didn’t feel like I was behind during the day, in fact, I was a ripe and curious learner who was always interested in the next challenge, so I didn’t always understand the *extra work* that I need to do. If there was an agreed upon subject of improvement, by all of my teachers, it was my cursive handwriting. It was poor by most *professional* accounts. While neat, most readers would have to strain to make out the letters. Of course, I didn’t think so. Incredulously, I would mutter something in my defense when asked about it, “I have a preference for writing at angles...I like it better this way.” *Each word carried significance.* My retorts were not entertained. White teachers would often comment on my writing, suggesting that I need additional practice. *I can’t read this*, notes coming home would surmise. *He will have to do it again.*

Internalized Lesson: *You are not legible. The way you move through the world is not legible.* My mother, monitoring my time closely between play and structure, would ensure that I worked on my cursive, to her satisfaction, before I did anything else. Despite my preferences, and the agitation I no doubt caused my grammar school teachers, my mother never questioned my

capacity to adjust. *I know you can do this, Wilson. They need to be able to read your work if you want to do well; show me you can do it.*

Internalized Lesson: *You are legible. The way you move through the world is beautiful and creative, but others will not always be able to see it. These are lessons your “grammar school” won’t teach you. Your Black body, like your hand writing, has been the subject of American grammar, and expected to adjust accordingly.* This arrangement marks “a theft of the body—willful and violent severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67).

Making an argument that language and terminology are historically embedded, carrying with them epistemological and ontological weight, Hortense Spillers (1987), explains:

Embedded in a bizarre axiological ground, they demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding; they are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean. In that regard, the names by which I am called in the public place render an example of signifying property plus. In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made in excess over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. (p. 65)

Illustrating the power of naming, and the degree to which minoritized bodies broadly, and Black female bodies in particular, have been misnamed, Spillers is accentuating the (im)possibility and failure of minoritized subjects to function Western logics of reason and rationality. Here, Spillers is encouraging the reader to question the logic that has framed our familiar conceptualizations of human agency, calling into question the historical residue that permeates the embodiment of Black bodies. The tragic terrorism scripted on Black bodies marks points in the arc of history where parameters were outlined as to who or what one was signified as and capable of becoming.

In the United States, the enslaved, and the offspring of the enslaved, have an identity undefined, until or unless, awarded by those who dominate them. Unrecognized in slavery, and thus absent of meaning, was dominion or acts of agency that extended, but was not limited to, naming. Spillers notes, “the captivating party does not only ‘earn’ the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but gains consequently, the right to name and *name it*” (p. 69). The powers of distortion that are owned by the dominant community act as levers of citizenship

under their prerogative. Situated acutely in an her/historical context, the captive body still surrenders to a governing episteme that remains, however muted or disguised, in the originating metaphors of captivity and dismemberment “so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topic, show movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again” (p. 68). This order of symbolism and herstorical/historical tracing represents what Spillers calls an “*American grammar*.” A framing of the Black body that starts from the *beginning*, under the pressures of events consisting of colonization of an indigenous Africa, the Middle passage, and the establishment of institutional slavery, necessitates a rupture of contemporary cultural understandings of dignity, personhood, and student development construction.

I sense my mother’s intentions, and her tension. This wasn’t about cursive. It was about existing in a way that was legible; to be understood. It was about discipline; about the ways our voices, bodies, and spirits are disciplined through and along lines that reinscribe our own suppression. Such a discipline reinforces what Sylvia Wynter (1994) terms our “narratively condemned status” (p. 70).

Internalized Question: *How do I become and remain undisciplined?*

Cultivating agency in the wake^{vi}. Existentialism deals with “the systematic formulation by an individual or group of an ongoing consciousness of its existence that is first, concretely, realized in everyday intersections and practices” (Henry, 1997, p. 15). Gordon (1997) seemingly agrees with this statement when he comments, “any theory that fails to address the existential phenomenological dimension...suffers from a failure to address the situational dimension” (p. 70). A consciousness of existence, thereby, is determined by the constraints and possibilities experienced in one’s life/existential situation. Existentialism, as a concept, is bound to epistemology (ways of knowing) and ontology (ways of being). Epistemology refers to persons’ assumptions about the nature, limits, and certainty of knowledge (Pizzolato, 2010; Taylor, 2016). Ontology, according to Kincheloe (2011) “helps us in the effort to gain new understandings and insights as to who we can become...as we discern the forces that have made us that way” (p. 334). Asking ontological questions suggests that the effort to explain complex process-cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions through a reductionist study of their components, outside of the larger processes of which they are a part of, is inherently problematic. Development theory in its current rendering tightropes on the brink of idealism, unwillingly it

seems, to grapple with the realism that undergirds our oppressive realities. Taking my cue from the critical theorist Derrick Bell, our theorizing ought to move judiciously:

I would urge that we begin...with a statement that many will wish to deny, but none can refute. It is this Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain dominance. This is a hard to accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on... That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph. (Bell, 1992, p. 373)

Foundational theories of adult development do not translate well or consider people outside of the ivory walls, nor do they fully or appropriately recognize bodies within its gates. Bodies that do not fit the analysis of these frameworks are relegated to the status of other and thereby forced to stitch themselves into tightly knitted developmental quilts. Third wave theory may provide the epistemological insubordination for bodies located at the intersections to invent themselves anew. Anzaldúa (1987) explains this tension when she conveys “every bit of self-faith I’d painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me... [I was following a deviant road]. Something was wrong with me...[I was beyond tradition]” (p. 16). Historically, women of Color have had to forge identities for themselves, having always recognized themselves as dialectically oppressed, and in possession of human agency (Anzaldúa, 1987; Dillard, 2000; Collins, 1990; Hurtado, 2003). They do not experience themselves as “floating signifiers,” as “dark others,” or “incoherent subjects” (Hurtado, 2003, p. 221). Daring to see themselves as more than *other*, women of Color advance a way of knowing and being that can be articulated and self-defined, constituted as *theory in the flesh*. Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981) discuss that this frame is an attempt to bridge contradictions through naming, the telling of stories, and giving language to their experience. They note “a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (p. 23).

The interrogation of cultural elements with an agenda set on reviving the *things we have learned to forget* raises questions about the legitimacy of patterns and schools of thought that inform our colonial truths. The humanity of those in the Black diaspora depends on a vigilant

(re)membering and persistent reinterpretation of their life worlds and lived experiences. Critical theorizing with Black bodies at the center and as the subject of analysis will inevitably lead us toward *endarkened epistemologies* (Dillard, 2000) that challenge physically and psychologically a dependency on white/Eurocentric preferences for reason and rationality, (i.e., a colonial complex). The manifestation of such a colonial complex is evident in Baldwin's (1985) exhortation about Negro children when he warns "long before the Negro child perceives this difference, and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it" (p. 342). Baldwin speaks of a living nightmare that elders and guardians cannot sufficiently prepare children, and so they wait for the "mysterious and inexorable punishment...behind their [parents'] authority stands another, nameless and impersonal, infinitely harder to please, and bottomlessly cruel. He does not know what the boundary is, and he can get no explanation of it" (p. 342).

The "another" that Baldwin refers to is the infamous antagonist that shadows the existence of systemically minoritized, particularly Black, bodies in a Western, United States context. This haunting stands shoulder to shoulder with the question of blackness, thereby raising the question as posed by Lewis Gordon (1997), "what is to be done in a world of nearly a universal sense of superiority to, if not universal hatred of, black folk?...what is to be understood by black suffering" (p. 1)? I am contending that these are inherently epistemological and ontological questions that are part of a rich tradition of *theorizing in the wake* (Sharpe, 2016) of *crisis*, representing my conceptualization of Black existentialism.

Christina Sharpe (2016) takes up the construct of existence in the wake, by outlining its multiple definitions. Among them, she describes wake as "a state of wakefulness or consciousness" (p. 4). This framing pushes me backward to definitive moments in my life where I understood that *freedom would be a constant struggle*. I include the personal here to illustrate the type of theorizing that Black existentialism renders. Calling attention to my mother's rearing practices, in the wake of crisis, will explain, in part, my first experiences with embodied theorizing, providing a backdrop for why it serves as an existential practice. According to Saidiya Hartman, "the autobiographical example," consistent with my use of Black feminist performance auto/ethnography, "is not a story that folds onto itself...it's really about trying to look at historical and social processes and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them" (Sharpe, 2016, p. 8). I recall early mornings with

yawning limbs and branches both stretching themselves out before the sunrise. It was the mornings, before breakfast and the hustle of running showers. The mornings where fog draped over the pine trees and dewdrops anointed the grass beneath the leaves. I was just waking up, but Mama, had been awake for hours. Her days seemed to never end. The last face I saw before bed and the first one to see me it when we started again. “Good morning, my son.” Her voice was cool and easy. A fortune, I never ceased to give thanks for, now and in those days, as little boys did/do not always make it home to see their mothers where I come from. Black mothers know this reoccurring nightmare too well. “Good morning, my son,” was a reminder to a world that would seek to *sift me—my spirit— like wheat*, and return me to her empty and void, that for at least one more day, *they had failed*.

And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren- Luke 22:31-32

Wake: A state of wakefulness or consciousness

My Mama was/is smart. She knew that this world was unsatisfied with her joy, and like it has done before, it will try with all deliberate speed available to strip her of it. More than an inkling, she knew that this world was terrified of Black children, which is why they rushed so fiercely to *adult* them. Perhaps, by dismembering them from the safety of childhood, they could manage them. History tells us why this the case—*Partus sequitur ventrem* was a law instituted before my physical arrival to this world, but a memory that I inherited and have lived with. The parameters of the law went about outlining the impossibility of childhood for Black children. *Partus sequitur ventrm* translates to mean, “that which is brought forth follows the womb” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 15). Born in, and through, Black passage, my ark was one that carried with it living memories of a world that has never seen the Black body as anything more than property. The legacy of which survives in studies that show how Black bodies, though known to be in pain, are thought to *feel less*, and thereby forced to endure more. Or, the ones that reflect how Black children as young as 9 years old are consistently seen as being older than they are. These truths go a long way in divorcing the Black child from the comfort of youth.

Sharpe (2016) defines this, too, as a wake. The living memory of oppression coming to bear on the black body. The consummate engine that steers and directs ambitions, desires, and

possibilities. “Good morning, my son” was an existential intervention, although I did not have the language to define it as such then. Grounded in logics of critical race realism, my Mama sought to affirm what had been deemed socially unlovable. She aimed to remind me that I was *somebody’s little boy*; I belonged to someone, to somewhere. Despite the rolling hills and plains that I would have to climb after breakfast and before I stepped on to the stoop in the evening, Mama saw me, hoped, dreamed, and was waiting for me to return.

Wake: the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow

There was an active awareness, an undeniable certainty within my Mama of how life had been structured for and around us; the medley of peace that saturated her words was a cunning maneuver to coat the ugly truth of emancipation, namely that it was an unfinished project. *Good morning, my son*, told me before deceit and miseducation could entangle me, that my *body was legible, intelligible, and worthy of acknowledgment*; that my *presence in this world* was good. Good is not simple language in the wake, where one lives “the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 15). Hartman (2007) agrees,

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too- long memory, but because black lives are imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. (p. 6)

As the realities of that terror are often minimized, if not erased, Mama understood that our bodies are vulnerable to epistemic and material violence in this Western, United States context. Like Trayvon, like Winston, like Raquel, like me, this is the body and flesh, by which anything can be done. This, I assume, was the reason Mama rose up so early. She had to make her case, to plead with God for us.

I (re)member my mother’s prayers. Early and earnest, while we were yet sleeping, she pressed for futures despite he(ou)r inheritance. I used to wonder, “why does she pray so much? What is she trying to get through to God?” She cried for us and on behalf of us, with a collection

of tears from mothers before her and those to follow. They were not sympathetic tears, for she knew that to be adorned in midnight hues was to be undeserving of sympathy. No, her tears were the embodiment of *fighting words* (Hill Collins, 1998)—a posture and vocabulary girded for confrontation. They were currents filled with oppositional knowledge, scripts of hope in the face of nihilism and realism in place of false generousities. Though her vocal chords carried no audible sounds, the desperation with which her tears fell taught me how to reconfigure my sense of identity, personhood, and possibility by holding on to both memory and desire. With no allegiance to a future engulfed with restrictions for Black bodies, my mother taught me how to deal with *living in the wake* (Sharpe, 2016), or in and with the terror visited upon our bodies historically, politically, spatially, legally, psychologically, and materially, by confronting without despair, the reality of our lot. My mother was teaching me how to *speak up*. As a witness and subject of her appeals, it was my first experience with intercession, for “to command things with words is to practice *magic*” (Jahn, 1958, p. 135). *What does it look like for me to practice word magic?* As it relates to Black existentialism, it was epistemological and ontological theorizing about our presence in the diaspora. Mama’s prayers were an imagined response, a way of seeing in subjection, and perhaps most importantly, a method for (re)inhabiting our bodies, minds, voices, and spirits while in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). I was witnessing the magical and beginning to feed the rumblings of my spirit to possess what Mama had.

Could I cry for others—intercede; embody theory as representation of the possible—the way Mama did? Was I capable of speaking with the same fire, consistency, and resolve as a praying mother, who, daily, didn’t know if her children would make it back to her?

Black existentialism requires that theorists appropriately take up *the situation* of questioning or inquiry itself. Doing so would center concerns of “freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation” (Gordon, 1997, p. 3). Adding further definition to *the situation*, it is described as “the lived-or meaning-context of concern” (p. 3). Theorizing, thus, is fundamentally conditioned by the question of: *what does it mean to exist in the body that I have, in the particular moment that I am in* (Hartman, 1997; Sharpe, 2016)? This version of theorizing, according to Rabaka (2009), is inextricably “linked to progressive political practice, that highlights and accents Black radicals and Black revolutionaries’ answers to the key questions posed by the major forms and forces of domination and discrimination” (p. 16). As such, to take up the theorizing student development from the standpoint of Black existentialism

is to place this research project in an explicitly critical paradigm, applying two major dialectical presuppositions: the dialectics of deconstruction and reconstruction and the dialectics of domination and liberation. As stated above, my endeavor, thus, is to demonstrate the ways in which Black existential discourse contributes to the deconstruction and reconstruction of conventional student development theory, specifically self-authorship, by bringing the traditions into critical discursive dialogue.

As prophets of experience, organic Black intellectuals, or those who participate in and are entangled with the communities they would not only analyze but also uplift, dealt ferociously with endemic intersecting oppressions. Historically and contemporarily, this political thought adds shape to understandings of the world and what it means to exist within it. Stewards of a prophetic tradition, Black intellectuals harnessed the creativity and ingenuity of African indigenous culture to introduce counter-hegemonic standpoints that offered practical solutions for their haunted reality, and in a multi-vocal breath, images of a liberated future. The creative fusion of critical analysis and pragmatism informed the ways Black existential intellectuals, “envisioned collectively, in struggle, what a revolutionary future might look like and how we might bring this new world into being” (Imarisha, Kelley, & Horstmann, 2016, para 5). This Black prophetic tradition illustrates how people in transformative social movements, moved/shifted their ideas, rethought inherited categories, and tried to locate and overturn blatant, subtle, and invisible modes of domination (Imarisha, Kelley, & Horstmann, 2016).

Illuminating in this is the presence of mind of Black thinkers to connect their criticality to the livelihood of minoritized bodies, who are charged with confronting terror indefinitely. As such, this is not thought for thought’s sake, but thought for life and liberation’s sake. This style of discourse conveys an active *thinking and doing* of disruption, revolution, and becoming. A process of thinking and doing is estranged from fixed psychological conceptions that have constructed thin theoretical models designed to assess development placement. Advanced in the discursive practice of self-definition is the continuous creation and re-creation of a contemporary theory that offers alternatives for what is and projections for what could be.

Rightfully so, any historical exploration must contend with the fact that theory, regardless of its flexibility and openness, is context-specific and the evolution of a particular set of circumstances. Principles and ways of being are nested in social and political moments, hidden agendas, power, privilege, and oppression. In agreement, Rabaka (2006) notes, “similar to finely

crafted woodcarving or hand-woven garments, theories retain the intellectual and cultural markings of the markers, and although they can ‘travel’ and cross borders they are optimal in their original settings” (p. 138). Theories, do in fact, lose some of their original power when taken out of their original context. To ignore the workings of this permeating overlay is naïveté and dishonest as it has a direct effect on how one experiences the world.

In the same breath, however, Western culture has been adamant about the separation of *indigenous tongues* from their speakers. Said another way, the organization of Western culture assumes a more than modest level of cooperation and assimilation, thereby severing historical memory from those who rely heavily on its curriculum as a way of life. The very markers of acceptable citizenship occur when we metaphorically split ourselves by hyphen. If this is the backdrop for the making of citizens, it would make sense that fashioning an alternative would begin first by re-visitation of what was forfeited. The goal, I argue, is not to replace one ideological frame with another, but to reflexively consider how we can be aided in our current struggle by the labor, multiple optics, and perspectives of those who have gone before.

In reaching back to theoretical foundations, the paradigms, points of departure, and schools of thought as they pertain to critical theory tend to focus on the Frankfurt School theorists and philosophers. In most disciplines, including education, it has been the interdisciplinary borrowing and building upon White frameworks, such as Piaget (1950), for interpreting the psychological self that have been the basis by which theory has been constructed to speak to minoritized people. Unique to this worship service study is the insistence that theorizing about the brilliance of minoritized bodies is limited in scope if researchers focus exclusively on practices and scholarship that seek to work within or invert a Eurocentric/white canon. The function of white supremacy is such that scholarship depends on the white intellectual tradition to analyze and make sense of minoritized experiences, distrusting of less-acclaimed perspectives put forward on the backs of minoritized people. While this does not mean that they are not useful, I am concerned with what possibilities are probable given this type of theorizing. Concomitantly, in order to transgress the prescribed boundaries of theory, I must be willing to peek into places for brilliance I might not otherwise look, building from the ground up. I endeavor to ask the uneasy questions of, whom are the individuals and where are the places one tends to go to find brilliance?

Mother loose my tongue or adorn me with a lighter load--Audre Lorde

Exhortation II: Revolutionary Hope pt. 2

Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.

-Isaiah 6:8

In 1984, the bookend year for the sermon's historical analysis, *we* (Audre [Lorde-AL] and Jimmy [Baldwin-JB]) met at Hampshire College, greeting each other in the service of *Revolutionary Hope*. Deemed two of the foremost thinkers of our time, the conversation was raw, unbridled...productive. Excerpts of our dialogue are included below as a reminder of where our conversation ended, and how we will pick it up in this worship service. It is hard to extract full meaning without the entire interview but these remnants introduce some of our basic assumptions about being in this world, Black existentialism, Black feminism, and the purposes of theory now and into the future:

JB: One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic, and I mean 'schizophrenic' in the most literal sense. To be a Black American is in some ways to be born with the desire to be white. It's a part of the price you pay for being born here, and it affects every Black person. We can go back to Vietnam, we can go back to Korea. We can go back for that matter to the First World War. We can go back to W.E.B. Du Bois...who campaigned to persuade Black people to fight in the First World War, saying that if we fight in this war to save this country, our right to citizenship can never, never again be questioned – and who can blame him? He really meant it, and if I'd been there at that moment, I would have said so, too, perhaps. Du Bois believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I. So do you. That's why we're sitting here.

AL: I don't, honey. I'm sorry, I just can't let that go past. Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. And I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it. I was Black. I was female. And I was out – out – by any construct wherever the power lay. So, if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out.

JB: You are saying you do not exist in the American dream except as a nightmare.

AL: That's right. And I knew it every time I opened *Jet*, too. I knew that every time I opened a Kotex box. I knew that every time I went to school. I knew that every time I opened a prayer book. I knew it, I just knew it.

JB: It is difficult to be born in a place where you are despised and also promised that with endeavor – with this, with that, you know – you can accomplish the impossible. You're trying to deal with the man, the woman, the child – the child of whichever sex – and he or she and your man or your woman has got to deal with the 24-hour-a-day facts of life in this country...

AL: Even worse than the nightmare is the blank. And Black women are the blank. I don't want to break all this down, then have to stop at the wall of male/female division. When we admit and deal with difference; when we deal with the deep bitterness; when we deal with the horror of even our different nightmares; when we turn them and look at them, it's like looking at death: hard but possible. If you look at it directly without embracing it, then there is much less that you can ever be made to fear.

AL: But we have to define *ourselves* for each other. We have to redefine ourselves for each other because no matter what the underpinnings of the distortion are, the fact remains that we have absorbed it. We have all absorbed this sickness and ideas in the same way we absorbed racism. It's vital that we deal constantly with racism, and with white racism among Black people – that we recognize this as a legitimate area of inquiry. We must also examine the ways that we have absorbed sexism and heterosexism. These are the norms in this dragon we have been born into – and we need to examine these distortions with the same kind of openness and dedication that we examine racism...

After five hours of conversation, we did not come up with wide-reaching solutions to the many problems our communities face. Perhaps, we simply muddled the waters in such a way that would make *easy definitions* of personhood impossible. For that, we offer no apology. Our hope is that our presence in this worship service would continue wading in those same muddy waters.

Pointing the Way Forward: Commencing Thoughts and What Lies Ahead

We began these Scripture Readings by tarrying with the students of the 1960s. The fire of their exhortation, made public at institutions of higher education, constituted a longing to engage with material that reflected their lives. Their instigation yielded promising dividends, as academic departments responded by establishing Black Studies departments at hundreds of universities from the late 1960s onward through the 1980s. The call for Black Studies, as it relates to the worship service, should be read as a yearning and earnest inclination by these students to cultivate a sense of self that could sustain the wilderness journey. If this was the red sea moment, it was Black students who found a way to part the water; if it was Jericho, it was their march that trumpeted the crumbling walls, if only momentarily, animating the thought that alternative ways of knowing and being existed and deserved a presence in academic annals.

Unfortunately, most theoreticians did not respond accordingly. As punctuated above, student development theory evolved between the 1950s and 1980s in a manner resonant of white/European notions of development. Within this model, *complexity* is attached to objectivity, rationality, and movement along a trajectory, specifically in the first wave of development. While the second wave did more to consider diverse identities, the regulating constructivist logic that undergirds these models stifles their potential to fully take up *the situation* of Black bodies in a Western, United States context. Movement toward a sociopolitical paradigm will fertilize the harvest of the third wave moment.

This paradigmatic shift, I posit, orbits several preliminary tenets, as outlined in *New Testament: Assembling a Third Wave*, in the Scripture Readings section above. These include *existential situations, history, and agency*. I am arguing that Black existentialism exemplifies one such example of this paradigmatic shift, brought to bear in and through the lives of Black intellectuals, organic and traditional alike. For the purposes of this worship service, I emphasize the organic, with attention to Audre Lorde and James Baldwin. My focus here is informed by their historical significance and location between 1950 and 1992. Facilitating a Black feminist analysis of their work will affirm, I submit, a critical theoretical canon, occurring alongside the student development theoretical canon, and lay the groundwork for a robust construction of theory in this third wave moment.

This is the word, for us the people...

Thanks be to God.

Song of Preparation: When and Where I Enter

We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. [...] The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song."

-Zora Neale Hurston

Beloved,

With great expectations of what is possible, I hope that you will sing and hear the words of the songs that

follow, breaking up the fallow ground of your hearts and readying yourself to receive what is uniquely yours.

Righting What I Refused to Write

If you would, turn in your Bibles to the book of Exodus, chapter 3. This portion of scripture brings us into an intimate, clarifying, and dare I say, defining moment in the life and appointed destiny of Moses. Beginning at verse 7, we read:

"And the LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people, which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows;"

"And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey;"

"Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them."

"Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt."

“And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?”

“And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.”

“And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?”

“And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.”

Let us skip down to Chapter 4, verse 10. The scripture continues by saying:

And Moses said unto the LORD, O my LORD, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.

The significance of this passage is one I am only now beginning to grasp. The words are familiar. The setting and plot are recognizable. The understanding that this was the moment that Moses received his *agenda* is not lost on me. What’s different, you may ask, is the revelation. I have never been able to fully make sense of this parable, because I never recognized, or believed for that matter, that I was called into an agenda that I didn’t feel prepared to take up. I know how to persist when things are difficult, but accomplishing tasks does not always mean that *the necessary* work was completed. I know how to stay in my lane. I know what I can handle and am fairly honest with myself about things I cannot. For these reasons, I could never truly relate to Moses because even in the assignments of this life, that were positioned to test me, or in the case of Moses, reveal something about myself, this world, those around me, or God, I have not always been obedient to the call, in all of its weight and authority. Put another way,

I have seen burning bushes before. Several times.

Mama used to carry them in her belly on rainy days.

I used to wonder why nothing could drown their flare

Consumed with no ash in sight

Is she the God that Moses spoke of?

Or do Black women just control fire
Either way, that is a God that deserves my praise...

Let me be clear...I have seen revelations, the likes of what was set before Moses, but all of those instances are cited in and through the bodies of Black women. There is godliness in their bodies worthy of my reverence and necessary for living. In the casual genius of Black women, who continue to *make a way out of no way* in the present, I observe the power of Black feminisms' embrace of the body, and what was/is possible to learn through it. If it is true that through their bodies—our bodies—we may come to understand critical representations for existence, then I was unconvinced that my body was built for the type responsibility that Black women have carried in them to outline a philosophy for living that could inform our theorizing. Again, if this is true, then my great responsibility, I assumed, was to bear witness to the things I have seen.
So I thought.

The burning bush event is significant not just because it breaks with the logic of scientific reason. It is significant because of what it teaches us about recognition. Namely, recognition without a devotion to witnessing threatens the opportunity to experience freedom—for the self and the community.

I
turned
away

from the call. Refused to believe that I, the proverbial and contested *n of I and autoethnographic I*, could possess the insight, language, or tongue to speak about the fire I was harboring. Like Moses, I pointed to proven ministers—surely, Lorde and Baldwin would have more to say about my yearnings than I could.

I saw
the
blaze
from
afar

and
ignored
it

thinking that the answers I was seeking as they relate to student development theory should come from ministers who had already lived the gospels they preached. There is possibility, I thought, and still believe, in revisiting and resurfacing an existential canon from our prophetic thinkers and doers, but the revelation in the bush as I understand it, is to also bear witness to how the very thing I am proposing is not an abstract conceptualization that I have no record or experience with.

No!

What happened to me...what is happening in my body...in this text...is a manifestation of self-definition.

I
am
the host

not the guest and desire to demonstrate in what follows that the body matters and should be studied as an intelligible entity, capable of producing the knowledge, I first *felt* to be true, referred to as a *theory in the flesh*. My body, as I will further articulate, understood self-definition, before I was able to attach words to the theory. It was being mapped onto my body, as I stood on the grounds of Black feminism, on stages across the country.

Acts 26:16 reads, “But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and as a minister and as a witness [to testify, with authority,] not only to the things which you have seen, but also to the things in which I will appear to you”

Black feminism, inscribed with oppositional knowledge, disrupts hegemony and distortions configured about the lives of Black women and minoritized others. Contemporary

topics in education that explicitly reflect Black feminist thinking and theorizing include, but are not limited to, African American female educators (Dixon & Dingus, 2008); Black women's experiences in higher education (Mabokela & Green, 2001); and gender and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy (Evans-Winter & Ivie, 2009); Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010); Black women's identity development (Porter, 2013). Despite its potential across the education continuum, it remains underutilized and theorized in higher education, specifically as it relates to development theory. This oversight is due in part to researchers' inability, and unwillingness, to grapple with Black feminisms' intellectual tradition, alongside a storied history of exclusion. In what follows, I bear witness to *the things that I have seen* as a way to open windows for things that will appear to us, but more importantly *through us*.

Black and Male and Feminist

Men's relationship(s) to feminisms are at best complicated, and at worst, appropriating and domineering. A sincere awareness of the patriarchal influences that are learned and transmitted through specific cultural practices can lead to an informed exploration of critical feminist theories (in my case Black feminist thought) and a resistance to the constructed impulses of hegemonic masculinity. This posture is insufficient, however, as a rectifying agent in the conundrum of men's position (with)in feminisms. Acts of reflexivity and discursive self-renderings unavoidably facilitate the creation of idealized versions of a unified or exemplary self that has performed all of the necessary labor required of those who support of the work of feminisms.

The project of men's engagement with feminism, necessarily, is troubled that much more as it pertains to the discussion of men of color and their employment of feminisms of women of color. A relationship problematized by the historic failure of men of color to provide accurate readings of feminist theory and practice, adding to a discourse of unintelligibility and marginalization of women of color, there is justifiable reason for suspicion (Smith, 1977). I acknowledge, understand, and own this suspicion, as it pertains to my work with Black feminisms. To be a Black man, in pursuit of Black feminist thought necessarily engages my body as a site of ongoing struggle. Ferguson (2004) posits that to do this well means to take up identifications with revisions, to determine "the silences and ideologies that reside within critical terrains" (p. 5) and refuse to take up or extend legacies of racism, sexism, or homophobia in theory and research. Pointedly, "the main theoretical task for men who would be feminists, then,

is to develop an analysis of their own position, and a strategy for how awareness of their difficult and contradictory position in relation to feminism can be made explicit in discourse and practice” (Awkward, 1995, p. 42).

Audre Lorde (2002) surmises that the manner with which we interrogate our lives will be revealed in what is produced. As such, my motivations deserve scrutiny, lest I replicate and collude in the very forms of systemic oppression that I am seeking to dismantle. A Black male feminism, I am learning, should be intellectually rigorous, accurate, and accountable, judiciously engaging Black women in literature. My biological maleness assigns me specific privileges that, regardless of how I careful I am, run the risk of patronizing and marginalizing the voices that undergird Black feminism. I serve to benefit from these proceedings directly and indirectly, largely because of the absence of Black cisgender, heterosexual men who will advocate for a progressive masculinity unattached to the designated patriarchal banner of the *strong black man*. I benefit directly from my involvement because I can be viewed as one of the *good ones*, praised for siding with and shedding light on issues that Black women have been espousing for generations. Indirectly, I am seeking to operationalize a framework that was created, in part, from the deep legacy of betrayal that Black men brokered in our desires to achieve power imitative of whiteness; white men were the occupants of ideal masculinity, and Black men have been, in a sense, pursuing that designation in some cases, at the expense of solidarity among other minoritized bodies, particularly, Black women. To ignore my maleness, is to risk complicity, regardless of my intentions and political investments. Abundantly clear in my work thus far is that Black feminism exists, not because of me, but despite me.

Critical reflexivity has held mirrors up to my ideological blind spots, pulling me out from underneath the shaded veil of racism, which could be the bank I stood firmly on as an oppressed figure in the Americas, unaccountable to others *isms* because of my own disenfranchisement. My victimization does not absolve me from my participation in patriarchy, nor does it condone sexist behavior. This is not a claim to, or that, Black bodies (e.g., men, women, trans) hold power in a Western, United States context. They do not. What deserves necessary scrutiny, however, is the ability to assert dominance (hooks, 1990). I have and continue to wrestle intently with the questions about my presence, chief among which is, how is my decision to study and employ Black feminism opportunistic and covertly taking up space?

These tensions remain unresolved, and I am committed to pursuing questions of theoretical ownership. As I move forward, my hope is that my criticality, not my sexuality or gender, will become the ongoing measure of my legitimacy to the project of Black feminism. Biological determinism should not be the basis upon which to build a politics (hooks, 1990). Consequently, Black men who seek to advance Black feminism, which embodies revolutionary potential for everyone, should be resolute in their integrity to the tenets and histories of Black feminism and tread persistently toward a complex and progressive existence. To be a Black, cisgender, heterosexual man who advocates (and embodies) Black feminism in educative and research spaces is serious labor. As is ongoing in my own life and scholarship, engagement with Black feminist history, by which we stand, had resuscitated the sleeping discourse within my body, saving me from (non) being and materializing an array of progressive alternatives for being in this world. My hope with this worship service and future research is, simply, to testify to what I have witnessed. Humbly, I lean on and elevate the longstanding commitment of Black feminism to foster critical insight and understanding of how minoritized bodies creatively piece together personal experiences into theory and practice for the purpose of raising critical consciousness and moving toward self-empowerment.

Black Feminism as my Theoretical Perspective

The Combahee River Collective Statement (1982) provides a lucid overview of the core aims and scope of Black feminist thought, proclaiming:

We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. (p. 13)

The emphasis on an intersectional experience debunks any myth that there is a peaceful consolidation of identity as it relates to Black women, pointing to the psychological toll of interlocking systems of oppression and how their personhood is routinely called into question. According to Joy James (1999), “attempting to synthesize emancipation theories, black feminisms improvise integrative analyses of race, gender, sexuality, and class that focus on commonalities in liberation struggles” (p. 43). The angle of vision created by this dismissal and devaluation galvanized a discipline of epistemological and ontological thought and practice that has proposed alternative ways of existence against internalized and external oppression. Black

feminist thought deliberately seeks to reclaim and resituate the Black feminist intellectual tradition. It takes up Alice Walker's (1983) position to "write all the things I should have been able to read" (p. 13). Reclaiming this tradition involves a diligent "discovering, reinterpreting, and in many cases analyzing for the first time the works of Black women intellectuals," the likes of Ida B. Wells, Maria Stewart, and Anna Julia Cooper (Collins, 1990, p. 13).

At the core of Black feminism lie Black women sensibilities, that is, theory which brings to fore a unique standpoint, or interpretations and sense making available only to those who participate at this axis. Membership in this standpoint does not presume that there is a uniformly collective response to the core themes revolving around the interlocking nature of race, gender, sexuality, and class oppression, denigrating/controlling images, and the pursuit of definition. This truth resists the tendency to see a monolith in discussions of *marked* bodies broadly, and Black women in particular, due to varying experiences, geography, and multiple identities.

A central component to Black feminist thought is the notion of a determined self. This determined self, long displayed and articulated in varying types of consciousness, were forged as necessary interventions for survival. Audre Lorde (1984) notes, "it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (p. 45). Fundamental to the expression of definition, is a decolonizing practice, in which Black women develop new interpretations for their familiar realities. This involves cultivating an Afrocentric worldview and feminist sensibility and merging both to carve out a new standpoint. To consider how Black women have shadowboxed on the margins of society is to distinguish their revolutionary power from that of existing models of domination. Black women have not conceptualized power in the name of domination, but for the purpose of embracing alternative visions based on humanist vision, self-actualization, and self-determination (Collins, 1990).

At the denigrated place in which Black women are located lies a peculiar tension to extract definition. If we are serious about the abolition of systemic oppression in all its forms, and the freedom of people most dehumanized by it, then we must responsibly theorize from and through *the faces at the bottom of the well* as contended by scholar Derrick Bell (1992). Feminist poet Adrienne Rich (1983) instructs, if you are trying to transform a brutalized society into one where people can live in dignity and hope, you begin with the empowering of the most powerless. You build from the ground up. If Black women are underpinned by domination in its multiple forms, then their freedom begins charting pathways to freedom for others.

These inherent rumblings of the colonized are always in the process of pursuing their most authentic humanity, and in doing so imagine an agency that will perceive and challenge dominant ideology, contest hegemony, and unmask power. Thus, the guiding principles for this project are decidedly entrenched in the bodies and spirits of people of Color. To approach this work outside of their life world would jeopardize the integrity of the findings as semi-colonial (Du Bois, 1903). Black feminist thought wrestles with a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating internally defined images of self, with Black women's objectification as other (Collins, 1990).

Black feminisms, as articulated by Boylorn (2013), are characterized distinctly by several components related to Black women's experiences. Though not uniform across time or location, Black feminisms have several distinctive features. Centrally, it has advocated for a multidimensional/multi-axis approach to liberation politics rooted in the belief that systems of domination do not exist in one form. To accomplish this, Black feminisms reject delimiting discourses, stringent and deterministic paradigms, deficit orientations, and pathologizing approaches to the study and interpretation of Black women's lives and the systems of oppression that surround them. In their place, Black feminisms call for a critical interdisciplinary method that borders, straddles, and crosses over into knowledge, history, identity, and nation. Flexible and kinetic in its technique, this analytical framing opens the door for multiple meanings to exist. A posture of multi-vocality, Black feminisms argue for both/and thinking that challenges false dualisms and dichotomies that have served to justify domination by severing categories like mind and body, self and other, reason and emotion, and philosophy and politics. By naming the multiple sites wherein power lies (e.g., material, ideological, emotional, psychological), Black feminisms illustrate the complex interrelatedness of Black bodies and argues for the inherent philosophical and political relevance of theorizing from lived experience. This theorizing is what Brittney Cooper (2015), James and Busia (1993) and Collins (1998) terms a visionary pragmatism. A Black feminist visionary pragmatism is invested in a politic of *not yet*, that is, an ongoing process of foregrounding futurity while perpetually engaged in the right now hostility of worlds resistant to change. Collins (1998) contends:

The notion of visionary pragmatism more closely approximates a creative tension symbolized by an ongoing journey. Arriving at some predetermined destination remains less important than struggling for some ethical end. Thus, although Black women's visionary

pragmatism points to a vision, it doesn't prescribe a fixed end point of a universal truth. One never arrives but constantly strives. At the same time, by stressing the pragmatic, it reveals how current actions are part of some larger, more meaningful struggle. Domination succeeds by cutting people off from one another. Actions bring people in touch with the humanity of other struggles by demonstrating that truthful and ethical visions for community cannot be separated from pragmatic struggles on their behalf. (pp. 189-190)

Visionary pragmatism in this way responds to fundamental questions of Black sociality and the would be theory, i.e., world making and being (Cooper, 2015) that it tends to. The "it" more specifically, asks what should good theory do? Collins (1998) fixes the following:

First, does this social theory speak the truth to people about the reality of their lives?.. Does this social theory equip people to resist oppression? Is this social theory functional as a tool for social change?...Does this critical social theory move people to struggle? For oppressed groups, this question concerns how effectively critical social theory provides moral authority to struggles for self-definition and self-determination. (pp. 198-199)

Enacting a moral center in the wake (Sharpe, 2016), of an ethical crisis functions to keep focus on the multi-general project of dismantling white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism (Cooper, 2015).

As an affront to Western forms of knowing, learning, and theorizing, Black feminism *brings the wreck* (Pough, 2004) in this text. Black participants in the public sphere, according to Pough (2004), have had to "reshape the public gaze in such a way as to be recognized as human beings—as functioning and worthwhile members of society—and not be shut out of or pushed away from the public sphere" (p. 17). Black and Brown feminist theorizing has refused to be pushed out, and in the process manufacturing theoretical interventions that have yielded praxis such intersectionality and critical race feminism (Anzaldúa, 1990; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000), and generationally specific intervention that is hip-hop feminism (Brown, 2009; Brown & Kwaye, 2012; Gaunt, 2006; Lindsay, 2015; Love, 2012; Morgan, 1999). Lindsay (2015) pointing to this creative refashioning notes "hip-hop feminist theorists developed new ideas about and approaches to eradicating patriarchy, misogyny, homoantagonism, and transphobia both within hip-hop and in our communities." (p. 64).

Lindsay (2015) continues by suggesting that theoretical interventions like "Fuckin' with the grays, bringing wreck, kinetic orality, somatic historiography, sonic pleasure, melodious

misogyny, Black girl standpoint theory, and percussive...offer critical insights into the gender, sexual, racial, and class politics of hip hop culture”(p. 64). I will articulate in the section that follows how Black feminisms’ embodied and reflexive character can serve as an intervention against Black violability (Lindsay, 2015) in student development theory.

Black Feminisms’ Intervention in Student Development Theory

Language is historically embedded. Illustrating the power of naming and the degree to which minoritized bodies broadly—and Black women’s bodies in particular—have been misnamed, Spillers (2000) accentuates the (im)possibility and failure of minoritized subjects to function under historically constituted definitions of citizenship: “We might concede, at the very least, that sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly kill us” (p. 63). Across history, terminology has been deployed as epistemological violence on the bodies and histories of Blackness. Spillers discussed labels on bodies as “markers so loaded with mythical prepossession” (p. 65) that there is no simple manner in which those pressed upon may be able to loosen themselves from its weight. Privy to the labor one must take up, she continues: “In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order” (p. 65). Stripping through the progressive adoption of false histories and statistics regarding the intelligibility of Black bodies adds further urgency to this article as I reclaim and reveal a Black subjectivity that has been erased, misread, and misunderstood. I will discuss how developmental theory, self-authorship in particular, as it is written has limitations when trying to understand Black subjectivity. A dialogic encounter of psychoanalysis (Western tenet of theory development) in conjunction with a Black feminist analysis, specifically the work of Spillers and her discussions of history and the body, will provide me with a way to reimagine how researchers theorize about development in the present and into the future. Spillers’s work is crucial, as it makes sense of the ways in which historical and sociological writings perform tirelessly as unremitting evidence of the pathology and deserved placement of minoritized bodies in the American imagination. Any effort to define a coherent self must, thus, be informed by reflexively *stripping down the layers of attenuated meanings* that have garnered historical significance and legitimacy and, as Spillers (1987) puts forth, claiming “the monstrosity of a female with the power to name” (p. 80). The Black female, according to Spillers, was never viewed as human/free, and had no rights to ownership, of neither her body nor that of her

children. From this place of nonbeing, daring to claim, let alone name anything, was an offense against the sociopolitical order. It is this logic that I believe can provide educators with a historicized sense of oppression and how that factors into the construction of one's identity.

The precondition to systemic change, as put forth and stipulated by Black feminism, is the rejection of internalized oppression toward a transformed self (May, 2007). This does not presume that this process is wholly individual. Quite the opposite, Black feminism conceptualizes the self as inherently connected to others, calling for inter-subjectivity and collective accountability (hooks, 1990; May, 2007). As the guiding theoretical framework of this worship service and ladder out of concentration of the psychosocial developing self, Black feminist thought assists me in considering the affective and psychological components of the many intersecting and political phenomena that contend for the dignity and personhood of minoritized bodies in a Western, United States context.

Wrapped up in the political, I argue, is the psychic self, constituted by the Black feminist aphorism *the personal is political*. As a theoretical intervention in student development theory, Black feminism demands a deliberate reckoning with the social, historical, and political oppressions engendered by *living* in a minoritized body (Wingfield, 2015). This framing has gone unexplored, explicitly, in student development theory, and for this reason, part of the rationale of this worship service is to discuss the possibilities of an emergent categorical place in student development theory I propose as the *sociopolitical*. The sociopolitical, after Sharpe (2016) and Hartman (2007), describes the conditions by which history, in its mental, social, spiritual, legislated, and spatial utterings, is mapped on to the present as the grounds of everyday existence for Black and minoritized bodies. The arrival to a more complex rendering of theory, creative enough to grapple with domination, and nimble enough to converse with its multiple and intersecting layers and sites, manifesting uniquely over time, is a layered process. It requires that I situate and recognize bodies as a site of knowledge production; a culture engaging with multiple cultures and sites and taking the next step to make meaning of that engagement. My performing body as a site in this sermon is exhumed across multiple stages. As well, I sit down with Black existential thinkers, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, for the purpose of reaching backward to retrieve political memory from ancestral leaders and sites to help corroborate and make sense of current sociopolitical struggles and possibilities of existence. I chart the wake of histories converging on the Black body in the present by interrogating my personal archives to

see what has been carried over and imposed upon my body as I grapple with the societal expectations of existence. The call to worship is an entrée into this latter interaction and analysis. The conscious decision to witness from these places demands that I preach these words. Before doing this, however, I will walk readers through a brief history of autoethnography and my use of it in this service.

Black Feminist Performance Auto/Ethnography

Broadly, this project is a Black feminist performance auto/ethnography (Anderson, 2008; Durham, 2014; Hill, 2014; hooks, 1995; Jones, 1997). I deployed a Black feminist literary criticism to analyze the textual writings of James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and three critical scenes in the development of my artistry. This methodology enabled me to clarify what Lisa Anderson (2008) calls a Black feminist aesthetic, or “the elements of the text/performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a ‘community’ (broadly construed)” (p. 115). Moreover, this methodology instructs my analysis to key into themes and strategies theorized through Joy James’ (1999) concept of limbos, which considers the various ways Black bodies progressively move forward despite the vulnerability of their positions. This approach responds directly to my purpose and research questions that seek to discern how Black bodies make meaning and decisions inside their social worlds, given the precarity of their allotment by asking two guiding research questions: How has the Black body been schooled?; and How might examining the present-day condition of Black bodies in conversation with literary records of Black existentialism contribute to the deconstruction and reconstruction of self-authorship theory? In what follows, I detail my methodology and its connection to the Black feminist theoretical framework guiding my analysis.

Autoethnography

The questions should guide the methods in qualitative inquiry. I am asking questions of the flesh, and thus, this sermon needs an embodied method. If researchers accept the notion that human beings lead contested lives, there ought to be an understanding of the job of “autoethnography as form of inquiry, writing, and/or performance that puts questions and issues of being into circulation and dialogue” (Bochner, 2013, p. 53). Accordingly, autoethnography takes up questions of humanity, enabling the sharing of stories, identities, and commitments, in relation with others. Recognized as a form of autobiographical writing and research, it unveils layers of consciousness that bring the personal face to face with the cultural. Competing against

the post-positivist demands of the 1970s, the emergence of autoethnography was seen as humanizing approach to research that resituated the person, along with their action and experiences, as vital and important contributions to understanding of larger phenomena.

Several themes distinguish autoethnographic writing from other forms of personal narrative writing, which include “purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices, making contributions to existing research, embracing vulnerability with purpose, and creating a reciprocal relationship with audience” (Holman et al., 2013, p. 22). While all of these add to the project of autoethnography, the insistence that this approach critique or provide commentary on culture and/or cultural practices is the nuance that clarifies its identity. For a piece of writing to take this on, it must be willing to reflect on the nuance of experience, highlighting the manner in which the individual is interacting with a culture, but also thinks about the ways in which that particular culture is always, already mapped on to the body. Autoethnography opens up the possibility for the individual to see themselves twice (Boylorn, 2013; Hill, 2014), “talking back to myself and others at the same time” (Boylorn 2013, p. 174). For example, in reflecting on my engagement with Black feminism above, I write about the tensions of Black male subjectivity, which can acknowledge that while being exploited, misread, and demonized by false cultural narratives, that position does not absolve me from probable exertions of privilege and domination. An auto/ethnographer might ask, how do structures of domination function to shrink Black men? Concurrently, they would also ask, how are/am Black men/I complicit in their/my own shrinking? In this way, it asks that I speak humbly about dimensions that are often left out of analysis while simultaneously speaking back to impositions (Hill, 2017, personal communication). Given the preeminence of self-interrogation, autoethnography becomes a meaning making vehicle by which the self is understood in culture and the society. Furthermore, it reveals how values are assigned to bodies based on the decisions that individuals make with how to express or perform their identities. Within this approach, the body becomes a site of ever-evolving meaning and understanding as it displays the fractures and seams of self-interacting with other bodies and text. The potential for researcher, researched, and reader/audience to be moved/through the interpretation of autoethnography underscores my decision to employ it in this sermon.

Black Feminist Use of Auto/Ethnography

Rejecting the detachment that is privileged in contemporary education and social science research, analyses of subjectivity and the self are central to the “direction, content, analysis, praxis, and materiality” of Black feminist research (Durham, 2014, p. 20). Black women have long wielded arts and letters to tell, represent, and create alternatives against the controlling images of existence for minoritized bodies. Though not named as such, their work mirrors the purposes of auto/ethnography. Stylistically, “auto/ethnography orchestrated by Black feminists is accompanied with the backslash between the auto and ethnography to connote a legacy and spiritual aspect of Black feminist auto/ethnography...marks a different and collective I, one that brings into the fold with ancestors and community” (Hill, 2014, p. 13). Further, Hill contends “how autoethnographers decide to deploy autoethnography is therefore informed by their/our goals, voice, and beliefs about the body” (p. 94). In response to this tenet, my goal in this research was to explicate the dynamics affecting the ways in which Black bodies exist in, and ultimately make meaning of the worlds they are situated in. In order to speak to the dynamics of rationality inherent in student development, I employ auto/ethnography to interrogate this phenomenon through my body.

Performance

Performance studies discuss the work of performance as that which “participates in an ongoing redefinition of cultural, social, and educational practices” (Stucky & Wimmer, 2002, p. 1). A form of subversion in the research process, performance is a site/stage of struggle as it pertains to the war between conventional and disruptive research/inquiry and the mind and body (Brown, Carducci & Kuby, 2014; Conquergood, 2002). Relatedly, as Omi Osun Joni Jones (1997) proclaims “performance work in the academy subverts the mind/body split even while it appears to exist on the physical end of that inappropriate binary, because performance is at once physical and intellectual, visceral and cerebral” (p. 60). Working out of this discipline appeals to imaginative explorations and representations of everyday occurrences and experiences (Spry, 2011; Stuck & Wimmer, 2002). Importantly, performance studies is interested in experience and embodiment by considering how meaning is transacted between the two (Spry, 2011). The notion of embodiment refers to experiential meaning in and through the body. Explicating the notion of embodiment and its connection to performance, Spry (2011) denotes:

Embodied knowledge is knowledge that is gained by paying close somatic attention to how and what our body feels when interacting with others in contexts. The knowledge is articulated through a performative-I disposition where the researcher critically reflects upon what and where the body knows. (p. 64)

To center the body as an inextricable component of the research and meaning making process opens the possibility for embodied knowledge.

Limbos in the Wake^{vii}: A Black Feminist Performance Auto/ethnographic Approach

How should readers think about my use of the body as a methodology? As I have done above, I turn to the genius of Black mothers. Sybrina Fulton. Lezley McSpadden. Geneva Reed-Veal. These mothers were charged with the pressing question: what do I do with the body of my child? Here, I consider the body as many things, including history, memory, and legacy. Considering the many wakes, as described above by Sharpe (2016), what viewing, opportunities for mourning or righteousness indignation, should these mothers have considered alongside the wake of history that befell their children? What opportunities are available, when Michael Brown's body for example, was presented to the public before his mother could decide how to represent him? With limited choices available to them, they all invoked the spirit of Mamie Till, a mother like them, who reclaimed what was hers. Mamie Till taught us about the educative/ing body in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). With radical clarity, she proclaimed, "I wanted the world to see what they did to my baby." Undoubtedly painful and repeatedly traumatizing, Till insists on providing the visual of her broken son as the ongoing manifestation of historical terror. She does this while also providing images of a smiling, whole, Emmett on and around his casket. This careful and difficult decision assists me in remembering Emmett, and the many other slain and broken bodies (spirits, souls, and voices) that have been swept up in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). The *site of memory* as explained by McKittrick (2006) seeks to re-present the Black subject in a world that has tirelessly labored to dehumanize and erase the possibility of interior lives—to know it only as the failed object of whiteness, and thus, expendable, disposable, and exploitable. The work, then, must be to reconstruct these interior lives with what remains—not the tools of dehumanization—but the remnants—sounds, music, colors, behaviors, and stories. This material and imaginative work, through exploration of the real and the possible, can provide a "route to reconstruction" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 32). Discussing the body as both the *site* of injury and pain, and the *sight* of healing and possibility, McKittrick (2006) admonishes Black women to

return to sites of injury to attain sight or vision. *The images are not inspirational. They will not make you feel warm inside or keep you safe at night. They are unlocked doors and dark basements. They are sealed closets and latched attics. Gates of no return and the hulls of ship. They are prison cells and lifeless on concrete streets for four hours.* The body is more than just the here and now, but an archive of memories, histories and dreams, as well as the probable violence, epistemic and material, that is waged against them as a consequence of living from day to day. Invoking Mamie Till's lamentation of the wake in "wanting the world to see," I take up the full weight of the historical and biographical body and weave it together with Joy James' (1999) notion of *limbos*, to respond to the question of how might centering the body clarify possibilities of liminality in the current sociopolitical order.

Limbos are known to entail "vulnerable backbreaking postures as well as isolated states" (James, 1999, p. 41) In these limbos, Black feminisms cultivated models and strategies for resistance that rejected injunctions of the status quo. According to James, limbo, in its primary usage, references liminal spaces, "oblivion and neglect, or suspension between states" (p. 42). Its secondary, and more playful usage, is characterized by "play, struggle and pleasure—the black/Caribbean performance where dancers lean backward, with knees bent to pass below a bar that blocks their path. It represents determined progress despite the vulnerability of the position" (p. 42). As choreographers of political agency, Black feminisms' conservative or liberal ideologies, conduct varying limbos as they negotiate the plurality of its meanings. They advance emancipation projects while simultaneously being distanced from the center of issues of oppression, and yet, continuously extract agency from these margins. This fluidity allows them to interpret, dissect, improvise, describe and agitate, displaying an agility and imaginative power to deconstruct and reconstruct. James (1999) conveys the work of such limbos as that which synthesizes emancipation theories. They assist in illustrating and analyzing intersections/multidimensionality of oppression and freedom.

Additionally, as has been textually embodied and what I will exhibit in performance representation in the sermon, limbos are ideal spaces for *witnessing*, giving language to experiences, which might otherwise remain muted. Finally, in their progressive movement forward, limbos "often bend backward toward historical exemplars to retrieve the sidelines of conventional memory important ancestral leaders for current considerations and political struggles" (p. 43). Examination of the liminal body, in the wake, will require multiple ways of

reading and interpretation. Conceptualizing limbos in the wake as a methodological intervention developed on and by the work of Black women and Black feminists (Hartman, 1997; Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 1987), necessitates reading and writing practices that can put into ordered speech the habits and sensibilities of Black feminist liminality.

Drawing from Black feminist theorizing, the following practices assists would-be writers of the body in (re)seeing and (re)inhabiting their body in the wake (Sharpe, 2016), while stressing the need for a deep commitment from readers if they are to fully be understood. The metaphors guiding my data analysis are appropriately referred to as *textual desire*, *speaking in tongues*, *ethical witnessing*, and the *restructuring of the gaze*. In what follows, I discuss how each contributes to a method of *in-between* textuality/embodiment that is mindful of an existence in the wake (Sharpe, 2016), while endeavoring to illuminate structures that produce and facilitate (non) being, so that reimagined possibilities might come to the fore.

The first frame I borrow to wield the body, as a methodology, is *textual desire*. Claudia Tate (1998) explains that master discourses have overstated and relied too heavily on the explicit social messages within texts, arguing they neglect, or worse, flagrantly suppress surpluses of unconscious desire of minoritized expressions. Said differently, the protocol for reading and interpreting Black bodies is one that should not ignore soulful yearnings in favor of rational renderings of a text.

Internalized Message: *Make yourself legible; appear dispassionate and serious; support your arguments with data and logic.*

In my reading of texts this means that I did not just key into social science renderings of theory; rather, I searched for and wrestled with writers human desires to be. For example, in reading Lorde's *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, I was interested not in the clearly stated theoretical formations, but the expressed fear, thoughts of death, anguish, and disease that inspired this realization, and what it was like for me to experience her offerings on the page as someone whose mother also wrestled with a diagnosis of breast cancer and the reality of a mastectomy. Calling for a more complicated explication, Tate believes "such desire manifest itself in...implicit (or unconscious) discourses or narrative fragments of a text that fulfill latent wishes, like dreams" (p. 9). The body remembers, even as the psyche forgets—materially as the burden of prudence, circumscription, and passivity; aesthetically as Eurocentric modes of

transcription—the body remembers. Textual desire validates alternative ways of being (as flesh and in text) as purposeful semiotics in pursuit [desire] of dignity and personhood.

Secondly, to understand bodies in wake (Sharpe, 2016), is to recognize their multiple speaking positions. Aesthetics, that is, creative (re)presentations of the self, are inextricably tied to the language and movement of Black bodies (Gates & McKay, 1997). Proposed by Mae Gwendolyn Henderson (1989), *speaking in tongues* hinges on the multiplicity of Black women's subjectivities. This interpretation is based on the "simultaneity of discourse... a model that seeks to account for racial difference within gender identity and gender difference within racial identity" (Kovalova, 2016, p. 89). Henderson privileges "otherness" by granting voice to the other(s) within the self, constituting "an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity... a dialogue with the aspects of otherness within the self" (Wall, 1989, p. 9). Stated differently, it asks that how readers make rooms for the multiple dialogues that are ongoing in and through the presentation of my multi-vocal Black body, in conversation with hegemonic discourse. The capacity to speak in a plurality of voices, or what Henderson (1989) calls *discursive diversity*, as well as using a multiplicity of discourses, referred to as *simultaneity of discourse*, defines what it means to speak in tongues. Speaking in tongues is a critical praxis that reclaims and reconstructs, while affirming the power of voice. This strategy required me to ask, who is the passage of text for? In *The fire next time* for example, is the writing designed to be instructive for Baldwin's nephew (community with which he identifies), or is it meant to be read by White (dominant identified) audiences such that they feel the weight of his unapologetic, incisive critique of Western culture? For both Baldwin and Lorde, on multiple occasions, the answers are yes and no when considering audience.

Third, I would invite readers into an *ethical witnessing*. Calling for a heightened awareness of Black resonances in the analysis of Black aesthetics, Henderson (2014) implores that we engage in the *miracle of hearing*, as Black writers/performers "make us listen...to what they hear" (Kovalova, 2016, p. 105). This approach invites the critic/reader to adopt an approach to analyzing text/body that "embraces an oral/aural aesthetic affirming the hearer's/listener's response to the speaker/narrator/storyteller" (p. 106). It is the position of the reader, who thus, completes the speaker's story upon witnessing it from, and through, a position of deep hearing and empathetic listening. Relationships of mutual exchange are built on "the dual and simultaneous processes of *address-ability* and *response-ability*" (Oliver, 2001, p. 16). The

responsibility of bodies in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) is to “bear critical witness and provide theoretical testimony” (Henderson, 2014, p. 20). When this happens, it becomes possible to reconceive what it means to be a self, a subject, to have subjectivity, [and] to consider one’s agency while in liminality. This theme compelled me to answer the question, what do I do with what I just experienced on the page. To sit with Lorde’s *Man child* as a cisgender, heterosexual, Black man is to assume a responsibility for continuous self-reflexivity with regard to my involvement in the project of cis-heterosexism, and what it means to work toward dismantling this system with other men of color.

Finally, readers should see this textual embodiment as a *restructuring of the gaze*. The *gaze* as a concept mediates on the dynamics of power. Expanding on this notion, hooks (2003), in her essay, *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators*, teaches that racist U.S history taught Black people not to look; slavery contextualizes this notion as the politics of slavery (i.e., racialized power relations) were such that slaves were denied the right to gaze, while simultaneously enduring the constancy of being gazed at. hooks (2003) contends that “the ability to manipulate one’s gaze in the face of structures of dominations that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency” (p. 94). When reading Lorde and Baldwin one perceives that they refuse disassociation, that is, their theorizing is inextricably bound to their lived experience and interiority. I make the similar assertion that intellectual contributions can’t be divorced from the body. Keying into the experience, centering the body is an affront to the gaze, peering into the eyes of structures of domination and oppressive discourses that construct Black bodies as unintelligible. This confrontation is done in an effort to invert the gaze toward the process of *reconstituting bodies* in the wake (Sharpe, 2016)—as sites of healing, pleasure, and resistance.

Methodological Tools

I am proposing a turn toward theory in the flesh. To take up this mantle in its entirety demands that I *walk the walk* through this sermon. Black feminist performance auto/ethnography is an embodied practice that reveres a tradition of knowing rooted in the body. This service and sermon stages researcher/ed engagement with real and textual bodies. To accomplish this task, I employed principles used by Aisha Durham (2014) to describe my attempt to capture epiphanic moments between my researcher/ed experience in relation to various bodies. Like Durham, this approach is more than “a method to decode, discover, or demystify,” rather, it is a “political project that aims to support marginalized bodies of knowledge and to challenge systems of

power in order to transform hierarchies of being” (p. 61). The fundamental tools of this approach rely on three ideas: recall, (re)membering, and representation (Durham, 2014). These ideas narrated the scenes of this performance auto/ethnography. The specifics of these tools will instruct me differently, but ultimately bringing together an interconnected body of reflexive moments that can inform my remapping of student development theory. This approach supports what Spry (2001) calls quality autoethnographic performance as it seeks to “reveal a substantive sophisticated weave of a performer’s textual analysis, her contextual analysis, and her somatic acumen, thereby presenting critical self-reflexive analysis of her own experiences of dissonance and discovery with others” (2001, p. 727).

Recalling my archive. Before I could offer my thoughts on student development theory, I needed to engage in *recall* to show that my auto/ethnographic *I* came from somewhere. I did some of this work in the Prelude with Raquel, the Call to Worship with Winston, the Scripture Readings with my mother, and the Black feminist hymn above; recall insisted that I weave my positions into this exploration. Pulling from their autobiographical basins makes the researcher acutely aware of how they witness their reality and the ways in which it has been pieced together (Durham, 2014; Hill, 2014, Spry, 2001). As it relates to the theorizing that came to bear on this analysis, recall clarified *the how of self-definition*, by showing *what I was made to be* rather than circling around questions of *who I am*. In other words, this process clarified important components of self-definition through the lens of history. I reached back to recover the memory of a boy...a boy who could have been me—Trayvon Martin. At a different moment in time, he was me. The death of Trayvon Martin stirred something up in me. Fear, most notably; a type of haunting that has echoed into sleepless nights and desperate attempts to make right of the worlds collapsed/ing virtue. Too, it has meant purpose toward a vocation and a decision to never, again, *walk in fear*. I have spent the years following this catastrophic and crucible moment, demonstrating through performance poetry, that the Black body is *capable, and worthy of, testimony* every time it shows up in a public space. Recall necessitated a visit to my archive—the repository where I have stored my untouchables; the familiar and strange; the ugly and beautiful; the art pieces that steer me back to myself; the makings of who I was and how I came to be at this historical moment.

This sermon drew 3 scenes from the well of memories that have informed and been my more than 75 public poetic performances/talks since Trayvon Martin’s death in 2012, where I walked

on stages, with a hoody, an iced tea, and a bag skittles in my throat, and I roared for him. I roared for me. I roared for all those draped in these midnight hues.

Philippians, chapter 2:12-13 advises *not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*. The reflexive accounts exhumed from this mining examined distinct sites of meaning making, chronicling my *sanctification*—in a spiritual sense the process of becoming holy; in a literal sense, it is the process of becoming the very purpose one is called to—in public. It is because of their *absence*—the Black girls in D.C. who disappeared and no one went to find them; the Black queer boys who disappear so that one *can* find them; the Black bodies who scale back, tune down, and walk gingerly in the halls of academia—that my presence on stage, in this text, and at this pulpit are pivotal. Invoking the ethnographic I, that is, the researcher who is able to see their body as more than just a template to be written on by the world, I viewed it as “instrumental to sensing the gaps, holes, fissures, and fixtures of culture and identity” (Durham, 2014, p. 22). I sat with, meditated on, and grappled with queries like that of Raquel and Winston’s about existence in Black, that either directly or indirectly, take up the question of student development theory.

This forecast into recall “implies reclaiming and calling up again lost memories and overlooked stories” (Durham, 2014, p. 22). It did more than rehash old tales. What happened when I was confronted with my own oppression? What happen when I (re)presented my body on stage and invited others to respond to it? The meaning excavated from this analysis is only as good as the interpretive criteria employed to make sense of the archival materials. As I ventured into my archive, lifted up the corners, shook out, and dusted off the artifacts, I endeavored to make meaning of what was uncovered by asking several interpretive questions. This archival work made use of memories by responding to the following: *What is the work of memory?* This question asked if the memories invoked illuminate, or bring to life, through the body, the larger phenomena being examined; *What is the feel of memory?* This question held me accountable to the body as a way of knowing through description and contextualized materials; and *What is the meaning made of (re)hashing memories?* Ascertaining meaning must take into account prior understandings, encompass all that is relevant about the phenomenon, and ultimately leave room for further analysis, as all interpretations are unfinished (Denzin, 1994; Hill, 2017, personal communication). Answers to these questions directed me in arranging a response to the looming

questions of this Black feminist performance auto/ethnography, that is, *what does embodied theory do and what should it mean for development theory moving forward?*

*the oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to
renew-bell hooks*

(Re)membering. In the *post* world that we live in, we are being seduced by the puddles we are standing in, and lead away from the longer wake (Sharpe, 2016) of history in its implication on the present. I choose to (re)member, as more than just the recall explicated above, but as a process of piecing back together things that have been separated out. To remember is to assume an embodied and engaged relationship with text(s). Active in nature, it is an “interpretive process of *bridging lived experienced with living memories embedded* in words, acts, objects, or sounds to generate temporal, plural, partisan, and partial meaning that is filtered through a historically produced subject” (Durham, 2014, p. 61). In this sermon, the intent was to bring my body, living memory, and the textual bodies of dear brother Baldwin, and our mother-sister, Audre Lorde, together to address proliferated renderings of student development theory and the possibilities of existentialism. I did this, in part, to humanize what can otherwise be a disembodied project of textual analysis and in doing so take ownership for my read of their work. Remembering comprised the three-step process of interpretation, interaction, and relationality (Durham, 2014; Hall 1975).

The interpretation stage invited me into a deep, full read of the texts to parse out hegemonic sediments and surface the lived experience that the *I* brings to the memories bound up in a text. This full read covered the content, structure, tone, values, and attitude of the text. After performing a full soak of the text, Hall (1975) suggests that the assessment or interaction should consider why the textual bodies are what they are by situating them in their social cultural setting. What do they represent and to whom? In my analysis, I wrestled with the possibility of identifying Black feminist theory in the flesh/text while understanding how the function of power deploys these texts for mass consumption. The third step involved relationality, and thought about how “interaction comprises shared moments and shared meaning between bodies” (Durham, 2014, p. 63). Relationality holds the understanding that texts/bodies constitute each other, complicate each other, and are open to mutual illumination. Taking these together, I toiled with the textual embodied memory of Baldwin and Lorde by *reading against the grain* between

1950 and 1992. This framing, juxtaposed with selected primary works, made clear a tradition of survival and resistance within a fiery furnace.

Justification for Lorde and Baldwin. The work of the artist is not simply to show the world as it is, but as it ought to be. Lorde and Baldwin urged themselves indefinitely to the struggle of writing and living a theory in the flesh that could in some way be useful to observers. Strong in their convictions and capacious in their commitment, these prophets and witnesses refused to legitimate innocence, and instead, ensured that the nation would deal pointedly with its sins. For Lorde and Baldwin, the work of the artist was at their core as they sought to illuminate the darkness that so rigidly paralyzes action toward equity and the promises of the American state. The crisis of innocence, as Baldwin (1955; 1963) often remarked, haunts the social and personal worlds. This innocence can be understood as the spiritual wilderness, filled with darkness. Endeavoring to blaze new trails in this vast forest of the unexamined life, provoked and cemented by distortions in the historical tales of dominant paradigms, these artists blazed trails to make the world a more humane dwelling place for all.

What they left behind has become the substance of lives all their own, as their letters, essays, and literary texts are itinerant preachers that assist readers and witnesses in imagining alternative conceptions of what deviant bodies could be in a Western, American context. Prioritizing excavation, synthesis, and memory in their writings between 1950-1992, during a period of intense hostility and the trafficking of the Black body as fundamentally deviant, Baldwin and Lorde emerged as the writers and artists of a social gospel that refuted flawed renderings. Doing so opened the door to a revolutionary consciousness that could sustain minoritized bodies. Across their penned and lived realities, they dared to step out on faith and force this country to explicate definitions of personhood and existence that would unravel taken for granted explanations. In what follows, I expound upon some of the ways in which they did this and why they are pertinent to this worship service.

Resistance to temporality and spatiality. Hosting a unique courage, hinged by desire, these disobedient theorists eloquently migrated between realities of their own experience and those experienced by their foremothers and forefathers, history/herstory and the present, colonization and heaven. Pointing the way forward, Lorde and Baldwin were not bounded by the insistence that the only possible way to understand the present condition would be to study those phenomena in its current state. Their existentialism was mediated by the living aggression of past

transgressions. Coming to understand that dominant paradigms exist the way they did because they have always existed in relation to a force upon which they had to subdue, both Lorde and Baldwin understood that subjugation was the key to their identity and the triumph of their history/herstory (De Veaux, 2004; Leeming, 1994). The devastatingly reductive framing of Black bodies and the gross internalization of these myths on behalf of the oppressor and the oppressed, means that daily living is fraught with disillusion for Black flesh. Freedom, thus, a routine prospect of their critical reasoning, depended on a restructuring of the mind.

This revision would see the, intolerable, yoke of history/herstory as an error, full of excesses, and a manifestation of behaviors fashioned by dominant logic. Their creative recesses allowed them to dance across time, leaping, stepping, sometimes pirouetting, in ways similar to that of the prophet in ancient Hebrew culture. Their role as artists, like that of the prophet, was to keep the ministry of imagination alive; to insert moral language into public dialogue, thereby, making hope accessible. Concerning spatiality, neither Lorde, nor Baldwin, was confined to a particular place. Raised by Harlem, they both experienced a resident restlessness throughout their lives that spoke both to the parochial toxicity of Western culture and the expansive development of a global imagination. Both Lorde and Baldwin came to understand and situate their American citizenship as a product of global empire, endangering how Western, United States citizenship makes sense of itself in the world. In doing so, they metaphorically and literally loosen the constrained Black body to movement, freely and widely, in order to story themselves anew. With respect to temporality Lorde and Baldwin's textual lives were not bounded by time. Their work strikes chords of relevance in 2017, with the same insight as they did in 1957. The ability to see their labor as both an archive of Black existential thought and active informants into the current sociopolitical order, make them *timely* theorists in this sermon.

Limbo. Invoking James (1999), limbo, which constitutes a larger methodological effort described above, here describes the spatial and temporal position of Lorde and Baldwin along the student development theoretical canon. Limbo, like Lorde's mediations on the *shoreline* in her poem *A Litany for Survival* (1978), is a queer space, always eroding, where identities and political practice are contested; the place where the outsider bends and stands, where the land is never consistent beneath them, where elements live and do not live. I argue that their teachings, lined in literature and scholarly letters, in the form of renegade poetics, and hallmark Black

resonances, can help us reimagine how we think about development theory, specifically, self-authorship.

Lorde and Baldwin facilitate an unlearning of oppressive order and instigate the arousal of what Black feminist theorist Alexis Pauline Gumbs calls “livable and loving logics” (Gumbs, 2010, p. 4). Their work survives an intergenerational archive that turns the (re)presentation of language into life and serves as an intervention into contemporary understandings of subjectivity that offer alternative forms of sociality for minoritized bodies and dominant bodies alike. Operating in the limbo of Blackness within the American imagination, Lorde and Baldwin openly grapple with affective, social, historical, physiological, and politics conundrums inherited and experienced by Black bodies. I dialogued with their writings and thoughts, at and around crucial moments of American history and higher education to invite the possibility of creating, critical, new futures for Black bodies in higher education and minoritized bodies broadly. My goal is not to recount the past, nor list their writings as a set of indiscriminate or depoliticized facts, but rather, to render a dynamic, complex record of theoretical conceptualizations (located in literary texts and letters) that have been erased or ignored as tools in student development theory.

Queer sensibilities. Jose Muñoz contends that “queerness is a structuring and educative mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). For Lorde and Baldwin, boundary crossing would become a defining fixture along the arc of their work and influence. Arguing against Muñoz in some respects, I am proposing that, although Baldwin and Lorde were forward-thinking because of the unacceptability of the present political condition, their politics were radically concerned with the *here and now*. Queer sensibilities enabled these theorists to insist on experiencing the world in its potentiality—from expressions of love, to the possibility of social freedom—as can be seen in Lorde’s theory of the erotic. According to Lorde, acknowledging the power of the erotic allows women both to tap into their potentially most creative energy and to affirm themselves as female “in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (Lorde, 1984, p. 59). Their courage to affirm what was deep within moved future scholars, like Cherrie Moraga, could proclaim that Black lesbian feminists such as Lorde gave lesbians like her, “a body, a queer body in the original dangerous, unambivalent sense of the word, a dyke body that could not be domesticized by middle class american aspirations” (Gumbs, 2010, p. 14).

Additionally, neither Baldwin nor Lorde settled for the convenience of an *easy* blackness, one that could seamlessly weave them into the Black liberation struggle and polity. Unity, as they explicated, did not require that “we” be identical (Lorde, 1988, p. 19). Alternatively, their work signaled a willingness to forgo the elusive embrace of community for a more complicated accounting of their bodies and history/herstory in an American context. In her journal, Lorde notes, “I have a right to be black. I have a right to be different and I have a right to survive” (De Veaux, 2004, p. 159). Publicly and privately, they demonstrated a queer sensibility, informed by pain and rage, as much as it was by love. Reared in strict households by parents whose practices were largely governed by their own experiences with oppression, both Lorde and Baldwin questioned the providences of respectability in their cultural context and the larger dominant paradigm. In doing so, they model a way of being in the world that embraces what is useful and discards what is not. For Baldwin, this manifested in his decision to *leave* the church, and for Lorde, finding a home and connection in Afrocentric spirituality, among other decisions. At home in no particular place, Lorde and Baldwin understood their identities as “the very house of difference” (De Veaux, 2004, p. 122).

This attribute also informs my decision to work with a gay, Black man in James Baldwin inside this Black feminist project. Baldwin complicates traditional ways of being, embodied, and in pen. Bound in limbo, Baldwin wrestles with race, gender, class, and religion, in a manner that stretches the respectable cultural terms in which he was entrenched. Further, a Black feminist reading of Baldwin delimits any perception that Black feminist thought is solely beneficial for those who identify as Black women.

Ethical and intellectual imagination. Embracing their roles as artists, Lorde and Baldwin chose not to shy away from placing value judgments on mass culture. They consciously gave language to the conundrum of America’s values and its actions. For example, in the demanding essay, *Down at the Cross* Baldwin (1963) argues that if a collection of the few relatively conscious people of this (United States) country were to find some footing together, that they might indeed be able to end the racialized nightmare. Evidenced here is a compass of what it would take for every citizen to experience freedom. Speaking to the spiritual state of America in *Another Country*, Baldwin reflects on the incoherence of life in America, and offers a commentary on the cost of the failure to resolve its complex identity as a nation. Inferred is the reliable truth that minoritized bodies must determine a pathway forward cognizant of the fact that

they hold little power to change the context in which they are. This effort to see themselves with a second sight, or multiple consciousness, that assists this worship service in proposing an existence consciousness responsive to life in the dragon's mouth.

Attention to the inner life. Baldwin noted, explicitly, that chief among his interests was "the Negro in this country in the mind of other people...and the role that he's always played in the American subconscious" (Leeming, 1994, p. 159). Both of these scholar-artists were richly concerned with the inner life. They emphasized an interior scrutiny and radical refashioning required of all of us, to remake ourselves in the dragon's mouth, that is, in a culture of anti-blackness. Embodying a commitment to wholeness, in all its complexity, Lorde posited "to be what is fashionable, what is easiest to be, is always dangerous" and thus resisted stances that dissuaded her from "learning to live in harmony with your contradictions" (De Veaux, 2004, p. 203). Relatedly, they were as interested, if not more so, in how others made sense of the world in which they lived. What were the psychological and emotional effects of oppressions like racism, sexism, and classism on the inner lives of Black bodies and White folks? These questions captured the attention of Lorde and Baldwin.

Representation. According to hooks (1999), "every woman's confessional narrative has more meaningful power of voice when it is well crafted" (p. 68). I understand this sentiment not as call for essentialist form; rather, the various manifestations of limbos, are "as much situated in craft as in their epistemological potential" (Spry, 2011, p. 106). Said differently, the depth of knowledge generated and thereby made accessible is directly related to its aesthetic dimension, and in doing so, a sociopolitical action. Limbos, as inherently social, follows hooks' (1999) consideration: "unless we able to speak and write in different voices, using a variety of styles and forms, allowing the work to change and be changed... there is no way to converse across borders to speak to and with diverse communities" (p. 41). Performative expression is the process by which aesthetic choices perform bodies in motion and space, recognizing that the body as capable of language, of speaking. Representation in this sense composes the body into being as an intentional, critical, dangerous intervention into the routine orders of social life (Pollock, 1998). The sermon set to take place used both prose and poetic transcription (Durham, 2014) to stage my reflexive interactions with various scenes. As an embodied writing form, this method of representation encourages sensory engagement; it allows the researcher-interpreter-performer "to manipulate language to create sound, to render rhythm, evoke emotion, illustrate ideas, and incite

action by using literary devices” (p. 103). Prose and poetic transcription offer a layered read of dialogic encounters to deepen understanding and provide multiple routes to access the experiences represented. Concomitantly, this approach was important for this sermon because, as articulated, a Black feminist reading of sites produces a critical review of what are typically literal translations of data. Thus, the form took on inflated meaning.

Recovering an intellectual history

Intellectual history, a sub-discipline of history, deals with the ideological ways in which people made sense of their life. Aldridge (2008) maintains, “Ideas have consequences...studying the history of ideas can provide us with lampposts to illuminate our present and future” (p. 4). Accordingly, Cameron (2016) notes, “an assumption of intellectual historians is that human beings cannot live in the world without theories about what they are doing. These theories may be explicit or implicit, but they are always present and make up our cultural construction of reality” (para. 1). The intellectual historian, thus, is not so much concerned with what people did, but instead, how and what people thought about their doing/being.

This worship service is a study of intellectual history, and as such, begs an important question. Can researchers recover the intellectual traditions of thinkers whose lives and thoughts have been ignored as critical contributions to theoretical development? How have the unique challenges of oppression posed to Black intellectual minds and bodies shaped their ideas (Bay, Griffin, Jones, & Savage, 2015)? There are no scholarly works that have offered explorations of Lorde and Baldwin as theorists of human and adult development. More to this point, there is no current scholarship in student development theory that mines intellectual histories as both *lived and living* reality by which to theorize about development. While bodies and texts certainly must be considered within context, this worship service will articulate the relevance of history and its utility across time. The oversight of this point has resulted in thin explanations of autonomy, existence, freedom, and democracy, determined largely by constructivist metrics.

Theoretical development: 1950-1992. The foundation of student development theory materialized over the course of approximately 42 years. Emerging in the 1950s, the discipline of psychology began plotting human development through the work of Piaget. Up and through the 1960s and 1970s, the building blocks, as noted during the Scripture Reading(s), of psychosocial and cognitive structural development. Self-Authorship, originally proposed by Kegan (1982) as *Order 4* in his theory of the evolution of consciousness, involved taking ownership of one’s

value, ideologies, and authority, is taken up and extending with Baxter Magolda's 1992 epistemological work. Erikson and Piaget inspired the work of Kegan's psychosocial theorizing, helping him to bookend several generations of theorizing that centered dominant communities. The fundamental issue with this theoretical development was that it ignored the social, cultural, and political dissent that was lobbying, literally and figuratively, outside of the castle gates. Having demonstrated the degree to which student development theory is grounded largely in White, enlightenment ideals about knowing and being, this research's examination between 1950-1992, made visible a Black existential canon that evolved alongside the establishment of human development theories, and evolution of a holistic development model put forth by self-authorship.

Alongside the construction of these human development theories, an alternative discourse was taking place. While not bequeathed in a traditional social science format, or cohesive educational philosophy, it was no less prolific. Audre Lorde and James Baldwin were key stakeholders of this Black existential canon, offering epistemological reimaginations and reconstitutions of existence. Doing the work of the artist, they worked in the marginal spaces of limbo, yet had a distinctly public presence, disrupting standard conceptualizations of what it meant to exist in a Western, United States context.

Responding back to Black feminist thought, I consider the predominance of *margins* as sites one chooses, of radical possibility, openness, and resistance. Within these limbo spaces, we are transformed, as we affirm and sustain our radical subjectivities (hooks, 1990). Here, in this space those subjugated are given a new location to articulate their sense of the world. What is brought to attention through this keen insight is the complexity of articulation as minoritized bodies wrestle with the politics of location. This tension demanded a method of interpretation sophisticated in its yielding of multiple voices from a given text. To absorb their past and plot new constellations for the future, I employed a Black feminist reading practice to remember Baldwin and Lorde.

The master's tools. My analysis sought to resurrect an embodied self, recumbent in text. Morris (2002) posits, "the body, far from being an essentialist notion, is situated at the intersection of the biological and the symbolic; as such it marks a metaphysical surface of integrated material and symbolic elements that defy separation" (p. 168). Lorde and Baldwin candidly addressed agency, dignity, and personhood while refusing to confine themselves to one

aspect of their identity. Resultantly, each part of the self they constructed was based on a sense of materiality, or lived reality, that they endeavored to make explicit in their prose and poetry. To build theory from the standpoint of Black intellectuals, through a Black feminist reading, moves from the essential work of recovery to the implementation of alternative modes of analysis. The black critic, as noted by Barbara Smith (1977), “should serveas an intermediary in explaining the relationship between Black people and those forces that attempt to subdue them” (p. 293). This lyric of Smith appropriately conveys that in order to make sense of the present, there must be an understanding the past.

The project takes up this proverbial platitude and proceeds down the path of understanding by employing literary texts as available tools to make larger arguments about Black dignity and personhood in the American cultural context, higher education, and the student development theoretical canon, respectively. Historical in nature, and intent on amplifying material voices, not the absence of bodies, this project sits in a critical paradigm. Literary texts, as extensions of the bodies and realities of Black people across history, can illuminate understandings of how the material flesh is acted upon in its desire to import subjectivity into existence within an American cultural context. Making a case against a poststructural theoretical paradigm in literary analysis, Kovalova (2016) argues that the Black critic should “take its cue from the literary work itself as well as the historical context for which the work is a part...a consciousness predetermined by culture and color” (p. 58). Continuing in this vein, Kovalova notes that minoritized bodies, Black women in particular, “did not see the world in abstract terms, but as complex, dynamic, polyvocal...an indication of the ways in which our theorizing, of necessity, is based on our multiplicity of experiences” (p. 63).

An essential question that emerges for the work of the Black critic should be one of audience and target: “For whom are we doing, what we are doing, and when we do literary criticism” (Smith, 1977, p. 281)? As the theoretical underpinning of this worship service centers Black feminist thought, there is an explicit effort in this study to weave the tradition into and throughout this historical project. The history of student development theory, as alluded to above, has bypassed a concentrated analysis of minoritized student experiences. The models of thought that student affairs literature establishes itself in were constructed against a backdrop, in an American historic context, where some bodies were not assigned personhood, the residue of which leaves glaring holes in understandings of personhood and subjectivity. This worship

service seeks to visit multiple sites that may offer interpretations of what it means to achieve subjectivity. Literary works are, and I argue, were a method by which theorists' constructed alternative pathways for other minoritized subjects. The words of Audre Lorde are pertinent in this task for the purpose of bringing to the fore works that have been dismissed as potent theoretical samples is my effort to *transform silence into language and action*.

A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the significance of race, gender, and class as inseparable and interlocking parts remains a developing task for researchers and methodologists. Barbara Smith (1977) opened up the possibility of this type of specificity with her seminal essay on the matter, *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*. Arguing for the necessity of this analysis, she notes "until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean" (p. 185). This mishandling of Black literature, and Black women's literature in particular, is paralleled only by their not being handled at all. Outlining some of the principles of a Black feminist literary analytical approach, Smith (1977) offers the first statement of what has become the bedrock for other scholars of the Black literary tradition. Smith denotes that: (1) there should be a commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing. For this assumption, there is a definitive position made that Black women constitute an identifiable literary tradition and are worthy of study. In addition to the confirmation of this verifiable canon, "thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a result of the specific political, social and economic experience they have been entrenched in and decided to share" (p. 188). (2) Further, Smith notes that as opposed to looking to alternative methodologies for validation, a Black feminist analysis would look for precedence and insights in the interpretation of other Black feminist works of art and literature. (3) A black feminist criticism, according to Smith (1977) would be, by definition, highly innovative, "embodying the daring spirit" (p. 188) of the work themselves and constantly aware of the political implications of the work. A Black feminist criticism is, by its nature, an in-depth study and close read of materials to reveal dimensions that may not surface through a cursory review. Smith called for a "non-hostile and perceptive analysis" that would counter the attacks lobbied by those critical of the theory. Distinctive from other forms of criticism, Black feminist literary analysis is reading practice "diverted from the essential task of defining its own

interpretative strategies by the need to jockey for position with American, African American, and women's literary traditions" (DuCille, 2006, p. 42).

Advocating for a functional criticism (Joyce, 1987; Christian, 2007), attentiveness to the historical context and language of the writer will shield one from a dependency on the *master's tools* in an attempt to reimagine how one might think about student development theory. In essence, to do Black feminist theoretical analysis, is to offer diverse methods, flexibility, and a willingness to embrace unique ways in which creative ideas emerge from the thoughts, practices, praxis, and pens of the writers under investigation.

Published and Unpublished Texts

This project examined published and unpublished works of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde between 1950-1992. I choose this scope of time to bring attention an alternative intellectual canon proffered by Black intellectuals, that spoke to human development, existence, and meaning making, functioning beside that traditional student development theoretical canon that has become the bedrock of student affairs praxis. I conducted a Black feminist literary analysis on selected works, in and around, the time period 1950-1992.

Rationale and limitations for text selection. The literary analysis reviewed the following texts: *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), *Notes of Native Son* (1955), *The Fire Next Time* (1963), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (1984) and *Undersong: Old and new poems by Audre Lorde* (1992). Below I offer an explanation for my decisions to focus on these aforementioned texts.

Go Tell it on the Mountain (1953)

Baldwin would come to describe this text as the one he needed to write before he could write anything else conceding "The morning I typed the end to my manuscript, I knew that I had come through something" (Leeming, 1994, p. 89). This reference mostly meant that he confronted and learned to understand his stepfather's agony. In the novel, Baldwin positions the main character, John, as one who is undergoing a spiritual conversion—which we might understand as the inner warring that consumed the soul Baldwin and would not release him until he journeyed to the core sorrow of his people. From there, he could *climb the mountain* and be experience freedom. It is a story of history's anguish, internalized racism, and the reconciliation of those fetters on one's identity.

Notes of Native Son (1955)

Several themes are broached in *Notes of a Native Son* that include the search for identity in a country, and world, that is woefully disingenuous about its current reality. Further, the reader experiences a realist's acceptance of that reality despite the promises of a birthright citizenship in an American Context, and global citizenship as a man. Baldwin often said that he left the pulpit to *preach the gospel*; *Notes of Native Son*, thus, is a prophetic sermon on the "perilous state of a nation" to which he belonged (Leeming, 1994, p. 102). This text added to this worship services conversation on existence in one's body.

The Fire Next Time (1963)

The greatest danger announced and confronted in this text is *believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger* (Baldwin, 1963). *The Fire Next Time* is an open letter directed to young people of Color, specifically Black youth, represented by Baldwin's nephew. The idea for the letter surfaced during Baldwin's trip to Africa. Students in the elementary schools were reciting histories and knowledge that reinforced their colonization and denied their identity. For Baldwin, it seemed as if the intended aim was to replicate the colonizers. Baldwin's impassioned testimony in this text educates against the colonizing myths that support whiteness. Baldwin wrote the text from the perspective of people oppressed by the culture in order to expose the weak moral standard of the West.

Black Unicorn (1978)

In contradistinction to the Western, utopic renderings of a white, pure, and magical unicorn, Lorde asserts the existence of a black, embodied, and oppressed unicorn in her book *The Black Unicorn*:

*The black unicorn is restless
the black unicorn is unrelenting
the black unicorn is not
free.*

This opening poem, as a signpost of the issues to be addressed in the collection, discusses Lorde's quest for identity in the teeth of oppressive environments replete with racism and sexism. One will find in these words utterances of a spirit awakened to a beauty that refuses to be entrapped by mandated chains of societal norms. Fiercely determined to *unname* the self from versions of womanhood that have repressed her, Lorde sets out to *rename* herself within an Afrocentric epistemology and spirituality by embracing a Black transnational feminist tradition.

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982)

Lorde broke new ground with the timeliness and construction of *Zami*. Situated at the brink of the black lesbian and gay movement of the 1980s, led largely by artists and activist, this project personified the process of Lorde's desire to elevate the narratives of Black queer folks in the literary canon. Creating a new genre—biomythography—that blended history, mythology, autobiography, and fiction, Lorde dealt with the breadth of her identities as shaped by existence in America though they were deeply non-Western in concept. *Zami*, symbolizes a “psychic journey toward a reconfigured Third World that is woman identified” (De Veaux, 2004, p. 311). Opening a discursive space, Lorde ponders a fluidness of identity that migrates between her immigrant identity and citizenship within the United States. *Zami* proposes notions of home and borderlands that disrupt notions of belonging to a singular location.

Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde (1984)

The essays collected in *Sister outsider* underscore the agility of Lorde as Black lesbian feminist thinker. These letters of nonfiction have been formative in the making and remaking of feminist theories broadly, and black feminism, which undergirds this worship service. Covering the scope of twelve years, the essays provide insight into the complexity of oppressive systems that cover racism, classism, and heterosexism among others, and prompt an intersectional analysis of these systems.

Undersong: Old and new poems by Audre Lorde (1992)

Within this volume of poems, Lorde takes readers on a journey of metamorphosis; as life experiences shaped and molded her evolving physical and spiritual self, her poetry was also shifting and changing. Following the wreckage of Hurricane Hugo in her home of St. Croix, she came across a waterlogged, but readable copy of *Chosen Poems* (1982). Determined to treat her work with the same intense honesty that constituted her living, she reworked most of the poems with a few new additions. The process of revision, I will show, serves as a critical contribution to discussions of development theory.

Centering these texts as the object of analysis is not intended to dismiss the value of other works across the arc of these theorists' letters. I choose to underscore these particular texts because they each speak to the themes of this worship service and a range of examples that may extend scholars' understandings about theoretical reach.

Memos. During the data compilation and analysis, I documented reactions and emotions that surfaced during the process. I registered these reactions as haiku poems and extended explanations of the said haikus as a way to make sense of what I was reading. With the impetus for this work finding root in autoethnography, it was essential that writing and self-reflexivity be fundamental tools throughout this process (Muncey, 2010; Pelias, 2013; Spry, 2011). I discuss this process in greater detail in the section that follows.

The Least of These: Prelude to the Sermon

For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee hungered, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, ye have done it unto me. - Matthew 25: 35-40

The song you just experienced, in Black feminist major, is the melodic chord that ties this worship service together. My own preparation for shepherding this service required a change in the rhythms of my thinking and being, informed largely from the tone and intonation of Black feminism(s). The sermon to follow will be directed by these intonations, specific to Black feminisms with the hope of resurrecting a usable intellectual history/herstory for theorizing about student development. A literary analysis and the use of improvisational aesthetics will generate enhanced visions of what are already purposed filled passages in gospels as according to Lorde and Baldwin. As with any sermon, the specific books of their gospel were chosen because they add depth to the overarching agenda framed in the call to worship, invocation, and scripture readings that precede it. Penned between 1950-1992, these social ministers preached a theoretical canon to the “least of these,” with an urgency of the times as their backdrop and eye toward a corrective future as their compass. The least of these in a spiritual sense is a reference to the oppressed (e.g., the impoverished, the imprisoned, those without hope). Aware of the lot of the oppressed, Lorde and Baldwin, too, hungered and thirsted for a well that would never run

dry. They, too, were sick, exposed to the infections of nihilism and longed to be clothed in psalms. Their identification with the least of these, locates them in the wake of crisis. The wake, according to scholar Christina Sharpe (2016), is a ritual that allows the living to mourn; it is a watching practice. It can also be understood as the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved; the air currents behind a body in flight; or as being awake. This sermon, a theoretical partnership between Lorde and Baldwin, entitled "When You Pass Through the Waters" will offer a way forward for theorizing and living, but before that let us receive our offering.

An Offering: Analysis of Lorde and Baldwin Texts

In the throes of this wake (Sharpe, 2016), Baldwin and Lorde limbo, engaging in the rescue and recovery of Black life worlds, by reclaiming their bodies, insisting on a right to disinherited space(s), and establishing an authority to name that was first stripped under colonialism and has actively been reprimanded through anti-black measures. Frank Wilderson (2007) definitely states, “there is something organic to black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society...one could just as well state the claim the other way around: there is something organic to civil society that makes it essential to the destruction of the black body” (p. 23). The choreography by which Baldwin and Lorde creatively labor enlarges understandings of self-definition by introducing a framework for thinking about the structure and content of definitions I refer to as *black aesthetics*. Additionally, as will be discussed later in this section, they assist on narrating potential pathways into self-defining processes, which already involve recall, (re)membering, and (re)presentation.

Data Collection Process

In what follows, I detail my use of the haiku poem as an analytic tool in the data analysis readings of Baldwin and Lorde’s texts. My methodological approach, *limbos in the wake*, described in full in the song of preparation portion of this worship experience, sought to understand how Black bodies negotiate and make sense of their positions in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). More to the point, I translated the movements—limbos—of Baldwin and Lorde in this analysis by conducting a close reading of the 7 books referenced. The guiding questions for my analysis were twofold. The first question responded to a central purpose of this worship service, that is: how has the Black body been schooled? Schooling, again, speaks to the social and conditioning strategies that function to reproduce the status quo. The argument being made here was one of textual embodiment, that is, I believed Baldwin and Lorde proposed a theory in the flesh through their texts. Analysis of their work demonstrated the myriad ways the body is schooled in the name of rationality and the status quo. The second leading question steering this data analysis asked broadly: how do Baldwin and Lorde exist in their bodies at and during the historical moments in which they found themselves (1950-1992)? With this question I sought overt and subversive strategies employed by Baldwin and Lorde. As I read through each book, I marked passages that responded directly to these questions with mini post-it flags to designate the page, and starred (or bracketed) the passages in pencil on the specific page. On some pages, I

wrote a note, words, and/or questions to myself in the margins about why or how the passage responded to my guiding questions. Take the following excerpt from Lorde's *Zami: A new spelling of my name*:

“I can’t,” I said, knowing full well that what you do with black crayons is scribble on the wall and get your backass beaten, or color around the edges of pictures, but not write. To write, you needed a pencil. “I cant” I said, terrified, and started cry. (Lorde, 1982, p. 24)

On this page, in the margins, I wrote, “this doesn’t fit my training/schooling.” This note was a signal to me that the passage was an example of schooling in the text. On other pages, I marked/starred/circled words or passages that reflected my Black feminist reading practice. Examining the following excerpt for example: “Something happened to their faces and their voices, the rhythm of their bodies, and to the air they breathed” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 13). In response to this excerpt, in the margins, I wrote “embodied politic” and “embodied knowing/belief.” These flagged notes stood out to me in my second read of the texts marshaling a closer look and decision as to whether the passage would move forward into my analysis. As I read back over the books and passages, I had to make decisions about which passages could best help me to answer the questions levied. Not every passage starred/marked, was used in the analysis. I chose passages that I believed responded to the guiding questions most closely, and, fulfilling an embodied commitment to the data collection, those that struck a chord with me emotionally. Across the 7 books, I chose 67 passages. I provide interpretations of those passages below, along with an explanation of my theorized connection to Black and minoritized lives. I did so with the belief that theoretical treatment and the exploration of Baldwin and Lorde’s limbos underscore the body as a dynamic—social, emotional, political, cognitive—meaning making entity.

The methodological tools of recall, (re)membering, and (re)presentation organized my analysis. Beginning from the earliest, to the most recent, I read each book in its entirety. During my reading I paused at, or during, portions of a book that I believed spoke directly to the two questions mentioned above. I cited, highlighted, and sat with those passages in order to understand what it was about the words that both struck a chord with me and addressed my questions. This reading and pause practice is one of the ways in which (re)membering occurred in this analysis as it endeavored not simply to record words on a page; rather, it helped to illuminate the ways that theory relevantly moves across time. My connection to a passage started

because of a feeling I was reminded of in my own life. In other words, feeling first is how I brought myself into conversation with these literary records. After citing those passages, I then began the work of transposing the passages into short poems. My initial reads of Baldwin and Lorde yielded the haiku poems below. These poems functioned as analytics, tracking my thoughts and feelings about the renderings I encountered in the readings. All of the poems do not fit the strict 5/7/5 syllable structure that typically defines haikus. This, in my opinion, is less important than engaging in an intentional reflective practice that did not privilege the regurgitation of words as textually embodied by the authors. A haiku writing practice necessitates moments of pause and careful attention to the words chosen to capture an idea. The detail with which the writer must follow and account for morass—syllables; stress and timing—while scripting haikus mirrors the concerted balance, strength, and persistence required for the choreography of life worlds in and against rational driven publics. Additionally, this procedure is an example of (re)presentation as it shows the process of translating and converting what I am reading into a new form that reflects my meaning making. Instead of a coding metric that brackets the subjectivities of the researcher, I made a case for the ways in which knowledge can take on new meaning beyond the contexts by which it was originally situated.

The movement of the poems, to the rhythm of seventeen syllables, meant that every start, stop, and pause became essential to how I ultimately made meaning of what was being read and analyzed. *Every word had significance*. This style of writing, intended to reflect directness of expression, intensity, and simplicity, had the arduous task of building brief moments in time into provocative images with the potential to enlighten and/or illuminate new understandings for the reader. Limbos, as the image of self-defining processes, seemingly, do similar work in their ability to negotiate structures, geographies, and violence's (material and epistemic) that are waged in and through various cultures mediums. The haikus are also guideposts to several themes that emerged for me in the reading(s). If we understand, that textual embodiments are a reflection of Lorde and Baldwin's material lives, then taken together, the themes that emerged from this analysis offer us an embodied portrait of once captive bodies remaking themselves across their life and literary works.

The haiku poems are issued a title, which represent my interpretation or reinterpretation of a passage given my Black feminist reading of the passage. In some instances, my reinterpretation serves as a critique of the work as read, and my attempt to envision the Black

feminist possibilities that may not be as transparent. I use the poems, and explanatory space under the poems, to offer this critique and point out possibilities for new understandings of a particular passage as it relates self-definition

Baldwin Haikus

Go Tell it on the Mountain Haikus:

“Something happened to their faces and their voices, the rhythm of their bodies, and to the air they breathed; it was as though whatever they might be became...” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 13).

To be a witness
Faces and bodies give voice
Transfigured through rhythms
-vicarious freedom

“Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord; indeed it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 13).

Familiar hymnals
Coursing through our limbs and veins
Of fire, or flood, or freedom
-embodied testimony

These passages bring into question: how has the body been schooled? Noting the prayerful event when an individual becomes *saved*, John is clued into the potential performances that are available to him. The only available models for much of his life were those approved by his father, but the conversion moment offers expansive imagery, and thus expanded options for who one can become in the wake (Sharpe, 2016).

“ ‘You getting to be,’ she said, putting her hand beneath his chin and holding his face away from her, ‘a right big boy’. You going to be a mighty fine man, you know that? Your mama’s counting on you...there’s a whole lot of things you don’t understand. But don’t fret. The Lord’ll reveal to you in His own good time everything He wants you to know. You put your faith in the Lord,

Johnny, and He'll surely bring you out. Everything works together for good for them that love the Lord." (Baldwin, 1953, p. 35)

Dim and opaque

Secret messages to keep

You must remember

--

Words will fail meaning

[my face will never tell]

though under my thoughts see my breath

And feel my love's intent

-a prayer for Black boys from mothers

In the novel, John is the main character of this story. Elizabeth, who is the mother of John, had him out of wedlock. The two share a close relationship, which differs diametrically from the ways that his overbearing stepfather, Gabriel, views John. Elizabeth has a sense that John is gay. On John's Birthday, they share the above moment, wherein it seems that she recognizes the plight John is working through and is sure to face in the world, in their family, and in the church. Without saying too much in the way of support of John's identity, she implores him, interestingly, not to fear, but to the trust in God. It can be understood that Elizabeth understands the silence that stems from a rational deference to the Pentecostal Christian God that he has been exposed to, and expressly hopes for John to own a more expansive image of God in the midst of the wake (Sharpe, 2016). Elizabeth's plea in this passage illuminates a Black feminist wielding of hope and futurity in the court of rational publics. In other words, she argues for a meaning making aesthetic that is capable, not of making new structures, but creatively revising the ones in place.

"Broadway: the way that led to death was broad, and many could be found thereon; but narrow was the way that led to life eternal, and few there were who found it" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 36).

Walk humbly, lowly
[for there is]
Safety in humility
Narrow is the way
--prudence

There is a consistent message of acquiescence in the novel that is revealed in this passage. John has been instructed by his strict and coded religious tradition, administered mostly by his parents. He is reminded of the dangers that await him should he bypass the precepts set before him. Simultaneously, John is assured of the joy and affirmation that would come from living a holy life. This parable of a narrowly defined pathway accentuates the sterile billing that prevents John from authenticity as it relates to his queer identity. There was no affirming, agentic, language within this subset of the Christian tradition for embracing the complexity of identity. This conundrum, or in this context, the sin, is seemingly resolved through obedience to the tradition. John, thus, is unable to place his feelings about other boys in his current meaning making structure, leading to confusion, which in turn necessitates a revised structure.

“These glories were unimaginable—but the city was real. He stood for a moment on the melting snow, distracted, and then began to run down the hill, feeling himself fly as the descent became more rapid, and thinking: “I can climb back up. If it’s wrong, I can always climb back up.”
(Baldwin, 1953, p. 37)

Huddled in darkness
Fear shields life more than death can
descend and climb back up
-parameters of existence

John is wrestling here with external press of his religious tradition and the desires he has been experiencing. As a metaphor of possibilities, he tells himself that by climbing down, he can always return to the safety of tradition (hill top), but the momentum—the longings—are too real to ignore and he owes it to himself to explore these thoughts in their fulfillment.

“There, outside, beyond the slowly rising mist, and farther off than her eyes could see, her life awaited her. The woman on the bed was old, her life was fading as the mist rose. She thought of her mother as already in the grace and she would not let herself be strangled by the hands of the dead” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 86).

I’m going away
Freedom dreams deep ambition
Due north, through cabin doors
-interior rumblings

Florence in this passage, and the novel as a whole, is a stand in, partly, for breaking oppressive systems that restrict the movements of the Black female body. For example, Gabriel, Florence’s brother, was the “apple of his mother’s eye. With the birth of Gabriel, which occurred, when she was five, her future was swallowed up. There was only one future in that house, and it was Gabriel’s—to which since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be sacrificed” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 72). In essence, Florence’s body was the sacrificial site by which Gabriel could live in patriarchal domination. This above passage (re)presents one example by which Florence opts to discontinue this pathological authority as she confronts the policing agents and epistemic violence that would otherwise have her remain in a fixed position. Revising her body as site of healing and possibility, her movement exposes a fallacy of organized rituals that justify, and perpetuate, troubling masculinities and skewed social norms.

“‘Yes, honey. You just let go, honey. Let Him bring you low so He can raise you up.’ And was this the way she should have gone? Had she been wrong to fight so hard?” Now she was an old woman, and all alone, and she was going to die. And she had nothing to show for her battles”(Baldwin, 1953, p. 98)

blame the victim
for their irrational love
worlds on her shoulders

-redemption

This passage signals an awareness, or lack thereof, of Black female subjectivity. There is the simultaneous recognition and move to pathologize the behaviors and life-giving sustainability of Black women. The familiar trope of the *tired, worn down, but strong Black woman* comes to mind in this passage, which doesn't seem to me a fair analysis of Florence, Gabriel's sister, in the book. Florence is, indeed strong, but the circumstances surrounding her survival, would do better to name the ways that she creates a life for herself when there were not many available pathways.

“And presently, in his agony, he was screaming, each cry seeming to tear his throat apart, and stop his breath, and force the hot tears down his face so that they splashed his hands and wet the root of the tree: ‘Save me! Save me!’ And all creation rang, but did not answer. ‘I couldn’t hear nobody pray.’ Yes, he was in the valley where his mother had told him he would find himself, where there was no human help. No hand outstretched to protect or save...’Then,’ he testified, ‘ I heard my mother singing. She was a-singing for me. She was a-singing low and sweet, right there beside me, like she knew if she just called Him, the Lord would come. When he heard this singing, which filled all the silent air, which swelled until it filled all the waiting earth, the heart within him broke, and yet began to rise, lifted of its burden; and his throat unlocked; and his tears came down as though listening skies had opened.” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 108)

soothing sounds come back
easing hardened hearts, unfit for growth
filling the silence
-my dungeon shook--

Gabriel's spiritual conversion provides commentary on the ways in which minoritized meaning making is part of a larger web of existential practices. Here, Gabriel is nestled in a spiritually collapsing place. Gabriel's deliverance came in his moment of recall, remembering his mother's voice and the manner in which she navigated the challenges of her life, specifically, through the use of song. More to the point, readers can understand that Gabriel's mothers' rituals of life

affirmation and self-preservation become the symbol and witnessing catalyst for Gabriel to reclaim a sense of authority and control of his body. Self-defining practices, thus, are augmented by witnessing Black feminist aesthetic (re)presentations in their many forms.

“‘Sister Deborah,’ he said, slowly, ‘all that sinful time—was you a-praying from me?’ Her tone dropped ever so slightly. ‘We sure was, Reverend. Me and your mother, we was a-praying all the time’” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 112).

Planted in the dirt

Watering old flowers

Readying for spring

-black knees (Black feminist labor/futures)

Black feminism holds out hope for critical futures. This passage has the potential to communicate something to us about how cultures have been sustained and reimagined through by Black feminist theorizing.

“With this cry, and the echoing cries, the tarry service moved from its first stage of steady murmuring, broken by moans and now and again an isolated cry, into that stage of tears and groaning, of calling aloud and singing, which was like the labor of a woman about to be delivered of her child...for the rebirth of the soul was perpetual; only rebirth every hour could stay the hand of Satan” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 127).

souls struggle to light

Labor as deliverance

Never cease pushing

-rebirth

Baldwin’s description of the threshing floor robs readers of any sense of arrival to static places of authorship. Likening the process to that of giving birth, a read of this passage suggests the self-definition is not a finite experience, but a series of configuring moments that each contributes

something uniquely to an evolving image of personhood. Provocatively, Baldwin walks readers through this experience with close attention to sensory mechanics of the body. Relatedly, I conclude in this imagery that the body is a site that must be continuously revisited in self-defining processes.

“‘I reckon,’ he said, malevolently, ‘you is just made up your mind to serve Satan all your days.’ ‘I done made up my mind,’ she answered, ‘to live all I can *while* I can. If that’s a sin, well, I’ll go down to Hell and pay for it. But don’t you fret, Revered—it aint your soul.’” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 140)

Out in the open
Judgement awaits our living
Power awaits me
-politics of pleasure

The sensual considers the phrase “it feels right to me,” an acknowledgment of one’s true knowing capacity (Lorde, 1984, p. 58). Where else does an idea come, but from a feeling, accepted or denied, first, before it becomes an idea made into language. This passage compels us to operate from internal knowledge/desires/needs as a way to illuminate and bring clarity to one’s agency in the world, and remain responsible to the self.

“And I reckon you wouldn’t marry me even if you was free. I reckon you don’t want no whore like Esther for your wife. Esther’s just for the night, for the dark, where wont nobody see you getting your hold self all dirtied up with Esther. Esther’s just good enough to go out and have your bastard somewhere in the god damn woods. Aint that Reverend?” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 150)

where do they go next
fallen leaves with no luster
made to feel ashamed
-source of hostility

Esther, Gabriel's mistress during his first marriage can be understood as the subject of fear. That is, when one feels their back against the wall, it is easiest to resort to the rank and file fundamentalism, which assures sanctity in the eyes of others and the self. Esther, as stand in for the unacknowledged/silences that individuals harbors, is not to be trusted with a voice but rather the source of shaming for what it (she) teaches. The lesson I pull from this encounter is one of self-love in the throes of oppression.

"He wanted to obey the voice, which was the only voice that spoke to him; he tried to assure the voice that he would do his best to rise...it was at this moment, precisely, that he found he could not rise; something had happened" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 220).

Get up from this place
Bowed heads and weary eyelids
Stay here until dawn
-struggle

Go Tell it on the Mountain scrutinizes the relationship between the Pentecostal Church tradition and African American homosexuality. Baldwin, through the mostly autobiographical character of John Grimes, dramatizes this experience of this condemnation by the strict religious guidelines maintained by the Church. The threshing floor moment for John may be understood as a metaphor, the embrace/awakening to his long *damned* humanity as a gay individual during a time when homosexuality constituted an outside position in the view of the Church and society. John's inability to rise on command represents the external press and competing forces warring for John's authority.

"In his heart there was a sudden yearning tenderness for holy Elisha; desire, sharp and awful as a reflecting knife, to usurp the body of Elisha, and lie where Elisha lay; to speak in tongues, as Elisha spoke, and with that authority, to confound his father" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 221)

from fiction to fact
images of possibility

out of joy, strength comes
-yearning

On the threshing floor, John's desires become irreducible. In this moment, John is, for the first time, permitting the body (his intuitions, eroticisms, and sensuality) to have a place in and against a dogmatic space that prohibits the body as a knowing entity. To confound his father, or those ways of knowing the regulate alternative ways of knowing, John had to reassess his desires.

"His father's eyes looked down on him, and John began to scream. His father's eyes stripped him naked, and hated what they saw" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 223).

swallowed up by sight
auction block ethics and judgment
chin to chest/push free
-the gaze

Gabriel, John's father in the novel, represents for the purposes of this analysis, the wake (Sharpe, 2016), that is the violent, abusive, unquestionable power and authority projected onto Black bodies. This wake is long standing, difficult to step out from under, and an always presents an obstacle by which the body must confront in order to move through the world with authority. The gaze/wake contributes to the meanings one makes of themselves and the internalized principles by which they should live. Stepping outside of these principles is to court retribution, but becomes essential in self-defining processes.

"Here there was no speech or language, and there was no love; no one to say: You are beautiful, John; no one to forgive him, no matter what his sin; no one to heal him, and lift him up" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 227).

affirming the self
insurgency for a strange land

start slow, be patient
-training the muscles

Attempting to locate agency in a rational place proves impossible in this passage, as John finds himself pressed against the rigidities of traditional sexual morality. This type of Christian church, religion, and god, acted not as a symbol of refuge, grace, and love, but as a condemning force that could do nothing to *save* him. Made clear in this passage, is that agency does not occur as rational, objective interpretations would suggest, and somewhere along the way, the subject recognizes and responds to this impossibility.

“But I aint going to let you do that. You done made enough folks pay for sin, its time you started paying...I got this letter, and I’m going to give it to Elizabeth before I go, and if she don’t want it, I’m going to find some way—some way, I don’t know how—to rise up and tell it, tell *everybody*, about the blood the Lord’s anointed is got on his hands...‘Deborah,’ Florence said, ‘was cut down—but she left word...When I go brother, you better tremble, cause I aint going to go in silence.’” (Baldwin, 1953, p. 245)

my words will be there
artifacts of existence
living out loud
-reckoning

Florence’s position in this novel’s conclusion serves as a Black feminist intervention on several accounts. She threatens the false consciousness of Gabriel, which can be understood as the rational, patriarchal establishment that has organized the lives of his wife and children, and been the basis for identity. Florence’s life, thus, becomes a truth about the self that has not been interrogated, and/or permitted to illuminate the darker place of the self. There is a sense here that Gabriel is reluctant to look himself in the mirror that Florence is embodying. Zooming out, one should presume that self-defining processes are never simply ends. Florence candidly floods Gabriel’s memory with persons he is and has been accountable to, which speaks to an interpersonal dimension of self-definition. Specifically, the quality with which one pursues their

self-defining process has a direct bearing on the manner in which others are able to live out their own. Lorde (1985) capturing the urgency and necessity of this reckoning states, “and when they do not, we will ask, ‘Why don’t they?’ And it is the asking that will lead us inevitably toward change” (p. 163). Florence has taken up Lorde’s call to *feel deeply*, and in doing so, is demanding that all aspects of her life, Gabriel included, do the same.

Notes of Native Son Haikus:

“So that before he can look forward in any meaningful sense, he must be allowed to take a long look back...I think the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly” (Baldwin, 1955, p. 6)

Our inheritance

Time, circumstance, history

Born to native sons/daughters

Ink stained memory

Locked out indefinitely

Created by/in fear

Born through Black/Negro Passage

I bargained for my birthright

Few options exists

A long view backward

The past makes the present clear

Refuse to turn away

-returning or trapped in history and history is trapped in them

Hudson-Weems (1998) makes the claim that Black woman theorizing must be “shaped by the dictates of their past and present cultural reality. No one is accurately defined outside of one’s

historical and cultural context” (p. 450). Decisions to forego this framing are seemingly made in bouts with acceptance and legitimacy. To do so, however, asserts the colonization, the process by which particular bodies were displaced and transformed into objects, was a singular, logical process that unfolded during early parts of the 16th century in the Americas.

“One writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience. Everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. The difficulty then...of being a Negro writer was the fact that I was, in effect, prohibited from examining my own experience too closely by the tremendous demands and the very real dangers of my social situation” (Baldwin, 1955, p. 7)

return me to me
interior aesthetics
for my arts sake
-black creative

The purpose of hegemony, primarily is to force agents away from, and out of, their subjectivity, into an object(tive) order. Said differently, Baldwin is discussing the ways in which aesthetic representations typically take on a certain style to be considered quality in the public opinion, particularly, as it pertains to the Black art and artists. If the artist is enticed away from themselves, it seems, that the work—the product—will lack a substance and depth, but meet the expectations of the status quo. I interpret Baldwin’s priority as being that of sustained and quality assessment about how one has come to be, beyond temporality.

“The American image of the Negro lives also in the Negro’s heart; and when he has surrendered to this image life has no other possible reality” (Baldwin, 1955, p. 38)

This voyage feels old
I looked at my feet to see
Indeed, they remember

Decades have changed
Decay, however, lingers
I don't remember life [only sustained in deaths]

Images live on/in us
Arrest your innocence
This isn't surrender
-living fully

The image of the Negro, according to Baldwin, is the thing, which Black bodies in a Western United States context work so hard to evade, and keep at bay through maladjusted good works. The existence of the Negro image, which should be understood in this passage as the embodiment of *nigger*, a sight and site of thingification, consumes the life worlds of Black bodies beyond matters of thought and reason. The Black body and its transformation into things are the outgrowth of habits, and not merely overcome by acts of will as reasoned by Baldwin when he notes that the image lives “in the Negro’s heart.”

Notably, and with profound purpose, Baldwin delineates the “the American image” of the Negro, from what one could assume is a version of the Negro that is detached from the colonial legacies. This scripting specificity is worth mentioning, even if it was not ontologically possible for Baldwin in the world in which he lived. Baldwin only knew what it was like to exist in the sight, and under the shadow of America, never outside of it. In other words, Baldwin never knew what it was like to be transformed from a conceptual self to conceptual other, emblematic of those who could realize their being free from colonialism. The literary maneuver, however, characteristic of Black feminist imaginings, licenses Baldwin with the creative capacity to embody the distinction, in text, as a realized, liminal, possibility. Furthermore, this sensibility to imagine is characteristic of a thematic that is present throughout the Black intellectual and feminist tradition, with efforts that enable a reconceptualization of what it means to know and be in the Black body. Confronting and undoing facts of consciousness make plausible a revised, invented, existential reality—self-definition. More pointedly, a process of meaning making is

being explicated in this tradition that suggests that epistemic struggle must precede the ontological (re)presentations. Recall, thus, must engage with epistemic violence that dates back to origins of the wake (Sharpe, 2016) to fully understand the establishment with which ones is entrenched.

Importantly, even if partially true, invented, and fictionalized, Baldwin's autobiographical passage constitutes a poignant example of how embodied renderings in literature can become a response to the past and present, while arguing for a future.

"It is part of the price the Negro pays for his position in this society...he is almost always acting. A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it" (Baldwin, 1955, p. 68)

Whose hands made/make us
Represent us honestly
Or do nothing at all

[Study to] show thyself approved
With disarming artlessness
Act, gauge, and reflect
-accommodation

At face value, Black bodies functioning well in culture can give the appearance of self-hatred, as well as complicity in, and collusion with, the status quo. A reading of Baldwin in and through Black feminism provides further evidence for the diverse workings of black aesthetics, that is, creative meaning making structures. This passage can also be understood as a rationale for why the cultural status quo is impervious to change. The price that Black bodies pay to, in a sense, embody the normative beliefs, action, behaviors that have structured society, services to reinforce that same society. For the Black life-worlds, who are always constituted as those which are in lack, the unyielding desire for blue eyes as Morrison (1970) so poetically reminds us, represents an attempt to realize one's knowing and being in terms of the illusive criterion of

whiteness. Concomitantly, Black and minoritized bodies are “always acting” because the rules by dignity and humanity enshrined by whiteness are always changing. Morrison (1970) aids in understanding this point when she proffers a critique of the idealized subject in a Western United States context, who reluctantly concedes, “And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life...we rearranged lies and called it truth” (pp. 205-206).

“I am not one of those people who believe that oppression imbues a people with wisdom or insight or sweet charity, though the survival of the Negro in this country would simply not have been possible if this bitterness had been all [they] felt...I can conceive of no Negro native to this country who has not...been irreparably scarred by the conditions of [their] life. All over...trying desperately to find a place to stand; and the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive” (Baldwin, 1955, p. 71)

ruin is not wonder
but that so many survive
beyond promises
-miracles in black

The message brimming from *Notes of a Native Son*, as elucidated in Baldwin’s (2016) unfinished work, *I am Not your Negro*, was the declarative statement, “I’m not a nigger, I’m a man” (p. 105). This evocate disposition urges readers to consider the possibilities of incarnation from thingification to fully human. Anna Julia Cooper (1892) takes up an earlier iteration of this contradiction in her quest to (re)present the Black woman from *Untrue* woman to *True womanhood*.

“I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder...my *real* life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart.” (Baldwin, 1955, p. 99)

A choice between evils?
the body will be punished
Keep your own heart free
-resolution

Though Black and minoritized bodies harbor rage, a reoccurring fever for which there is no apology owed, Baldwin persuades readers of a precarious reality that is full of nuance, contradiction, and carefully weighed decision-making. Missteps, that include rage as a legitimate response to oppression, can be threatening emotions for Black and minoritized peoples. This lamentation raises the question of futurity; specifically, what does it look like for Black and minoritized bodies to incorporate their real and imagined lives into their meaning making structures?

The Fire Next Time Haikus:

“Take no one’s word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 335)

trust your experience
the dungeon is not forever
chains can be broken
-epistemic fugitive

Baldwin is affirming his nephew in this passage as a knower, and too, issuing a cautionary tale. The interpretation I make here is that Black bodies are not given the assumption of being knowers in the minds of audiences that view them. Without an audience, Black feminist philosopher, Kristie Dotson (2011) suggests that there are limitations placed on the possibility of testimony, or testimonial quieting occurs. Black and minoritized bodies present a conundrum for

publics because of audience's inability to discern them as credible beyond the historically stigmatized, and cemented, images that precede them. Dotson (2011) hearkens the words of the Patricia Hill Collins (1990), when she claims, "that by virtue of her being a U.S. black woman she will systematically be undervalued as a knower" (p. 242). Women of color have long been the targets of epistemic violence, and undervalued speaking agents, making her status as a knower less than plausible. The act of affirming oneself as a knower proffers a defense against the workings of oppressive testimonies, made plain in Baldwin's plea to "trust your experience."

The warning for Baldwin's nephew speaks to an awareness of epistemic exclusion. In this analysis, epistemic exclusion can be understood as "an infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers that reduces her or his ability to participate in a given epistemic community" (Dotson, 2012, p. 24). Believing what "white people say about you" is incompatible with epistemic agency, "which concerns the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources" (Dotson, 2012, p. 24). Agency, in this case, would seem to follow alertness to one's condition.

"The word sensual is not intended to bring to mind quivering dusky maidens or priapic black studs. I am referring to something much simpler and much less fanciful. To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread...something very sinister happens to the people of a country when they begin to distrust their own reactions as." (Baldwin, 1985, p. 350)

a warmth of presence
rising, sinking, ebb and flow
rejoice in senses
--pleasing to the senses

Baldwin is offering a critique on the absence of intuition/sensuality in this passage. Ostensibly misunderstood as what is done sexually with the body, readers are encouraged to free themselves from antiquated trappings.

“I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering...but people who cannot suffer can never grow, can never discover who they are. That [person] who is forced each day to snatch [their personhood], their identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if [they survive their effort, and even if [they] do not survive it, something about...human life that no school on earth--and indeed, no church—can teach. [They] achieve [their] own authority, and that is unshakable. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 376)

Between a fuming smoke
and achieved authority
looms a hungry fire
-precarity

Baldwin posits that is one is “continually surviving.” The beacon to drifting and shipwrecked crew in this passage seems to be one of normalizing struggle. To make something normal is to discover, it seems, that the looming waves will cause distress, but if damned by ontological standards, will maintain their footing.

Lorde Haikus

Lorde's theorizing asks the following: Are we willing to recognize and give attention to the voices we have been taught to distrust, articulate the lessons they stand to teach us, and act upon the world with the revelations they assure us of (Lorde, 1984)?

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches Haikus:

"For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, "beautiful/ and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/"** and of impotence. These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness." (Lorde, 1984, p. 36)

"Mary (white woman), I ask that you re-member what is dark and ancient and divine within yourself that aids your speaking" (Lorde, 1984, p. 69)

Dark, ancient, and deep
Reservoirs full of power
Cherish your becoming
-excavation

In these passages, Lorde is suggesting that readers place a mirror on the shadow spaces of their lives for the purpose of intimacy—vulnerable exchanges with hidden parts— so that “those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us” (Lorde, 1984, p. 55). These passages also argue for situating the Black female body a bridge of analysis. I want to purposely hold the notion of the Black female body as “tool of analysis” at bay, so as not to continue in exploitive herstories that seek only to consume. This passage encourages me to see the Black body as a paradigm (Dei, 2017), for the purpose of understanding how non-Black and non-minoritized people may come to see themselves in the world. This approach calls for a bottom up politic that begins assessments of dignity, not from privileged places, but from the faces at the bottom of the well (Bell, 1992).

“We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry, which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.” (Lorde, 1984, pp. 37-38)

“The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 38)

beware the fury
hold her hand in the crowd
she's always speaking
- for Elizabeth Eckford

In these passages, Lorde is assuring readers of the workable combinations for living fully. More specifically, she is reflecting on the limitations of cognition as the sole way in which women survive. I am redirected to the ways that women of color planned for and responded to the hostilities that they confronted in public. Elizabeth Eckford walking to school through a crowd of angry protestors puts forth one example of the body poetically recites a poem of dignity and resistance. One has to wonder what voice young Elizabeth was listening to amongst the shouts hurled in her direction. I suspect she was attuned to the Black mother whisper that Lorde alludes to as her walk, poise, and disposition are themselves a poem—the very desires she feels within and is daring to make real, or bring action into accordance with her terrors (Lorde, 1984).

“Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors. For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 39)

Recovery takes work
Fantasy is apocalyptic
Refuse to disappear
-refashion

These passages support alternative possibilities by which to achieve meaning in the world in and against publics driven by rationality. The poetic process becomes a distilling experience where the body becomes the canvas for self-defining processes. Poetry, as the body, in this sense is never sterile but a spawning ground by which one assembles the shades useful for coloring choices. Explaining the process as a necessity for existence, a poem becomes a poem—our thoughts become more of themselves—by transposing feeling into language, then into an idea, and then a version of personhood—the poem—that meets the demands of the moment. This process offers a picture of recall, (re)membering, (re)presentation, with the additional probability of revision.

“We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (Lorde, 1984, p. 44)

What silences do you carry?
What is your work, are you doing it?
Self-revelation
-transformation

As a whole, Lorde’s (1984) essay, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” compels me to think about the lengths people will go to protect themselves from the convictions of revelation. Without an awareness of the fences one hammers in place to keep out potential offenses, those same fences keep in, hold back, and debilitate possible actualizations.

“When someone said to me, “How do you feel?” or “What do you think?” or asked another direct question, I would recite a poem, and somewhere in that poem would be the feeling, the vital piece of information. It might be a line. It might be an image. The poem was my response...But this was the first reason for my own writing, my need to say things I couldn't say otherwise when I couldn't find other poems to serve...there were so many complex emotions for which poems did not exist. I had to find a secret way to express my feelings. I used to memorize my poems. I would say them out; I didn't use to write them down. I had this long fund of poetry in my head. And I remember trying when I was in high school not to think in poems. I saw the way other people thought, and it was an amazement to me - step by step, not in bubbles up from chaos that you had to anchor with words.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 83)

the supply will end
after the mouthful of words
learn to make your own
-irrational

This passage challenges meaning making conceptualizations that privilege approaches to complex knowing as those that follow linear patterns of reasoning. The push appears to be a way of knowing that exists beneath language (content) or the framing (structure), toward an aesthetic of articulation beyond explicit definition. The lesson in this suggests that definitions are best incomplete, unfinished, and subject to revision.

“Leaving rationality to the white man is like leaving him a piece of that road that begins nowhere and ends nowhere. When I talk about the Black mother in each of us, the poet, I don't mean the Black mothers in each of us who are called poets, I mean the Black mother...The Black mother who is the poet exists in every one of us. Now when males or patriarchal thinkers (whether male or female) reject that combination, then we're truncated. Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don't honor those places, then the road is meaningless. Too often, that's what happens with the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 100)

If they are to learn
Standing at the foot mountains
Mother the self, whole.
-rearing

I wonder about the ways Black and minoritized lives have been schooled into dependence on rational fixations to sustain and grow. The insinuation here is that one has reached a time when they are capable of doing the thing(s) they were not able to do, but are unsure of the power they possess to see themselves anew. The Black mother (voice) in this passage—in all of us—readily knows what the learner has been taught, and knows what they must confront, and refuses to inhibit what must mature into self-definition.

Mothering the self, or giving way to the Black mother, who is the poet in each us, is itself, a statement against rationality that argues for a fusing of the feel-think dichotomy. Embodiment, thus, is not the absence of reasoning (objective thinking), instead, it is bringing object into a full and creative conversation with the subjective self. In other words, this approach calls for a meshing of subject object positions.

“For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”
(Lorde, 1984, p. 123)

weak and failing house
where the wind means destructions
rebuild the wreckage
-deconstruction

The heed in this familiar passage, is to take stock of the ways in which schooling can infiltrate the self, to the degree that it becomes deodorized even as the individual believes they are moving without, or outside of it.

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name Haikus

“But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else. It was so often her approach to the world.” (Lorde, 1982, p. 18)

“When I hear the deepest truths I speak coming out of my mouth sounding like my mother's, even remembering how I fought against her, I have to reassess both our relationship as well as the sources of my knowing. Which is not to say that I have to romanticize my mother in order to appreciate what she gave me - Woman, Black. We do not have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 139)

Change reality

If not, change your perceptions

An approach to life

-internalized suppression

In this passage, readers are introduced to an ethic of questioning; how do we begin to question the authorities that have guarded our epistemic and ontological beliefs about the world? In Prologue (1971), a poem written ten years earlier, Lorde resolves:

whatever my mother thought would mean survival
made her try to beat me whiter every day
and even now the color of her bleached ambition
still forks throughout my words
but I survived
and didn't I survive confirmed
to teach my children where her errors lay
etched across their faces between the kisses
that she pinned me with asleep

and my mother beating me
as white as snow melts in the sunlight
loving me into her bloods black bone—the home of all her secret hopes and fears (Lorde, 1992,
p. 111)

A reading of this passage can engender ideas about internalized oppression and the dedicated way it showed up in Lorde's mothers' life, but Lorde asks for us to pause that assumption in favor of a more complicated, and grace-filled, witnessing of her mother's mothering. In the lines, "Whatever my mother thought would mean survival/made her try to beat me whiter every day" (Lorde, 1992, p. 111), it becomes clear that Lorde understands that her mother was the product of a larger system of rights and wrongs that yielded limited versions of Black womanhood in a Western, United States context. While compassionately understood, I read a desire in Lorde that would not have her betray the desires that her mother foreclosed. The work of ontological personhood, I gather here, must be a sustained project of sifting.

"My mother knew very well I could follow directions, because she herself had spent a good deal of effort and arm-power making it very painful for me whenever I did not follow directions. And she also believed that a large part of the function of school was to make me learn how to do what I was told to do." (Lorde, 1982, p. 27)

I should raise my hand
discipline was my undoing
do as you are told
-unruly

I am out of place
Desire was my infraction
From the back, forward

-existing on the margins or sister outsider

The project of schooling is about following the rules and meeting the demands of the status quo. This passage illuminates the myriad ways by which society may come to depend on the schooling apparatus to socialize people into the existing epistemic and ontological frameworks. Unruliness seems to be the bodies first sign of resistance; the not to be tolerated response by those charged with mimicking rationality.

What new sights are available by rummaging through the old spaces and plots. Lorde seems to be prompting readers into the hard work of recall and recovery. To what extent are emerging theoretical maps and models constructed on structures that have always been the template for new knowledge? More than a cultural setting, the individual is seduced into old blueprints as the legitimate course for the knowledge accumulation, or in other words, that “piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics,” is functionally at work in are meaning making (p. 123). Growth out of this paradigm means that something has to be released, which may mean pain (Lorde, 1984). Part of the work deconstruction, is exposing the ways in which we have been taught to meet and reflect the status quo.

“We learned to appreciate each other’s softness behind the lockers, calling it all different kinds of names and games—from touch tag, to how-does-that-feel, to i-can-hit-harder-than-you. Until Gennie said to me one day, ‘Is that the only way you know how to make friends?’ and right then and there I began to learn other ways. I learned how to feel first and ask questions afterwards. I learned how to cherish first the façade and then the fact of being an outlaw” (Lorde, 1982, p. 86)

sensual rhythm

new and special, unfamiliar

evidence of life

-touch

The message advised in this passage is one of a shifting ontology as the by-product of a revised epistemology. Discernably, Lorde is coming to be differently in the world because she had an image of what was possible through the embodiment of Gennie. I am admonished to consider the

role of self-defining images whom, in their movements, convict, call forth, and (re)acquaint witnesses with the visions of a current self, while, also introducing them to versions of being that were outside of their purview. Said another way, these self-defining images allow us to touch the idea. In this instance, Lorde is able to cherish the idea, morph that idea into feeling, and embrace the feeling as revised aesthetic.

“We spent the next few hours deciding what she would wear, and who were going to be for the world on that particular day. If we did not have something suitable, we stitched and pinned an assortment of wide skirts and kerchiefs into place...we took hours attiring each other, sometimes changing entire outfits at the last minute to become two different people, complimenting each other always. We blossomed forth...” (Lorde, 1982, pp. 87-88)

Try it on and see

Mix and match wardrobes

Decide who you are

-daily impermanence

There is a lack of permanence in these vignettes that makes room for multiple versions of the self and expanded ways of being. Adorning the self in this passage serves a metaphor for the poetic ways in which Black bodies engage with and make meaning of the world around them.

Performativity, as one definition for a metaphor of changeability, should be understood, as instances of creativity that are always stitching, and pinning, dressing, and undressing, in outfits that suit a particular situation. Blossoming forth, affirms the body and decisions made, as part of the aesthetic that is capable of changing tomorrow, but in the moment serves a particular purpose.

One must also consider how adornments, the creative ways in which they work together, speak to Black interiors (Alexander, 2004). Dressing the body in this sense is a hint into the imaginings of Black bodies that stretches beyond the “limited expectations and definitions of what Black is, isn’t, or should be” (Alexander, 2004, p. 5).

Adornments, as ways of being, are not always about challenging the systems of rationality, as it were. Creativity, as it extends to Black bodies moving through the world, may take on particular appearances that fit with, and prop up, mechanisms that allows for systems of oppression to exist. The impermanence of our structures/aesthetics, suggests however, that they are subject to revision by taking time— “we spent the next few hours deciding what she would wear”— through personal interrogation and the mirror like counsel of those with whom we are moving through the world with.

“I wasn't going to—this action was a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That's what living was all about. I clung to that and tried to feel only proud” (Lorde, 1982, p. 111)

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“That's the only thing I've had to fight with, my whole life, preserving my perceptions of how things are, and later, learning how to accept and correct at the same time. Doing this in the face of tremendous opposition and cruel judgment. And I spent a long time questioning my perceptions and my interior knowledge, not dealing with them...” (Lorde, 1984, p. 105)

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Protective images

Preserve the spirit from pain

Power returned

-self-preservation

Efforts to return to subject positions and allow those impulses to inspire meaning making and decision processes invite grey area into what object dispositions position as mostly black and white conclusions. Grey areas are muddy with choices, not all of which may serve the greatest common good, or cultural expectation. Grey areas, as denoted by Lorde in this passage are not easily dealt with, but there appears to be something gained in the difficult decisions made on behalf of the self.

“Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire”

“... as if I had been born to make love to this woman, and was remembering her body rather than learning it deeply for the first time.” (Lorde, 1982, p. 189)

Out of mother's mouth

Picturesque and surreal

Other worlds possible

-politics of pleasure or codicil to cultural dissemblance

“The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or recognized feeling...we have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence. It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 53)

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“When I speak of the, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.” (Lorde, 1984, p. 55)

a depth of power

carefully curated souls

glowing/informing

-erotic

Power exists in every aspect of our lives. Lorde introduces readers to the erotic as a measure “between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. As a way of

knowing and decision-making attribute, the erotic enlarges questions of doing to questions of feeling, more specifically, “how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” in order to make our lives richer.

There are opportunities, for those who are not women, to engage with the erotic given their willingness to sit with the embodiments of Black women in all of their complexity. The Black mother, as Lorde (1984) recounts, is in each of us, but many choose not to deal with it. The erotic, as a politics of pleasure does not endorse a life without analytical thinking; instead, it is a charge to enliven the fruitful areas of our lives that are often the very markers of humanity. These, often, undisclosed positions are given permission to exhale in the select locations we call poetry. Theory on the other hand, has required a particular way ordering life-worlds and experiences that inherently fragments the self. Schooling, and thus, control, is a manifestation of theoretical (rational) and poetic divisions.

“All the pains in my life that I had lived and never felt flew around my head like grey bats; they pecked at my eyes and built nests in my throat and under the center of my breastbone. Eudora, Eudora, what was it you used to say to me? Waste nothing, Chica, not even pain. Particularly not pain” (Lorde, 1982, p. 236)

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“Everything can be used except that is wasteful I (you will need I to remember this when you are accused of destruction.)* Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change.” Lorde, 1984, p. 127)

--

Find the usefulness

Pain and rejection leave marks

This is not fatal

Waste nothing

-metabolize

Remember. These passages emphasize the creativity of the Black body to take that which seeks to destroy it, remake, redistribute, and repurpose that energy in alternative ways. The body remembers what the mind often forgets, hailing ideas that we can feel and experience historical events in the present as if they are happening to us. If that is the case, then the manner in which the Black body has recreated itself in and against publics driven by rationality remains part and parcel of the meaning making aesthetic (structure). Creativity surfaces when rationality ceases to respond, or is insufficient in its current rendering of a particular situation (Okello & Quaye, 2018), which prods, and supports, the notion the Black bodies have existed as creativity entities, always and already at odds with pains, rejections, dismissals, and plunder. To be exist in Black and minoritized bodies in a Western, United States context, is to antagonize publics driven by rationality, repeatedly and in perpetuity. As such, to exist in Black bodies, is to be the very definition of creativity.

Black Unicorn Haikus:

“We had come together like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better.” (Lorde, 1982, p. 253)

Love each other hard
seamen are wild, look inward
Our hope was at home
-Zami

Lorde continues to frame self-definition as an interpersonal achievement as much as it is an intrapersonal process. Lorde lifts up the women whom she has loved over the years as inextricably bound to her ideas about self-definition. In some way or another, bearing witness to their aesthetic, or the creativity with which they negotiated, held up, managed, and ultimately lived their lives, has left an indelible mark on who she is becoming. “Exchanging energy,” (Lorde, 1982, p. 253), can be read as happening between physical bodies, but my sense is that

there is also something that occurs beyond the meetings of physical essence that speaks to metaphysical affirmations of the Black body as a worthy and lovable entity.

“my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind” (Lorde, 1978, p. 4)

presence is power
the waves obey your fury
we shall not forget
-validation

(Re)presentation can be instructive. Black bodies, as poetic scripts and scenes, bend light in ways that allows viewers to see differently and hearer’s to respond differently. The language of “magic” speaks to something beyond the social and easily traceable. Tensions of public and private representation are synonymous with meaning making in the Black body. Part of the genius of Black bodies, as conveyed in the passage, is the ability to survive across temporal and geographic space, such that they show up in innumerable new ways. In showing up, there in places, the sentiment is that there is always something left behind.

“ ‘Let us sleep in your bed’ they whisper
‘Let us sleep in your bed’
but she has mothered them before.
She closes her door.

They become men.” (Lorde, 1978, p. 8)

“I did not fall from the sky/I/
Nor descend like a plague of locusts
to drink color and strength from the earth
and I do not come like rain

as a tribute or symbol for earth's becoming
I come as woman" (Lorde, 1978, p. 14)

Soft and terrible
Midnight falling and noon sun
A dark and fire life
-unbounded

This passage interrupts our common sense. As a portrait of disruption, the reader is made to wonder about continuity, that is, *does this equal that, or, if this doesn't happen, how does that become a reality*. The passages dislodges the Black, queer, woman's body from violence's and dispossessions, and thrusts readers into a rival space and time, where survival becomes the possible reality. I interpret Lorde's aim here as a disruption of Western, capitalistic, consumptive motives that produce and ultimately lead to unsustainable forms of life. Motioned for, I would argue, is a centering of Black feminism as a way rethinking what it means to exist.

"Our voices
seem too loud for this small yard
too tentative for women
so in love" (Lorde, 1978, p. 39)

"I am tired of holy deaths...
the psychology of the oppressed
where mental health is the ability
to repress
knowledge of the worlds cruelty...
please cry
whenever it hurts" (Lorde, 1978, p. 42)

not every face is yours
mirrors do what we ask them to do

the fault is inside
-waiting to exhale

The primacies of epistemic and ontological repression are made clear in these stanzas. The function of schooling apparatuses, as has been argued, is to reproduce the status quo—to move through the world in a state of non-being—, obedient citizens to the patterns of culture. In the first passage, Lorde is uplifting sensibilities that, seemingly, across our lives lose their fervor, cooled under muffled lids of circumspection. In other words, one learns how to shrink the self into palatable intakes for the cultures digestion. I am left wondering about the many types of deaths—psychic, social, cognitive, emotional— Black and minoritized bodies are tasked with carrying so that they are legible.

Undersong Haikus:

“once I was immortal...
time drove the moon
down to the crescent
and they found me
mortal” (Lorde, 1958; 1992, p. 12)

“and look mother
I am dark temple
Where your true spirit rises...
I learned from you
to define myself
through your denials” (Lorde, 1971;1992, p. 101)

“with their blind and terrible love
and I am lustful now for my own name” (Lorde, 1978, p. 62)

“I do not want

to make a poem
I want to make you
more and less
a part
from my self” (Lorde, 1978, p. 63)

with every sun
the moon pushes down her light
climbing, always, climbing,
-finding my way back or talking back

Arrivals as it pertains to meaning making, are not fixed places, but rather something like a moving river, wherein as one never steps in the same place twice. The lusting for our own name describes a longing for something witnessed—observed, or perhaps experienced—that stirs up quelled desires, of which the moon stanza acutely punctuates. Something about absorbing the light that is a full moon assures the individual that crescent embodiment is not all that there is.

“we made strong poems for each other
exchanging formulas for each particular magic.” (Lorde, 1970; 1992, p. 87)

“but raising her up to a correct little sister
is doing your mama’s job all over again...
our daughters will explore the old countries as curious visitors to our season...
our girls will grow into their own Black Women
finding their contradictions.” (Lorde, 1971; 1992, p. 109)

“za ki tan ke parlay lot
you who hear tell the others.” (Lorde, 1980; 1992, p. 185)

precious love, take my hand
beloved community

magic born communion
-critical citizenship

Poems do the work they are supposed to do, and become what they are supposed to become when they are gifted to a community of witnesses. The ways in which iron sharpens iron—encouraging, exchanging, inspiring—(Psalms 27:17) in these passages stands out as a deliberate Black feminist practice that explains how Black women’s bodies, though a persistent site domination, also become sources of possibility.

“but I was born Black and without illusion
and my vision which differs from yours
is clear
although sometimes restricted” (Lorde, 1970; 1992, p. 90)

“seeing usually
was a matter of what was
in front of my eyes
matching what was behind my brain
now my eyes have become
a part of me exposed” (Lorde, 1978, p. 94)

“but I want you
to know
your darkness also
rich
and beyond fear” (Lorde, p. 1978, p. 106)

subject to object
gaping distance between selves
object to subject
-give us back

I am led to wonder about the conclusions one makes when they make contact with the precarity of their existence. What are Black bodies to make of the dissonance, turned expectation, formed absolute realism that is the wake (Sharpe, 2016)? How are they to manage forces impinging on their body, behaviors, and desires? Relatedly, how might analyzing the relationship between human desires [pursuit of things that give us meaning] and demands [wake of crisis, forces, possibilities of terror] expand and deepen conceptualizations of agency? I am contemplating an aesthetic renders a robust, and unforgiving, conceptualization agency; in doing so, I imagine it as a dialectical dance between defensive motives and self-actualization motives. If power and hegemony are ever-present impositions (Foucault, 1980), then it stands to reason that a great deal of energy must be devoted to maintaining our meaning making constructs, such as one's faith or cultural worldviews (Lorde (1982; 1984). Sustaining a durable self-esteem/self-appraisal by meeting defensive maintenance needs, however, does not foreclose enrichment capacities to create, explore, and pursue curiosity. The ideal, agentic, self-authored person, free from the defensiveness instigated by external formulas (object), autonomous in their striving for actualization (subject), is not possible. Realizable, and perhaps, the most optimal condition, is a melding of subject-object poles into an embodied position.

"How else can the self become whole
save by making self into its own new religion" (Lorde, 1971; 1992, p. 135)

"There is a strange man attached to my backbone
who thinks he can sap me or break me...
Every day I walk out of my house
With this curious weight on my back...
I used to pretend
I did not hear him." (Lorde, 1972; 1992, p. 168)

"How many deaths
do we live through daily
pretending

we are alive?...

We cannot live without our lives” (Lorde, 1979; 1989; 1992; pp. 202-206)

these streets are familiar

embalmed by old ritual

quake to be reborn

-yesterday’s meanings

Lorde’s offering here is teaching the reader something both historic and prophetic about coping and healing from the various forms of trauma (Androne, 2012). There is an unsettled normalization of systems of oppression in these passages, such that readers might understand the urgency, yet not surrender to it. The alchemist sensibility—making a way out of know way, spinning copper into gold—is ancient and contemporary, as Lorde dares to believe that a “new religion,” i.e., new of way of knowing, being, and believing, can be made from, and in the midst of devastation.

Meaning Made of Historical Analysis

“What do you think you are going to find in those books” (Hill, 2017, personal communication)? The question startled me when I first heard it. In attempting to resurrect a theoretical canon I entered this historical analysis believing I would find ancient wisdom folded under the pages of each book; that if I looked hard enough I would find missing linkages, relics desperate to be uncovered. That happened, and then again it didn’t. The haikus, and the proceeding explanations that follow them, demonstrate my interpretive understandings of the texts covered. Themes emerged from my analysis that I observed as fundamental to how Baldwin and Lorde existed in their bodies during their historical wakes (Sharpe, 2016). In the section that follows, I theorize about these findings and the contributions that they make both materially and existentially (epistemic and ontological) to the life-worlds of Black and minoritized people. This analysis does the root work of articulating the aesthetic dimensions of self-definition, that is, it gives language to the interior make up of self-definition, informing how Black and minoritized lives organize responses to their worlds.

In a similar vein, the ideas that surfaced were familiar—familiar in the sense that they seem almost inherent, coded in and mapped on to Black and minoritized bodies, recognizable as an everyday dynamism always measuring oneself in relation to a world staring back at them. They were familiar such that I have seen them play out around and through my life. This, I suspect was the question Dr. Hill was pressing to me consider. I was looking for something(s) that my body already had a knowledge/memory of, in which case, these texts serve more as a bridge for me back to myself (Dillard, 2012). I expound on this connection in the sermon to come.

Defining Black Aesthetics

As noted by Sylvia Wynter (1987), literature, as textual embodiments, function to encode the dynamics of desire on deep structural levels. In this case of data analysis, the Black feminist reading of these literary accounts focused explicitly on the works of Audre Lorde and James Baldwin provides a peculiar type of insight, or what Wynter (1987) phrases as a knowledge about “system specific modes of mind” (p. 219). These specific modes of mind assist this worship service and sermon by identifying the various epistemological and ontological embodiments, or ways of knowing and being, that operate together, or at times apart, in the process of meaning making for Black and minoritized life-worlds. Across the life-works of Lorde and Baldwin, I bear witness to their sociopolitical theorizing in the flesh, interpreting their embodied texts through the medium of haiku poems.

Their offerings, the tithes that they sowed by living, surviving, and creatively (re)presenting their experiences in the public commons through their literary oeuvres, grants us a picture of what theories in the flesh consider, and as I will explicate below, outlines a structural and content basis by which to understand Black and minoritized meaning making. The themes chronicled above, recognizable through a Black feminist close reading practice, constitute what I would term aesthetic principles, and in this particular reading, black aesthetics. Succinctly, I am led to recall, and (re)member Black living as an imaginative, capacious, and densely complex counterclaim to the machinery of white supremacy and rationality. Opened up in this analysis is the opportunity to look beyond the forces of circumscription that have managed, if they considered at all, the legibility and relevance of Black and minoritized meaning making. Insisted upon is a form of knowing and being imbricated with histories, mythologies, sophistications, and imaginings dislodged from positivist underpinnings, and unrestricted by constructivist temporalities. Black aesthetics is not a new term in the literary canon, as poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, and scholars like Houston Baker Jr. (1984), Henry Louis Gates (2000), Elizabeth Alexander (2004) and Evie Shockley (2011) have contributed to the chorus of voices and pens defining a Black aesthetic. Any attempt to nail down a specific definition will prove illusory. The historical wrangling’s that have followed the idea are worth mentioning, however, as insight into how an aesthetic should be understood in relation to self-defining processes.

The concept of a black aesthetic arose during the Black Arts Movement (BAM), in the mid 1960s. Originators of the concept, artists, writers, and poets who first promoted the term had

not come to an agreement on its parameters, value, and or reach (Shockley, 2011). Moreover, there was a sense of caution that hovered above view of a black aesthetic that sought to guard the notion from parochial views and singular arbiters that could overlay the realms of Black creativity and cultural life. Notwithstanding debates over the concepts potentialities, rigid compartments did emerge among theorists, to form a *Black Aesthetic*. Characteristics that made up this crystallizing form included an understanding that “black music, black speech, black heroes, and black history, should and do determine both the form and content of black poetry” (Shockley, 2011, p. 3). The cultural context by which this definition takes shape is particularly important here, as again, the charged political climate demanded that culture and politics not be mutually exclusive terrains.

Black Power, having taken stock of American culture, was imploring its artists to establish an alternative set of cultural standards that would center the needs of Black bodies, as opposed to finding validation in art forms injected with the belief that Black people were at best inferior to white people and culture, and at worst not even human. Shockley (2011) uplifts Addison Gayle’s incisive critique of an essentialist Black Aesthetic, asserting “aesthetics are not universal...and as long as black art was being written out of one set of cultural materials and values, but being evaluated in accordance with the touchstones of another culture-especially where the latter culture takes the former to be inferior by definition-black art would be found wanting” (p. 4). I argue, as Shockley (2011) does, for a redefinition of Black Aesthetics that is more descriptive than it is prescriptive. I submit that we think about *black aesthetics*, plural: “a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies...to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing” (p. 9). Pulling from this definition, I mobilize black aesthetics as the shape-shifting (Cox, 2015) meaning-making forms that emerge consequent of limbos in the wake. Durell Callier (2018), calling upon June Jordan (1985) records “the syntax of a sentence equals the structure of your consciousness,” demonstrating how the structures of ideas reveal our world views and values (p. 27).

True to limbos, black aesthetics do not inhere to particular strategies and tropes that favor preferred objective locations, that is, those forms of knowing and being that accent the broader cultural expectations. Rather, they are constructed in and constituted by one’s subjectivities in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). In calling for black aesthetics I am not alluding to styles or

characteristics of particular textual embodiments, nor is it a reference that is confined by race. Rather, it is meant to acknowledge the subjectivity of the individual, who by nature of the Black and/or minoritized body they are in are placed in opposition to rationality. Black aesthetics, as illustrated by a limbo approach, and aware of the body as dynamic entity, are highly historicized and contextualized, and contingent “with regard to period and place, and with regard to the various other factors that shape an individual’s identity, particularly including gender, sexuality, and class as well” (Shockley, 2011, p. 9). Administering the dictionary definition of aesthetics that is concerned with the study of the mind and emotions in relation to the sense beauty, I hold black aesthetics as a set of principles concerned with embodiment. This definition is akin to what I described in the invocation as the movement from self-definition—a noun—to self-defining—a verb, in a deliberate act to return generative possibility to bodies whose agency is always mediated through the wake (Sharpe, 2016).

Black aesthetics as a lens to understand Black and minoritized meaning making structures is to reconsider competing imperatives of student development theory, in particular the subject-object principle that tends to manifest in the procedural unfolding of meaning making structures, consistent with constructivist theory. Stated differently, the cognitive movement from the subject-object, and the transformation that takes place in that process, constitutes consciousness raising and complexity for young adults. Alternatively, there is no ideal achieved placement aspired to in the comportments of black aesthetics; rather, credence is given to one’s ability to know and be, both as a product of their choosing, and a consequence of their sociopolitical location.

Referring to peculiarity of Black poets in diaspora, Shockley (2011) comments on these comportments marveling at the impulse of Black poets to “coax from the available tools of language something that is felt to have been excluded, repressed, or rendered impossible in previous poetry by constructions of blackness imposed on African Americans, inter- or intra-racially” (p. 10). Importantly, Shockley is delineating the availability of power/authority in culture to some, while complicating the opportunity for Black and minoritized bodies to the move with the same methodology. This perceptive accounting for the creativity of Black and minoritized bodies to innovate—create—outside of the canon of formal and avant-garde theorization of meaning making, lends credibility to my use of black aesthetics as an intervention against rational theoretical tracings of meaning making, and too, affirms a theoretical canon in

Black existential discourse. As part of a larger canon, Lorde and Baldwin's self-defining praxis instigates black aesthetic production(s) in their literary embodiments by outlining several principles for a holistic framing of meaning making for Black and minoritized bodies "not as a 'freedom from'—freedom from the deliberate implacability of the wake (Sharpe, 2016) and its stringent hold of memory and futurity—but 'freedom to'—freedom to compose a multilayered self (Shockley, 2011).

Black aesthetics, denotes what Crawley (2017) calls "other possibilities, other capacities for knowledge, other modes of existence... an enunciation of historicity, "the forms by which a group of humans engages the difficulties posed for it in existence, including both its possibility, its survival, or its becoming something else altogether [... and] is about possibility in general" (p. 55). Reconnecting the subject flesh, with the body that followed, inscribed upon through rhetoric and discourses of rationality, black aesthetic structures make vivid, while in the wake (Sharpe, 2016), a resistance to Spillers notion of American grammar:

agency, act, scene, and purpose as the principal elements involved in the human drama—is compressed...into a living body, insinuating itself through a material scene, and in that dance of motives, in which the motor behavior, the changes of countenance, the vocal dynamics, the calibration of gesture and nuance in relationship to a formal object — the song itself is a precise demonstration of the subject turning in fully conscious knowledge of her own resources toward her object. In this instance of being-for-self, it does not matter that the vocalist is "entertaining" under American skies because the woman, in her particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterable and discrete moment of self-knowledge. (Spillers, 2003, p. 165)

Black aesthetics, illustrates the possibilities of an embodied—enlivening of a compressed flesh outward onto the body—demonstrating what is possible in limbos. Creativity rises in the impossibilities of constraint.

Principles of Self-Defining Practice

As it pertains to the principles undergirding black aesthetics, which speak to one's ability to participate in their unfolding, this analysis orchestrates self-defining praxis as constituting the following: (1) *validating and integrating standpoint knowledge of minoritized bodies*; (2) *prioritizing self-love*; (3) *emphasizing agency in a matrix of domination* (4) *foregrounding identity as performative*; (5) and *dreaming and imagining futures not yet known*. The following

comparative glance will discuss how each of these ideas, or parallel concepts, has functioned in student development literature to school the body, and how Lorde and Baldwin open up these concepts, i.e., free the body up to imagine new possibilities, in the works under investigation.

Validating and integrating standpoint knowledge (SK)

Baxter Magolda (1992) citing Piaget (1926), defined “intellectual development as the evolution of thought structures characterized by qualitatively different assumptions about knowledge” (p. 267). Assumptions were later to be regarded as “epistemology because of the general focus on the limits and certainty of knowledge and the criteria for knowing” (p. 267). Ways of knowing have been historically understood through positivist assumptions, which foreground objectivity and rationality (Belenky et al., 1986; Perry, 1970). Motioning for the inclusion of multiple realities, social constructivism sought to build off of positivist notions, positing that individuals’ experiences should be centered in discussions of meaning making (Baxter Magolda, 1992). This approach informed Baxter Magolda’s (1992) work, which outlines four epistemological levels, or ways of knowing.

Those ways of knowing, which follow the distinct pattern from certainty and passive accepting of authorial knowledge to uncertainty and the development of a self-authored mind, are characterized by the following ideas: absolute knowing, which suggests that knowledge is certain or absolute; it is received from the instructional authority and valued as a irrefutable. The individual role, as this type of knower, is to acquire and secure knowledge; transitional knowing represents a knowledge that is partially certain and partially uncertain. Troubling the notion of absolute knowledge, transitional knowers seek comprehension; independent knowing identifies knowers who see knowledge as uncertain with the understanding the multiple realities exist. independent knowers have the capacity to think for themselves.; and contextual knowing, which describes knowers consider the context of an issue or segment of knowledge. This type of knowing no longer favor their own or others’ ideas without some measure of critical analysis (Baxter Magolda, 1992). Outlining principles that underlie cognitive/epistemological development, Baxter Magolda (1992) puts forth the following: the making of meaning is influenced by each individual’s worldview and by interaction with others and depends on the context of an individual’s experience, which preserve the integrity of individual stories and experiences; reasoning patterns are not mutually exclusive and may shift in changing contexts

and over time.; reasoning patterns are related to, but not dictated by, gender; student stories and interpretations of patterns cannot automatically be generalized to other contexts.

This approach to understanding knowledge, while constructivist (multiple realities) in nature and mindful of shifting contexts, does incur some limitations, particularly, as it relates to what Lyons (1990) and Welte (1997) determine are the interdependent, intradependent, and intersubjective way in which modes of knowing may work together, or apart. In other words, individuals do not belong to just one stage of knowing; it is possible to simultaneously know in multiple and varied ways. Lorde and Baldwin model a multilayered and polyvocal meaning making structure that lobbies for a critical framing of knowing. Lorde (1984) testifies to poems, as a multivalent way of knowing, she contends:

When someone said to me, "How do you feel?" or "What do you think?" or asked another direct question, I would recite a poem, and somewhere in that poem would be the feeling, the vital piece of information. It might be a line. It might be an image. The poem was my response...But this was the first reason for my own writing, my need to say things I couldn't say otherwise when I couldn't find other poems to serve. (p. 83)

Poems, prose, and the overlapping ways in which they are utilized across Lorde's writings exemplify transgressive behavior that traverses established containers of discipline and genre. The purposeful and formal blending of the rational, consistent with third person political essayist, with the first-person poem and autobiography, undergird Lorde's philosophical beliefs about dismantling the rigid binaries between self and other, mind and body, reason and emotion; proffered instead, is a mode of both thinking and feeling at once:

The Black mother who is the poet exists in every one of us. Now when males or patriarchal thinkers (whether male or female) reject that combination, then we're truncated. Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don't honor those places, then the road is meaningless. (Lorde, 1984, p. 100)

In this way, standpoint knowledge, or the relevant, localized knowledge, that is representative of ones multiple and intersecting identities, always mediated through history, is embodied in text, in her refusal to be hemmed in by the customary writing, knowing, and speaking of the present day. She presents readers with a multifaceted narrative self, that is at once socially and politically located, and in the next breath a mother, daughter, or lover. Lorde and Baldwin structure

interplays between the changing narrative self, both to convey social critique and to persuade witnesses to broach formal expectations of knowing, and as the next section will prove, *being*.

Prioritizing self-love (SL)

Enslavement in a Western, United States context, was justified for several reasons. Among them, as has been articulated in this worship service was the notion that Black bodies were not fully human. The separation from certain rights carries unique challenges, but in and of itself, the acts are not uncommon in social hierarchies. Raising a partition between who, or what, can be human is another matter. Cardinaly, the assumption in the mind of colonizing forces was that Black bodies “lacked the range of emotions accepted as norm among civilized folk,” and for all intents and purposes were “incapable of deep feeling and fine emotions,” i.e., these folks suffered from the capacity to love (hooks, 2001, xix). Enlarging rudimentary tropes about love, broadly, and self-love in particular, I consider the question of love to be ontological, that is, its rooted, centrally, in ways of being with the prevailing conundrum of, how does the Black body escape dehumanization—affirm and (re)member a worthy bodily presence—in view of anti-blackness and schooling structures?

Development theory’s closest discussion is found in what Kegan (1982; 1994) calls order 4 of consciousness (self-authorship), and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) notion of establishing identity. To establish one’s identity is to develop a healthy self-concept and outlook towards oneself that is considerate of

comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 49).

The glaring presumption in their review is the felt sense that establishing identity is a matter of will to do. Love is not suggestive in the project of self-definition; it is a necessity, for as hooks (2001), attending to the spirit of Baldwin (1963), punctuates, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within,” referring to love as not merely “the personal sense but as a state of being...the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (p. xxv). This pursuit of a state of being, to intimately wrestle with issues of self-esteem and self-hatred, becomes essential due to the traumas and condemnation of white supremacy:

I am not one of those people who believe that oppression imbues a people with wisdom or insight or sweet charity, though the survival of the Negro in this country would simply not have been possible if this bitterness had been all [they] felt...I can conceive of no Negro native to this country who has not...been irreparably scarred by the conditions of [their] life. All over...trying desperately to find a place to stand; and the wonder is not that so many are ruined but that so many survive. (Baldwin, 1955, p. 71)

This statement buttresses hooks' (2001) sentiment that decolonization is the immediate and necessary battlefield for the rights to self-love. Baldwin charges Black life-worlds with the task of compiling tools to confront white supremacy (e.g., surveillance, assimilation, disembodiment) in the shadow of oppression, contending that those who are "forced each day to snatch [their personhood], their identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if [they] survive their effort, and even if [they] do not survive it, something about...human life that no school on earth--and indeed, no church—can teach" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 376) will be awarded to them. Persuaded that Black bodies "felt" something more, Baldwin (1986) points to the miracle of self-love in attempts to make meaning of the worlds they were/are in.

Emphasizing agency (EA)

Fanon (1967) suggests that "as soon as I *desire* I am asking to be considered. I am not merely here-and-now, sealed into thingness. I am for somewhere else and for something else" (p. 170). Desire summons the capacities of the individual to, by their own actions, influence their existence in the world and the course by which their lives take. It is this power of desire—the creative, charismatic, and persistent longing that takes place at the very limits of authority—that may be understood as agency, or the belief that one plays an integral part in shaping their life (Bandura, 1997; Fanon, 1967). Agency as a concept, supposes that one is capable of being a curator and arbiter of cultural production offering a rebuttal to determinism, which says that every decision and action is the inevitable and necessary consequence of preceding events (Bandura, 1997).

Human agency, as outlined by Bandura (1997), comprises four distinct yet interlocking components: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. Intentionality describes functions where the individual formulates outcomes and plots a strategy to achieve them. Centrally, it asks, how do I bring about the desired ends that I seek? The second component of agency is recognized as forethought. This notion suggests that there is a cautious

overview of prospective actions, and careful attention to how those actions may influence intended outcomes. In a sense, visualized futures are brought into the present as guiding logics to steer behaviors. The third component, self-reactiveness speaks to actors' capacity to self-regulate. Agency, thus, is not simply the ability to make choices and identify plans, but to work in the gap, self-correct, and adjust, between those choices and desired ends. The fourth agentic function is self-reflectiveness. Through functional self-reflectiveness, actors consider their thoughts, actions, and the meaning behind their pursuits.

If agency is the manifestation of desire, then efficacy is the mechanism that makes agency possible. Self-efficacy denotes an actor's beliefs in their causative capabilities. In other words, self-efficacy is the belief that one holds about their ability to control a specific situation or set of circumstances, or simply, it says I can produce desired effects by my actions (Bandura, 1997). In human development terms, this notion of the individual functioning from an internal system to make decisions in an external world is compatible with understandings of self-authorship (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; 2001; 2008; Kegan, 1982; 1994). The construct of self-authorship articulates that individuals are equipped with the capacity to take ownership of their internal authority/foundations and establish their own sets of values and ideologies (Kegan, 1994). Self-authorship attributes meaning-making complexity, as mentioned in the Invocation, to subject-object reflection (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kegan 1982, 1994). In this way, conceptualizations of agency, or one's ability to be a producer of their life and not merely produced by it (intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness), appear to mirror the theoretical grounding of self-authorship, which affords the individual the ability to coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states.

The emphasis, however, in structuring agency and student development theories with the subject-object relationship (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kegan 1982, 1994; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970) as the primary indicator of complexity, steeps these models in rational, scientific approaches to knowledge, which has limitations when trying to cultivate meaning in publics driven by rationality. Baldwin's (1953) portrayal of the church body as a somatic entity, describes the array of emotions it passes through as it readies itself to assist parishioners in encountering the holy spirit, and in doing so illustrates the strain enmeshed in projects of agency:

with this [self-definition] cry, and the echoing cries, the tarry service moved from its first stage of steady murmuring, broken by moans and now and again an isolated cry, into that stage of tears and groaning, of calling aloud and singing...for the rebirth of the soul was perpetual” (p. 127).

This imagery, importantly, centers the body as the primary site of contention by which agency unfolds. Limbos, which make room for Black aesthetics, model a necessarily complex rendering of agency for minoritized persons that bridge the tenets of intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness with an awareness of the one’s histories, vulnerabilities, and the notion of self-preservation.

This analysis is consistent with Black feminisms (Collins, 1990, Lorde, 1982; 1984; 1992) and research that suggests that the pursuit of self-actualization is a subordinate goal by which human behavior aspires (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Steele, 1988), instead much of human behavior is rooted in the need for protection from epistemic and material violence, or what Lorde (1982; 1984) would call *self-preservation*. A more robust rendering of agency, thus, should be understood as the integration of defensive motives and self-actualization motives:

We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry, which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (Lorde, 1984, pp. 37-38)

In the integrated place of embodiment, defensiveness, generally, precedes self-actualization creativities as it responds to the needs of actors in an environment (Maslow 1955). I would submit that the two work in tandem, similar to that of a contracting and expanding coiled spring. Imagine that the coils of a spring are given their shape because of historical and present-day systems of oppression—the wake (Sharpe, 2016). Actors, as springs, are pre-disposed to a defensive posture, anticipating and thus equipped to buffer the weights of anxiety, distress, and terror. When pressed upon the coils compress downward, at first overwhelmed by external forces. This defensiveness, trained by historical memory, is able to absorb, or make meaning of the force(s). From there, creative sensibilities take over, as the coils, having made sense of the opposing motives, reclaim and repurpose the momentum that was originally designed to dominate them into an upward proclamation that we would call agency. The result is an

expanding spring that is much more tested, conscious, and resolved. In this limbo, instructed by critical race realism and Black feminism, there are no promises of escape from meaning making tasks mediated by the wake (Sharpe, 2016). To think otherwise, is to presume that systems of oppression are static. The agency that surfaces is altogether futuristic and historical, deeply hopeful and determinately realistic. Agency, as it relates to black aesthetics, sees the body as fluent and intelligible.

Movement forward (limbo metaphor) or upward (spring metaphor in the *Invocation*), appears to happen with attentiveness to the intersecting variables mentioned, and a recognition of the creative affordances/possibilities available within a particular context. Thus, a revised conceptualization of agency emerges from the themes above in concert with reflection on the ways Black and minoritized bodies have engaged in resistance, rupture, and disruption aesthetically and materially over time. The themes that emerged, for what Okello and White (2018) term *embodied agency*, are inclusive of one's existential situation, an appraisal of competing forces (F) against the individual, one's historical memory (HM) in concert with their current meaning making capacities (MMC), and the implementation of creative capacities.

Foregrounding identity as performative (IP)

The freedom to choose is not universal, and for Black and minoritized bodies, is always interrupted by larger, quotidian pressures and concerns. The project of anti-blackness exists to create fixed versions of a self that are consistent with the status quo. If one cannot live outside of the historical moment they are in, the labor, thus, becomes squeezing an organic life out of the lemons afforded. Black aesthetics, therefore, are not inscrutable zones—distanced or unfettered—nor, are they colonial proxies, but imagined and contradictory spaces, by which Black bodies bend, accept, expand, comply, reject, and repurpose limited expectations and definitions. Staged uniquely, this sense of performative casting that envelopes Black and minoritized meaning making structures, competes with elements of self-authorship, that propose pictures of consistency.

According to Baxter Magolda (2008), the three elements, building an internal foundation, securing internal commitments, and trusting an internal voice, are undergirded by an organizing principle that calls for “internally determining one's beliefs, identity and social relations” (p. 281). Baxter Magolda (2008) continues this line of thinking, writing the first element

involves developing the internal voice to use in these decisions. The intermediate element involves using the internal voice actively to build one's internal belief system and solidifying that internal system. The advanced element involves refining and strengthening the internal system as it becomes the core of one's existence. (p. 281)

I see, and understand the value in the construction of what Baxter Magolda calls an internal voice in a higher education system driven by rationality. It would be irresponsible to suggest that larger societal functioning does not reward this type of thinking, and therefore embraces the learning of it through its schooling practices.

For this reason, Black and minoritized bodies take this up as a reasonable option for moving through the world, as Baldwin (1955) concludes, "It is part of the price the Negro pays for his position in this society...he is almost always acting. A Negro learns to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it" (Baldwin, 1955, p. 68). I understand this in a hooksian sense (1995) as performance used to "manipulate in the interests of survival (the notion of wearing a mask)" (p. 200). Across Black histories, performance has been a crucial site of resistance, liberation, and knowledge production, central as hooks (1995) says to the process of "decolonization in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 212). The "act" that Baldwin speaks to, references the claiming of voice and assertion of one's right to be in an ontological sense, against modes of discipline that seek to "overdetermine...those who are exploited and/or oppressed" (p. 212). There is sense of immediacy in these types of performances, that is, a particular performance of identity is always localized in the present. Johnson (1998) suggests "the performance of identity emerges from the contextual cues and markers" (p. 400). Crawley, (2008) echoes this sentiment saying, "Space allows for variations and riffs of identity and has no prescribed ideals towards which subjects must aspire" (p. 310). The search, thus, is not for a patterned end point; rather, identity as performative asks, did the performance meet its intended goal, and what knowledge was created, and/or what transcript was interrupted in the production of the performance?

The progression between elements, forward from building, to securing, to trusting is consistent with societal needs to control for multiple variables when attempting to understand a phenomenon. Said differently, a reliable concept is one that has been tested for; predictions can be made about the consistency of a concept based on the variables it has controlled for. While I am not suggesting that self-authorship makes claims about absolutely certainty, I want to disrupt

the notion that control is an option when it comes to Black and minoritized bodies; perfect uncertainty is a more appropriate rendering. Scholars have called interruptions in this progression stagnation, or even regression (Torres & Hernandez, 2007), which would seem to cuff expressive possibilities as it relates to meaning making structures. Lorde (1984) discerns and warns against this way of being when she states, “For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings [bodies as dynamic entities] were not meant to survive” (Lorde, 1984, p. 39). Baxter Magolda (2008) motions for an internal voice, believing that with “stability,” comes freedom (p. 281). Freedom, should be read here as the sociopolitical authority to *name it and claim it*, as it were. Alternatively, black aesthetics envisions creative possibilities, where they were once trimmed by expectations of the status quo, which is to say, classical Western philosophy of a subject wholly bound, through the acquisition of rights and laws.

We spent the next few hours deciding what she would wear, and who were going to be for the world on that particular day. If we did not have something suitable, we stitched and pinned an assortment of wide skirts and kerchiefs into place...we took hours attiring each other, sometimes changing entire outfits at the last minute to become two different people, complimenting each other always. We blossomed forth... (Lorde, 1982, pp. 87-88)

Baldwin (1955) agrees, posting, “everything depends on how relentlessly one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art” (p. 7). Recreating, from deconstruction does not proceed without visions of what could be. The interdependence of self-definition is, again, made clear as the very image of self-defining praxis (re)introduces witnesses with the self, while providing alternative potentialities:

We learned to appreciate each other’s softness behind the lockers, calling it all different kinds of names and games—from touch tag, to how-does-that-feel, to i-can-hit-harder-than-you. Until Gennie said to me one day, ‘Is that the only way you know how to make friends?’ and right then and there I began to learn other ways. I learned how to feel first and ask questions afterwards. I learned how to cherish first the façade and then the fact of being an outlaw. (Lorde, 1982, p. 86)

Whether the (re)presentations are staged as contradictory ways of knowing or shifts in how one chooses to identify with respect to their social identities, a performative basis, that is a notion that forcefully foregrounds the flesh by intentioned bends, extensions, and reaches of movement (amplifying limbos) is to enact a presencing (Crawley, 2017) tuned in to the chorus refrain (status quo), and simultaneously creating its own lyrics.

Dreaming and imagining futures not yet known (DIF)

Constructive-developmentalism, as a theory of adult growth and longitudinal meaning making has been the steward of the student development canon since the early 50s where one encounters Piaget (1952), up and through the early 90s where Baxter Magolda (1992) takes up and first begins to extend Kegan's (1982; 1994) notion of self-authorship. This history went so far as to cement constructivist development as the only one way by which to understand young adults. According to Drago-Severson (2010), constructivism means to "actively construct and make meaning of our experiences and create our realities with respect to cognitive, emotional, intrapersonal (the self's relationship to itself), and interpersonal pathways of development" (p. 37). Developmentalism adds to this construct, believing "the ways in which we make meaning and construct reality can develop over time and throughout the life space, provided that we can benefit from developmentally appropriate supports and challenges" (p. 37). Taken together, constructive-developmentalism incorporates what Kegan and others call ways of knowing into the subsequent, more expansive meaning making systems given the developmental demands that call for it (Drago-Severson, 2010).

Dreaming and imagining futures, as a conceptual arm of black aesthetics stretches constructive-developmentalism metaphorically and literally. Pivoting slightly, Baxter Magolda (1992) affirms constructivist developmentalism as the premier authority for gauging adult meaning making when she asserts, an individual's way(s) of knowing are best understood through the principles of naturalistic inquiry, that is, observing participants in a societal or cultural context. Her work, more than others, takes up this logic in a longitudinal methodological framework that follows participants across a set time span. Unstated in this approach, however, are the ways history (the past) comes to bear on an individual in the present (starting place). Additionally, longitudinal approaches dismiss futurity as a way of knowing, mediated by the past and present. The present, by and large, becomes the portrait of increase/decrease,

complexity/immaturity, progression/regression, with some relation to prior ways of knowing. Susana Morris (2016) expands this thinking, insisting:

To be black and not only envision yourself in the future but at the center of the future—to be the agent and subject of the future, and not relegated to the primeval past, used as props or pawns, or disappeared altogether—is an act of resistance and liberation, particularly in a present plagued by white supremacy and imperialism. (p. 33)

Futurism in black aesthetics is a way of knowing, being, understanding, and “creating in the world that transgresses the bounds of Western notions of progress and identity” (p. 34). This way of being in the world dares to sit in and respond to an active present with questions of *how I did get here*, and *what* futures are possible, in the body that I hold? Baldwin (1955) takes up these questions when he states,

before [Black and minoritized people] can look forward in any meaningful sense, [they] must be allowed to take a long look back...the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly.” (Baldwin, 1955, p. 6)

These three poles, past, present, and future working together, engender a complex figuring of development beyond the temporal pinpoints of constructivism. Lorde (1971; 1992) reflects this weaving when she writes, “and look mother/I am dark temple/Where your true spirit rises...I learned from you/to define myself/through your denials” (p. 101), and further when she asserts, “za ki tan ke parlay lot—you who hear tell the others” (Lorde, 1980; 1992, p. 185). Constructing realities becomes porous language when mainstream cultural constructions have misrepresented, distorted, rendered invisible, exaggerated, and made altogether monstrous Black bodies in the Western, white imagination. Baldwin (1955) teases out this notion of the Black body and the white imagination in response to his visit to a village in Switzerland, that had a ritual of painting individuals black who were then positioned as slaves and bought, writing:

I thought of white men arriving for the first time in an African village, strangers there, as I am a stranger here, and tried to imagine the astounded populace touching their hair and marveling at the color of their skin. But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned, whereas I,

without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even in a sense, created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know, who yet do not even know of my existence...*they move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger...as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have—however unconsciously inherited* [emphasis mine]. (p. 164)

What is deemed *real*, therefore, is frequently, and perhaps irresolvably, at odds with the *imagined* versions that Black and minoritized folks do not own. Lorde (1979; 1989; 1992) effectively raises this issue with a nuance reporting on the real lives available to Black women, proclaiming, “How many deaths/do we live through daily/pretending /we are alive?...We cannot live without our lives” (pp. 202-206). Instinctive, though expressed differently, the coaxing of past, present, and future poles brings a past into conversation with the present, while preserving a future.

Revision in the Makings of Black Aesthetics

Readings of Baldwin and Lorde across the timeline of constructivist-developmental theory, between 1950-1992, yielded architectural principles for shaping black aesthetics. The principles work together as much as they do apart, and establish a theoretical grounds by which to support the meaning making of Black and minoritized bodies. Self-definition as explained through these principles is orchestrated from an embodied position that reinterprets the pursuit of the object position (Kegan, 1982; 1994) to the embodied place of subject-object. Distinctly, the subject-object should not be characterized as a space of constancy; rather, as the data maintain, it should be understood as a canvas for revision. Lorde and Baldwin both discuss the values of revision toward a work of art becoming more of itself—more of what it was created to be.

Lorde (1992) remarks, “the process of revision is, I believe, crucial to the integrity and lasting power of a poem” (p. xiii). In a similar stream of consciousness, Baldwin (1985) writes, “to do your first works over means to reexamine everything. Go back to where you started, or as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it” (p. 36). Noting, perceptively, that a single work does not need to be all things to all people, nor does it need to become the “mythical, unattainable” thing (Lorde, 1992, p. xiii). Determining whether or not an aesthetic needs revision appears to be guided by its ongoing utility. The process appeals to the sociopolitical demands one is situated within, or as Lorde denotes “what was/is the work of

the poem” (p. xiv), as every piece, “has a bedrock of experience(s) within which the poem is anchored” (p. xiv). As it relates to meaning making, aesthetic(re)presentations are the prism by which those experiences are transformed into praxis.

Revision, as mentioned above, doesn’t appear to be a spontaneous gesture; rather it is initiated by one of two impulses, *reaction* or *resemblance*. The always active and enduring forces of the wake (Sharpe, 2016) that prompt one to revisit their ways of knowing, being, and understanding galvanize reactionary revision. Traveling back (recall) to the places where a meaning making aesthetic is built is more than just an epistemic venture. The exploration must reestablish the world—“that constellation within emotional time and space”—from which the aesthetic gained power and life (Lorde, 1992, xiv). This requires one to feel and relive their former conclusions and experiences. I do not presume this to be simple or without angst. As I will detail in the sermon that follows, crafting art that tells the truth requires courage and heightened levels of honesty if they are to be functional for days present and future. Lorde and Baldwin had an intimate understanding of revision in their meaning making with particular attention to the reexamination it spurred. Lorde (1980) responding to the crisis of breast cancer, and the silences it impresses on women broadly, and women of color in particular, gives voice and unrequited transparency to her thoughts and emotions with it. Candidly, she writes on May 1, 1979:

Spring comes, and still I feel despair like a pale cloud waiting to consume me, engulf me like another cancer, swallow me into immobility, metabolize me into cell of itself; my body, a barometer. I need to remind myself of the joy, the lightness, the laughter so vital to my living and my health. Otherwise, the other will always be waiting to eat me into despair again. And that means destruction. I don’t know how, but it does. (p. 6)

As one of several journals Lorde penned and began compiling six months after her modified radical mastectomy for breast cancer, one can see the range of competing emotions, sensibilities, and rationalities that are wrapped up in this particular moment of her life. Twelve months later, readers bear witness to an emerging aesthetic representation defining itself anew:

Living a self-conscious life, under the pressure of time, I work with the consciousness of death at my shoulder, not constantly, but often enough to leave a mark upon all of my life’s decisions and actions. And it does not matter whether this death comes next week or thirty years from now; this consciousness gives my life another breadth. It helps shape

the words I speak, the ways I love, my politic of action, the strength of my vision and purpose, the depth of my appreciation of living. (pp. 9-10)

This revision was far from instantaneous, and still open to remaking, but one is able to gather a sense of the unbounded temporality of black aesthetics in viewing these excerpts.

Reactive revisions are also present in Baldwin's meaning making aesthetic. Reflecting on a night out in New Jersey diner, Baldwin (1955) writes:

She did not ask what I wanted, but repeated as though she had learned it somewhere, 'We don't serve Negroes here.' She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown accustomed, but, rather, with a note of apology in her voice...this made me colder and more murderous than ever. I felt I had to do something with my hands...there was nothing on the table but an ordinary water mug half full of water, and I picked this up and hurled it with all my strength at her. She ducked and it missed her and shattered...I realized what I had done, and where I was, and I was frightened. (pp. 96-97)

After escaping the situation, Baldwin continues:

I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do, but from the hatred I carried in my own heart. (pp. 97-98)

Baldwin's encounter with anti-blackness in the diner teaches readers about the long memory of black aesthetics. Specifically, readers are made aware in this passage that racism is not a new experience for Baldwin: "She did not say it with the blunt, derisive hostility to which I had grown accustomed." The presumption here is that if the presentation of racism had been familiar, then his response may have also followed suit, whatever that reaction may have been. The catalyst, however, for a revision was provoked by the nuanced manner in which the racism was cast, which in turn, ignited some new emotions, feelings, and thoughts, that were previously unresolved by the aesthetic in place. Hence forth, Baldwin was compelled to the revisit (recall) his former aesthetics, and (re)member the self-defining principles that constructed it, toward an existential and material (lived) (re)presentation that would serve him. Over time, his revised aesthetic took shape and considered the following:

The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's life, accept these injustices as commonplace but might fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart and it now had been laid to my charge to keep my heart free of hatred and despair. (Baldwin, 1955, p. 113)

Reactionary revisions demonstrate both the elasticity of black aesthetics and their mediating creativity. *Resemblance* revisions appear to be motivated by images of what could be, and may work in concert with reactionary revisions. The next chapter will bring clarity to resemblance revisions by retracing my steps toward becoming the poet I am in this present-day moment. Lorde (1982) submits, that it was on a hill in Cuernavaca where she “had the first intimation that I could bring those two [words and feeling] together. I could infuse words directly with what I was feeling,” that would serve as a *how to* in her evolution as poet (Lorde, 1982; 1984, p. 84). For me, it was bearing witness to the possibilities of spoken word poetry on a stage 9 years ago, and what it inspired in me, that would begin curating the ever-evolving aesthetic that has been my poetry.

Sermon: When You Pass Through the Waters

Self-definition, a meaning making theory that centers Black bodies, is comprised of several principles. Those principles work together and apart in unique and nuanced ways that give form to an individual's meaning making aesthetic. The process by which I arrived at these conclusions was through a methodological framework that involved recall, (re)membering, and (re)presentation. I submit that this framework is the core of the overlaying meaning making process for Black and minoritized bodies, which always and already includes revision. Given the precarity of Black existence, as explained throughout this service, and emphasized in the selected readings of Lorde and Baldwin, aesthetic revisions are constant. What needs further explanation, however, is how these revisions are instigated. This auto/ethnographic retracing, alongside and intertwined with the offerings from Lorde and Baldwin, will further explicate potential pathways into self-definition.

The next three portions, *Breaching the Shoreline: Recall*, *Wading in the Water: (Re)membering*, and *Emptied out: Representation*, are written as a performance. Readers should imagine themselves at a church service. Having moved through the order of service, the speaker is stepping into the pulpit to deliver the sermon. I have delivered dozens of speeches/talks throughout my adult life and wrote this sermon as if I were delivering one such speech/talk. At various points throughout this account, I will star the text with short interludes/meditations, designated by italicized writings that are right justified. Primarily, these interludes/meditations are a means of weaving together my autoethnographic account with the offerings of Lorde and Baldwin. Additionally, they will cue readers in to my temperament and the complexity of my emotions that underwrite this sermon. Readers might think about these meditations as my *writing in the margins* and *notes to self* around the pages to be performed.

Breaching the Shoreline: Recall [sermon point I]

I have crossed the line before; too eager; too soon; impatient; overstepped; inopportune; premature; selfish; self-less; early; erratic; rash; curious. I have said things I didn't necessarily mean; done things that did not align with my values; joined in the chorus of voices so as not to be a lingering echo—so as not to let someone go it alone. I have crossed many lines before. There have also been times when I stayed still—closed; hushed; play it safe; contained; pacified; static; sealed; stable; fixed; inert; lifeless; noiseless; placid; silent; stagnant; stationary; undisturbed, unruffled; buttoned up; clammed up; deathly quiet—when I should have moved. In the instances that come to mind, the availability of outcomes was a luxury. Unlike the cemented rules that governed my childhood—“stay where I can see you; be in before the street lights; “if such and such jumped off a bridge, would you”; and “I am not one of your little friends,” there wasn't always a clear sense of right and wrong (or the assumption that this was what was “good for me” as my village would often retort)—only what I perceived would be most comfortable and produce the least amount of consequence. Schooling has that allure. It is designed to keep you on the banks of the river, away from the shoreline, trained and unsure. “Miseducated” as our dear brother Carter G. Woodson (1933), would say:

If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do...you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. (p.xiii)

“Miseducated” as our dear sister Lauryn Hill (1998), would say

Let me break it down for you again/
You know I only say it because I'm truly genuine/
Don't be a hard rock when you really are a gem
-(Doo Wop) That thing

Miseducated. I am grateful, in this moment, for convictions in human form that saw me miseducated, and intervened.

(I came to tell someone today)

I know what its like to be found out. Exposed. Called out. Naked and ashamed. The place of discomfort and angst, where the blood streaming to your heart pauses, and just, for a moment,

your body turns cold. Deaths of innocence and silence, followed by the gentle pulse of consciousness reminding you that someone is owed a response. I know what its like to be found out. Within the Black feminist pantheon, one would find scholar, activist and creative, the late Toni Cade Bambara. Her prescient words in the parable “The Education of a Storyteller,” (1999) offer us a see through, a window, into and on the vexing question of knowing, more specifically not knowing because of lessons we have been taught about the world. Bambara begins this parable with a fictional young girl—we do not know her name but we do know that she, like many of us at young age had life figured out—she knew, or would soon know E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G.

(Raises hand as a sign of call and response)

(I see I only have a few honest people in the room-soft smile)

We can safely assume that she did not know EVERYTHING, but that she did know some things. I appreciate the candor of this brilliant Black girl testimony. In a world where we are taught not to know (Dillard, 2012), it is dangerous to presume that one has knowledge of something. Bambara’s intentional move to place within this story a Black girl who held fiercely to a peculiar knowledge about herself and the world around her, is lucid proclamation about the importance of seeing and affirming one’s self as a knower.

*I know things
Wisdom, myth, biography
I built this house of me*

To be Black.

And girl.

And young.

In america.

With a claim to know *everything*.

Audre: Does know everything—And she is right!

*There is something particular about being Black and girl or Black and woman, in a Western, United States context that demands a way of knowing that is inconsistent with the status quo. There lives hang in the balance. I have not always been helpful in this regard; in what ways have I resisted, or indirectly, dismissed their knowing.
May this sermon begin to make up for those shortcomings.*

Wilson: Is to be in crisis. We need not miss the earnestness of her testimony. Knowing within herself, however, as we learn from the account, is not the issue. It is one thing to know that there is something in me worth giving language, and another to expressly, and assuredly give shape to it. In others words, what are you able to do with what you know? We pick up the story with Grandma Dorothy or Miss Dorothy or M'Dear as she is named—we all know this Black woman. The one who heard us coming before we turned the corner. The one who loved us enough to teach and push us.

And she had this saying designed expressly for me, it seemed, for moments when my brain ground to a halt and I couldn't seem to think my way out of a paper bag—in other words, when I would dahh you know play like I wasn't intelligent. She'd say, "What are you pretending not to know today, Sweetheart? Colored gal on planet earth? Hmph know everything there is to know, anything she/we don't know is by definition the unknown...A remark she would deliver in a wise-woman voice not unlike that of Toni Morrison's as I relisten to it. And it would encourage me to rise to quit being trifling. (Bambara, 1999, pp. 246-247)

I am moved by the intentionality of M'Dear in this passage: the awareness of larger context; the frailties and consequences of a weak self-concept; the agenda against Black girls to be unsure. How many of us know what its like to be found out? We know M'Dear and we all have met her, on purpose, or by accident. The Black woman—female within Spillers (1987)—fuming, rage, love, and desire to speak the things we know to be true of the world. The M'Dear in all our lives, internally, or externally, that knows that there is more to what and who you are, and calls to the front—with every bit of grace and deliberateness—the version of you that is sitting on the back pew every Sunday.

Even as I write this, I know that people don't just go to the back for no reason. They do so because somewhere, in the midst of the congregation, there was, or is, a reminder of their back pew lot. Perhaps, we understand like Baldwin (1969; 2016) that this is "not as a result of anything [I] have done," nevertheless, "when [I] try to stand up and look the world in the face as if [I] had a right to be here" I attacked the entire power structure of the western world. "What are you pretending not to know," (Bambara, 1999, p. 246) is a hard question to sift through, made tougher, because of the truth or perhaps, the untruths that we have made of ourselves. Alone, the question is enough cause for sustained reflection. If, I could, however, but

for a moment, descend into the depths of this question.

*Hold your breath,
What do you feel?*

The most difficult part of this confrontation with are pretenses is not that this brilliant Black girl—that we—are *being found out*, but *that we are being found wanting*.

*a little while longer
What do you hear?
And open your eyes
What do you see?*

This Black girl is not unlike us. She laments that “her brain, ground to a halt and I couldn’t seem to think my way out of a paper bag” (Bambara, 1999, p. 246). When pressed. No! When convicted about our truths—who we desire to be, what we know—it much easier to not know, than to deal with the ambivalence—suspicion, doubt, distrust, uncertainty—that comes with our knowing. Too, we rely on our ability to think things through. What happened to the Black girl who knew, and would come, to know everything?

I submit to you that, she like us, has been schooled into specific ways of knowing that function, purposefully, to rob us of this capacity and train us away from ourselves (Dillard, 2012).

Returning to the passage, we see the reasoned, and rational response to a new revelation of the self, is to participate in our re-schooling.

One day, I came bounding into her kitchen on the sunny side of Morningside Park in Harlem, all puff-proud straight from the library-and I stood over her with my twelve-year-old fast self... "Grandma Dorothy, I know Einstein's theory of relativity."...I had to explain that this was not a call-arid-response deal but a theory, "an informed hunch as how the universe is put together in terms of space and time."... I had to explain that

this was not a song or a singing tale...but a theory. (Bambara, 1999, pp. 247-248)

I would submit to you that this happens because there are dangers, however real or imagined, to not knowing. Consequences. Ramifications. Repercussions. If we believed it was okay to know less than we do, then there would be no need to enliven images—perceptions—of ourselves that so resolutely say otherwise. Interpreting our M'Dear incorrectly, we respond to her questioning about our pretenses, by equipping ourselves with a new tongue. Found wanting, the Black girl

desires in all of us have been taught to shrink, acquiesce, and conform to what we perceive as the epistemic avant-garde of the day. I know what it is like to be found wanting. The residue of a dark history pours from my lips, also. I was this Black girl.

Ten years ago, on the doorsteps of undergraduate graduation, wholly unaware of what the world was, yet deeply dedicated to changing it, I went east for the summer. I went to address the lack of diversity in the nations teaching faculty, of which I would soon become, as part and parcel of my call to education. The institute selected 26 of the most decorated, and diverse, students they could find from across the country to engage in the four-week experience. What I found, or rather, what awaited me was an immersive experience into words, language, and theory that I had previously only heard used by the likes of Brother Cornel West and the indescribably alliterative acrobatics of Michael Eric Dyson. They belonged to some class of scholarly acumen that I had no training in, and was far beyond the daily exchanges of my South side home. I knew some things. I was creative and could write, if nothing else, a paper that would lead sheep to wolves, but this world...this world was beyond me. And, I knew it very early. Yet, and still, I was here...believed to have something to contribute.

Brother Baldwin (1953) comes to mind, and the image of a little boy standing at the chalkboard, having scripted with near perfection his letters to the fascination of the principal's gaze.

James: Yees, yes, I remember that well (*nodding in agreement*)

"Which child is this?...you're a very bright boy...keep up the good work" (p. 19). They invited me and must have seen potential in my application to be like them—part of a brilliantly assembled force of diverse scholars who would shape up higher education. I knew some things!

James: Tell the truth...

Audre: Yes, tell it...you were both being affirmed by the white gaze!

Wilson: It's true. I had mastered schooling by this point and had done it so well that I could no longer distinguish between the self I was made to be and the me I desired. I knew what to say and when to say it. I knew how to place myself in conversation with history, and how to appeal to the appetites of those in power in the here and now. I was the charismatic, well-respected, smart, exceptional, Black man. Audre [Lorde] (1984), in discussing important lessons for her son to understand, says the strongest lesson I can teach my son is the same lesson I teach my daughter:

Wilson and Audre simultaneously: “how to be who he wishes to be for himself” (p. 77).

Wilson: If we do not define ourselves, for ourselves, we will be swallowed up by others “fantasies and eaten alive”(p. 137). We are schooled early on to understand that our poetics sensibilities, our play, our life, energy, and work, are not useful, nor acceptable unless they *pretend* (Bambara, 1999; Lorde, 1984) to match somebody else’s norm.

I am here to tell someone, that I know (*short pause*) what it means (*short pause*) to be found wanting.

--

A couple weeks passed and the filters were coming off. Restless nights led to longer days, and I was making peace with sleeplessness. Rigorous and exhausting, mentally and physically, this was no joke, but I was finding my people. Michele and Ebone. Black. Women. Queer. Brilliant. Fierce. We were studying one evening, and by this time, we had seen each other in class enough to know what we were capable of. I don’t quite remember what I said, or why I said it, but the way I ended the statement caught Michele’s attention and changed an evening of communal studying into an intervention that saved my life.

Sisters and Brothers, she looked into me, with a saddened disappointment, like watching some you love slip away into a wilderness of hurt they can’t see. “Why do you do that...say *you don’t know like that?*” Ebone, half irritated, had picked up her head by this time and was waiting in agreement with Michele. “Yea, why?, she chided” My back stiffened, hoping to disappear from the loving press of their inquiry. “You have good things to say,” Michele stated convincingly. They spelled out for me what I had earnestly tried to keep to hidden, or at the very least beyond view. Why couldn’t I say what I wanted to say? In my schooling, I learned to distrust thoughts and sensibilities by which I had no immediate language for. Unknowingly, I had trained my tone and cadence to match the doubt of my voice. Everything I said sounded like a question.

In her poem Prologue, Lorde (1992) recalls the ways she was trained to hold whiteness as a standard. Years later she lamented “the color of...bleached ambition still forks throughout my words but I survived and didn’t I survive...confirmed” (p .111). It seems to me that there is some residue of bleached ambition in me and my work. Michele and Ebone instigated a reactionary revision by haling principles of standpoint knowledge coupled with self-

love. Poetry cannot survive without honesty, and it is no more than abstract proselytizing if it doesn't have a firm basis. Believability was the lesson here. Before anyone would believe my words, I had to believe them first and that was possible through a revised aesthetic.

You know, the cautious certainty that eases the potential weight of our words into the atmosphere, smoke like, so they never last too long, and are sure not to offend witnesses by seeming overly confident. Too bold.

Too courageous.

Too sure.

Too Black. Too girl.

Too Black girl, firm, assertive.

Too Black, boy, fearless, genius.

Play small and pretend.

Don't play

Pretend.

Fixed in this state, there was no need for correction, because I did the work of silencing myself.

Ruth Nicole Brown (2009, p. 101) calls this schooling impulse domination, as she insightfully clarifies how disciplining works when Black girls over choreograph during play. She asks, "Why, Black girl, can you not think for a moment about yourself, what you want to say and how you want to say it?" (p. 101).

I suspect, my friends, that there is a Black girl in all of us that has over-choreographed our intuition, that is, been found wanting! That is still seeking permission to dance—to speak.

Reconfiguring our flesh, redeeming the aspects of our lives that we have given, or been stolen away from, I am persuaded, must begin with the reaffirmation of a numb body, rocked to sleep by the corrosive history it has been trapped in. For, indeed, as Baldwin (1955) laments, "I am what time, circumstance, history, have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that" (p. xii). Lorde (1978) knows something about this callous place of indifference that so easily lulls the mightiest warriors into hopeless slumber. She pulls us into the Blues tradition as she bemoans the hard earned truth that "we were never meant to survive" (p. 31). I suspect that there may be a welling up of fear for anyone to learn that their existence is not only terminal, but

that the project of living is indefinite. The gospel according to Lorde (1978) sympathizes with this point, saying:

“and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed” (p. 31)?

The imprints of fear, of voices not our own, of finding safety in the things we can touch, smell, taste, remember, all serve the same ends of ensuring that we remain in mourning. Afraid. Grieved. Yearning. We, who live on the shorelines, know pain well. We have experienced mourning.

Bury It

don't touch her.

Don't touch him.

Don't—don't nobody touch them

Leave them be

They want to live

I hear it/ it's faint

ear to your chest, drifting

but I hear it

this world doesn't expect you to make it;

warnings littered in the church hallways and sunday school lessons/

sanctuary pieces cover our peace while we are still in it/

buried/ in rubble/in Birmingham's, Audubon's, balconies,

and pavements as headstones

oceans roar with the our echo

these

cemeteries

are tight

too small

too soon

I'd jump too

*Lay me to down to sleep
So I bury it and stand watch
before we ever step on stage/ stand up in rage
bury it
before its taken/ sentenced/ stolen/persuaded away,
I bury it
deeper/beneath dirt plot/before wakes and eulogies/
kill the thought
so I wont believe it—or dig it up like should I be here
Like/ I know things/
Like, I should be here and know things
Don't nobody want you- I know it
Don't you think I know it?
I don't blame you/how you crawl into yourself
Close and lock yourself in,
It's dangerous
Beyond these walls/outside of the jaws
where you have learned that your words are laid to rest before they are born
where every letter you put together is more than anyone thought your could utter
sit down/stay put/lie still/ that mic aint magic- something don't come out of nothing
but
I hear it/ it's faint
ear to chest, drifting*

*I see it/rise and fall compressions
There are hidden things in me too
Hushed and mute and tired/ fit to be tied
I know you are tired/of explaining/of forgiving/
/of needing and nobody askin
heavy hearts and hollow points
victim blaming and niggas just doing their thing,*

*I get if you are tired of bein powerful
I know-this life can be its own coffin
Embalmed but withering until nothing remains
But where there are bones
and skeletons
there is more to life than dying an daily
And I've salvaged the bones
where their was voice and body
ashes and dust
I believe in resurrections
Dead things.
Buried and bound come back to life.
But this stone
This stone
Is
Heavy
And I cant do it own my own
Lift it on my own
Get up/ stand in/ or up
Return to me

Give it back
Return us to ourselves
We are stolen
Give us back
[The house of bones]
bring me home.
To myself. Bring us out
And home
I'm tired
Hold her up/she's weary*

*My arms are tired
Stand in
On the dome of my mouth
They are weeping
And my arms are weary
Get up/ like you said
Get up like you said you would
You can do it
Muscle and bone and prove the doubters wrong
Don't touch her
Don't touch him
Don't-don't nobody touch them—they are dreaming
I knew them
Rocked and named them
Get up/
Sleeping giant/shotgun/
Brewing tornado
I don't care
I don't care nobody wants you
You are mine
Return to me
Rose and beanstack---[wish to live]
I want to live and can't do it without you
There is fire
And-And rain
Tsunami and flowing volcano
eden and eruptions—
You harness both

tell me what you need
and ill get it/ill do it*

*if this it, let me pay my respects/
chisel on your tomb/hurried here are miracles/black ones/
surviving lifetimes/warrior who would not die when
buried alive built tunnels/cardiovascular windpipes too breathe underground/
here rests a psalm- raw/and rage she is rhythm and sorrow in hallelujah chants
an ode to complexity in all its beauty
worthy of time to her self*

whatever you choose/let it be/for you

...

I am not certain when, or if the rain will ever stop. I am fearful that the young seeds that have not seen sun will forget and drown easily (Lorde, 1978). I believe, however, that if “places do not change, so much as what we seek in them” (p. 46), then I must be compelled to re-center my attention on the very thing I have turned away from. I will ask you the same questions I am asking myself, are you willing to look at the places where your body is buried?

*A long view backward
The past makes the present clear
Refuse to turn away*

Not everyone has the desire to go back to that place, but like James (1955), I agree that “the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horrible for exactly as long as we refuse to assess it honestly” (p. 6). The particular condition that the Black body finds itself in is living proof of one’s inheritance. Giving into the fear and domination will give the world “an altogether murderous power” over you that is self-destructive. Too many of us have given up our power, thinking that our silence would preserve us:

(Audre: “but when we are silent, we are still afraid!)

“So it is better speak

Remembering

We were never meant to survive” (p. 31).

Lorde (1984) coaches us through the transformation of silences by offering the sobering reality: Our silences will not protect us. As we sit and wait for the words of others, or with an eye to future articulations, our bodies remained mute—an ornament of a society. An unfulfilled destiny.

“What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say?” (Lorde, 1984, p. 41). *What are you pretending not to know?*

Wilson: Stepping beyond the lines drawn in the sand for us—ensuring the we reap the promises and rewards of the assimilation; acquiescence—as Lorde (1984) contends, is never without fear—of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death” (p. 43). But we, as in those whose shoulders we stand on, have lived through those already, understanding that some futures do not belong to us and this was purposed by the American imagination. Perhaps, this, too, was the message that Michele and Ebonee wanted to push me into, on that foggy evening, against the shoreline, all those years ago. Was this why they moved through the world the way they did? What futures did not belong to them because of me? How did they learn to read (see) through me? Had they mourned bodies like mine before? Had they mourned their own?

I am convinced that Michele and Ebone knew something about surviving, with an emphasis on the verb tense; they knew something about embodied agency. Gumbs (2012), , referencing Lorde, recounts “survival references our living in the context of what we have overcome. Survival is life after disaster, life in honor of our ancestors, despite the genocidal forces worked against them specifically so we would not exist” (para. 2).

In this sense, “survival has never meant, bare minimum, mere straggling breath, the small space next to the line of death” (para. 2). Observing this aesthetic disposition in them engendered new images of the possible, i.e., resemblance revisions.

The inextricable link between present affirmations and future potentialities, also, becomes clear as I think about what it means to exist for Black and minoritized bodies. A meaning making aesthetic that accounts for shifting temporalities is essential. Futures come at premium, and perhaps, no one knew it better than Michele and Ebone.

With everything to live for, but no guarantee of it, what is their/my alternative?

Audre: We have mourned and imagined, and mourned many lifetimes...

Every black woman in america has survived several lifetimes of hatred, where even in the candy store cases of our childhood, little brown niggerbaby candies testified against us. We survived the wind-driven spittle on our child's shoe and pink fleshcolored band aids, attempted rapes on rooftops and the prodding fingers of the super's boy, seeing our girlfriends blown to bits in Sunday School, and we absorbed that loathing as a natural state. We had to metabolize such hatred that our cells have learned to live upon it because we had to, or die of it. (Lorde, 1984, p. 156)

Wilson: And it is in, and because of those many lifetimes of mothering yourselves, that I might have a pathway forward.

The words of my dear scholar sisters were sharp, partly, because they revealed something about my ideal, unattainable, masculinity that I worked so hard to uphold. Without this image, that had grounded much of my early adult life, the home I constructed for myself could not stand up against fiery winds nor gusting arrows. In that moment, I remember desperately searching the floor for answers, looking for a solid piece of earth to the gather the flimsy heirs of my self-esteem.

Black cisgender men in many ways have depended on Black women to be their salvation here on the earth, in this Western United States context, for decades, and here I was again in need of their saving. True to Black feminist politics, I was shown an underserving mercy and grace. When they could have left me to perish in pride, for my irresponsibility, they wrapped me in a basket of profundity and sent me down the river to safely consult my complicities and collusions. Any power that I possess today to subvert the schooled patriarchal codes common among Black men were seeded in the M'Dear interruptions of Black feminist questioning.

The belief was that I would come back—not for them, because they didn't need saving—but alongside them.

Redemption, before it is the conviction for transformation, is first and foremost an affirmation of one's existence. The state I was in, the peace I had made with my colored conditioning, was unsustainable for a life of possibilities—for alternative futures. Their words arrest and humble

me, yet and still today, because of the value they placed on my coming to know. In seeing what I was unable to see at the moment—the persistence of the wake (Sharpe, 2016) and its influences on the mobility of Black life—Michele and Ebonee were helping me come to terms with the impossibility of safety that comes by consuming methods and modalities most available to us. No matter how much I thought I knew, or believed I could verify in text, the type of learning I would need, to move through this world intact, could only come by becoming undisciplined. My theories of relativity, regardless of how firm I believed them to be, would fail me because they assumed that knowledge was something outside of myself. It meant learning to search the archives and figuring out how I arrived to the place I was in; why I believed what I did. They were asking me to begin crafting an aesthetic for survival that no longer depended on those who enslaved me.

The inability to think of alternative ways of being in this world is inextricably linked with the revisionist storying of violence as it relates to the captive Black body. The teachings we have been inundated with throughout our educative and social lives dutifully work to suppress our ways of knowing and being. As such, it will be necessary to rediscover those alternatives when enemies are standing at your back and threaten to push you out to sea—when this world questions your right to know, to be, your very existence:

-White professor, who taught my history capstone, asks after reading one-third of my senior thesis “Did you write this?”

-White practitioner [now a higher education faculty member] says, after hearing that I was interested in pursuing Ph.D. Programs in the following year, “You’re not ready. I know you think you are, but you are not.”

-White colleague, after listening to me describe my initial thoughts about a theory that centered the condition of Black bodies, and built on the existential thought of organic intellectuals and artists, says “I don’t think that you can just make up theory like that”

- Colleagues, hours before our first presentation on a class project, said “I think we should cut the paper into two papers; [keep their portions and cut my contribution] they seem to be going in different directions”

Friends, I know what it means to be found wanting!

And these were educators and those training to be educators in my life. The list is likely unconscionably long and all the more distressing when we consider the un/sanctioned schooling

of our bodies by those outside of educative institutions.

When those moments come, when you feel like you are tearing at the seams, “expected to discard, discount, disregard, jettison, abandon, and [your] ways of knowing” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 13)—seeing and understanding the world—,those moments where you are being crumbled, and drafted into the self-destructive reflexes of epistemic violence—thereby severing your capacity to read, think, and imagine otherwise possibilities.

Can you (re)member to trust your sensibilities?

Can you mother yourself? As our dear sister Audre (1984) so aptly reminds, to mother ourselves is to “establish authority over our own definition, provide an attentive concern and expectation of growth which is the beginning of that acceptance we came to expect only from our mothers” (p. 173).

-Momma’s correction about my cursive handwriting and affirmation of my legibility

-Momma’s “good morning, my son” greeting to affirm my value and belonging

-Michele and Ebonee’s “Why do you do that...say you don’t know” “You have good things to say.”

-My email response to Winston to affirm his bodily existence.

-My response to Raquel “Take all of the images, all of the pain, all of the memories of those [Black bodies, voices, and spirits] I just talked about. Huddle them together and place them in your voice box.”

To mother ourselves is to “affirm my own worth by committing myself to my survival, in my own self and in the self of other Black women” (Lorde, 1984, p.173).

(Cadence begins to rise, voice becomes more urgent)

...it means that as I learn my worth and genuine possibility, I refuse to settle for anything less than a rigorous pursuit of the possible in myself, at the same time making a distinction between what is possible and what the outside world drive me to do in order to prove I am human (p. 173)

(Intonation becomes deeper and more forceful)

...it means learning to love what we have given birth to, and been birthed into, by giving definition to it, by being “both kind and demanding in the teeth of failure” (p. 173)

...it means claiming power, and knowing that the capacity to do so is relative, conditional to the realities of our lives.

Our survival depended on and development depends on nurturing our creative parts, and the creativity in others, “without understanding what will be created” (p. 173). It hinges

on the ability to turn [our] peculiar status in the Western world to [our] own advantage and, it may be, the very great advantage of that world. It remains for [them] to fashion out of [their] experience that which will give [them] sustenance, and a voice. (Baldwin, 1955, p. 173)

(Cadence pirouettes into a conversational whisper)

It means to find yourself wanting (desiring to know) and laying to rest what is timid.

The familiar scripture, For the spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. 2 Timothy 1:7, comes to mind. To find myself wanting is to seek safety; to plant my feet steps behind the shoreline as if I were supposed to remain here, for fear of what a breach could mean for all of things I have learned to hold dear. The incoming tide that rushes over my ankles feels like an invitation to move with the receding border. How do I know I won't sink? Am I strong to swim against the current if necessary?

Wading in the Water [Difficult Miracles]: (Re)membering [sermon point II]

Fashioning out of experience that which will give us sustenance and voice is a prophetic rumination that has its roots in the genealogy of Black creativity, which brings me to my second point.

Sisters and Brothers,

...poet, artist, and Black woman genius, June Jordan, takes readers on a lyrical and historical expedition into the life and brilliance of Phillis Wheatley. She disrupts our senses and expectations in the title alone and calls on all those who would choose to continue down this journey, to do so on her terms. One gets the sense in this first mouth full of fire that there was a reckoning, a restoring, an appropriate eulogizing that was taking place beyond the title doors, and viewers would finally get to see the body... the body that had so long been erased, distorted, forgotten. The good artist knows that *every word has significance*, and Jordan takes care not to waste the attention of audiences with meaningless words. She calls it, “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America: Something like a sonnet for Phillis Wheatley” (Jordan, 2006).

Pause. We, the readers of this text, have a decision to make.

Audre: (Hmmm.)

Wilson: Jordan allows would-be viewers, exploiters, and witnesses of Wheatley to turn back before entering the wake (Sharpe, 2016). The warnings seem to be clear: This body. Phillis Wheatley. A Black woman. A poet. The Black woman poet, Phillis Wheatley. The body of this Black woman poet in America, Phillis Wheatley, is contested space. This (re)presentation is not a fairly tale.

There is Black feminist parable that comes to mind when I think about sister Wheatley. It is the one that assures me that the body is both a *site* of injury and pain, and the *sight* of healing and possibility (McKittrick, 2006).

Can it be both? And if so, what is required of us to see that this happens? Sitting with McKittrick’s call to return to sites of injury of pain, my first feeling is that of apprehension. Fear.

Uncertainty. Suspicion. Skepticism. What will I find? What is waiting for me? Is it worth the mental and emotional energy? Why forfeit the sense of security, regardless of how fragile it is? I am not unaware, I say to myself, just guarded. This is how I protect myself...make a life for

myself. Returning to a site suggests that I have something to go back to you. Does any Black or minoritized body have that luxury? Sense of place, or rather placeless-ness for Black bodies in a Western, United States context has been structured by the knotted diasporic tenets coloniality, dehumanization, and resistance (McKittrick, 2011). Wheatley was uniquely positioned to understand this. My sense, however, is that recall becomes valuable here. As was done in the first point of the sermon, recall is about surfacing the undetectable, bringing the conscious back into conversation with the forgotten patterns of our knowing, being, and seeing. Keep going. Past the line. One step at a time. My mind goes to Lorde and Baldwin and how their art became a reflection of their movements spatially and geographically throughout their lives [Baldwin to France, Turkey, Atlanta; Lorde to Mexico, Grenada, Switzerland, South Africa]. Placeless-ness, in this way, can be instructive. (Re)membering is not unlike the process of creating a poem. In those spaces of creation (of arranging incoherent pieces together) I undergo pruning, where the ambiguous, superfluous extracts are trimmed away, making room for the more fruitful word to grow out. Revisiting these sites then could be just as much about leaving something behind—unlearning, cleansing, releasing, forgiving, confronting, mourning—as it is about taking up. Letting go is difficult work.

The making of a poet/artist/writer is difficult work. We should, rightly, assume that there is a great deal of time needed, committed to craft, to produce the credential and credibility of the title artist. To be Black, however, and girl, and to dare term yourself anything other than that which has already been permanently consigned to you (Cox, 2015; Spillers, 1987), is to wander into the realm of the miraculous; transgressing prescribed boundaries is to violate agreements—to live, move, and breathe as a fugitive. The making of a Black poet in America, Wheatley proclaims, adds a layer of impossibility to the equation.

--

Our dear Brother James [Baldwin] (1963), knows something of the impossibilities attached to defining, or attempting to define, anything in the ravaging waters that are America. He tells his nephew, with astounding sincerity, that he faced the particular futures he would endure because of the body he was in and “for no other reason” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 334). With unflinching immediacy and a gaze that understood both his past and future, he cautioned:

the limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were

a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. (p. 334)

James [Baldwin] robs his nephew, and subsequent readers, of innocence in this unflinching rendering, like the pulling off of a band-aid, and with it any sense that roads into definition are acceptable ventures for everyone.

What is the work of the artist? In what ways is the poet...am I, responsible for this type of truth-telling? We are often schooled in the name of protection from formal authorities and logics, as well as those closest to us—Lorde’s mother: “Whatever my mother thought would mean survival/made her try to beat me whiter every day” (Lorde, 1992, p. 111); Baldwin’s misguided, father, to some degree, functions in this way. For this reason, it’s impossible to indict schooling as a malicious endeavor derived from a hostile place. In an unpredictable world, it makes good sense to articulate rules and boundaries that would give people a chance, especially, when you are charged with the care and futurity of those people. Truth-telling is complicated, and comes with an innumerable amount of risk. That said, I am struck all the more by the candor of Baldwin in this passage; he seemed to understand the stakes were high, unforgivably so, and that mediating ones assumed worthlessness was a question of existential priority. I am moved by the urgency of Baldwin in this passage to his nephew, similar to way I was moved with Michele and Ebone all those years ago; similar to the way Malcolm showed people how he loved them with his intonation; similar to the way Martin quickened the impulses of congregants on that mountain in Memphis; it’s the same honesty I’ve heard in Saul Williams, Aja Monet, Amira Baraka, and Sunni Patterson...I am noticing that the memory of these writers, poets, speakers, has something to do with their words, but also, and perhaps more importantly, I marvel at what they modeled with those words—a fierce devotion to breaking with the limits placed on them and recognizing themselves as knowers. Maybe this is the work of the poet...to inspire revisions, and therefore create resemblance images for others to witness..

Mediocrity has no relationship to miracles. Jordan makes clear, as is deeply understood by both James and Audre, that miracles, Black creativity—the audacious idea that one is capable of agency—is something to be struggled for. Jordan asks that we take our eyes off of the spectacle of herculean occurrences as the catalyst into definition. Miracles are not birthed immediately, nor will come through accepting mediocrity in one’s life. Poets, the manifestation of miracles, are birthed in difficulty.

Jordan clues readers into journeys of self-definition with the subtitle: “Something like a sonnet,” which alerts us to the unconventional lyricism that awaits; it is a form of rupture, and only a poetics of rupture could sufficiently choreograph the miracle of Black poetry in America.

Black poetry. Rupture.

Difficult poetry.

Miracles in Black.

Black miracles rupture.

Black poetry. Miracle.

Jordan’s (2006) (re)membering begins:

It was not natural...to be worked without rest, to be worked without pay, to be worked without thanks, to be worked day up to nightfall: to be three-fifths of a human being at best: to be this valuable/this hated thing among strangers who purchased your life and then cursed it unceasingly: to be a slave: to be a slave. Come to this country a slave and how should you sing? After the flogging the lynch rope the general terror and weariness what should you know of a lyrical life? How could you, belonging to no one, but property to those despising the smiles of your soul, how could you dare to create yourself: a poet?

Phillis Miracle, the first Black human to be published in America, was property before she was poetry. A product of the Middle Passage, Wheatley was fully literate in the language of her slaveholders 16 months after entry into America. Fluently reading and kitchen trained with a classical education by her well-intended owner, this miracle wrote in the language of her schooling.

Publishing her first poem at 14, she scripted 32 lines of black verse, articulating for the first time, the how of her miracle. It wasn’t magic, nor some strange technological advancement; rather, it was “an intrinsic ardor” (Jordan, 2006, para. 12).

The parable of “the difficult miracle,” is that schooling will give you a seat at the master’s house and with it the luxuries of assimilation and the procurement of the status quo. How we respond to the intrinsic— M, Dear, the Momma, Michele, Ebonee, Black girl—ardor that is inside all of us, will determine the existential processes we submit to. In other words, our recognition of the ardor—

*a warmth of presence
rising, sinking, ebb and flow*

Or what Audre might call the erotic (Lorde, 1984), or that source of power and information that is alive in the depths of us that is deeply spiritual, and definitively female. The project and purpose of schooling in Western rational meaning making had been to discredit and devalue that which is unscientific.

Audre: (Our brilliance will not be regarded as scientific.)

Wilson: This ardor—the sensual (Baldwin, 1985); that rejoicing in the force of life that seeks to be present and embedded in the moment. Ardor, or that willingness to connect with the female within (Spillers, 1987), is “not a question of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde, 1984, p. 54).

To feel in our doing is a complicated ask. The attempt to do so has had to contend with Western rational walls of White men and the manner in which they have been socialized to make decisions. There is much to be desired in the language they [cultural accepted practices] use to frame their thoughts, as it is difficult to formulate words that are consistent with who one truly is as their core (Lorde, 1982; 1984). This ardor, can be understood as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings...an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (Lorde, 1984, p. 54). A close reading of this miracle in Black, we know as Phillis, reveals a longing to reattach, or (re)member the sense of self—before captivity, before the auction block, before the Wheatley’s placed a value on her body and welcomed her into the bondage—and a chaos of her strongest feelings. At sixteen she wrote the following words:

Twass mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their color is a diabolic die.”
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join the angelic train

(Now read between the lines)

With Jordan's analytical assistance, readers become aware of the conditioning logics that have been levied against Phillis, visible in her scripting of Africa as "Pagan" as opposed to referencing its deep richness. Her interpretation of herself as "benighted," or one who is encamped and with darkness; or lost in a state of pitiful or contemptible intellectual or moral ignorance (Jordan, 2006). These things should not surprise readers. After all, her classical schooling, no doubt filled with reprehensible portrayals of the Black body, presented as truth, was all that Phillis was exposed to in literature.

Audre: (Emphasis) This knowing that was not her own.

James: The indefensible American imagination.

Wilson: We have all been schooled in one way or another; seduced by individuals, communities, reward systems, and structures of power that work to entice us away from our core (Dillard, 2012). All bodies, "are involved in a culturally and politically mediated process where by certain bodies are designated as important (that is, they matter) and others as unimportant, unworthy of recognition and certainly of respect" (Dillard, 2012, p. 15).

James: You were expected to make peace with this mediocrity...

Wilson: Phillis knew this, and used the language available to her for a while.

But then... (Turn to your neighbor, and say "but then")

But then, her ardor outgrew the simplicity of her Harvard. Trained. Classical education.—
Making room for that Black-girl-fire-erotic-unreduced type of definition- is to come to grips with the limitations of our seductions, that is our training, schooling, and rational logics. Who is a poet, but that person who has learned to recognize and examine the seductions we have been seated in:

When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I

have to say now, or reexamine the world of her old words. (Lorde, 1982)

Here, in the very same poem, she does the unimaginable. She offers readers an idea entirely her own.

(How did she do this? Where did the thought come from?)

Unwittingly, in the middle of the stanza, when one might have thought that she had no mind of her own, she does the extraordinary, writing, “Once I redemption neither sought nor knew”

(Jordan, 2006). Profoundly, she is saying: There was a time when I existed on different terms.

And, if that were not disruptive enough, she connects this defining sensibility to the *chaos of her strongest feelings*, suggesting: I am Black...and may be of angelic descent.

How dare she redefine her slave body to one in accord with the heavenly! How dare she take a language fed to her and spit spew magic with it!

It is not natural. Understand, there is no model for this type of disobedience when you are the first Black poet.

As sister Lorde (1984) prophetically asserts, once individuals begin to sense what they are capable of—experience the fruits of their agency—they begin to demand of themselves and others that their lives fall in accordance with these sensibilities.

The difficult miracle of Black poetry is not that poets string together words; it is that they are able to take the form that was designed to control the sound, feel, content, and structure of felt words, and make it do something. Poetics for Phillis Miracle, Audre, James, and myself, holds the value of expansion, that is, it becomes the textual embodiment of our strongest feelings with reality. Audre (1982; 1984) tells us how it made her feel alive. James (1953) demonstrates its cleansing and redeeming qualities.

I came to poetry in precisely the same way Black miracles and creatives come to grapple with life: once the poems [things we learned, borrowed, and took on] I memorized fell short of the occasion, I started to write my own (Lorde, 1982).

—

Nu Blaze was a place of beginnings. The first formal space in the city dedicated to creative expression through a myriad of mediums. Writing was a place of beginnings for me. This is unsurprising to those who grew and groomed me. “He was always watching and observing.” My mother’s slight grin always follows this narration as she tells her favorite stories of my public

encounter with strangers. As a boy, strangers added up to everyone outside of my immediate family. The common understanding amongst my kin was that “Wilson wasn’t going to waste his words on little people,” my dad jokingly scoffs. At least, this is how my parents justified my reluctance to recite my Easter speeches at the annual Easter Sunday Program.

Every word has significance.

They must have held their breath every year, hoping that I would release audiences/witnesses/church members from whatever grievance I was holding toward them, and audibly share out the 1-2 stanza speech that they had rehearsed with me in the weeks leading up to those Sunday mornings. It goes without saying, that this was not the case. It would be a while later before I was properly trained to recite, repeat, and speak on cue. For those few years, ironically, before I *knew any better*, I gave my gifts of language only to those who I felt deserved them; those who could appreciate them; those whom I could trust. All of this to say, that our silences are not always the inability to speak; in some cases, it is the attempt to salvage, and preserve our spirits and psyches from forces who intend to do us harm.

(Let’s unpack this together)

Harm, has been taught to us as those mounting shadow figures for which we should avoid and retreat.

(Am I right about it?!)

There is a particular safety Black and minoritized bodies can experience if they [we] follow the sundown town logic (Loewen, 2006) [Whites only are allowed outside after dark] for living in our bodies; stay in the yard; under the streetlights; within an ear shot; at our elders’ feet; on the straight and narrow; hidden; speaking only when spoken too; in our own lanes; at our own lunch counters; on our side of the block; in the presence of God. The price of progress as our dear brother James (1955) points out, is that we hide ourselves from ourselves, and by doing so, hope that we remain safe. Threats are real in our life worlds!

We have been schooled, and in many ways staged our disappearance(s) because it has meant the preservation of our material bodies inside the condemnation of blackness that is our [corporeal]

nation state (Baldwin, 1963; Lorde, 1984; Muhammed, 2011). Self induced schooling is sometimes necessary and deserves no apology.

Winston's testimony about "his body being the very thing that invites harm", is a profound statement in that he demonstrates the survivability of this condemnation, this wake (Sharpe, 2016), and its ability to transcend generations.

Recalling my own rearing, encamped by those who desired to keep me whole, it is easy for me to sense the anxiety of my parents, church family, and peers as their hopeful eyes pressed upon me, hoping that I would recite my lines.

*Train up a child in the way that [they] should go and when they are older they will not depart
from the path
--(Proverb 22:6)*

In this body. In this country; regulation and preservation are defensive motives choreographed by ever-present impositions, which means that it will be that much more important for us to hold on, TIGHTLY, to the things that help us give meaning to the world around us (Lorde, 1984).

Now without giving TOO much praise to my childhood sensibilities, it is possible, I suppose, that I was just being stubborn...and maybe just a bit shy.

(Gentle grin and wink)

(Don't miss the point, though)

There is something to be gleaned in the organic methods by which we preserve the self.

Yet and still, there was a larger reason for these procedural open mic's that was, in many ways, an introduction to performance poetics.

I understand, right now, in this moment, that it wasn't my words they cared for, so much as an assurance that I knew something that just might save my life; I was being armed, trained, in this spiritual sense (Ephesians 6:12) to defend myself against impending, imminent, and immanent hostility and plunder (Baldwin, 1963; Coates, 2015; Lorde, 1982). Sustaining a durable self-esteem/self-appraisal by meeting defensive maintenance needs, does not foreclose enrichment capacities to create, explore, and pursue curiosity (Okello & White, in press). Nu Blaze did that

for me. Nineteen years removed from Easter Sunday memorization, I would begin to write my own lines.

If growing up in the church was a particular type of schooling, then Nu Blaze was an exercise in discovering my sound, anew, in public.

Elevator conversation. That was the title of my first performed piece. In the weeks and days leading up to event, I wrote and revised, and wrote and revised what I imagined was the 30-45 second ride we all have been on with someone we don't know. On most occasions passengers simply mind their business. Stare contemptuously at ornamental numbers as the brighten at each new landing. Words are scarce. Thoughts are not. No one speaks, usually, unless spoken to, or petitioned: "2 please?!" "Excuse me." "Take care." It was a piece about our silences. Our desires for voice that lie beneath stiff tongues and straightened backs. Elevators box you in, but there is no rule that silence should govern the experiences. I learned it. From observing. No one makes eye contact in these closed in spaces.

I am not seen.

No one talks to me in these quarters.

I am not heard.

Engaging in either would seemingly violate accepted, and agreed upon, lines of behavior.

(Maybe its just me)

Elevators took people places, but somewhere I had been schooled into believing that this odyssey demanded that I leave parts of me, literally, at the door, where I could, upon reaching my destination, magically usurp my (dis)possessions.

Stiff. And fixed.

Rigid. And tense.

Assume the position.

Look up. Not over. Your bondage is not over.

"Stay put" (Harman, 2007, p. 87) is the message my body and tongue seem to remember and understand seconds before I step foot into an elevator. Scholar Saidiya Hartman (2007) expounds on the precocity of my conditioning to the word "stay," when she insightfully

deciphers, “staying is living in a country without exercising any claims on its resources. It is the perilous condition of exiting in a world in which you have no investments” (Hartman, 2007, p. 88). If I run into someone from the YO (my hometown), my question to them is not, “where do you live?” It is “where do you stay?” My response, is often, “I stay on the Southside...up the hill, next to Boardman.” Staying implies a place of transience. A temporary shelter. The first part of this spatial localizing is indicative of displacement and a lack ownership, notwithstanding my ability to call the same house my address throughout my life.

It’s the latter part of the statement that adds, all the more, to my internalized, collective sense that Black bodies have always been forced to make meaning while in a state of perpetual motion (Danitcut, 2015). Youngstown has been labeled one of America’s fastest shrinking cities (The Atlantic, 2016, para.1). At one point in time it was a thriving center of Industrialization. Since the mills closed it has traded one title for another.. White flight to neighboring suburbs has pulled human and financial resources out of the city. Boardman is one of those suburbs. Dividing Youngstown and Boardman, Market street may as well be the gulf between the Berlin’s of yesteryear. Ravenwood, where I resided is about five blocks from Market street. In many conversations I have had about Youngstown, with strangers and those familiar alike, I have not attempted to shield the fact that I stayed on the “good” part of the Southside. “Good” symbolized something redeemable; that we weren’t all bad. All poor. All violent. I stayed in relatively safe area. There was a way out for me. I could see it on most days. Though my dwellings did not associate me whiteness, perhaps, my proximity to white spaces might provide me with some credibility. Proof. Evidence, that I was willing to make the transition out; do what was necessary to be accepted by what I perceived as *white culture*.

Stay put. Or be put in your place.

Audre tells a story of her youth that involved crayons and pencils. Her wonderful mother, in her astute, strict, and methodical parenting, sat Audre down at the kitchen table at four years old and taught her the alphabet, forward and backward as it is done in Grenada (Lorde, 1982). Audre traced each letter and called them by name. To diverge from this training in any way was grounds for a good ol’ fashion spankin’. The terms of which she held onto as she descended on her grade school classroom. Simply put, crayons were not what you wrote with, and the lined paper notebooks that students were given, surely were not to be written in (Lorde, 1982). Her

instruction, “to copy down the first letter of our name in those notebooks, with our black crayons” understandably left our dear sister undone (p. 24). Audre’s pleas of “I can’t...I can’t” and the tears that followed, were assuaged by the wiser, knowledge holding educator who refuted, “Imagine that, a big girl like you. Such a shame, I’ll have to tell your mother that you won’t even try. And such a big girl like you” (p. 25)! Deciding that it might please her mother, Audre consented to the task, but did so on her own terms.

She took the “nasty old soft smudgy crayon and pretended that it was a nice neat pencil with a fine point, elegantly sharpened” by her father’s little pen knife (Lorde, 1982, p. 25). Untrained by the discipline of lined paper, despite the width, she wrote her name slanted across the front and back of the page. It goes without saying that this fugitive act angered Miss Teacher. “Well I never!...I thought I told you to draw this letter? You don’t even want to try to do as you are told” (p. 26). The next morning that same teacher reports to the astute and methodical Black mother, that she did not think her child was ready for kindergarten because she could not follow directions, nor would she do as she was told.

*The project of (re)membering is contested terrain.
There will be instances where our desired ways of knowing and honored ways of being bump up
against schooling,
and what is desired for us. The question seems to be, can I love myself well enough when I am
accused of destruction...to keep myself from destruction? Lorde’s encounter with her instructor
at an early age
is but one example of this. If it is through recall where one is made aware of their arrivals to an
aesthetic place,
then it is through (re)membering where those inklings have the opportunity to congeal.*

James: (How do I/we become undisciplined in the presence of formal and covert schooling?)

I hold out hope that this is possible, where all around me I see the formally unschooled surrender to the pressures and grandeur of whiteness. Perhaps it is inevitable if we live long enough. Is any aesthetic strong enough to withstand violent turbulence over time? I have watched educators and artists claim a politics only to lose grip of those same espousals. Maybe they never learned how to internalize them, choosing instead to focus on the performance of identity not the identity as

performative. I see a distinct difference in the two. To be born into a Black body, but never learn how love that body, is to never truly have rights to it, Michael Jackson is a premier example. I didn't know young Michael, and thus didn't have to experience the trauma of watching his attempts to liberate himself from the collective 'we', but I heard the stories. I knew the artist, who, more than any artist in recent memory insisted, through his body, that Black people were magical—reclaiming his body and staging it with profound freedom. Coates (2018) remarks on his body as poetic miracle: "a man had been born to a people who controlled absolutely nothing, and yet had achieved absolute control over the thing that always mattered most—his body" (para. 23). The sad truth however, is that Michael was no more than a performer; he rejected the very body audiences came to celebrate. As Baldwin would say, he came to believe what the world believed (whiteness defined him as) about him, and in this way is not what I would identify as self-defined; it is escape from the dictates of the Black body. An internalized voice for Michael allowed him to construct an identity that could manage the demands of the life he was in. Thus, he could wield his body without ever having to deal with weight of it. The poet is not a performer; rather, the poet's body is a praxis by which multiple identities can be achieved. By situating the body as the site by which a poem does its work, the poet is offering a picture of the various meaning making aesthetics of self-defining praxis. In other words, what is the work of the poem, and how do I become as Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange have done so well, one with the poem?

My first penned performance was an offensive against the regimented movements of my trained grammar, body, and spirit. That I would utilize my first opportunity to say something of the world I knew should not surprise. The space made room for what James calls the "insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut" (Baldwin, 1955, p. 57). For what else would I, or anyone for that matter, do with an unedited space? I have closed away silences in many elevators and was in need of way to bring them out—unlatch them. Silences that were projected onto me and, too, those silences that I have been complicit in forgetting. "What is it we choose to remember about our past and what is it we will to forget" (Hartman, 2007, p. 15)? Our mother's voices are always a-singing, faint, low, and sweet, right beside us (Baldwin, 1953). *What are we pretending not to know* (Bambara, 1999)? As I sit across from, staring, at the little girl Audre trying to figure out what was expected of her, I am transported back to my own desks of confusion. Much older

than the 4-year old Audre, my frustration was every bit as palpable as her tears that yearned for answers unfounded. The task for Audre was not impossible; one might ask, why not just cooperate with the instruction orchestrated by Miss Teacher, who clearly had expectations of where children should be at this particular age—the product of a classic early education preparation program. The curriculum that Miss Teacher was inundated with told her that kids like Audre were not ready to script a series of letters together, let alone write their name, nor were there motor skills sophisticated enough to whirl lead into language. Miss Teacher had no instruction for the peculiar type of Black miracle that was a Black girl like Audre; the site and sight of which did not cause her to praise this Black girl genius, rather, she saw reprimanding her as the more befitting response to Audre’s mother approved crime of readiness/intelligence.

How do we become undisciplined, when your genius of being is threatening and punishable under a fixed gaze?

--

Graduate school coursework was not a game for me, it was a job. Everything about my demeanor—my short side conversation, my tied back locs, my disciplined eyes—alerted peers and teachers to my expectations of learning. Graduate school classrooms are spaces so replete with privilege, that many people I know would never set foot in one. My being there was a temporary release from the coursework of life, to pursue dreams of my own. I didn’t come to make friends or play with fantasies of an idealistic future. I came to push myself to find answers to larger questions of this world, with the hopes that it might mean something for the people and communities who sent me. My priority in the classroom was deep learning and critical analysis, and to push my colleagues to do the same. Convinced that there were no second chances for me, I saw it as my responsibility to gain as much as possible from my time there. These beliefs about my schooling are the residue of Black parenting and the emphasis on being educated while Black, with no exceptions.

—

Having outgrown him physically, my fathers 5’9 inch no nonsense, no B’s, *be the best* chorus, that he sang between his drinking across my childhood, has become the shadow I can’t escape. A survivor of his own trans-Atlantic trade, he exchanged a connection to home for a coded constitution of promises. He came for an education, and I don’t know with certainty that he ever

intended to go back. He made it out, and now, so would his children.

Internalized Lesson: Elevators take you places but you will have to leave something's at the door. You will have to give up something, some pieces of who you are if you are to achieve the power and prestige of the American Dream.

In between my Ugandan father's demands of *be the best*, was my Black mother's kitchen retort, *be your best*. She was always listening to the contracts my father passed on to his children, and seemingly always planning a way to reimagine his locution. He didn't speak Swahili to his children, but my mother seemed to understand his intent and served as a translator of his, unbeknownst to him. The nuance of language isn't artificial. My Mother had some idea of what was (im)possible for her children, but never stopped dreaming, saying recently, "I use to dream about what y'all would be...I couldn't wait to see it...I just prayed that y'all would leave your mark on the world."

Internalized Lesson: You exist in the wake but you can still create new definitions for yourself.

I learned quickly that everybody didn't see or approach graduate school education in the same way. The diverse approaches to our work, and release of long held emotions, shaken throughout our first year together, would finally erupt during an early afternoon class in the fall of our 3rd semester. Evan, a white, cisgender, man who identifies as a feminist, paused half way through the period. Carefully piecing together a statement/suggestion that resembled "our work is getting personal... and the ways in which people are showing up to class is getting in the way of our (specifically he and his wife, Carla) ability to be vulnerable." I own that I am paraphrasing slightly, but the unmistakable target for his appeal was me and the manner in which I was *showing up*. What happens next is hazy. Suffice to say, my clap-back was ever bit as raw (read: vulnerable) as he longed for and some of which he didn't anticipate. Evan was trained in inter-group dialogue and prided himself on his ability to engage and talk through difference(s). Generally, my classroom demeanor is fairly controlled. I am an avid listener, and while I do not operate in excessive displays of vulnerability, I am always in tune with what are being said, nodding and gently affirming speakers. For Evan, and others, *showing up* meant exaggerated head nodding and constant "thank you for sharing's," as the sure telling sign that one was present in a community. I disagreed.

Regulation of my impulses scattered as soon as I deciphered that it was me standing in the way of his ability to be his full self. Pacing back and forth between breaths, I let out an unsuspecting and incredulous smirk, followed by a numb giggle.

(Think Denzel, in Training Day)

This was not one of his dialogue sessions and I was not about to be managed by the rules of academic discourse. Fury spilled off of and out of my tight jaws before I had time to reel them back:

“Ev-(clap)ery-(clap)-day(clap) I walk out of the house is an act of vulnerability for me” (*staring through Evan*).

My jaws were loosening, and my voice was rising as I continued:

“I carry communities with me when I step out those doors...on this campus...where this body has no value...I came here to wrestle with ideas”

“In this Black body, I can’t show up like you! Nobody will take me seriously! (*my voice at full shout*)

“...we don’t get to show up like that...academia has taught me that if you are going to be taken seriously you make sure to show up with your ideas FIRST”

“Whatada you want from me?? Do you want me to nod my head whenever some talks... Like you??”

Evan’s response to my testimony, to this day, still fills me with rage and pity. He said, in an apologetic tone, “I didn’t know this about you...”

My immediate response to this still saddens me. I sympathetically consoled, “...please forgive the tone of my voice.”

Thinking back on this incident, I am troubled by the multiple signs of my schooling—though I was the one offended, I opened up the door, however sarcastic, for them to tell me how I can be better; to stage and direct me; “Whatada you want from me?? Do you want me to nod my head whenever some talks... Like you??” Furthermore, the thought that my vulnerability, in all of its weight and conviction was something that I should apologize for, points to the ways in which my (our) bodies are schooled in the art of minding others reactions and mediating their feelings above my own dignified living. As my learning would have it, I reached out to Evan and

apologized. Why? Because in some way, notwithstanding my desire to pursue education and this world the way I wanted, with authority, I still needed this white man's (a stand for society) approval.

(How do we become undisciplined?)

My treatise on that day did not fall on dry soil. Carla responded through email several hours later:

Thank you for sharing in class today. I appreciate deeply your honesty. I left class feeling humbled, as always, by your brilliance and your graciousness in continually teaching me and challenging me to think more complexly.

Additionally, I left class determined to reflect further on my own privilege and the unintended and yet problematic impact of my preference for how folx engage and show up in class. Your questions hit hard. When you asked what I (or Evan) want from you, what we want you to do about the way in which you have learned that showing up with ideas first is necessary with your body as an academic. Damn. This gave me pause. Who am I to set demands or expectations for how you should show up. I am truly sorry for the ways in which prioritizing my preferred way of being in the classroom has perhaps silenced or dismissed your and/or other classmates' reality and humanity.

Again, thank you for journeying with me.

With deep respect and gratitude

—

My response to Carla serves to emphasize how desires for definition implicate others and deserve scrutiny:

Thank you for your patience in my response to this email. I trust that you will keep this message between us as I am still working through several thoughts. While I can appreciate much of what was said collectively during class, I am unsettled by some pieces that have left me questioning myself, some relationships, and whether to continue with this program. That said, I remain humbled by your insight, authenticity, and your heart. You do not owe me or our classroom space the show of transparency that you willingly offer, but do so with graciousness. I do not take this for granted, but also recognize that I have likely caused hurt, bred resentment,

and led to you (and our colleagues) feeling exhausted. In many ways I feel undeserving of how you show up because of the ways I have learned to do so. I am sitting with and scrutinizing my current positions and thinking about how to contribute to a classroom space that will be beneficial and life-giving for everyone. That I have hindered or in anyway impeded your learning, or left you feeling emotionally exhausted is a haunting reality for which I must apologize. I am deeply sorry. I hold a rooted respect for you inside the walls of class and out of class, as a colleague I hope to journey with long past our time in the program...

For weeks leading up to the first open mic event, I wrote for the crowd. Leafing through and listening to the poem 9 years later, I can identify traces of desire and definition. The poem begins:

“I freed a thousand slaves, I woulda free a thousand more if only they had known they were slaves. See, like Harriet Tubman I came to see that this Sojourner was never meant for me. Back and forth as the co-conductor of this covert defiance of consciousness lies the disposition of intent.”

One notices in this writing that there is an attempt at making connections to the long physical and psychological memory of Black bodies in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). I was cognizant of a history, and the need for others to recognize their entrapment within it. Interestingly, this opening line, a popular refrain by the godmother of Exodus, moves quickly to disrupt the failed belief that bondage is monolithic. My delivery harsh; authoritative; patriarchal; it was intended to both reprimand and issue warning. I projected my voice to just above a modest yell, loud enough to let the neighboring buildings know that something was going on, but level enough not to issue alarm, because that is what I believed you were supposed to do as a poet. You talk at those who are bearing witness with a (T)ruth that they can take hold of. They, the audience, came to be entertained, and slightly, if at all, pushed in their familiar ways of thinking about themselves and the world.

My voice was not prophetic. I didn't remind anyone of Saul Williams, Amiri Baraka, or Sunni Patterson. It wasn't an exceptional performance. I was a stranger to the art of spoken word poetry, and despite the elation I had at the opportunity to create images with words, this was not

a home. In listening to elevator conversation, however, I hear a series of contemplations that annotate what one might share with the people they love most dearly. The poem feels like I am having a hard conversation with students in the classroom or a mentee. Like Phillis, my audience was my community. Like James and Audre, I hear someone who, though experimenting with the type of writer/speaker/artist he was going to be, recognized the site he was in as one that could fertilize imagination for others, and facilitate (re)membrance in the self. Albeit thin, I was coming to understand the connection between space, movement, the body, and voice as the foundations of my poetry.

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Tell me I'm strong

Is it easier to believe the story fed to us; to write it as our own; rinse and repeat like the scrubbing of our skin/our calligraphy/ so there could no trace of deception; our voice so that it was always our choice; until there is no whisper of the accent –

akin to your origins/

You emerge from this prison, with false promises in your mouth and nothing there to heal you---

I know differently

Mama showed me how to be well—every bowl of soup tasted of revolution—she made being whole irresistible—

About a destiny—of things in flight—

this journey aint of the feel good variety, not the rest your head don't cry baby/ this aint for the light of heart, my child/ Are you sure, sweetheart? , that you want to be well?... Just so' you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness-

aint no trifling matter, Toni Cade fades in and through my memory--A lot of weight—she says take back your mind, take heart in the art of living for and not in response to/ she left a trail/

guided by a tongue full of words—big words like dignity, like legitimate, like unmoved-- the creative labor of magicians-

sanded with black skin and woman—midnight goddess who could speak of a thousand tongues, the dialect of the brilliant, the big and masterful—proof that we were capable of life— fierce in the presence of death, its threat gave them power, clarity, audacity

What manner of prodigy/ Ingenuity and propensity to thrive in fire/

spin their freedom into fluoresce/ to choose night to shine brightest/ ablaze and radiant/ this aint entertainment/ aint a spectacle for the masses/ or fortresses of glass/ It's a rebuttal/ a confession/injunction that maybe the things you through away wouldn't die/ that they could find they way, at dusk-

when you weren't looking/ a future beyond mason jars and the tight clasp of eager hands/ star swinging chariot/comets cast, but not lost of glory/ what power we must have/as fireflies/ encased in nightfall/ wrapped in light/ours heart afloat/this glow is not a mistake

a fate this magnificent can't be mediocre; when I felt mediocre

I ran to her, showed her muscle, and said Mama tell me I'm strong,

Baby, she said, you are strong/

Mama, will you always tell me im strong/

there are some things that will bring even the strongest woman down/

heavy wind oak tree tumble with no sound

shifting/shrinking/sifting/splitting /dust to dust

pain has a way of catching up to you

we black woman who care for everyone accept herself

we colored girl beautiful back bone trying to be everything

Baby/ colored children always be strong/ their mother made it so

dimples in the earth so you would know the way to go
Wore a smile
She smiles
Knows smiling
Perfected the art smiling through pain
You wont always feel it though/
and I won't always be here to tell you
we mother spirits,
break when you hear the spirit
listen to the mothers in your belly you when your spirit breaks
She be relentless, never given up
She is relentless and never given up on you
Even in this moment,
the spirit is up off the floor, like she has done many times before
yells, what are you broken for
you is blessed high and low
you are healing in your wounding,
screams, is that the best you can do.
Im sorry colored child, love aint always going to stare back at you
In those moments- thirsty eyes give way to hurricane pour,
Like avalanche
Like cant stop wont stop
Like my heart is going to stop soon, but my love will keep going
Don't you ever forget where you come from,
And how
I guided your hands to make letters/
taught you to count by giving you kisses
plot the stars with finger paints pictures on the pantry/
What are your broken for?
You born of magic and miracle,

choices do not exist in our world, magic is what she did with the options she had left
Mama, made the most of wasn't there,
strong and vulnerable
making do with what madness comes from choosing to survive

Change shouldn't frighten me any more, we come from magicians
meta(phor) and morphosis
with butterfly dreams-

*Black poetry is an aesthetic miracle because of what it endures on the way to the stage.
Blossoming is as hard as it beautiful and no one knows this like the Black poet whose charge is
to morph a feeling into an idea, into language, into performance that still retains the original
feeling. Writing of a poem, for me, is a slow, unflattering, and joyously painstaking process.*

Sisters and brothers,

Miracles are difficult. My mothers' decisions to affirm a seven-year-old slender Black boys
muscle every time he ran to her, was the Black feminist miracle I never knew I needed. In the
absence of her praxis, could I believe myself strong? Capable? Worthy? In the muck of
dismissal, misrepresentation, disrespect, and hostility, can I dust off and polish this body every
morning and wear it with pride despite the implications (Cox, 2015)?

*"I want to be white." Playground antics and elementary politics sent us [my brother and I home]
home convinced that we were a mistake. This wasn't love...this [body] had to be hate. He has
always been bolder than I, so while I stood under, what I hoped was a mystic rain, hoping an
extended shower would do the work of bleaching cream, I wasn't surprised to learn that he told
my mother of his desired death [dying to be white]. I remember her tears. I want to tell her that
it's not her fault...that, in my mortality, today was just too hard: "Here there was no speech or
language, and there was no love; no one to say: You are beautiful,; no one to forgive...no one to
heal...and lift [me] up" (Baldwin, 1953, p. 227). The interconnectedness of self-love and agency
converge as I sit in this moment.*

To exist in this body, in this time and place, means digesting the things other people think and
say about you while holding onto the truth of who you know yourself to be.

James: It's the game of identity...

Audre: It's defense and self-conscious self-protection...

Wilson: Black poetry is a miracle because of what happens beyond the shoreline, while wading, on the way to the stage; in the writing process, where the poet is recalling, digging up, submerged in, and piecing back together, always and already present, and patient. This gives new meaning to breaks and pauses in [our] poems, something my first performance left to be desired.

*Sounds trapped in the dome of my mouth,
expiring from lack of air
they exhaled quickly.*

*Forcefully. Wildly. The cold rush of water breaking through a damn;
anxious for the taste of freedom;
like the sky was falling and I didn't have a moment to spare...*

Audre: We live and survive in the breaks.

James: It's what the congregation means when they say take your time (Crawley, 2017)

Enjambment: *The running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next, without terminal punctuation.*

Wilson: The line break and pause [*hold thought for 5 seconds before continuing*] extends an idea; it forces witnesses to sit [wade] with a feeling; to meditate on a word or passage; it places your body on the line-to be gazed upon as a source of expectation and anticipation; instantaneously you become a site of knowledge, for only you [the poet] knows what is supposed to happen next. In this life of bottom lines and deadlines, I was uncomfortable with this notion. Making people wait for or on me? Absolutely, not!

James: There are consequences for that type of offense.

Wilson: Assuredly! Modestly eager for feedback, I remember asking a colleague what they thought about my first performance... emphasis on the modest (*gentle smile*)

(What? Ima a artist...and I'm sensitive about shit)

On a serious note, I remember asking a colleague what they thought about the performance. And, while they were gracious and complimentary, the line of critique was directed at my presence:

“Next time, don’t wait so long to start,” he advised.

In other words, my yearning sensibility to gather myself—take my time; take up space—was a violation of [temporal] norms and should be trained away if I wanted to keep the audience’s attention.

Wade in (verb): to walk through water, snow, or any other substance that impedes free motion or offers resistance to movement; to makes one’s way slowly.

This, I submit, is what it means to *take up space*. At that early moment in my development, I had only a sense of what this—the right to be in a space without apology—could look like, or more importantly, what it could mean. It would be much later, before I would begin writing myself intentionally into spaces. Lorde and Baldwin perform this very work, arguing for self-definition as a theory in the flesh by positioning their voices, bodies, and written texts in and against representations of the status quo [schooling]. Hailing the words of June Jordan (1974), Dr. Alexis Gumbs (2010) writes “we must devise and pursue every means for survival as the people we are, as the people we want to become. Choosing not to separate ‘the people we are’ from ‘the people we want to become’ with so much as a conjunction” (p. 121). This poetic manipulation of language necessitates a particular way of reading, viewing, and understanding Black poetry and presence. One that is not beholden to historical trappings or contemporary seductions.

The flow of a piece, read, and/or spoken, keys witnesses into the multiple layers of a poem, and moves the question of being in culture beyond individual lives to the collective.

(Turn to your neighbor and say STAY IN THE WATER (*audience response*), A LITTLE WHILE LONGER (*audience repeat*))

Your presence...your decision to take up space with your pauses, your breaks, your conjunctions or lack thereof, is interrupting ways of knowing, being, and understanding in the right now, and creating futures! You, the poet, are not a performance. You are an invitation (in)to an experience.

This brings me to my third point.

Emptied out: (Re)presentation [sermon part III]

I recently saw a movie (*form an X over chest with arms*)

I see many of you have been to Wakanda as well (*smile*)

This movie does important cultural work that I believe speaks to the life and function of a poet, and contributes to our discussion of the black aesthetic principles that comprise self-definition. Specifically, I want to hone in on the Black feminist sensibilities mobilized by the daughter of Wakanda, Princess Shuri.

When there is no perceptible logic, or available framework for understanding the existence of a phenomena, the imagination takes over, and with it a litany of possible explanations. There are few perfectly logical explanations available to support the survivability of Black life-worlds.

(Audre: Enter, the imagination!)

Wilson: The loose translation for the wielding of the imaginary onto a phenomenon that is out of the tangible reach of comprehension is *magic*. I would argue that it is easier to believe that Black bodies are magical, than it is to see, acknowledge, or honor their humanity. It's why culturally we can celebrate Black Panther the Marvel magical fantasy, and condemn Black Panthers, the materialist vanguard of revolution (Nelson, 2015). The Black body, however, while a miracle and every form of genius, is not magic, much to the chagrin of rational logic.

James [Baldwin] supports this notion as it pertains to Black expression...

James: I do! "The black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (Baldwin, 1985, 336).

Wilson: The expectation communicated here, is that Black bodies make peace with the limits of the white imagination. Whiteness, as a result, is the fundamental organizing principle that structures Western society, and imperialism globally, grounded in the need to explain and define the boundaries of existence.^{viii} For the Black body, this has meant *stay in your place*, or be *put in your place*. James's [Baldwin] metaphor of a star—an extraordinary incantation of great power,

pull, and mystery—is a useful illustration here, because Black bodies have always been as fascinating as they are overwhelming in the white imagination, and thus, a thing that can and should be controlled (hooks, 1990). History owns a long record of terrors against the Black body in an effort to remind Black life-worlds of their fixed positions—Black people feel less pain, or no pain at all; Black people receive less medical treatment, or worst, are treated more harshly; enforced sterilizations of Black women; mass incarceration.

In articulating the wake, Sharpe (2016) describes it as “the history and present terror, from slavery to the present, as the grounds of everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies”(p. 15).

*Living is porous
inhalations and exaltations
breath as flesh*

as along as there is breath, there is the opportunity for more...life.

I am pondering what Spillers (1987) notes as “the flesh and blood that was essentially ejected from the...body in western culture” (p. 67), toward an embodiment, or the merging of the subject-object positions. Making a distinction between the body and the flesh, Spillers suggests that “before the body there is the flesh”; a difference between captive and liberated subject positions, such that the body before it is and was inscribed and imposed upon by the discourses of rationality, is flesh— a creative entity and grounds by which life occurs.

Black Panther addresses the Black body, in the wake (Sharpe, 2016), in myriad ways, but most profoundly through the brilliance of Princess Shuri. Amongst her many, brilliant, productions, in the movie, I want to highlight two: 1) Princess Shuri challenges tropes of Black intelligibility in her short dialogue with CIA agent Everett. 2) The design of the Black Panther suit, I submit, enlarges our understandings of the Black aesthetic and its possibilities in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). Specifically, this material and imaginative work/suit, capable of absorbing kinetic energy into the suit, holding it, and then redistributing it elsewhere, provides a methodological “route to reconstruction” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 32). Discussing the body as both the site of injury and pain, and the sight of healing and possibility, I consider Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick’s (2006) call for a return to the body to assist witnesses in (re)seeing and

(re)inhabiting bodies in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of crisis, and to (re)present the Black subject in a world that has tirelessly labored to dehumanize and erase the possibility of their interior lives. CIA agent Everett has just woken up from what most, including him, would believe should have been a life altering wound at best, and fatal at worst. Surveying his surroundings, he is astonished first, by his mobility, and secondly, the sophisticated, technologically advanced laboratory that he has found himself in. As if this were not disorienting enough, his first encounter in this new world is a Black woman! It's worth pausing here to point out the disequilibrium he must have been experiencing because of three seemingly disparate recognitions: 1), I'm alive. 2), I am in a mysterious place. 3), The only person I see is a Black woman. The "fixed an immovable star" that Baldwin discusses has been thrust out of orbit and into his gravitational pull. Bewildered by his surroundings, and struggling for meaning, he proffers the only potential solution available: "*It has to be something like magic.*" What Princess Shuri says next, in my estimation, is a central theme in the cultural work that the Black Panther movie performs. With accomplished certainty, and an understandable irritability, she corrects "Its not magic, its technology." In a single breath she confronts the multiple prefixes—sub, non, super—assigned to the humanity of Black bodies and their intelligibility.

Audre [Lorde] calls it the transformation of language into silence. The brilliant Black woman scholar, bell hooks, might say, she *talks back* (hooks, 1989), as "the movement from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance" (p. 9).

I can't help but wonder how Shuri nurtured this sensibility. In my own life, talking back was the surest way to find yourself on the other end of a belt "the backhand lick" or "the slap across the face that would catch you unaware" (hooks, 1989, p. 5). Trained into a deference that just might save your life literally and figuratively, at home we [my brother and sister] were taught to stay quiet when being addressed by those in authority—aunts, uncles, Sunday teachers, and school teachers. To speak when one was not spoken to, or worst, when someone was talking, were courageous, and equally, punishable acts

*"Lift every voice and sing/
till earth and heaven ring..."*
--James Weldon Johnson

Before jump ropes scuffed gymnasium panels and before basketball dreams hit the backboard, summer days would begin with the words of the Black national anthem. With my parents at work, my siblings and I needed a place to go during summer work days. The day-camp was located in West-Lake terrace, a subsidized housing area in Youngstown, otherwise known as the projects.

There is a long history of gang violence and structural decay in this area of Youngstown, but that's not what I remember...what I choose to remember at this point. I remember learning about the importance of one's gaze. Where one places their eyes, how they do it, and when they do it,

could mean everything from confidence to disrespect. I have seen too many fights break out between brothers and sisters because someone interpreted someone else's eye contact as threatening and/or a sign of confrontation. I found myself on the opposite end of a gun—another

young black man's gun—for this very reason. Talking back, questioning, lifting your eyes and voice without permission, can have material consequences. And, this is just my reflection as cis-het black man. The intensity with which the Black gaze is monitored and controlled is magnified

for Black women and queer and trans folks. One of the markers of oppression as bell hooks (1990) recounts, "was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity...so that they could be better-less threatening-servants. An

effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered around white control of the black gaze" (p. 340). Black and minoritized communities, and families, have internalized this maneuver to our detriment. Lifting our eyes up, while we lifted

our voices during this morning ritual, was rehearsal of sorts for reclaiming our gaze in the presence of whiteness, and each other. This scene of Black Panther is striking because of the ways it talks back (hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984). If the punishments I received for speaking out of

term were intended to suppress the possibility of speech, it is through the platform [(re)presentation] of poetry that my voice would emerge. It was through this medium that I could, as hooks proffers, and Shuri makes tangible, "change the nature and direction of our speech", that would compel listeners (resemblance revision) to pursue their own voices.

I suspect that Shuri internalized alternative ways of being at an early age. Unlike you and I who encounter self-defining, quick-witted, informed, all-knowing brilliant Black women in our households, in texts, sprinkled across academe and corporate space, or on Shonda-land, Shuri bore witness, broadly, to a culture that affirmed Black women as knowers, cultivators, and defenders of civilization.

Refusing to be categorized as that which is beyond comprehension, or something undeserving of it, she revises his conceptions on the limits of Black genius in a language he is able to understand, making the larger case for the Black body as a legible *sight*.

James: It means something when you write.

Audre: It means something when you speak.

Wilson: It means something when you step on stage and do all three!

With a frankness that is not fashionable in the presence of the white gaze, I am moved by Shuri's interruption and reclamation of the Black gaze. In this sense, the Black body begins to take on new meaning for witnesses as a dynamic entity. This talking back, is not merely a symbolic gesture, but an expression of one's movement from object [a body to gazed upon, held, interpreted] toward a reclaimed subject.

Flesh gives breath to lifeless bodies

If Shuri's statement does the intellectual reordering, then it is her design of the Black Panther suit that locates the project of reclamation, by situating the Black body as a *site* by which creative capacities are possible. This maneuver allows us witnesses to envision the fullness of Black personhood, where cultural suggestions tend to favor the mind over body. As it relates to Black life-worlds, the body is favored, if anything at all. Shuri's idea for the suit is not magic; rather, it is a physics lesson on Black survivability in the diaspora. The suit's mastery, again, is in its ability to store kinetic energy ($\frac{1}{2} \text{ mass} \times \text{velocity}^2$), similar to the way a spring works, in what is scientifically termed *elastic potential energy*.

In essence, the very energy that is intended to shatter, break, move, or at the very least reposition, may cause some shift in posture to the suit wearer, but is ultimately taken in as an additional resource (contracting spring), ready to be repurposed in acts of agency (expanding spring). Pointed in her critique of the myths of survivability, in this lesson, Shuri proves that the Black body is not impenetrable, nor is it indestructible. Black life-worlds, in fact, do feel pain, and in

many ways are forced to sit with an undeserved amount of it. As Audre [Lorde] reminds, “waste nothing...particularly not pain.” (Lorde, 1982, p. 236). Shuri’s genius lets us know that pain, and various forms of distress, however, need not be fatal, though sometimes they are. The body can become a site that exist not just to be berated by forces competing for its possession, but a site where new knowledge is constructed, and healing and joy are probable.

hooks (1989) stresses the difficulty of this task, suggesting that we are in a

cultural context that defines freedom solely in terms of learning the oppressor's language (language as culture; learning to live the oppressor's culture, what Baba, my grandmother, what Native American Indians before her called learning the white man's ways)...

assimilating however slowly into the dominant hegemony, into the mainstream.” (p. 29)

This remaking, taking back of power, or movement out of object positions toward the subject, is to move beyond the imitation of dominant society and the expectations of the status quo.

Recueillement: [From the French] contemplation; the attitude of someone trying to be himself or herself not to be dispersed, one member of the body here, another. One tries to recover, to be more in good shape, to become whole again.

(Re)inhabiting the body as a mental, emotional, spiritual, and spatial construct, in a culture that benefits from its rational disembodiments is fraught with tension—Princess Shuri’s Black feminist sensibilities, which confront myths of intelligibility, and position the body as a site and sight possibility, assist in charting a new pathway forward.

As a Black cisgender man witnessing the film, I am further convinced of the potential for Black feminism(s) to serve as an intervention in and against heteropatriarchy, and a reorganizing principle by which Black people broadly, and Black men in particular, can (re)see themselves in the world as embodied entities who have some say in the ways in which they make sense of, and respond to systems of oppression.

*“Go where I can see
Dark corners used to scare me
I trust myself more*

I let my body go. Set it free. My interrogation of Black masculinity engendered an emotionality that has been missing in my work. I learned, throughout my time in this experience, about the potential benefit of embodiment in research and theorizing. To read something in text permits some level of understanding. To take on, and pursue embodiment as an existential practice—a

way of being, thinking, and doing— has changed the way I know and how I come to know. I am still learning to trust my body, but from this experience, I know that it is speaking eloquently. I recognize its language and am becoming attuned to its utterances in others and myself.” This was a beginning of sorts. I wrote the above reflection at the end of the semester following an exploration of Black feminism and disruptive qualitative inquiry. My teacher, Dr. Dominique Hill, operated from a Black feminist epistemological standpoint with radiant brilliance. I sought her genius because something was missing in me, and subsequently, in my work. I knew her to be well trained in the discipline and the embodied text of Black feminism and saw in our potential work together, an opportunity for growth. The growth I reference was more of an aspiration, as I was introduced to what theory looks like in flesh. My introduction here prompted a resemblance revision that would, in turn, inform my meaning making aesthetics and the performance of my poetry. I pondered what it might mean to adorn my body and psyche with a sensibility so compelling. As the spiritual educator she is, Dr. Hill lovingly submerged me in the labyrinth and fractures of my positionality, through which I would emerge with the tools to both swim upstream—to pass through the waters—and keep others from drowning.

Princess Shuri’s choreographs the sonic, the visual, and the sensual in a manner that insists on a break from the quotidian norms of anti-blackness, that is, the norms that treat Black and minoritized bodies as discardable and/or in need of remediation, and an embrace of black aesthetic principles, which manifest themselves in the diverse (re)presentations of self-defining praxis.

Journey with me as I return to the body to generate a narrative about “the intentioned forms black life-worlds took, and take, to contend with and against a history of violent eclipses of breath— drownings overboard, whippings, lynchings, incarceration—and how those forms of life are the instantiation” (p. 57), and incarnation of life and existence in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of gratuitous violence and violation.

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December 4th, 2014:

Looped in literal chain, I held my breath—more like, my airways stilled—as she tried to pull away to no avail. Strained and stretched, the chains did not break and the block they were stapled

in didn't move, but she unwrapped herself with a clenched grace and decisiveness that stories the greatest passages of Black survival. It was an artistic dance performance. I don't remember ever seeing someone move with the anguish and pain of an entire room the way Dr. Hill did on that evening. This evening, wintery footprints melted away with a fiery rage as the Mobilizing Anger Collective^{ix} was born, and gathered for its first public forum:

She took every bit of the mourning over, yet another slain body, and placed it on her shoulders; carried the tears and wailings of broken spirits in the clutch of her forearms, delicate and safe, as if to say I can't fix this and I know how you feel, let's tarry together.

She knew something about this world—about living in endarkened (Dillard, 2000) bodies— that others either didn't, or were to afraid to make real. Unforgiving, her strides steady, sure, and certain. Breath emanating from the space between her lips, left trails of smoke, signs of fire, love, and honesty. Who was this, who commanded the sees—white gazes fixed upon Black bodies—walking through their water, light and unyoked by the drench of their moisture. Her body was alive, unshackled by the lyrics of schooling and respectability. She moved with a musicality—kinetic orality, sonic pleasure, percussive resistance—that whispered to the ears of my spirit, like the Black woman preachers' question to James [Baldwin] (1963; 1985) “with that marvelous smile, ‘Whose little boy are you’” (p. 343)?

Why Black boy, aren't you moving? Whose little boy are you?

The sentiment of “whose little boy are you” (Baldwin, 1963), provoked deeper questions for me; Meditations of living that matched my convictions. In other words, I didn't want to just breathe in water, I wanted to walk on it. I, like James [Baldwin], “unquestionably wanted to be *somebody's* little boy,” (p. 343). Her interpretation of whose child are you—the question her presence chided—was a layered question around what my body was rooted in philosophically. What camp did I belong to and how was that informing how I moved through the world? The exchange our individual, artistic, bodies held went as follows:

Dr. Hill: Hi, [dancing, body introducing herself as a body-lyricist].

Wilson: Hi, I am a poet. I think we do similar work.

Dr. Hill: We don't.

Wilson: I mobilize my voice on stage to...

Dr. Hill: Stop. You just proved my point. You say you are a poet, great. So what? My body transcends the theatrical stage. Where is your art beyond the moment? What does it do?

Performance poetry had become almost like a controlled substance—whenever I needed a high, a quick resuscitation, I could find my way to a stage, unleash and bask in the steam of the emotional waves—intoxicating; reinvigorating, for others and myself—yet, it was only as powerful as the length of a program. My breath; my power, for all of its curative possibilities, was regulated in its potential to a particular setting and command.

Ready. Set Go. What prison had I stumbled into when attempting to leave my parole? How many times have I traded in one form of bondage for another, and do I even know what authority feels like? I get the sense that performance is reduced to a form of entertainment in some instances. Once words leave my mouth, I lose control of their interpretation despite whatever story I may have wished to go forward.

Her flesh was an ark, and I was just learning how to paddle, to place my hands and feet in sync to move across the still water. I said to her, I don't know how to swim yet, and there is a flood on the way, *can you show me how?*

12/7/15

Hello Doc,

I hope the semester is wrapping up nicely for you. I have another question/proposal for you. Next semester I am scheduled to take Advanced Qualitative Studies, but the course falls at the same time as one of the classes I will be teaching. While I could wait another year to take this course, I started thinking about the possibilities of working with you in a deeper capacity. With that said, would you be willing to supervise an Advanced Qual Independent Study next semester with me? My thought is that the publication idea I proposed to you could serve as one of the assignments along with other readings and assignments we develop together. I have discussed the possibility of this independent study with the faculty and they would be onboard pending your

decision.

I recognize that this request is asking more of your time, so know that I would be happy to discuss how this could, if at all, also benefit you at this point in your career.

I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Wilson

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She agreed. As a method of chronicling pivotal moments of insight throughout my time with Dr. Hill, I recount three crucial questions that she asked me, and my then, reflection on them as she guided me toward embodiment.

Question #1-What did you come here to do?

A father's dreams and a mother's sacrifices have to add up to something. I came because they said I couldn't. They said 'no' on more than one occasion. "You're not ready." "You can walk away." "You are dreaming." I came to prove myself right. I came to be a hero, to find the answers to the most persistent problems facing my community...my people. I came to give them something they could be proud of. I came to be a bridge, a tidal wave, and earthquake. To free. I came to show my God-sons that there are alternative ways of existing in this world. I came to show them how to be better than they think they are...better than there their parents dreamed they could be. I came to infiltrate openly. I came to be more than disruptive knowledge, but as primary, "constitutive of a new world." I came to do messy work. I came to make friends with discomfort and to willfully pursue the dirty. I want to upset balance and articulate the knowledge that I carried with me to this place. I came because others could not. They had other things to do. They were busy saving their world and could not be bothered. I am a steward to them. I believe that so many others could be here if they wanted but trusted that I could handle this until they had time... I came to find my own garden. There were seeds planted for me long ago that are craving spring blossom. I need to water them. I came to create. I came to dream. I came to love. I came to inspire.

Recall, in the form of critical reflexivity, was introduced early on in exchanges with my mentor. As scripted by Alexander (2005), this depth of scrutinizing "calls us to attend to the tracks that led us to a particular place, what our presence tracks over, and what we track into other...territory" (p. xviii). I was asked to lay bare my rationale for pursuing doctoral education

and wrestle with whatever moral/ethical issues might arise because of it. This question pressed me to explain my presence in the academy, both to myself and to the communities who hold me accountable. The notion that I was accountable to others was not new, rather it was heightened, as a reminder of what it meant for me to be in this space and the responsibility that came along with it. It is in and through critical reflexivity, where we can begin the process of disclosing alternatives and scripting new trajectories. Critical self-reflexivity forces us to put language to our sensibilities and dispositions as it interrogates and tests our allegiances to them.

In order to engage the work I felt called to, I would first have to see through the eyes of others to generate a sense of what the world was inscribing on my bodily presence. Standing on the opposite river bank (Anzaldúa, 1987), as it were, would not be sufficient in providing me with a substantive reckoning of *what I came to do*, as it lends itself to absolute perspectives, security in pointing the finger, and positions the self as exempt and somehow insulated from the destructive forces of oppression. “The counters-stance refutes, the dominant culture’s views...and, for this is proudly defiant....but it is not a way of life. At some point, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 78-79). To be Black and male, in pursuit of Black feminist thought necessarily engaged my body as a site of struggle. I poked my finger in the cool waters, just beyond the shoreline where it was safe, and stirred. Ripples echoed out without interference, clearing the surface of debris that washed up. So far as I could see outwardly, it seemed like a simple enough task. Step out. Dive in. The waters of Black feminism, however, were a beautiful dusk, too dense to see to the bottom. If I was going to pursue this study, it would mean going in, and trusting whatever happened after that. *Would I get lost? How deep is too deep? What if there is not firm grounding? Why should I trust this woman? She speaks as if she knows me; like I am some failed object of humanity in need of fixing...maybe I am. How does she know?* None of these questions came with answers, but Dr. Hill owned something, and this pathway was part of it. Even if I didn’t know her enough to trust her, my spirit longed to move the way her body did.

*The ground will rattle
This is new for you don’t hide
Growth is happening*

My body said to trust her, so I did. Assisted, I began wandering in the fields of Black feminism. I pricked my finger on several roses bushes, captivating and fiercely protective of their stems and

wisdom. I stood beneath the cloak of its wide branches and leaves and understood anew homeplace (hooks, 1990). I marveled at their steady trunks, layered and timeless. When holding the soil in my hands, I felt worlds of creativity in its seeds. Ponds were reflecting pools showing me back to myself: Selfish. Callous. Sexist. Patriarchal. Prideful. This didn't feel like judgment, so much as a prodding to be better. Splashing my face with cupped hands of water, I looked into the mirror. *Was this me?* I bought into ways of knowing and being, frail as they were, that trained me to stay quiet. Respectable. Poised. Put together. Fake. *I felt fake, no better than Stepin Fetchit, the proverbial coon or Tom set to please white audiences.* Bowties. Polished wingtips. Creased pants. Paper mache thin, my mask muted the evanescent tones of my Black body. There was substance, perhaps a trickster somewhere tucked away, that is, the Black folk(s) who misrepresented themselves on purpose to fool white slave owner, but he was asleep. This was my war to fight within: waking someone lulled to sleep in the wake (Sharpe, 2016).

*are you still asleep
you don't get to be tired
the fire is coming*

I have been in fights before. The cultural message was always, *if someone hits you, you hit back. Don't let somebody just beat on you.* Protect your body at all costs. So I hit back. I bought in and steeled myself such that I would be palatable for most audiences—it was fear incarnate as I wrestled popularized versions of the Black men's bodies as unfeeling, superhumanly strong, and dangerous. Black feminism seemed to be saying, *even if your body is not stolen from you, the fear of losing your body steals your energy, your time, and your freedom.*

If the body casing is vulnerable to dispossession, constantly, I needed to make a decision. Continue on in the pains of disembodiment, or push further into the learning available. I stopped throwing punches, so that I could experience the body afresh, reconnected to the flesh (Spillers, 1987).

Question #2-Who Am I v. Who I say I Am to the World?

I sat back. We were meeting in a local coffee house, just off campus. Couched in the middle of the room, the air dissipating, I tried to maintain some semblance of balance, some image of confidence as Dr. Hill's question reached across the table and hit me in the gut. I was losing and I couldn't hide it. I let out a slow, exasperated, sigh. *Sheesh!* I dribbled my foot as if trying to launch a rocket; covered my mouth like a child who cursed for the first time. No words came out,

just sounds, movement—somatic gestures. Dr. Hill did nothing. She was holding me under with her eyes, watching me convulse in front of her, in the middle of this empty room, and did nothing, as if to say, *listen to your body*.

*what is honesty
migrating subjects expressed
let the body speak*

Decolonizing. That's where I am. That is who I am, right now. I am disassembling, pulling apart, and uprooting myself from the harvest of domination and oppressive logic that has instructed my yearning. Yearning. That where I am. That's who I am right now. I "do the right things." I feel predictable and insincere. There are modes of my being that are still guided by systems of power and the gaze of others more frighteningly. I am on a quest to love myself more than I love and or desire the approval of people. My dress feels more rehearsed and imitation, more ornamental, than a deliberate confrontation with respectability. The act of wearing interpretive and interruptive scripts allows me to "be the thing" as my truest self catches up with the one I imagine myself to be. I am safe and pleasingly distracting. The way I show up is neither upsettingly creative nor dangerous, but vibrantly mute. I may be the essentialized Black man that I read about. I should be doing more for sisters. Yearning. That's where I am. That is who I am, right now. The place that I am currently in [the way I see myself outside of public view] is not sufficient for who I am telling the world I am, more truthfully, who I am pursuing. There is a little boy sitting on the porch of my soul still trying to prove that he is worth the lofty dreams and worthy of the hopes that others have for him. His hands are still growing, still maturing in ways that will be able to hold the expectations of home without dropping them. I want to believe myself...perhaps, because I have been raised in a world that has taught me to distrust myself and to be afraid of my own sound. I tell people to move through the world without fear and on their own authority. I tell them [students] to find their voice and fill the silence. I tell them to own space, to show up big, and be their full and authentic self. My words motion towards my own ambition. The world thinks I am beaming with confidence, humility, and discipline. I tell and give people a picture of who I long to be.

Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1913) account of a metaphorical *mask*, rings true in my early work of excavation. This mask, a veneer of white enamel, romanticized courage, suppressed an inheritance of bottomless, instructive, anger, and accepted a role as the one who *made it out*. I

had learned the talk, but was only beginning to walk it out. I did not have to give up anything—push the envelope unnecessarily—in this role. My presentation to the world was not untrue, but simultaneously, it was not one that I had full faith in; it was not the one I longed to embrace. This question, *who am I v. who I say I am to the world*, was a confrontation with my own complicity, as I held a furious desire to be seen, yet moved altogether as invisible in how I adjusted [read: assimilated] to the spaces of academe. My decision to blend in fit neatly within oppressive systems function to erase my marked, and inherently disruptive body, toward a surveilled historical ideal. Ellison (1995) fluently translates this idea noting, “that invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of their inner eye, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes, upon” (p. 4). As the folk poem states in Mills (2007), “got one mind for white folks to see/Another for what I know is me,” or, in James’s [Baldwin] brutally candid assessment, “I have spent most of my life, after all, watching white people and outwitting them, so that I might survive” (Mills, 2007, p.18). What I came to know, fiercely, was that my disappearance was part of a larger project of systematic unknowing, unspeakability, and erasure—as Mills suggests, I was not meant to be seen at all.

Though I was not meant to be seen, threatened by the clouds and insistent winds that howled ahead steering me toward a safer shore, the thought that there was something beyond the tumultuous waves was vibrant and expansive:

*For we must speak
Remembering
that we were never meant to survive*

Lorde’s (1984) words were the echo chambers of the hidden places within me that hungered for a new language. My strivings were conversing with a Black feminist canon, prompting me to look back, not at my current condition, but to my relationship to history, knowledge, and political advocacy anchored in the home-places of Black feminist thinking. My mentor, in and through this ontological prompt, was reminding me of *what was* so that I could imagine, and piece (back) together *what could be*; she was instructing me to (re)member. What was, mediated through western imperialism and empire, were partial anecdotes of a genealogy anchored in a commitment to nonbeing. What could be, however, was to become “attuned and attentive to the movement of embodied histories that breathe, live, and walk with us” (Alexander, 2005, p.18).

Being, as I was learning, is a complex project, unresolved without a compass that traveled backward and plunged one into the depths. This experience, alongside my mentor, was not about simply attaining new methods to lay on top of old problems, rather, an injunctive to remember and repay an age-old debt serviced through a thoughtfully worked out plan for the ongoing rights to self-definition of Black and minoritized bodies.

Familiarized with the landscape of higher education and its inherent function to mirror and reproduce the status quo outside of its walls, I was learning to recognize how systems of oppression controlled my movement and monitored my spiritual strivings. The words of reflection above spiraled from a longing to make the world intelligible. Uncomfortable as it was, the mask had become such a part of my everyday dress that it no longer necessitated application or sealant—it just was. In addition, written and erased, and written again on my body's psyche, was the festering unresolved angst of imposter syndrome that went to great lengths to question my capacities as an educator. Severe are the catastrophes of disembodiment; among the various methods of this violence is the excision of the tongue. Excision, according to Alexander (2005), functions in much the same way as dominant knowledge frameworks and resides at the intersection of power and social authority. Power is reinforced when subjugated bodies are silenced. Reconstituting my tongue, i.e., cultivating a language to talk back (hooks, 1989), was the result of my immersion into the deep end, past the shore line, and beyond wading in waters that stopped at my hips—my transformation from silence to action (Lorde, 1984). It was in coming to see myself insecurely and broken, that I learned of an authentic power that could arise from rebuilding devastation, that is, learning to piece the self back together in response to competing forces that endeavor to present a body devoid of subjectivity.

Question #3-If more whole, more fierce, more unapologetic, more you, what would you be doing?

I would be living my convictions publicly. The path I am currently on has propelled me into the public, courtesy of my gifts. When I show up in public, however... speaking engagements, performances, and the like, I am meticulously prepared. I have thought through my words and the (re)presentation that audiences are bearing witness to is a well-orchestrated set of scenes, mostly. There are parameters where I want learning to place, and I typically go out of my way to ensure that those parameters are well defined. Some might call this being a good educator. The highest compliment I believe you can give someone is that they are, in fact, a good educator. I

am not ashamed of my thoughtfulness and (re)presentation, but do wonder what fully living from my convictions would look like. Would I say more? I think I would. Would I post more of my work [on social media]? I think I would. Perhaps, there is a public responsibility I am not assuming.

I am coming to vulnerability differently. Several years ago, I read Brene Brown's work Daring Greatly. By and large, I was not a fan of the book. My colleagues were smitten and deeply resonated with the book's concepts. I read a white woman, speaking from a place of privilege about a topic that did not consider the bodies of minoritized people. The invitation to vulnerability was not an invitation I was willing to accept. I resisted the notion of vulnerability as Brown discussed; I chose alternatively to live a life of calculated risk taking and guarded vulnerability. My recent renderings of vulnerability prove it to be more than a simple stance of open living, rather a tendency to choose the self. Placing the body as a site of research and representation has fundamentally restructured my understandings of vulnerability. I am coming to trust that vulnerability can be a site of power. Until now, I had not seen it done in ways that resonated with me. Specifically, I am drawn to the notion of embracing the body as more than just a feeling/sensing home but the vulnerability of how our body must move through culture, through various spaces, and across time, always on the line, for the purposes of knowledge, realization, and inspiration (Madison, 2009).

The work is keeping 'the personal' at the center. I do not ever want to get to the place where I am not intimately attached to my production in the academy. I am choosing to be here. I am pursuing a career as an educator..., which means that I have to get used to defending my points and articulating my place at the table.

Without intense screening, the vigorous and everyday oppressions that condition our lives will leave our imagination inert. Dr. Hill did not shield me from this possibility but rather went to patient lengths to offer me a long-wielded knowledge engineered through the bodies of women of color. This magic is known as (re)presentation, or, the capacity for the body to carry out the imagination in public. It was at her prompting that I began to conceptualize the ministry of doing disruption as embodied praxis. Brown, Carducci, and Kuby (2014) describe disruption as a way of being and doing, suggesting that scholars engaged in the practice do not often feel like they have a choice with respect to the work they do. Our positionalities, and thus our autobiographies, are the raw materials used to inform and shape our work and engagement with the worlds around

us. Brown et al. (2014) conceptualize disruption further as the methods educators will employ to “work against the academy’s collusion of militarization, violence, privatization, and elitism” (p. 6). Much of what is signaled as disruptive practice is context dependent, negotiated by placement within hierarchies and influenced by power and privilege, but it is nonetheless a fluid and dynamic procedure that places at its center transformation and the agreement that “we not reproduce what we have inherited” (p. 13).

*we create culture
architects of worlds
Write into existence*

If more whole, more fierce, more unapologetic, more me, I would insist on resolving the contradiction between reality and my dreams. It was during my rigorous plunge inward, with my mentor, that I came to know that revolutionary dreams are born out of political engagement. If words have hands and feet, as the Haitian proverb *parol gin pie, parol gin zel* suggests, then I would need to be vigilant in my fusing of theory and practice to do more than offer visions of dignity and personhood resurrected from (non)being, and rather transport, compel, and enable others to imagine the very thing they desire.

As the poet, Keoraptse Kgositsile posits, “when the clouds clear/we shall know the color of the sky” (Kelley, 2012, p. 11). Dr. Hill, in an effort to explicate and make clear a pragmatic discourse of imagination required that I script poems, specifically haiku’s, weekly in response to what I was reading and wrestling with. Taking her lead from Barbara Smith, Pat Parker, June Jordan, and many other Black queer feminists alongside and before her, I was offered an opportunity to cease waiting and begin painting for myself what I believed the color of the sky to be, unsuppressed, and without arrest. My art, and my presence work in step and “envision a different way of seeing, and perhaps a different way of feeling” (p.11). This I learned is the most radical type of art—one that goes from the body, to the page, to the stage (Spry, 2011), to public stages unbounded.

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May 5th 2016

My assignment was to develop a final project in the independent study that would capture the essence of my journey throughout the semester. Landing on idea I felt proud of, I sent the following email:

As you know I have been meditating on my final qual project. I landed on an idea that is a conversion of my reflection this semester, readings I have been doing, and how I see myself moving forward in the academy. It is territory I have not yet ventured into, but have witnessed happening and want to explore it for myself. My plan is to write a short autoethnographic script/play on the theme: Black male performance. This script will grapple with who I have trained myself to be, what I am wrestling with, and who I am becoming as an educator and researcher who favors Black feminist perspectives.

By all intents and purposes, I was ready. This performance was about (re) presenting a self that was learning to identify with and advocate for Black feminism beyond the philosophical; it was about stretching my wings, shaking loose from the tight-lipped cocoon that tempered my being; this performance was about validating a standpoint; loving the self; emphasizing agency; embracing a dynamic, contextual, discursive body; and imagining the possibilities for Black men to materialize joy in academic spaces.

I bobbed my head gingerly, my shoulders searched for the rhythm as the soft beat faded in from the speakers.

All eyes on me. Don't stop now.

My chest snapped forward and my arms thrust back. Behind a purposefully white mask, something was alive inside this black casing and was beating its head against the walls.

*When I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions...
I too have only called butterflies beautiful when they are in flight...ignoring the dungeon, made
alter where they laid down their life, forgot that the caterpillar wasn't sure of a future self, just
that the body they were in was not sufficient for emerging springs bellowing from within,
tensions with no happy ending.*

Right wing, now, the left.

*This is my performance. My little secret, the butterfly that didn't know they were beautiful, and
just got comfortable showing wounds in public.
colored with all the bruises and shame, I picked up along the way, the skin I shed left stories on
my vertebrate.*

It is dangerous to assert personhood when you are under the regime of the powerful. There lies in such an act of disobedience the audacious impression that the defiant body is deserving of such an authority of destiny. Hidden under the marked callousness that comes from silencing—the bruises on a spirit, the drag and weight of ambition, rusted from internalized pleas, alas a comfortable ambivalence has become a mechanism for living—lie a prudent and passionate mumbling of awareness, a sentiment of impatience, an eagerness to taste the freshly baked sun just beneath the dawn of freedom. Dormant, yet, remarkably playful we tussle with images we have artfully, and necessarily kept alive, albeit submitted to the archive of legend. In the precarity of dungeons overlooking the sea, the body remembers what the eyes have stopped believing in, and fashions a creativity to keep alive the memory that it should have more.

*refined, I know the workings of illusion, figments, and apparitions
smoke and mirrors, renditions of a life time, wrapped so tight in the optics, cryptic coloration,
I cease to exist, betwixt between two worlds at once, binaries hell bent on keeping me in
contradiction/anxiety and inscribed meanings,
adorned disguises compiling the variance of black masculine, hypnotizing negotiations
I gave in so I didn't have to fight anymore,
it easier to not fight, surrender to the common projections and imaginations; representations
distorted and disfigured, knots that no one has the patience untangle,
call it bow tie camouflage*

The body in its (re) presentation, is always and already at work in the creative business of keeping our imagined selves alive!

*I am being reborn
Into love made of silk and vulnerability, milk, honey and durability*

Public displays of audacious imaginings can be fraught with danger. Bodies lie in the wake across our memory as reminders that to create dangerously (Danticut, 2010) is to resist the hopelessness of dying—spiritually, emotionally, and physically. An alternative to the dissident troublemaker that shapes the unique experience of Black and minoritized bodies, who defer

dreams of humanity, surrendering to the safer dwelling of confirmed docility, is the dangerous non-fiction assertion of what Martin King would call a *sombodiness* (King, 1967).

(I dare you to tap someone on the shoulder and tell em, YOU ARE SOMEBODY)

Falling to my knees, I stripped my bow tie and reached for a towing chain, the likes of which shackle inmates in correctional facilities. Rewatching this part of the performance compels me to ponder the invisible chains (schooling) that are always weighing the body down. I replaced my polyester patterned bow tie, with a menacing 10ft chain that coursed around both arms and rested on my shoulders. Burdened with emotion and inescapability, I tried to stand and could not. This part of the performance was intended to simulate how a vicious history stills and entangles Black and minoritized bodies. As I scanned the audience briefly, I remember their stares, their curiosity, and their tears.

Can they feel my pain? Can they see these real tears? This is no longer a final project or staged production. I did not anticipate the flood of emotions I would feel while doing this performance, but it is assuring me, even right now, that new habits are emerging—a revised aesthetic.

I wore the chain throughout the performance, as if to say this body is permanent, contested text and terrain, which must reckon with the fact that we are always and already implicated in the production of culture, yet can come to embody opposition and purpose under oppressive order. In these troubling times and waters, one strokes forward, not despite pain, but in the midst of it-- Taking deep breathes in and out under the gaze of colleagues and peers-- Choosing to chart a script of pain and joy are all indicators of what it means to limbo in the wake--

To recall, (re)member, and (re)present--

To demand a deliberate claim to life and personhood amidst societal pressures to acquiesce, and feign deference to be seen as acceptable in the eyes of whiteness and to consciously resist the schooling of our bodies to fit a historical idea of respectability.

One does what they can, and ultimately must do, and this is, they show up!

In the rancor of disputing waves, self-defining praxis, the byproduct of reactionary and resemblance aesthetic revisions, one is favoring a position of holistic well-being, which works against a historical backdrop of mischaracterizations and classical appeals to citizenship that mark and render Black and minoritized bodies as inferior and illegible.

In the depths of these pools, as it was in our grandmother's time, one is acquainted with the secrets of "what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit" that Black women created (Walker, 1972, p. 406).

The very person that I am in this moment is intertwined with the development of my artistry, and as such, is a continuous work in progress. The embodied performance that occurred on May 5th, 2016 was an important step toward my unfolding belief that embodiment matters, and yet, as much as that staging required, I had not fully embraced embodiment. I know this because Dr. Hill's comments to me following the performance made clear that I was capable of more. She said, "you still stepped out in that moment unsure... What would Wilson look like if he was sure that embodiment mattered? How would that step out be different" (Hill, 2016, personal communication)?

Excuse me? What did she just say, I scoffed to myself. I put myself [my heart, secret thoughts, emotions, my body, my insecurities] out there in a way I have never done before, only to be told that I was *unsure*. Suffice to say, this pill would not go down easily. Though it would be almost two years before I watched the video from the performance, I never forget what I felt and discovered in that 10-minute performance—strength in embodied vulnerability, ownership in the space I was taking up, a freedom that comes showing oneself to the world.

Pushing play almost two years later, I saw what Dr. Hill was talking about. While assuredly difficult to hear in the moments after the performance, I appreciate the truth of her commentary. Indeed, I was still *unsure that embodiment mattered*. Importantly, Dr. Hill did not say that I didn't have faith in the concept or believe in its possibilities, but the poignancy of her critique focused on it "mattering". I take this to mean, that I did not yet understand embodiment as a way of survival. The difference is in commitment.

For example, I do not just have a desire to breathe; I need to do it—to participate in the respiratory cycle of inhalation and exaltation—to sustain my life. The performance was a picture of someone who thought that embodiment was a good idea, not something that was essential to his knowing and being in the world. I gather more fully in this performance that (re)presentation, that is, the pronouncement of a revised aesthetic, is not an end unto itself; rather, it is a practice of unraveling the knots that dominant worldviews mandate while submerged in waters of reconfiguration. To participate in (re)presentation is to pursue the unfulfilled and always unfinished project of coming to terms with the ever shifting social and political rules of engagement which call for one to “submit and assimilate to the canon or remain outside” (Mignulo, 2015, p. 106)—An iterative process orchestrated by an unlearning of the routine habits that one has been trained into.

I am persuaded.

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The gospel according to Baldwin (1985) reads as follows:

And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen...If we do not dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, recreated from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time (Baldwin, 1985, p. 379)

I am drawn to this passage because of its scorching candor. James [Baldwin] takes good care not to hold readers' hands in this pointed evocation. Interestingly, the same lyrics seem to carry a different meaning for the Negro slaves who first rehearsed it: Baldwin's words embark upon the present and wrestle intently with the fierce urgency of now. While the hope of the passage is similar, the lyrics, as part of a spiritual titled, “I've got a home in that rock” (The Weavers, 1957, track 17) point to and take hold of a future promise. Both expressions are correct and inform each other showing us readers how aesthetic decisions can move across time and space.

I am inclined to believe that “if we dare everything,” by breaching the shoreline (recall), wading in the water ((re)membering), that we will bring to the surface revised aesthetic (re)presentations when we are emptied out—an alternative way of seeing and (re)inhabiting our bodies in the present, providing a picture for the those coming after us to do the same.

he measured off a thousand cubits and then led me through water that was ankle-deep. He measured off another thousand cubits and led me through water that was knee-deep. He

measured off another thousand and led me through water that was up to the waist. He measured off another thousand, but now it was a river that I could not cross, because the water had risen and was deep enough to swim in—a river that no one could cross... then he led me back to the bank of the river. When I arrived there, I saw a great number of trees on each side of the river. He said to me, “This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arabah, where it enters the Dead Sea. When it empties into the sea, the salty water there becomes fresh.

--Ezekiel 47: 3-8

A Provisional Benediction

It was Ida B. Wells, in all of her love and prophetic fire, who said, “I wish I could put my arms around my people and flyaway,” but instead kept her hand to the plow and continued on in her anti-lynching campaign. Similarly, Fannie Lou Hamer comes to mind, specifically her lucid and resolute appeal that said, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” yet determined that she would empower Black personhood with all of the strength she had. Following their lead, I offer you, the reader, no way out, around, under, or over the burning house that Martin King spoke about; this service and sermon is a way through, past the shoreline, into the water. Taking up the directive of Stokely Carmichael, that we “Go home and tell {y}our [children] they are beautiful” (Brown, 2009, xxii), I write and speak these words as outstretched arms, a place of solace, refuge, and restoration in preparation for whatever tortures, indecencies, assaults, and micro-aggressions await tomorrow. Just as the sun rises and scatters darkness, I write and speak these words with hopes that they will flicker between your thumbs and leave your belly restless and inflamed. I close this service in the same way I opened it—by looking back. This retracing surfaced from a need to decipher a rubric for living in the bodies that I [we] hold. In this closure, I offer my reflections upon the processes, key insights, developments, and next directions regarding my work with intellectual histories and student development theory.

I did not set out to create a theory; in my opinion, the desire to do so, or the belief that something can be established that appropriately meets the complexities of realities in Black, is dangerous. Theories, at their core, are the guiding principles that structure how one moves through the world, and as such, they are as infinite as they are personal. In student development theory, educators use them, in most cases, as plotting tool to better understand where students are at a particular time in their life, for the purposes of learning and support. Theories inform the large sum of educative practices facilitated through institutions of higher education and are fundamental tools for the large majority of practitioners who plan and implement them. I say in most cases, because theories can be misused, overgeneralized, and misappropriated. The specificity with which theories are constructed is often lost in the luster of a concept, which seemingly provides answers long waited, if used at all. Theory can be dangerous.

It is with these cautions, fissures, hopes, and caveats that I tell you, that I did not set out to create theory. I had questions about self-authorship, seeding a necessity to understand its roots, vis-à-vis, I wanted to know how it was constructed. In my deconstruction, hidden in plain

sight, I found the axis by which it, and theories of student development have rotated. There was more. Acting as an asteroid belt, floating along as debris that no one took the time to explore, were the remnants of another planet. Another life form. I didn't seek to create theory, I simply chose to stop and look at the remains of what was there, and rebuilt it, piece by piece.

Theory happened. More pointedly, self-definition— an iterative, existential practice, that sees the body as a dynamic entity, with personal and collective manifestations, always mediated through history—surfaced as a happening. Situating the present day Black body in conversation with classical theorists—classical by definition, “relates to the most highly developed stage of an earlier civilization and its culture” (Brown, 2009, xvii)—of Black existentialism, assisted me in bringing attention a theoretical canon that has long been ignored in meaning making literature. This pursuit follows the direction of Alice Walker (1983) who rediscovered Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s, forcing a conversation about the anthropological and literary genius that had literally been covered up. I like Walker, believe that “A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is [my] duty as a witness for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone” (Walker, 1983, p. xx). Self-definition, a theory in the flesh, was pieced together bone by bone, from the thoughts, labor, and genius of Black creatives, as to hold a Black body in a Western, United States context and survive, is to be creative. The limbs of self-definition, which I have outlined as *validating standpoint knowledge, prioritizing self-love, emphasizing agency, foregrounding identity as performative, and dreaming/imagining futures*, limbo in and against the shifting rules in society, across history, demonstrating the jointed agility and creativity of black aesthetics. Ever moving forward, this was recovery work, and the first mapping of its kind in student development theory.

As a steward of this work, I bear some responsibility for how it is disseminated. While I cannot control how this work will be perceived or taken up, I leave instruction here, in print, for those who would consider its use in charting new agendas.

What I Know (and Have Come to Know) or Implications

This is not self-authorship. I began with a critique of self-authorship because of its claim as a holistic student development theory. As the only theory of its kind in the student development theoretical canon, it has proven itself meaningful in educative spaces, and rightfully the starting place for any discussion on holistic meaning making. Early interpretive and deconstructive work left me with critical questions regarding the utility of self-authorship as a

meaning-making construct, especially when considering it through a critical paradigm that deeply considers a sociopolitical context, and through the eyes of Black and minoritized life worlds. Instead of trying to fit a square peg into a round circle, that is, adjust a constructivist framework to meet the demands of a critical paradigm, I went back to the beginning. I chose not to focus explicitly on the contemporaneous context as if it had no beginning. I went backward first. Additionally, instead of looking outside of myself, I engaged in critical auto/ethnographic work with my own archive. With Black feminism as the guiding theoretical framework and methodology, I changed the sample and moved the examination back and forth across time. I broke away from subject-object determinations and dove deeper into the trove that was theory in the flesh, or embodied meaning-making. This is not self-authorship. This is self-definition.

Creativity is essential for survival. Before I started this work, poetics was something I believed in and knew to have meaning. Writing and performing were important mechanisms for how I made sense of the world around me; it is how I gave language to what otherwise remained muted. The research process asked that I make creativity strange. I did that. What came out of it was a new relationship and appreciation for creativity that extends beyond the performance stage out into the public sphere. Creativity became praxis, the matter and sustenance of our great-grandmothers and ancestors. Specifically, I understand that the practice which involves recall, (re)membering, representation, and revision that engenders the excavation of my performance writing, is pertinent, inextricably, to embodied movement upon the world. Both are poetic. There is nuance and negotiation in every decision I make and step that I take; there is a careful, mediated, and simultaneously organic flow to one's engagement with their sociopolitical realities.

It is not so much what one sings, as that one keeps alive, the notion of song- Alice Walker.

I have read Audre Lorde's (1984) essay "*Poetry is not a luxury*" (p. 36) dozens of times, but not until I explored my own poetic archive as a site of examination did I realize creativity's potential as a mechanism for knowing and being in society. The value of creativity continues to be a topic of scrutiny in education, such that programs dedicated to nurturing the creative sensibilities of students are underfunded, if not cut all together. As a viable defense against rationality and the principles of schooling, the essence of creativity, or the creative event—an inventive manifestation formed as a response to a problem—poses a legitimate threat to enterprises that function to reproduce the status quo. Creativity is my y[our] inheritance, the

secret that “has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, spirit...and that pops out in wild and unlikely places” (Walker, 1983, 406). The creative ardor of Black and minoritized life-worlds is the only reason I am able to pursue [this] work; I own them a great debt. Them qualifies the many mentioned in this research, and the many unnamed who have forged pathways for me to follow and extend. In that vein, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde gave volume to, and helped to inspire the insurgency of this research, leaving word of their insurrections in text and spirit. Their creativity has withstood the tests of time, enabling and prodding generations of artists and academics to pursue work that matters, always keeping their personal realities at the center of their agenda. I marvel at their content as much as I do their firmly held desire to create from their core. I reason from their example that creative manifestations [black aesthetics] are uniquely diverse because they flow both from paralleling and divergent core realities. It was while pursuing their life works, that I developed the audacity turned fugitivity to think my own archive worthy of study in an educational and social science research culture that dimly considers autoethnography valuable, let alone rigorous. My decision to center Black creatives, to call them existentialists instead of looking to well-known Black existential scholars, is likely to raise eye-brows, and yet I felt the need to do it anyway.

Black genius is happening. Emerging from my archive, and the multiples reads of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, I am further convinced of the astute, existential, genius of Black and minoritized bodies. Living in the sociopolitical environment that has engulfed the Black experience in the diaspora, I am clearer about the ways in which that genius is reflected contemporaneously in the subtlest of ways. I am left to wonder how educators can move beyond their training to recognize and interpret black aesthetics, and in doing so, the genius of self-definition. Toni Cade Bambara, as recorded in Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) review of Black girlhood, advocates for a confrontation with the normalized complicity that renders Black and minoritized bodies as fundamentally inferior and illegible, suggesting:

But that is of course, what we must demand of teachers who come into contact with our children—that they have to think more clearly and more honestly than they're trained to, too react more authentically to what they experience with the Black student rather than to what they think they know... (Brown, 2009, p. xvi)

The Black body has become a site full of miseducation and the subject of continuous remediation—assimilated, suspended, cuffed. This research is not remediation, but a decoded

series of messages that have long been part of the resilience arsenal for oppressed communities. The problem I was confronted with was not whether or not a Black intellectual tradition existed; the issue lies along the fault lines of rational sensibilities that refuse to see or determinately explain away the genius of Black bodies. Brown (2009) seemingly agrees, advising, "we do not have a language that accurately describes what it means to work with Black girls in a way that is not controlling their bodies and/or producing white, middle-class girl subjectivities"(p. xv). Returning to the student and adult development canon, I bring evidence, in language, of the genius at work.

Self-definition dares to regard Black intellectual traditions as serviceable in academe beyond the humanities. It can be easy to regard theorists of color as creative, and good storytellers with a gift for the imaginary, but educators do not often see them as theorists, who are part of existing knowledge canons. As an artist-scholar, I know this intimately, and offer my own narrative, in conversation with, classical thinkers who are recognized mostly for their *creative* work, instead of trained social scientists (e.g. Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B DuBois) to illustrate and make clear a tradition of theorizing unrecognized due its questioned theoretical legibility. That is, theorizing in the Black intellectual tradition doesn't always follow acceptable social science research protocol or representational form.

In resisting the hailed social science formulas for theorizing, creatives model the self-reflexivity necessary for good inquiry, namely they lift up the personal as political and relevant. A procedure that considers the self and how one interacts with research questions, I argue—and as they demonstrate—may prevent researchers from conducting exploitive agendas that misinterpret and misrepresent the participant's lives, realities, and experiences. Further, my narrative, alongside Baldwin and Lorde's embodied texts draw attention to the aliveness of Black and minoritized bodies away from the "Look, a Negro!" (Fanon, 1967), established idea, a countering of the Western cultural imagination and visual signification, "structural abjection, (non)recognition, and psychic/corporal violence" (Callier, 2018, p. 19), refashioning it as curricula of possibility. This plays out in higher education spaces as the recognition of Black and minoritized bodies as more than things—data points, enrollment figures, publication samples; rather, they are credible sites, complex theorizing entities, always negotiating their presence in dominant spaces.

Embodiment matters. Schooling, the socialization processes that serve to regulate movement in all of its embodied forms, is ever-present:

Why, Black girl, can't you move the way you want to move on a whim? Why, Black girl, can you not think for a moment about yourself, what you want to say, and how you want to say it? Why, Black girl, are you still seeking someone's permission and/or approval to dance? (Brown, 2009, p. 101)

In the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of living stilled and schooled lives, where domination is the order of the day like the girls mentioned in Brown's (2009) dance workshop, I am persuaded of the possibilities of embodiment as praxis. Embodiment, as the fulfillment of a life in touch with the senses, and what I have defined above as the merging of subject-object positions, enacts what Wynter and McKittrick (2015) note as, being human as praxis. Moreover, Dr. Hill in her assessment of my embodied performance was inviting me into an understanding that could mobilize embodiment as a pedagogy for living and praxis beyond the stage, conferring, "that was not it...there is more in you" (Hill, 2018, personal communication). With consideration to embodiment as an organizing principle for moving through the world, or as a curriculum (Callier, 2018; Fanon, 1967; Stanley, 2011; Young, 2010), Gumbs (2014) asks what it means to exist in the marked body that one holds "in a university economy designed to produce somebody individuated" (p. 237)? Citing and siting the Black body as an educative, curricular construct for larger society, begging the underlying question of citizenship that Dr. Hill was moving toward, Callier (2018) puts forth:

Black bodies are held up as warnings to others, providing the nation an education. The educational knowledge which is transmitted through the (mis)treatment of Black bodies, knowledges and culture is one which illustrates a hierarchy of guaranteed rights to life, as well as recourse and recompense for violations of one's rights." (p. 21)

In other words, Dr. Hill was distributing a wake knowledge (Sharpe, 2016) that stated, indeed, embodiment is a Black existential (epistemic and ontological) matter, and it must contend with what it means "to live in the knowledge produced by the impossibility and illegibility of Black citizenship" (Callier, 2018, p. 25). Baldwin, Lorde, my mother, Ebone, Michele, Dr. Hill and the many others not named teach me [us] how and model the labor required to actualize self-defining praxis in the teeth of contention. I hold this to be true, joining together with Baldwin (1963;

1985) who affirms the poetic sensibilities of Black bodies, writing “you come from sturdy peasant stock [a people] who picked cotton and dammed rivers and built railroads and in the teeth of the most terrifying odds achieved an unassailable and monumental dignity” (p. 363).

Uses of Self-Definition

Returning to and extending questions I raised for myself at the outset of this service and sermon: Who can be a Black feminist?; who can embody this consciousness?; who is self-definition for? Unmistakably, self-definition is rooted in the philosophies, scholarship, and existential praxis of Black women and Black feminism(s) with Black and minoritized life-worlds in mind. I am pointed in this articulation for several reasons. As I have outlined in several places throughout this study, higher education broadly, and student development theory in particular, has failed to recognize and rigorously take up the Black intellectual tradition. The manner, in which it has been done, reduces ideas and theorists to sound bites and oft-quoted mantras such as *the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house* (Lorde, 1984). This approach appropriates and severely clips the winged potential of theoretical contributions because they are taken out of context and offer no real explanation for how they theory operates in relation to the personal or public. When ideas are taken up more fully, theorists who are responsible for the ideas, many times Black and/or minoritized, are situated in the periphery and never given ownership of the ideas beyond footnotes. Self-definition is an effort to rectify this tradition of research, calling on educators to move past simple recognitions and toward a meaningful integration of ideas. The historical analysis that weaves inextricably in and throughout my theoretical and methodological approach was purposeful, so as not to reproduce the appropriation I am arguing against. Self-definition, situated in what I call the sociopolitical, is at all times in conversation with history. As I mentioned earlier in the *song of preparation*, any historical exploration must contend with the fact that theory, regardless of its flexibility and openness, is context-specific and the evolution of a particular set of circumstances. Principles and ways of being are nested in social and political moments, hidden agendas, power, privilege, and oppression. Placing the self, or sample, in conversation with appropriate histories communicates a consciousness of the ways ideas and concepts in transit over time are shuffled, rearranged, or fractured. Stated differently, it holds researchers accountable to standing knowledge canons while theorizing about the present and future.

Self-definition, as sociopolitical theorizing in the flesh, is a rescue and recovery project that endeavors to reclaim the body, insist on a right to disinherited space(s), and establish an authority to name that was first stripped under colonialism and has actively been reprimanded through anti-black measures. Plainly, it is a matter of public health. The social science field of epigenetics supports this finding and the necessity for Black and minoritized bodies to pursue self-definition. According to Darren Smith (2017), epigenetics is:

the science of how the external environment affects us at the molecular level by altering gene expression and function that can, in turn, be heritable. It refers to chemical modifications or “tags” that mark specific genes around the intricate DNA complex. These modifications can alter gene expression influencing our biology and function. (para. 2)

Subsequently, the rapidly growing discipline of epigenetics, a blend of neuroscience, biology, and anthropology, is curating significant evidence on how oppression induces changes to the expression of certain genes linked to biological development and the existence of disease. According to Kuzawa and Sweet (2009), “environmental influences contribute to adult health disparities by influencing biological processes and responses across the life cycle, with certain ages or developmental stages particularly sensitive to environmental and social influence” (p. 3). These epigenetic changes can linger for a lifetime and can potentially be transmitted to offspring” (Smith, 2017, para. 5). Dr. Joy DeGruy (2005) calls this multigenerational propagation of trauma, post-traumatic slave syndrome. In conversation with epigenetic evidences of trauma that have deleterious effects on the bodies of Black and minoritized life-worlds, self-definition, begins to lay the groundwork for the possibility of a transgenerational corrective to trauma. More specifically, if gene expression is possible with trauma, then the likelihood of gene expression, or adapted response to histories of terror, specifically chattel slavery, is that much more plausible.

A sociopolitical framing, which I have stated previously, considers one’s existential situation and the ramifications of history, reveals that Western, United States culture and society, has failed, more or less, to address the role of history in producing structural oppression impressed on Black and minoritized bodies, yet Black and minoritized lives have not ceased to exist. I posit, that just as maladaptive gene expressions can be inherited, so, too, is it probable that gene expressions essential to survival can be inherited across generations; self-definition, a

theory premised on the reconnection of the subject-object poles, may act as the body's instinctual, antibiotic in defense of the sustained historical trauma of living in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). Buttressing this notion, Ralph Ellison in his seminal work, *Invisible Man*, notes American society is not likely to become free of systemic oppression, thus it is necessary for Negroes to free themselves by becoming their idea of what a free people should be (Ellison, 1952). Given this precarious situation, minoritized subjects, imbued with living memories of nonbeing, historically have concentrated on the production of subjectivity in the face of objections to it. Within the confines of this citizenship, where postures of acquiescence are habitually understood, Black bodies developed dispositions of livability that were keenly aware of their sociopolitical allotment. Analyzing the history of slave ships, for example, Peter Linebaugh (1982) extols the creation of *Pidgin English* as a critical performance of survival, as the transformation of flesh into cargo/ledger balances could not repress the humming desire for life that those enslaved harbored in them. The impulse for creativity stood in the intended communicative gap managed by European imperialism. He states, "It was a language whose expressive power arose less from its lexical range than from the musical qualities of stress and pitch"; "Pidgin became an instrument, like the drum or the fiddle, of communication among the oppressed: scorned and not easily understood by 'polite' Society" (p. 111). Speaking to these ways of knowing and being, imbricated by social, legal, and political text, Ellison's (1952) invisible protagonist resolves, "when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity. I'll solve the problem" (p. 6). My intergenerational methodological approach to this research study maps the varied and specific strategies [black aesthetics] employed by Black bodies in the wake (Sharpe, 2016). The consistency between the present-day body and historical records is significant. More research is needed to explicate the possible inheritances of self-defining aesthetic sensibilities and gene expression.

The critical role of educators. This does not suggest that educators play no role in student processes of self-definition; resemblance revisions attest to the interpersonal nature of existential praxis. However, resemblance revisions do no account for all revisions, and it's possible that when they do, the impetus for students may not be the result of educators with whom they are attempting to mimic. This study calls upon educators, researchers, and practitioners to reimagine, reassess, and repurpose student development theory. Reimagining theory shakes loose the rationalistic preferences of the subject-principle in favor of theory in the

flesh, or embodied theory. Reassessment invites educators to critique their own assumptions about living in relation to the students they are serving. If the goal of education is in helping students to attain a power to move through the world on their amassed authority, and not simply reproducing contemporary logics of society, then educators must adjust how they understand Black and minoritized life-worlds as constituted by the sociopolitical. This strategy works at dismantling the subtleties of oppression in domains within educator's control, such as their pedagogy, advising, and programming endeavors, and too creates opportunities for them to be reflective about potential institutional changes they can motion for. Additionally, as touch points, educators can assist students in developing a language of self-definition. Again, as this research suggests, Black and minoritized students possess certain aesthetics due to their inherited and lived experiences in the wake (Sharpe, 2016); there is an issue, however, in the lack of language readily available across the general curricula in higher education, or expansive enough when present, to assist students in making sense of their realities.

In order to assist students in developing a language about self-definition, it will be essential for educators to engage Black feminism(s) potential in education, and therefore, Black study (Crawley, 2013). Black feminism has life-giving utility for how non-minoritized lives situate themselves in the world. The invitation exists as it always has, for others like myself who are not Black women, to participate in Black feminist theorization and practice under the stipulation that there is serious engagement with the embodiments of Black women (hooks, 1990). This is less of a call to enlarge sociability, as it is a beckon to sit with Black women's material and textual embodiments in all of their complexity. To do so establishes a different grounding and prism by which to consider one's own meaning making, agency, and, broadly, the fundamental question of self-definition, "how do we exist in the bodies that we hold at this historical moment?" The quality with which educators and researchers participate in this questioning, will have a direct bearing upon the meanings, both made and revised, by which they live.

Unschooling the body. Responding to an initial inquiry of this study: *how has the [Black] body been schooled?*, higher education, perhaps, more than any other formal institution trains students to meet the prevailing standards of culture (Walton, 1969, Woodson, 1933). Baldwin (1979) agrees, declaring, "when Americans talk about progress, they mean how fast I become white...they know perfectly well I can never become white... there is a reason, that no

one wants our children unto this day educated” (Pavlic, 2017, p. 272). Knight Abowitz and Harnish (2006), put forth, “Institutions and social context...play an important determining role in the development, maintenance, and circulation of discourses” (p. 670). “As powerful socializing institutions,” the authors suggest, “schools reproduce civic republican and liberal discourses of citizenship; together, these construct the language, values, and norms of civic life in the United States today” (p. 679). It is the university, for a particular class and subset of Black and minoritized students^x, which becomes the training ground for learning performative acumens representative of citizenship in Western, United States culture. According to Benjamin (2013)

Once the question of the university is posed in these terms it becomes clear that the position of the individual student or academic and thus their relation to the university cannot be thought other than in relation to the broader considerations of human being as such, a concern that would then come to be re-expressed today in terms of citizens and, in the end, citizenship.” (para. 2)

Derrida (2004) calls this the imposition of statehood, whereas, statehood implies an obvious purpose of conquest and administrative domain. State language, thus, is a professional aspiration, and the university seeking to professionalize is seeking to produce certain language. Of course, this is not to suggest that they are solely responsible—whiteness, as way thinking in the world has both philosophical and material consequence, material as in a “violent encounter, an encounter and way of life that is fundamentally about the interdiction, the desired theft, of the capacity to breathe” (Crawley, 2017, p. 6); whiteness as racial socialization; whiteness as the lived acceptance of violence as a way of life, as quotidian, as axiomatic, as built into the fabric of Western reason. Across history, through a myriad of mediums that included literature, records, and scholarship, dominant communities were able to define themselves and convey an idealized portrayal of citizenship, while simultaneously “policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power” (Morrison, 1992, p. 7). More than an interrogation of the omnipresence of whiteness as an organizing function in our explanations of citizenship, is a necessary exploration of cultural appeals to this un-critiqued version of citizenship as a desirable aim.

Toni Morrison’s insights on patterns of Black stigmatization beg the question how, if at all, might educators and civic servants begin to reconstitute citizenship—teach/model alternative versions— in a way that takes up the complicated full narrative of Black bodies in the Western,

United States culture and her/history, and what it has come to signify. This full narrative would include the range of assumptions, significations, and misreadings administered by White theorists and writers. From a Morrisonian perspective, the shadow of the Black presence informs conclusions of citizenship, whether visible or invisible, serving as a mediating force.

As such, if educators, and higher education broadly, are to do more than reproduce the status quo—that is students turned agents of epistemologies anchored in whiteness, which regard citizenship as the possession and upholding of enlightenment reason—it will have to encourage what Crawley (2013) calls, a “training about the aspiration and movement toward becoming a subject, becoming a proper citizen against declarations and ideologies about the incapacity for blacks to be human” (p. 239). Stated differently, educators must engage in Black Study (Crawley, 2017). Black Study is “a general agnosticism that does not dismiss the journey, is a structure of belief, belief in the necessity of new beginning, in other beginnings.” (Crawley, 2013, p. 284); it is at once a brand of knowing and being; an unsettling praxis; a kind of “thinking and desiring more than what we have, knowing we already have enough to produce flourishing in the world” (Crawley, 2017, p. 9). Black Study takes up a posture of *sankofa*, or what it *means to go back and get it*, where “it” indexes the always otherwise possibilities of being produced through and as a consequence of Black life. Black life, the breath and the persistent desire to return to the flesh, to be clear, is an abolitionist politic—always already accepting the fact of living and seeking otherwise possibilities, other worlds. Otherwise underscores the ways alternative strategies already exist, as made clear in this research exhumation. I consider the black aesthetics of self-definition (validating standpoint knowledge, self-love, emphasizing agency, foregrounding performativity, dreaming and imagining) for educators and non-minoritized people as a resistance to normative modes of study (with the assumption educators are too students), constituting a critique of neoliberalism in education.

This is not the popular refrain of best practice and concrete solutions, as routinely denoted by higher education research—Black life and sociality are not afforded the luxury of conclusiveness; instead this is injunctive praxis that presses toward what Moten and Harney (2004) call the role of the critical academic. They offer

[T]o be a critical academic in the university is to be against the university, and to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it, and to institute the negligence of that internal outside, that unassimilated underground, a negligence of it that

is precisely, we must insist, the basis of the professions. The critical academic exists in the space of the university while troubling its frame, resisting its enclosure, breaking down the distinction between the inside and outside of the institution. (p. 105)

This press is *a*institutional, in that it goes against the universities inclination to produce outcomes in one general direction. Self-definition, in this way, is more than an intervention and treatment of holistic existential practice, more than the praxis of black aesthetics, it is too, axiomatic—a method and set of values to critically analyze the psycho-social-political forms that produced the very thing understood as citizenship.

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I am told that my voice changes when I perform spoken word pieces. I don't deny this—it is deeper, fuller, and uncompromisingly urgent. In some ways, it is unlike the sound of my conversational tonality, and yet, it deeply bespeaks the essence self-defining praxis that Black and minoritized living instantiates. The performance of black aesthetics in my poetics are as much a mediation of duress, as they are an enactment of the sensual; an illustration of joy and desire, speaking back against aversion, abandonment, and the outright denigration of the Black body. My poetics [Self-definition] rejects dematerialization, that is, the reduction of theories in the flesh to the realm of the abstract; a remediated sound that is clear, and thereby acceptable, in its lessening—un-textured and light; disconnected from material life (Brown, 2009; Gaunt, 2006). Reprimanded through socialization or by agreement, reduction is common, and in many ways unavoidable, but self-definition as a rescue and recovery project can generate movement forward. I quote Baldwin (1989) at length:

When I say I was trying to *dig back* to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little, I realized that I had acquired so many affections, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn't mine, but white people's image of me.

I realized that I had not always talked—obviously I hadn't always talked—the way I had forced myself to learn how to talk. I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning, in order, just technically as a writer to recreate Negro speech. I realized it was a cadence it was not a question of dropping s's or n's or g's, but a question of the beat. Bessie had the beat. In the icy wilderness, as far removed from Harlem as anything you can imagine, with Bessie and me...(p. 4-5)

My poetics, thus, is not just lyric. It is theory in the flesh; it is material; a movement within, a listening to, feeling of, collective practice, and gathering, as I told Raquel at the start of this service though I did not have the language for it. In all of its possibility, it is but one iteration.

Though self-defining praxis represents a sharp, and ongoing *no*, that is, a declaration of disbelief in the conditions in which Black life worlds are told they must endure, and though it is reminder of life and love, alas, it is not utopic. The Black intellectual canon that this research drinks from is not free from the problems of marginalization. I am not making an argument that I, nor the persons I reference, exist/ed without participating in marginalization. I am aware of how a reading/listening of this research may constitute middle-class potentialities, and masculinist utterances. Self-definition won't bring back Michael Brown; it may not stop officers like Eric Casebolt from violently slamming Black girls like Dajerria Becton to the ground (2015). Despite the radical love ethic that parishioners at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church offered Dylan Roof, he still performed his heinous act, during the benediction no less, when the eyes of those gathered were closed. There may not be a perfect response to the ever-present question: What to do, how to move, in a world—on campus, in the classroom, in corporate and public spaces—that invite such violence. This is the ethical crisis [we] must respond to. This sermon was a response. A response that articulates the movement of bodies in against the terrors that tarry; a response that takes notice of a way of existence, of knowing and being, over and against the range of other possibilities for doing so. In the throes of constraint, with limited possibilities, the black aesthetics of self-definition operate out of—and produce—a different epistemology altogether. By way of benediction, I offer you the same words I offered Raquel:

Close your eyes. Deeply breathe, in. Now slowly, out. Take all of the images, all of the pain, all of the memories of those [Black bodies, voices, and spirits] I just talked about. Huddle them together and place them in your voice box. I assure you, my sister; my brother, you won't sound the same. Now, open your eyes.

Amen.

Appendix I: Glossary of terms

Black aesthetics: I mobilize black aesthetics as the shape-shifting, meaning-making forms that emerge consequent of limbos in the wake (Sharpe, 2016).

Black existentialism: I define Black existentialism as the epistemological and ontological theorizing of Black bodies in the wake (Sharpe, 2016) of crisis.

Body: The body is communicative and possesses the power to theorize possibilities, despite the many conflicting narratives that are often waged against it. In the midst of denigration and historical misconceptions (Sharpe, 2016), the body can resituate, reconfigure, and reimagine dignity and personhood. That is, the body as a dynamic entity, comprised of mental, emotional, social, and spiritual components, has within it, the capacity to make and remake itself and thereby the contexts wherein it is located.

Self-definition: An existential practice, self-definition is a process; a deliberate warring of deconstruction and reconstruction, vis-à-vis, translating needs into demands

Sociopolitical: The sociopolitical, after Sharpe (2016) and Hartman (2007), describes the conditions by which history, in its mental, social, spiritual, legislated, and spatial utterings, is mapped on to the present as the grounds of everyday existence for Black and minoritized bodies.

Schooling: After Dr. Dominique Hill, I define schooling as the social and conditioning strategies that function to reproduce the status quo.

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ⁱ I conceptualize Blackness here as that which is non-white.

ⁱⁱ Winston is a pseudonym for the student I exchanged emails with.

ⁱⁱⁱ This title borrows from Dr. Dominique C. Hill's (2014) article, "A Vulnerable Disclosure: Dangerous Negotiations of Race and Identity in the Classroom."

^{iv} This title is inspired by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) *Between the World and Me*

^v This line is inspired by Lucille Clifton's "won't you celebrate with me."

^{vi} This title is inspired by the work of Christina Sharpe (2016) *On blackness and being*.

^{vii} This title is inspired by the work of Christina Sharpe (2016) *On blackness and being*.

^{viii} I am arguing here, as Cheryl Harris does in her essay *Whiteness as property*, that whiteness meets the theoretical and functional criterion for property, and in doing so, governs who has sociopolitical power.

^{ix} The flier from the public forum read as follows: In the wake of the killing of Michael Brown and the continued uprisings in Ferguson as well as others unpublicized, the purpose of this town hall is to examine the creative potential of this moment. Structured as a working session, this event intends to offer insights into this particular moment in the United States, while brainstorming what we (as individuals within higher education) can do to actively engage in and shape this moment.

^x David Blacker's (2013) text, *The Falling Rate of Learning and the Neoliberal Endgame*, describes the contemporary project of neo-liberalism and its erosive makeup. Blacker describes the concept of "educational eliminationism, whereby increasing segments of the population are morally written off as no longer exploitable and hence irrelevant to capital accumulation" (p. 12). Within this framework, minoritized bodies are read to serve no functional purpose in the societal order outside of exploitation, and thus relinquish their right to be educated, granted full citizenship, or governed in perpetuity. This *newer* kind of non-recognition (e.g., Flint, Michigan, prison industrial complex) as Blacker submits, pivots on "not merely reducing people to means but simply wishing them away and ignoring them altogether; in this way at the level of concern for the Other, we are transitioning from *abuse* to *neglect*" (p. 111). Tolerable, yet unstated, this general philosophy of democratic governance is an extension of the exploitive practices initiated generations ago.