Centering our liberating voice: Black women's contemplative criticality

Centering Our Liberatory Voice: Black Women's Contemplative Criticality

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Abstract

This article is a creative collaboration, a dialogue between a professor and a doctoral student who dismantle power dynamics in the academy, demonstrating the "liberatory voice" (hooks, 1989, p. 29) through (a collective chorus of Black Womens' contemplative criticality (Canon, 2021; Holmes, 2017; Williams, 2022) and ART, or activism, research, and teaching (Tyson, 2001). Our work, rooted in the SOUL (soulfulness-oriented, unitive, and liberatory) framework (Harrell, 2018), makes a case for re-imaging the intersection of criticality and contemplative pedagogy by centering the historical multi-modality approach to contemplative practices evident in Black Women's cultural heritage tradition and pedagogy. In our creative collaboration, we use letter writing to express our journey within Black Women's onto-epistemology that results in memoirs, life writings (Evans, 2022). Traditional boundaries in the academy are disrupted by exploring our roots, soulful practices, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and culturally relevant and sustaining mentorship in teacher education. The creative collaboration results in a counter-narrative as a method (Milner & Howard, 2013) to develop an integrative, and culturally sustaining (Paris & Aims, 2017) approach to critical contemplative pedagogy (Kaufman, 2017) in teacher education, based on Black Women Educators (BWEs) pedagogy of liberation (spirituality and social justice) in higher education.

Keywords: *Black Women, critical contemplative pedagogy, memoirs, liberation, soulfulness*

The most important part of our work-the work of liberation-demands of us that we make a new language, that we create the oppositional discourse, the liberatory voice.
-bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*

This work, our work as Black Women, expounds upon the dearth of scholarship on pedagogical liberation, freedom, and creativity developed while navigating systemic issues in higher education. Our work centers the collective voice of those whose work is informed by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), which acknowledges our cultural heritage and gender as not mutually exclusive experiences. Utilizing a liberatory voice, an oppositional discourse to normative language, we purposefully capitalize both terms, Black Women (Wilson, Acuff, & Kraehe, 2022). Our intention is to recognize and respect the legacy of Black Women who traverse the academy to make an indelible impact on society through knowledge creation. Such Black Women as bell hooks, Cynthia Dillard, and Angela Davis, to name only a few, are central to our work. Within their theorization

or pedagogical practices, they demonstrate an intersectional pedagogy weaving spirituality (contemplative practice) with critical pedagogy. The collective voice becomes a creation of a new language, a counter-narrative, that we will call Black Women's contemplative criticality (hooks, 1994, 2003b, 2009; Dillard, 2022; Davis, 1983). It is emerging out of critical contemplative pedagogy (Kaufman, 2017) and in some cases was a forerunner to it. Therefore, we will explore the differences and similarities between the two.

Another intention for this article is to advocate for Black Women's nuanced and unacknowledged contributions to the emergence of critical contemplative pedagogy (Kaufman, 2017). The emerging philosophy of critical contemplative pedagogy is the merger of two seemingly opposing schools of thought: an outer-directed pedagogy focused on social change, the critical, and the inner-directed pedagogy concentrates on inner peace and wholism, the contemplative (Kaufman, 2017). Within the last ten years, the two schools of thought were merged and adopted as a pedagogical approach in adult learning and higher education (Krikorian, 2020). Teacher preparation programs socialize educators into critical pedagogy, and educators interested in contemplative pedagogy are often alone on a personal journey that ultimately improves professional practice. Low (2023) offers the assessment that the academy is slowly swinging in the direction of intersectionality, but unpacks how Black Women, specifically bell hooks, who theorized from a Christian-Buddhist perspective, are often left out of the conversation on contemplative pedagogy unless their work is seen through a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000) lens.

Black Women's Pedagogical Epistemology

Black Women have written memoirs, research articles, and books, and designed curriculums around their onto-epistemology. This is reflected in the educational theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins, 1990) and endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000). While studying Black Women's educational theories and pedagogical approach we noticed Black Women's thoughts are contemplative because our work is rooted in an expansive and inclusive experience of spirituality (liberation, healing, wholism, etc.) in education (hooks, 1994; Dillard, 2022; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Harrell, 2018; Tinker Sachs, 2021). The African American educational experience has a unique tradition of contemplative practices from the Civil Rights era of singing freedom songs while fighting to end school segregation to the creative arts embedded within the Black Lives Matter movement.

The current social and emotional k-12 curriculums center mindfulness and meditation practices rooted in secularized Tibetan Buddhism (Low, 2023) utilizing modalities such as sitting, walking, eating and stillness. In the groundbreaking article, "Soulfulness as an Orientation to Contemplative Practice: Culture, Liberation, and Mindfulness Awareness" psychologist and practitioner Dr. Shelly Harrell (2018) offers an in-depth framework from an African American orientation to contemplative practice rooted in the soul work of writer, educator, and social critic bell hooks (hooks, 2003a). The SOUL (soulfulness-oriented, unitive, and liberatory) approach explores interconnectedness, creativity, resilience, and the struggle for liberation to overcome historical and ongoing oppression expressed through action. This can mean that Black Girls arrive at school with years of practice in the contemplative art of soulfulness through dance, activism, time in nature, deep listening, and storytelling (Tinker Sachs, 2023).

Similar to a secularized Tibetan Buddhist approach, the SOUL practices extend to everyday activities such as cooking. Historically, Black Women infused Black culture into cooking, making it the culinary art of soul food. Cooking is a practice that requires mindfulness and cooking

soul food with family becomes an act of collective communing that enriches our souls and transforms teaching and learning. The practices and principles of secularized Tibetan Buddhism are similar to the SOUL approach, but one nuanced difference is the interconnection between criticality and contemplation that exist within soulfulness. Low (2023) cites bell hooks as an example of someone whose works lives within an "epistemological gray zone," because her work is at the intersection of critical and contemplative pedagogy. Her work has always reflected a Christian-Buddhist perspective, but she was only recently included as an engaged Buddhist teacher (p.89). Low believes hooks' work is "symptomatic of the disciplinary and epistemological silos that bedevil modern scholarly thought" (Low, p.89). Low also adds the lack of cross disciplinary conversations between the critical scholars and contemplative scholars may have contributed to the "double logic of exclusion" of bell hooks in the field of contemplative practices in education (Low, p.89).

Black Women's pedagogical approaches are often only subsumed under critical pedagogy, but we offer a more nuanced assessment of the onto-epistemology of Black Women (Hill Collins, 1990; Low, 2023). Therefore, our theoretical framework is based on the SOUL approach to contemplative practices which includes Black Women's conceptualization of criticality, "the capacity to read, write, and think to understand power, privilege, social justice, and oppression, particularly for populations historically marginalized in the world" (Muhammad, 2020, p.117). As the emerging field of critical contemplative pedagogy charts a paradigm shift in teacher education, we must center the liberatory voice of Black Women's contemplative criticality to disrupt traditional ways of knowing and being in higher education. The SOUL approach to contemplative practices integrates spirituality, psychology, and culture, which is not separate from the critical understanding of our place in the world. Black Women's contemplative criticality is our counternarrative. We are creating an "oppositional discourse," the liberatory voice to talk back to the Eurocentric narrative that prescribes a perspective of contemplative practice rooted in Tibetan Buddhism. Black Women's soulfulness is an integrative approach that works in tandem with secularized Buddhism in education because it is expansive enough to recognize multiple and creative healing modalities within its framework.

The Counter-Narrative: Centering Our Liberatory Voice

A counter narrative, in the way hooks (1989) describes it, is an optional discourse that leads to humanity's collective liberation from oppression. hooks calls this action of changing the narrative as finding the liberatory voice, a process that impacts the oppressed to recover the self through spirituality and social justice. When we use the oppositional discourse, we are countering/opposing/pushing back on the dominance of hegemony in mainstream discourse. We are therefore centering the liberatory voice in opposition to *The White Racial Frame* (Feagin, 2020) that has historically marginalized the theories and practices of Black Women. Several other authors have discussed the liberatory voice as counter-framing (Baker & Howard, 2021; Kretschmar & Ziechner, 2016), countermoves (Baker & Howard, 2021; Coles & Stanley, 2021; Eagle Shield et al., 2021) or a counter-narrative (Acosta, 2018; Coles & Stanley, 2021; Morris, 2004). We also use the counter-narrative as a method to disrupt traditional epistemologies of teacher education and shift the paradigm from an individualistic to a collectivistic worldview that values intersectionality.

Black Women write, teach, and lead from a collective disposition and have contributed to the academy's broad worldviews through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016), Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins, 1990), and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

and Teaching (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995) to name only a few different approaches to teaching. Within a traditional teacher education paradigm, Black Women's pedagogy would be defined as either-or, categorized as critical or contemplative. Still, it is recognized as less of the latter due to the current trends of categorizing terms as either/or rather than both/and, meaning multiple perspectives can exist at once (Low, 2023, p.90).

Abolitionist teacher educator Dr. Bettina Love's (2019) book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive,* is a counter-narrative that contributes to the liberatory voice that reflects both wholeness and criticality. Describing the interconnectedness of students, teachers, and community members mental health, Love states, "Educators, students, and parents need to be on a path to wellness together for schools to be sites of healing" (Love, 2019, p. 160). Love (2019) echoes the sentiment of bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (hooks, 1994), a book every teacher and educator should study. Disrupting traditional epistemologies in education is teaching "in a manner that respects and cares for the souls" of students and teachers (hooks, 1994, p.13). To do so will take a conscious and collective effort to recognize and reference the names and work of Black Women who have contributed to the liberatory voice writing at the intersection of spirituality and social justice in education.

Writing to Save Our Lives

The goal of Black Women's studies is to save Black Women's lives.
-Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, *Flat-footed Truths*

Life writing is a soulful practice utilized by Black Women writers from diverse walks of life to cultivate a "shared knowledge creation" (Evans, 2021a, p.101). In this article, we, two Black Women, explore our diverse backgrounds and intergenerational and international experiences of contemplative criticality in the context of a forthcoming dissertation. The first author, a doctoral student, is an emerging scholar in teacher education. Her dissertation centers on Black Women's well-being and critical contemplative studies in higher education. The second author, the professor, is the doctoral student's dissertation committee chair whose work centers on language and literacy education and critical, culturally responsive, decolonizing, and dialogic pedagogies. Letters addressed to one another provide personal and collective memoirs that contribute to curricular innovations in the cultivation of Black Women's contemplative criticality while grappling with discourses around wellness and healing in teacher education, professional development, and deconstructing traditional interpersonal power dynamics in the academy. The letters are the doctoral student's and professor's reflections on their personal and professional lives. Collectively, we demonstrate our ability to create ART (activism, research and teaching) (Tyson, 2001) using letters to illustrate Black Women's contributions to the roots and growth of critical contemplative pedagogy and liberatory pedagogy. Our purpose is to map the current paradigm shift toward healing education and to broaden the lens of critical contemplative pedagogy to recognize Black Women's contributions to the field.

Krikorian (2020) reflects on the Western traditions of education rooted in "objectivity, materialism, and individualism" (p.262) that stems from the White racial frame (Feagin, 2013) and suggests that a critical contemplative "narrative of subjectivity" (p.261) can disrupt it. A "narrative of subjectivity" is one way we demonstrate the liberatory voice, the oppositional discourse and the counter-narrative. Our work aligns with the ways Black Women approach theorization through

memoir, such as bell hooks (1994), Cynthia Dillard's spirituality in education (2022), and Stephanie Y. Evans' historical wellness and healing practices (2021a, 2021b). The second element within our narrative is the concept of writing letters and memoirs. We are aligned with the work of Dr. Maya Angelou (2009). Her book *Letter to My Daughter* inspired Evans' (2022) *Letters to Our Daughters: Black Women's Memoirs as Epistles of Human Rights, Healing and Inner Peace* that encourages "readers to look back for wisdom, look inward for strength, and look forward for courage" (Evans, 2022, p. 100). Our epistles are aligned with the life writings of Black Women's intellectual history (Evans, 2022) as we reflect on our social, cultural, and political identities and contributions to critical contemplative pedagogy, as we build upon the current knowledge of Kaufman (2017) and Krikorian (2020) and apply futurity toward theorizing liberatory practices in higher education (Wilson, Acuff, & Kraehe, 2022).

In this way, our letter writing represents a liberatory practice in academe. The letters are not the traditional esoteric essays. Letters appeal to the personal and speak to the heart. They help us to deconstruct power dynamics through vulnerability and reimagine the teacher vs. the student roles. Letters bring a liberatory spirituality to our work that is mutually satisfying and beneficial to our individual and collective growth and professional development. The liberatory teacher or professor needs to become the learner by supporting the growth and development of the learner, such as asking critical questions, examining reasoning and hypotheses, drawing out connections within and across disciplines, analyzing, and offering encouragement when needed. In a liberatory spiritual space, we do not operate with fixed notions of how to be other than our authentic selves. We respect each other's gifts and capacities, ask questions when needed, and provide helpful answers to the tasks. If we do not know something, we seek the answers. Our numerous conversations on the dissertation and related themes resulted in this article's writing and the creation of our epistles during video conferences.

The Letters: The ART of the Liberatory Voice

In our experiences as Black Women in different places on our academic journeys, we found the academy to be a cold and sterile environment that leads to the burial of the soul and the demise of the spirit. The competitive individuality of striving for the next promotion or the next award and the quest for recognition online, as in the number of citations and downloads, all lead to the demise of the soul and the eventual killing of the spirit (Williams, 1987; Love, 2019, p. 38). Because we strive to unearth the soul and resurrect the spirit in education, we found the writing of this article a beautiful liberation of our being! Our epistles speak to our spirits, which sustain us and help us be our authentic, soulful, spiritual selves, just as we want. This is what we came from in our upbringing and what the academy needs: people who are true to themselves and joyful in their own skin. In our dark chocolate skins, we aspire to bring contemplative, soulful, and critical spiritual praxis to our learning, workplaces, and the academy. We cannot be our best selves if we do not challenge sterility and disrupt the soul and spirit-killing practices (Smith, 1990; Young & Hines, 2018) that alienate and destroy the joy in each of us.

Unearthing joy (Muhammad, 2023) is a creative process that allows for the epistles to become ART (activism, research and teaching) (Tyson, 2001) in both senses of the term. The creative collaborative process of constructing our letters is somewhat like the art of a play. It is like a script with two acts consisting of four scenes. Each scene is one letter addressed to *professor* and the second letter addressed to *student* based on four themes reflective of four discussions about Black Women's contemplative criticality in higher education. The script comes alive when actors act out

each letter like a monologue on a stage. The epistles are also ART much like the demonstrations of Civil Rights during sit-ins in the 1960s and the global wide Black Lives Matter marches taking place at the height of the 2020 pandemic. Our writing is also narrative, in that each letter serves as a standalone narrative, but read collectively becomes a story about liberation in education. In these ways, our work is abstract and avant garde. Critical scholar Darder's (2011) *Dissent Voice* is quoted below as a literary structure that represents the overarching narrative. We revisit aspects of the quote as epigraph at the beginning of each set of epistles to guide the narrative:

> There is no doubt that great moral courage is required to stand up against educational policies and practices that betray oppressed communities rendering them disposable. To transform such conditions within schools and society, we need a revolutionary pedagogy solidly committed to the unfettering of the body, through embracing the liberation of our humanity as sensual, thinking, knowing, and feeling subjects of history. This entails rewriting the body into our understanding of critical praxis, by calling forth the establishment of new conditions for academic formation (p. 358)

A sentence or phrase from Darder's quote will frame the letters within the context of criticality and provide a contemplative practice of returning back to a point of focus, cultivating mindfulness as it is read. The narrative is also a demonstration of the contemplative practice of storytelling, memoir, or life writing. The concepts of spirituality and social justice are intertwined as themes across all of the letters.

Within each set of epistles is a rhythmic call and response dialogue between a professor and doctoral student that transpires naturally. We decided to use the generic titles *professor* and *student* to offer others an opportunity to imagine themselves in our position while grappling with their own vulnerability and positionality in the academy. The first epistle, "Cotton Fields and Contemplative Practice," developed during our first virtual meeting to generate our life writings on contemplative criticality. It explores our intersectional lens, our cultural roots and a range of soulful practices, such as resting, remembering, and recalling our ancestry. The second epistle, "Criticality in Context," was developed during our second virtual meeting as we explored the impact of race, class, gender, and power on our professional endeavors. The subsequent epistles, "Christianity, Culture and Church Service" and "Centering Black Women's Pedagogy in Teacher Education," were generated through online discussion on our faith-based experiences and discuss how Black Women's contemplative criticality will impact our current and future work in the academy. Each letter details at least one soulful practice such as movement, music or meditation.

ACT ONE

The First Epistle: Cotton Fields and Contemplative Practice

There is no doubt that great moral courage is required to stand up against educational policies and practices that betray oppressed communities rendering them disposable.
-Darder, 2011, p. 358

Dear Professor,

My maternal great-great-great grandmother Susan was a wise woman who purchased twenty-six acres of farmland in Sampson County, North Carolina, in 1911 (Owens, 2019). Upon her death, she willed 2.25 to 5.9 acres to her seven children, who grew up working the farmland. My grandmother, Joyce, raised her children in a house on the land across a two-lane highway where there was a cotton field. As a teenager, I began a journey toward understanding our family history. I became curious about the cotton in the field. Without permission, one day, while visiting my grandmother, I ran across the two-lane highway and into the cotton field to understand what our ancestors had experienced in the cotton field. I picked a cotton ball, rolled it around between my fingers, and remembered feeling the seed in the center of the cotton ball. I placed the piece of history in my pocket and ran across the highway before my mother or sister came looking for me. When I returned home to Kentucky, I put the cotton ball in a jewelry box that had belonged to my grandmother. Twenty-two years later, I opened the jewelry box drawer I had tapped to keep the contents secure. I was reminded of the piece of history I had treasured all these years when I recognized the cotton field in the photo you had cast behind you on our video call of the cotton fields of Georgia.

For many of us, the cotton field elicits an array of emotions. Still, over the years, I have come to terms with aspects of what our ancestors endured through my personal and professional contemplative practice, which I call my healing practice. My healing practice began as a child learning to pray before bed and over my meals and, at a very young age, connecting to anything in nature: trees, water, mountains, animals, etc. From the age of thirteen, I began attending Baptist church service in the Black community, where raising my cultural and spiritual consciousness blessed me spiritually, culturally, and intellectually. This experience led me to believe divinity looked like me. My early childhood was a mixture of singing spirituals on Sundays and wandering in the backwoods of rural Kentucky, my imagination running wild and free. I also enjoyed the healing I received, dancing to soul music and baking goodies with my mother and older sister.

My childhood dream of becoming an actress was realized when I was accepted into an inner-city youth performing arts school for drama. From the intense training in theatre arts, my healing practices expanded to include formal training in meditation, yoga, and tai chi. As a youth, I did not understand the benefit of my holistic experience grounded in African American "soulfulness" and formal contemplative practice, each within a unique context of culture and worldview (Harrell, 2018). I also did not understand how the formal training in meditation and yoga would become foundational to my experience as a teacher and educational leader. I did not choose the teaching profession, but instead, I answered a spiritual calling that transformed my perspective on life and, eventually, my perception of education.

While completing my teaching internship in a Master of Art in Teaching program, I was inclined to experiment with implementing healing practices in the classroom. My entire high school experience was an embodiment practice through dance, mindful movement, art, drama, singing, etc., making me a better student. Therefore, as a preservice teacher, I strongly advocated for mindfulness meditation in my classroom. While training to become a teacher, a classmate recommended I read Daniel Rhetshaffen's (2014) *The Way of Mindful Education.* This book changed my pedagogy and transformed a personal practice into a personal professional practice. From that point, there was no way to see

them as separate based on the understanding that to teach mindfulness, one must first have a personal practice (Rhetshaffen, 2014). As a preservice teacher, I was fortunate that my mentor teacher encouraged my exploration of mindfulness in the classroom. As a third-grade teacher after graduation, I continued integrating healing practices into the elementary curriculum through drama, music, restorative circles, brain-based learning, reading, writing, and studying history. Now, as a teacher educator, I know there is no way I can teach without my healing practices.

Dear Doctoral Student,

After our meeting today, where we discussed numerous themes, starting with the background on my Webex account of the cotton fields of Georgia, I thought I knew very little of the conceptualizations of "contemplative practices." What does this look like? However, I believe I have some contemplative practices ingrained in me since early childhood. I was a quiet and contemplative girl child. The word contemplating was used frequently to ask what I was thinking about. I loved reading. As my mother's only girl, I was not allowed to play in the streets and ride bicycles like my two brothers. I was not bothered by this at all. I loved my books, I loved reading, and I loved writing poetry. I loved the numerous trees that crisscrossed our big yard, and I loved sitting by the open window and watching the rain come down. Being close to nature drew me into a thoughtful mood.

I climbed trees to read my books from the treetops, and if I were inside and it began raining, I would begin to draw my coconut trees and the big green leaves of the evergreen growing on the palm tree with red berries outside. This was the extent of my drawing, but it made me happy as I contemplated things. My resting contemplation was lying on the bed, staring at the trees through the open window while my mother ironed and sang. My mother had a solid, powerful alto voice, and her heart-wrenching laments evoked in the hymn "Jerusalem the Golden" still make me cry whenever we sing this song in church. I sensed my mother's unknown struggles and sorrows when she sang about Jerusalem, another place not in this lifetime. It was a catharsis for her, and singing became a catharsis for me. Ours was a singing family. My brothers, Uncle Harold, Uncle Abe, and I sang in our school choruses and/or church choir at one time or another.

As a child of eleven, my mother took me to join the adult choir. Under the direction of Mr. Theodore Richardson and with the majestic playing of the organ by Mr. Cyril Baker, several of us young girls would grow to become adults in the choir. One of us is still a member of that same choir. I remained in this choir for at least twenty years, going to choir practice every Friday evening without fail. What I learned in the choir was the deep spiritual connection that anchored me for life to the Catholic Christian faith and Biblical precepts. Singing for me dug into the deep recesses of my being. This was particularly true of Negro spirituals such as *Deep River* and *Walk Together Children* that put a fire in my heart and soul. But what took me to the spiritual heights of heaven with a deep reverence for holiness and the sacred was the first time I heard our Bahamian tenor, Chris Richardson, sing "Panis Angelicus (Bread of the Angels)" by Saint Thomas Aquinas and the first time a young Black Bahamian priest sang, "God is Love and he who abides in love, abides in God and God in him." I can still feel Father Moss's singing deep inside my soul. Singing, for me, is a contemplative practice. I still sing in church and instill a love for the sacred in the children I teach in our children's choir. I taught them the hymn , "God is Love," just as Father Moss taught me. I also taught them "This Little Light of Mine," just as I taught the

children in my Brownies and Girl Guides because their lights must never fade, even through the storms of life (Tinker Sachs, forthcoming).

The Second Epistle: Criticality in Context

To transform such conditions within schools and society,
we need a revolutionary pedagogy.
-Darder, 2011, p. 358

Dear Professor,

I learned about my Blackness at an early age. Though my older sister and I have the same mother and father, we are different hues. The differences in our complexion cause onlookers confusion. My mother mitigated the situation with wisdom, teaching her young daughters the basics of genetics at the tender ages of three (me) and six (my sister). She transferred her criticality through compassionate determination to teach us the truth of who we are rather than allow society to dictate our identities. My Blackness is something I have always been proud of, though my complexion is fair, and my hair texture when in certain hairstyles, is deemed acceptable by societal norms. I do not equate my cultural identity and heritage with stereotypes of what a Black woman is supposed to be, the Mammy, Sapphire, or Jezebel caricatures that have harmed my effectiveness as a teacher and leader (Acosta, 2019). I am defined by my authentic inner experience, first and foremost. I have a critical consciousness of how race, class, and gender impact how others see and treat me (Davis, 1983). My criticality is necessary for mitigating the MESS (mental, emotional, spiritual, and social stress) I have encountered as a student, specifically in higher educational spaces (Duff, 2022). My Blackness is an amalgamation of my essence and my daily experiences.

Why does my Blackness only equate to critical pedagogies and practices in education? When can I be fully human in all my complexities? I remember struggling as a first-year teacher because I was culturally connected to my students but not aware of how I was complicit in the school-to-prison pipeline (Love, 2019). The dissonance between my nature and duties caused my mind, body, and heart to be conflicted, always in chaos. I was losing myself. I was losing my Blackness—a sense of selfhood I had cultivated within the context of faith and spirituality. At my home church in Louisville, KY, I grew up immersed in a rich culture of faith, spirituality, and Blackness. When I moved to Georgia, I left the comfort of my community, which provided a base to return to during adversity. Black Women have theorized the idea of a healing community as a homeplace or space as a healing practice (hooks, 1990; Bryant-Davis, 2022). Therefore, one of the first things I did when I moved from Louisville to Atlanta was join a church where I could continue to nurture my cultural identity and contemplative ways of knowing and being for my well-being.

My framework for understanding the world includes global teaching experiences in Africa, China, and India. These memories are near and dear to my heart because, as a young teacher, I cultivated my teaching identity there. Each immersive experience changed how I viewed myself and my pedagogy. As I began studying Black Women's theories on well-being for my dissertation, I understood my teaching philosophy as an intertwining of contemplative criticality developed through encounters with understanding how power, privilege, racism, and white supremacy impacted my well-being. Traveling abroad and

perceiving the world through the lens of Black Women broadened my capacity for criticality in context.

On my first international trip, I taught English as a Second Language (ESOL) for a month during a summer program in Shaoguan, China. I stayed in Hong Kong for a week at the program's culmination. I know that God kept me there, and this was my first profound spiritual awakening. My first mission trip to Uganda, Africa, with my church in Atlanta, was the first time I led an international workshop for teachers. My first international guest speaking engagement was the launch of Emory University's Center for Cognitive Science and Compassion-Based Ethics' SEE (Social Emotional and Ethical) Learning curriculum. I had the honor of co-developing the curriculum in the context of an after-school program in my final year as a classroom teacher. Each time I traveled abroad, I shared my contemplative criticality through my pedagogical approach to teaching and learning.

Dear Doctoral Student,

I am still thinking about "contemplation." I draw not only on Black Women who have influenced me but also on the life and activist work of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Reverend Desmond Tutu. I have visited the places they have been in Atlanta, India, and Johannesburg. I also think of the Jesuit priests in Hong Kong who greatly supported my spiritual development and Father Richard Rohr at the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) in New Mexico. These men from different backgrounds and spiritualities were all inspirational because they demanded action against oppressive forces and advocated for justice at the local and global levels. I met Father Rohr at the CAC and have been reading his works and listening to his talks. He states that "Contemplation is not avoidance of a problem, but a daily merging with the problem, and finding its full resolution" (Rohr, 2006; p. 18) and that it, "quite simply, is meeting reality in its most simple, immediate, and contradictory form. It is the resolving of those immense contradictions that characterize the mystics, the saints, the prophets, and all those who pray" (Rohr, 2006; p. 28). The result is "the third something" (Rohr, 2006, p. 28). I feel like I am just on the periphery of a contemplative life and felt inspired to write the following poem.

Contemplation – The First Gaze
Can you see them?
Calling letters
Always naming
Big letters
Small letters
Can you see them?
And writing letters
Short letters
Long letters
From near and far
Receiving letters
With money in them
To buy coffee or tea
Personal letters

Writing letters to describe my life
To be near while far away
Professional letters
To build community,
Get a job,
Evaluate
Writing emails
Short and succinct emails
Long storied emails
Impersonal, sterile emails
Abrupt no-conversation emails
Writing poems
Short poems
Long poems
Starting with letters, then words, then phrases, then sentences
Always my constant
Always my presence
Always my dreams
Always
Contemplatin' contemplation, sitting on the steps
Thinking
Walking to the library
Thinking about all that you see along the way
Reading books and dreaming
Of a different life
Walking to my father
Thinking by myself
Sitting, waiting alone
Waiting quietly for what?
Listening
Answering melancholia
Watching at the graveside
Thinking and studying
To pass the exams
Studying and creating
To be a teacher
Walking to become a teacher in Nassau
Walking in Toronto to school
Walking in Hong Kong after school
Walking in Atlanta to move away from school
Thinking and dreaming
Along the way.

ACT TWO

The Third Epistle: Christianity, Culture, and Church Service

We need a revolutionary pedagogy solidly committed to t
he unfettering of the body, through embracing the liberation
of our humanity as sensual, thinking, knowing,
and feeling subjects of history.
-Darder, 2011, p. 358

Dear Professor,

I go to The Rock of my faith (Psalms 18:2) when my heart is overwhelmed. I feel life is happening right now, and I'm along for the ride. I work full-time as a teacher educator, writing curriculum for educator professional development, facilitating professional learning, and working on my Ph.D. in the evening. Sometimes, I isolate myself from family and friends to focus on cultivating a deep connection to my research and writing. To slow myself down and enjoy living life, I walk in nature, journal, stretch, dance, cook, and listen to soul music. This past July, I felt led to return to singing in the church choir. As a youth, I sang in the choir and used my talents to glorify God through drama and dance ministry. As an adult navigating oppression in society and at work, I developed a strong stance on fighting the good fight of faith in all areas of my life. I publicly accepted my call to minister the Word of God in April. Since then, I have become more active in church ministry.

Though it is a time commitment, on top of work and school, singing in the choir feeds my soul and keeps me connected to the local community. When I notice the signs of burnout, my thoughts are dragging, my body is exhausted, and the quality of my work is waning, I turn to gospel music to lift my spirits. I also turn to Black Women theologians like Barbara Holmes and Katie Cannon, whose work echoes this idea of contemplative criticality. "Lived theology is a contextual and dialogical process that is always enhanced by a responsive and collegial community" (Holmes, 2017, p.xvi). There is no way I can finish writing a dissertation without my faith, my family, and fellowshipping with like-minded individuals like my classmates, colleagues, and church community members.

The university is supposed to represent the vastness of the universe, but in the past, it has been a place of hurt and harm for me (Duff, 2022). My faith in the Lord has helped me to mitigate my experiences and find healing through the trials and tribulations of obtaining a Ph.D. Last year was a challenging year for my family. In 2022, my family lost my grandfather, stepfather, and brother-in-law within a short time. Death has a way of changing you without your permission. I grinded through my grief for months to complete assignments, attend funerals, and meet the demands of everyday life. The sense of belonging to a spiritual community helped to center me. Holmes (2017) states that "centered belonging" is "located in the contemplative spiritual legacy of Africana people" (p.xxii). I agree. I think there is an interconnection between my healing practice, faith, and culture. I can feel it, the centered belonging, during praise and worship at church among Black folks. It is the same feeling I aim to bring to teacher education and professional learning as I write and research for my dissertation on Black Women's well-being practices in higher education. This sense of belonging is also an element of Black Women's contemplative criticality.

Dear Doctoral Student,

We cannot live in unfettered joy because of the hierarchal, patriarchal, racist structures that question our capabilities as Black Women, Black Transnational Women. When our capacities are not recognized and appreciated, when our assets are not valued and are repeatedly bashed and diminished by the microaggressions we receive – what saves you? What carries you? The unspeakable joy of your faith and spiritual traditions. Before I left home to study, my church held a special send-off mass for me. Many people were there, and I felt the Holy Spirit in my soul as my heart was lifted by so many parishioners saying farewell and good luck. My church celebrated my contributions as a long, long-serving choir member, Brownie, Guide and Ranger leader, Sunday School leader, and Youth group leader to our community and sent me off in faith, service, and love of God. I could only be strong on the unknown journey in a place where no one knew me. In the Bahamas, I did a lot of walking to visit family members, and I took long walks to and from school in Canada to sustain my spirit. In Hong Kong, I got off the train early at Tai Wai to walk along the Ching Mung River to catch the bus home. When I walked, I prayed and cleared my head and mind. I rested my soul through walking as I share in the poem below:

When I left home
To go to Canada
I found refuge in the church
I taught Sunday school, just as I did back home
I led Brownies, Pathfinders, Girl Scouts just as I did back home
In Hong Kong
I did the same
Led the liturgical music ministry
And now in the US
The Children's choir
The presence of children
Bring me unspeakable joy
Unfettered joy
For They ask so little
To experience joy
They just need us to take away the fetters
That kill joy
We can learn and experience joy
From the children
Unfettered Joy.

The Fourth Epistle: Centering Black Women's Pedagogy in Teacher Education

> *This entails rewriting the body into our understanding of critical praxis, by calling forth the establishment of new conditions for academic formation.*
> -Darder, 2011, p. 358

Dear Professor,

I remember the first time I met you at a conference, before I became your student. I was in awe of your confidence and intelligence during our brief interaction. A year later, I experienced unspeakable joy (Holmes, 2017) when I became your student, and you became my first doctoral professor. I waited a year before approaching you about serving on my dissertation committee. When I asked you, your guidance immediately pushed me to take a course I had not considered, knocking me out of my comfort zone. Reflecting on your guidance, your direction, given as a warm demander, has made me a well-rounded critical scholar. In our writing sessions, we shared our expertise, institutional knowledge, critical pedagogies, leadership, and experiences applying critical contemplative pedagogy. Though you sit in a seat of power as the chair of my dissertation committee and the chair of the department, my encounters with you over the last three years have strengthened my faith and expanded my ways of knowing and being. "Communal contemplative practices in Africana contexts have been hidden from view by the exigencies of struggle, survival, and sustenance" (Holmes, 2017, p.xv). We have not allowed the struggles we face as Black Women in academia to diminish practicing soulfulness in our interactions, hence sharing our life writing with one another and the field of education.

As I navigate my dissertation, one thing is for sure: I am an advocate for centering Black Women's pedagogy in teacher education. Second, I advocate for being well and encouraging the well-being of others. My mission is to transform teacher education by centering the theories of Black Women teacher educators in the teacher preparation curriculum because Black Women have a wealth of knowledge about wellness and well-being in higher education spaces. Healing-centered education is nothing new, but there are new ways, like contemplative criticality and critical contemplative pedagogy, to help us frame what it looks like in the field of education. bell hooks studied Paulo Freire's critical consciousness and Thich Nhat Hanh's holistic approach to teaching to develop her engaged pedagogy detailed in her groundbreaking book, *Teaching to Transgress* (hooks, 1994). Her underappreciated work, a teaching trilogy, inspires my dissertation centering on her well-being practices in teacher education.

It is rare to be a teacher-healer in a university setting, and my dissertation is an opportunity to self-actualize a vision for a more holistic teacher-education program to help teachers and teacher educators remember, recreate, and reimagine (evolve and transform) K-12 schooling. Over ten years ago, I began my journey to improve education, and along the way, became clear on my purpose and passion to cultivate healing education. It was not until I began studying Black Women's well-being in higher education for my Ph.D. that I understood this pedagogy as an onto-epistemology of Black Women that could heal Black Women and our inequitable education system in the United States and beyond. "Our healing practices differ from those White folx, but we all have to get well" (Love, 2019, pp.157-158). Centering Black Women's well-being practices in our pedagogy will help us heal education for ourselves and everyone in our community.

Dear Doctoral Student,

I started to tell you about two teachers at Teachers' College who greatly impacted my pedagogical practices and styles. When I met these two Women as a seventeen-year-old teacher in training, I was riveted by the sheer energy they exuded. They were passionate

about what they were saying and had strong beliefs about teaching and learning that resonated with me. I had just left high school, where I had been exposed to a Eurocentric curriculum and examination system. My major exams were developed and graded by people in the United Kingdom. I did Cambridge Ordinary level exams (these exams are taken in British colonies and qualify one for admission to universities at home and abroad; passing any number of these will also give one access to white-collar jobs upon graduating from high school). My last two years in high school were taken up with preparing for these exams.

When I met Telecine Turner-Rolle from the Bahamas and Sybil Rendall from Jamaica, I was blown away because I had certainly not met anyone who had written Bahamian poetry and had a book to her name. I had yet to hear about the discovery inquiry-oriented approach to teaching that Mrs. Rendall advocated for teaching Social Studies. It would be my first time learning Bahamian history and reading local poetry. I studied Shakespeare in school and read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* for my Literature Ordinary Level Exams. I had studied US and British history for my history exams (in which I made a distinction). I experienced the beginnings of the "decolonization of my mind" by these two Women. I was deeply embodied in learning my culture, which I had been denied in my PK-12 Catholic schooling. I learned my cultural heritage from these two Women who inspired me to continue building on this foundation to this very day. Telecine Turner-Rolle's *Song of the Surreys* (1977) and the clip-clop of the horses as they pulled the surrey stay with me to this day because it was a pivotal moment in my life when something I was culturally familiar with was used to teach and inspire. Years later, my doctoral dissertation on culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts may have been inspired by this experience with *Song of the Surreys.* To this day, I continue to decolonize my pedagogical practices and knowledge sources beyond Eurocentrism, and I celebrate this by telling the stories that made me who I am (Tinker Sachs, 2014; Tinker Sachs, 2023). In the United States I am compelled to do more given the need for "the work of racial reckoning, justice and reconciliation in the Catholic church as in as much of American society" (Williams, 2022, p.266).

We, professor and student, therefore, dedicate this demonstration of Black Women's contemplative criticality to humanity, spirituality and social justice for the benefit of transforming and healing education.

Epilogue: Black Women's Contemplative Criticality

We can center the conversation about education on the spirit of Black women teachers who have thrived and loved in spite of our unmentionable and multiple oppressions.
-Dillard, (Dillard, 2022, p. 2)

We, two Black Women center Black Women's liberatory voice and distinguish Black Women's contemplative criticality from the mainstream critical contemplative pedagogy because it is authentic to our ways of knowing and being in the world. The purpose of writing epistles is to document the historical and current development of Black Women's work through memoirs and support the research process of an upcoming dissertation on healing education by studying bell

hook's well-being practices for teacher education. **"**Wellness is wisdom, and being well is hard work" (Love, 2019, p.156). We are encouraged by a legacy of liberation from Black Women writers who demonstrate contemplative criticality in their pedagogy, such as bell hooks, Cynthia Dillard, and Stephanie Y. Evans. Our contemplative criticality is most conceptualized in the work of Shelly Harrell's (2018) SOUL approach to understanding the meditative practices of African Americans. Black Women's pedagogy has been assessed as either/or, never in its complexity, as more than one, or intersectionality. We have been known as the mules of the world, working harder in the academy and without recognition for our intellectual prowess (Procher & Austin, 2021). A debt is owed to our work as contributors to the canons of knowledge in the academy.

Our pedagogy is "the liberatory voice" that creates a new language, the counter-narrative to the traditional ways of knowing and being an educator (hooks, 2003a, p. 29). Our liberatory voice countered the narrative of the traditional student-teacher relationship; it deconstructed what contemplative practices look like in higher education (healing education), and it contributed to the emerging field of critical contemplative pedagogy utilizing the perspective of Black Women teacher educators, whose united voices shout for freedom from the margins of the academy. By centering Black Women's theories and perspectives throughout this process, we went beyond the fight for justice to prioritize our inner lives and flourish beyond our positionality in the academy (Love, 2019). Black Women's contribution to the academy is a legacy of resilience, resistance, healing, and transformative philosophy. As we continue to transform education by centering Black Women's well-being practices and stories in teacher education (Tolliver, 2022), we are working toward our wellness, the well-being of others, and doing the work of social justice. "Wellness is a part of social justice work. There must be an inner life that refuses to be treated less than human" (Love, 2019, p.156). Therefore, by demonstrating our contemplative criticality, we are raising our liberatory voice for the sake of humanity. We also provided a counter-narrative to the mainstream narrative of secularized Tibetan Buddhist centered currently in the social and emotional learning curriculum and research on contemplative practices focused on mindfulness and meditation.

In writing this article, we never forced the process. We had a flowing, generative, organic dialogic experience that always respected each other's contributions. This means we *listened* to each other. This, in essence, is *liberatory* because often, as Black Women, we are dismissed and ignored. We received each other's contributions in non-judgmental ways. Again, this was *liberatory* because we are always being judged by others. We had a loose structure that we grew comfortable with over time to hold the essay together, but generally, we wanted our letters or epistles to be naturally occurring. It was initially uncomfortable to get into a natural rhythm because we are products of the academy, and we had to work to decolonize our mindset about how we wanted to communicate our stories. After lengthy discussions about our different experiences, we sometimes wrote online together or separately. Then we returned later to imbibe each other's stories, always listening and marveling at our commonalities and/or differences but always in appreciation. We made each other glow because we accepted each other's stories. This, too, was *liberatory* because we are used to being askfed ridiculous questions about Black Women in the academy. As Black Women, it was affirming to be in community with another like-minded soul, even if we were professor and doctoral student. Those nomenclatures became irrelevant. To read our letters, one must strip away the gaze, to feel and experience the import of our words.

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