

BLACK WOMEN ABOLITIONIST TEACHERS AND THE SPIRIT OF OUR WORK

by

AMBER MONÁE NEAL

(Under the Direction of Cynthia B. Dillard)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation utilized digital archival methods to establish the significance of 19th and early 20th century Black women teachers in the fight for abolition. Historical Black women were not only active participants in the fight to abolish slavery but broadened the scope of the movement to include education. They expanded the role and responsibility of a teacher by providing instruction to pupils in the pulpit, podium, prisons and the press, in home schools, churches, in quiet nooks, and in secret. More importantly, they injected their work with deeper meaning—namely, that freedom and education were not only human and civil rights, but God given rights. Grounded in womanist theology, this dissertation is presented in a three-paper format in order to ask distinctive research questions and engage interdisciplinary bodies of literature. In the first paper, I explored the spiritual underpinnings of historical Black women teachers’ radical abolitionist work. I theorized a theo-ethic of abolition to demonstrate how historical Black women teachers were guided by and rooted in deep moral, ethical and spiritual values, igniting them into radical action. In the second paper, I established how historical Black women teachers contended with staunch antiblackness, white supremacy and racialized terror in their educational strivings, specifically by constructing sacred, hush harbors spaces of healing for Black students, even in the midst of it. In the final paper, I explored how the historical struggles

for freedom and education are inextricably linked to the contemporary demands for abolition and equitable education. Extending the abolitionist trajectory of historical Black women teachers, I examined how they responded *after* the abolition of slavery through an examination of the Reconstruction era. In conclusion, my dissertation study suggested that there exists a radical womanist tradition of Black women teachers subverting oppressive structures to ensure educational justice and Black liberation, through radical faith. Abolition persisted in slavery *and* freedom; it was a way of knowing, being, and believing. This conceptualization highlights that if true educational justice is to take place under our contemporary social conditions, abolition must become a way of life and must be guided by something deeper, the Spirit.

INDEX WORDS: Black Women Teachers, Abolition, Faith, Christianity, Womanist
Theology, (Re)membering, Archives, Hush Harbors, Historical Research
Inquiry, Slavery, African American Educational History

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DEDICATION



To my (fore)mothers

Willie P. Pitts McClendon (January 18, 1940 – June 18, 1990)

Monica B. McClendon Neal (December 18, 1961 –)

Verilia Mae Neal (March 23, 1936 – October 20, 2020)

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PREFACE

DEEPER THAN DOCTRINE: HE KNOWS MY NAME

The Spirit, or spirituality, defies definition... Like the wind, it cannot be seen, and yet, like the wind, it is surely there, and we bear witness to its presence, its power. We cannot hold it in our hands and put it on a scale, but we feel the weight, the force, of its influence in our lives. We cannot hear it, but we hear ourselves speaking and testifying because it moves, inspires, and directs us to do so.

- Gloria Wade-Gayles

Allow Me to (Re)introduce Myself: My Name Is...

In *My Soul Is a Witness*, Wade-Gayles (1995) makes an explicit case for considering our mothers' faith as a means of celebrating ancestral connections and to reconsider the ways in which race, gender, culture, religion and spirituality are all in fact foundational to Black women's identities. While these faith ways are often manifested in diverse cultural expressions like music, rituals, symbols, and practices, Wade-Gayles specifically relies on two expressions to illuminate the richness of Black women's spirituality, storytelling and testimony. To begin, I offer my own testimony to story my entry into the faith, and into my dissertation research. I come to this (re)search (Dillard, 2021) not as a theologian, religious scholar, or ordained minister. Rather, I enter as an emerging education scholar whose intimate relationship with God permeates scholarly inquiry, teaching, learning and life.

Pentecostal Pew Baby

I was what people called a "pew baby", someone born and raised in the Black church from infancy. As the oldest child of two Christian ministers, I spent my formative years in the 1990s attending multiple church services throughout the week, bearing witness to the charismatic styles of worship, preaching, and music of Black Pentecostalism. Notwithstanding the

Pentecostal outpourings prior to the 20th century, the Pentecostal movement originated in a revival among Black Americans (Simpson, 1974). William J. Seymour, the son of formerly enslaved people from Louisiana, led the Azusa Street Revival in April 1906, preaching sanctification and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The revival, which drew thousands, was characterized by ecstatic spiritual experiences accompanied by miracles, dramatic worship services, speaking in tongues (glossolalia), and interracial socializing.

Participants of the revival were highly criticized by the secular media for behaviors that many considered outrageous and unorthodox. The Los Angeles Times documented the revival in September 1906, calling it a

...disgraceful intermingling of the races...they cry and make howling noises all day and into the night. They run, jump, shake all over, shout to the top of their voice, spin around in circles, fall out on the sawdust blanketed floor jerking, kicking and rolling all over it... These people appear to be mad, mentally deranged or under a spell. They claim to be filled with the spirit. They have a one eyed, illiterate, Negro as their preacher who stays on his knees much of the time with his head hidden between the wooden milk crates. He doesn't talk very much but at times he can be heard shouting, "Repent," and he's supposed to be running the thing... They repeatedly sing the same song, "The Comforter Has Come."

Despite ridicule, what began as a spontaneous gathering amongst believers in a small two-story wooden building in downtown Los Angeles, ignited into a historic revival, continuing until roughly 1915, marking the spread of Pentecostalism in the 20th century (Robeck, 2006; Simpson, 1974).

Some of my fondest memories from my early years are from Sunday night service when, rather than preaching, the preacher would moderate testimony service. These services were always quite emotional affairs. Folks were screaming, fainting, convulsing, dancing, and running laps around the church. I also noticed the tears that streamed down their faces as they lifted their

hands in praise. While I didn't fully understand what was happening around me, it touched me deeply, and I felt something within the core of my being that was unexplainable.

Behind the humming of the Hammond organ, congregants of the testimony service would spontaneously come up to the microphone beside the pulpit to share. I loved hearing their stories, as it often gave me a deeper look into the lived experiences of people in my church. Folks shared stories of salvation after being astray from the faith; miraculously being healed from ailments to the surprise of medical doctors; finding unexpected checks in the mail that prevented evictions; children being protected from stray bullets while playing outside; overcoming decades long addictions; and so much more.

These testimonies were individual, intimate and personal indeed, however, in the sharing of them, they reminded the listening congregants of God's saving grace, His restorative power, and the ways that our everyday lives can be transformed by a single touch of His hand. These testimonies provided encouragement and faith was often renewed as folks responded "Amen!" and "If He did it for you, He can do it for me!" Their testimonies sparked ecstatic dancing, inspirational spirituals, fast paced tambourine playing, the stamping of feet and rhythmic clapping of hands as we celebrated and gave thanks in community. At my young age, I hadn't yet experienced God, for myself, but over the course of my life, I would certainly come to know Him, quite intimately.

Amber Neal, Stellar Student

It was the end of my 5th grade year, and I was thrilled to attend middle school. In elementary school, I was a stellar student and engaged in a number of extra-curricular activities including karate, cheerleading and band. I was also a budding student leader, selected by

teachers and administrators to participate in student council and safety patrol, so I was anxious to see what the next phase of my educational career would hold.

Because of the violence laden within my neighborhood middle school on the eastside of Detroit, Michigan, my mother researched other schools that would foster my intellectual prowess, leadership ability and talents. She located a K-8 performing arts magnet school that met all of her criteria, and endeavored that all of us, my three younger brothers and I, would attend. In order to be admitted, however, the school required an application, several recommendations, and exemplar performance on the entry exam. Week before taking the test, my mother pulled me aside and told me, "I don't know why I keep hearing it in my spirit so strongly, but you're in". She went on to elaborate that she heard from the Holy Spirit that I would get into the school, and not to worry. I didn't quite know how to respond to her statement because all I felt was excitement about the possibilities of taking modern dance, choir and drama at my new school.

Weeks after taking the entry exam, we received the results in the mail. My younger siblings passed the exam with flying colors and received admission into the performing arts school. But I didn't. The denial letter had an immediate impact on my mental health, and a slew of emotions rose to the surface. I felt I had disappointed my parents and the teachers who wrote recommendations for me. I felt panic that I would now have to attend my neighborhood school. I also felt embarrassment as my brothers celebrated their success while I sulked in my failure. "Amber Monáe", my mother called. "Do you remember what I told you? You're in!" Anger then filled me. "How am I in when the letter clearly says that I'm not?" I snapped. "You'll see!" my mother retorted as she walked away, smiling.

He Knows My Name

In the weeks leading up to the start of the school year, I did back to school shopping right along with my brothers. My mother purchased the required uniforms and supplies for 6th graders at the school and behaved as if she hadn't even read the rejection letter. I, on the other hand, continued to mope around. I even started calling to local middle schools myself to see what I needed to do to enroll. As my brothers started their first day of school, I also rode with my mother to drop them off. Her faith was so radical that she refused to enroll me in *any* school, against the behest of her friends, who thought her actions were both negligent and far-fetched. Instead, my mother used my time at home to provide me with deeper Christian instruction. We talked, laughed and watched the soap opera, *Passions*; but we also spent a lot of time praying together and watching sermons on TV. My mother understood the distinctive relationship between God and women, and so we also spent time reading and chatting about the incredible stories of women in the Bible. After about two weeks, she came to me and said, "it's time you got to know Him for yourself, baby". After our time together, my mother shepherding me through deep study of the Bible and teaching me how to pray, she sent me off, on my own. Despite our time together and my previous 10 years in the church, I felt stumped and didn't know how to "do" Christianity. I didn't know what to say to God and didn't even know where to start in reading the Bible on my own. "Where do I even begin?" Asking my Mom this, she replied, "Tell God that. He'll give you what to read".

Alone in the privacy of my bright pink bedroom, I got on my knees, clasped my hands, then closed my eyes. "God, I don't even know what to say", I confessed. I felt ridiculous asking Him to help me pray and to give me what to read in the Bible. But I did it anyway. After my brief prayer, I plopped onto my bed and decided "wherever I stop, and place my finger, that's

what I'll read". After haphazardly flicking through the pages, I open a page, and randomly place my finger on a scripture. My finger lands on Matthew 11:24 (KJV), which reads, "Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." My eyes bulged as I read the scripture a second time. It was too spot on. I stood arrested and amazed that the scripture I stumbled upon applied so directly to what I was dealing with at the time.

"Whatever you ask in prayer, believe", echoing in my ears.

Taking advice from the scripture, I returned to my knees and immediately began to pray. I told God what the letter from the school said and how I felt about the situation. As tears welled in my eyes, I told Him that I felt like a failure. I also confessed that I *wanted* to believe that He could work a miracle for me, but the reality was that school had been in session for weeks. I couldn't see, with my natural eyes, a way for me to get into the school. I hadn't yet learned that God often defies human senses and material realities.

Arriving home from Sunday night service, my siblings and I rushed inside to be the one to press play on the answering machine. Winning, I pressed play on our machine to hear the following message,

Hi. This is Mrs. Engels from Detroit Performing Arts School. I'm trying to get in contact with Monica Neal regarding your daughter Amber Neal and her admission into our school. I would love to schedule a meeting to talk with you further about this matter. Please contact me at your earliest convenience. Thank you.

I never stuttered a day in my life but as my parents came into the house, I bum rushed them with the news, stammering over my words, and bubbling over with tears of excitement and disbelief. My Mother smiled and simply said, "Thank you, Jesus". The subsequent meeting with the principal and my matriculation into the performing arts school materially manifested what she already knew and heard in her spirit.

At the end of the quarter awards ceremony, the principal read my name on the list of students on honor roll. In front of parents, students, teachers and community members, she repeated my name, once in a declarative, celebratory tone, and the other in confusion and disbelief. “*Amber Neal*”? She then shared my story, and the fact that I started school an entire month late. She also spoke on the radical faith of my mother, who refused to see anything else but brilliance, genius, and excellence in me, even when the scores did not. The faith of my mother was prophetic and filled with certainty, expectation, and hope, *knowing* that God would do as He promised. This experience was a pivotal moment in my life, helping me develop from knowing about my mother’s faith, to knowing *about* God, to knowing Him, personally; helping me to understand the faith of my foremothers even more clearly.

Relationship vs. Religion: When and Where I Enter

The delineation between knowing *about* God and knowing Him has been crucial in my spiritual development. This designation is most illustrated in the differences between religion and relationship. Religion is often about human effort, strict obedience and the mechanics of worship; the performance of faith. It emphasizes that discipline, good behavior, and religious practices are mandated in order to achieve salvation, or right standing with God. The dogmatist’s self-righteousness often appoints himself as the moral authority to judge and castigate others. Religion also produces a give-take dynamic that says, “if I work hard for God, He’ll reward me; but if I don’t, He’ll punish me”. The legalism that religion produces is rooted in fear; fear that in *not* adhering to the rules of Christianity, God will retaliate in fierce anger and impose eternal damnation. Religion also offers a one-sided interaction where God only serves as a genie to grant our wishes, while we retain full autonomy over our self-guided, self-righteous lives. Indeed, religion involves a (very limited) knowing *about* God that mostly begins and ends there.

Relationship with God, on the other hand, is much deeper than doctrine. It is grounded in the belief that we are justified—saved by grace—through faith in Jesus Christ alone. By grace, our heavenly father invites us to enter into intimate relationship with Him, each moment and minute of our lives an opportunity to move closer and draw nearer to Him. And because He is a gentleman, as I've come to learn, the relationship is not compulsory or forced. He desires that we come to Him on our own volition. But He steadily and gently draws us by demonstrations of His intrinsic goodness and grace. So, even when I fall short, miss the mark, or return back to Him after being astray, I am *always* welcomed back home with opened arms, full of loving-kindness. The tender mercies of God withhold the punishments we deserve while the grace of God is His goodness, benevolence and unmerited favor on the undeserving. This grace frees us from the bondage of religion as we know it. It also grants us freedom from sin, guilt and shame, enabling us to live hopeful, joy-filled lives in relationship with Him. And in remembrance of this, and in pursuit of relationship, not religion, we come to know *Him*.

In relationship, I have come to know God as one who knows my name, knows my thoughts, sees the tears and hears me when I call. He cares deeply about my human condition here on earth, and desires that we *all* come to know Him, and to come to Him about *all* the things, regardless how minuscule and insignificant. Likewise, regardless of how embedded or systemic the issue. Through this dissertation research, I've grown to know Him as the same God that my mother, grandmother and foremothers knew and communed with. The same God that they prayed to, leaned on, and relied on in the midst of horrific conditions, often stirring in them righteous indignation, and in turn, spurring radical action.

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INTRODUCTION

BECOMING AN ABOLITIONIST (TEACHER)

Background of the Study

Martha was a quiet student, often sitting at her desk with imaginative eyes fixated on the happenings outside of our 5th grade classroom window. When asked to read, she would trace the words on the page with her fingers, mouthing them silently. Although I, and her classmates, gently encouraged Martha to practice reading aloud in class, her behavior remained the same. Consulting the campus speech therapist, I expressed my concern, and was told that Martha was simply an English language learner and a shy student who had operated similarly in past years. But I knew there was more to her story.

As the school year progressed, Martha's reading skills unfortunately did not. Whether in whole group settings, small groups, or one-on-one, Martha operated the same. As a result, I solicited the support of my school administrator who suggested that I place her on the computer and focus on "more important things". Namely, the students who would pass the state standardized assessment. The STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) exam was a large part of our school and district's accountability measures, and in turn, the money we received from the state. In Texas, this annual exam dominated school curriculum, pedagogy and campus-wide policies. The entire school environment governed by a test. As a result, those deemed unable to pass were effectively disposed of and discarded. But I refused.

I found ways to adhere to the expectations of the school, while creatively and often subversively, agitating against it. Gutierrez (2016) coins this practice as creative insubordination

or bending and reinterpreting the rules in order to advocate for students, or yourself. I had spent time getting to know my students, building strong relationships and rapport with them, so, they felt comfortable relaying to me their frustration in spending hours practicing for the test. I witnessed firsthand the ways that testing culture drained the joy out of school, and the energy out of students. So, while the demands of the school required lengthy daily test prep, I quietly resisted by creating my own rules and classroom culture.

During test prep time, instead of written exams with dozens of questions, we played games that practiced the skill while having fun. One activity was four corners, where I would pose a question to the whole class based on the skill and give students four options as answers. Each answer was represented by a corner of the classroom, where I'd hang posters to show A-B-C-D. After hearing the answer choices, I played the jeopardy theme song to allow students 30-seconds to move to the respective corner of the room. After the music goes off, students are then given 1-3 minutes to discuss with their corner community why that was the best answer choice. Afterwards, an appointed spokesperson from each corner shares with the entire class the rationale for their answer choice. Finally, I share the correct answer, and explain its justification.

Admittedly, from the outside looking in, my classroom looked like madness. Students darting from one corner of the classroom to the other, desks moved out of the way, and the floor is wide open. Students are standing, some sitting on the top of desks, conferring with their classmates. While the teacher is off to the side, listening. You can hear the roar of an entire class of 28 students talking, reflecting, and evaluating with each other from the hallways. Entering my classroom, school administrators were initially dissatisfied to find me "going off the cuff" from the printed lesson plan. However, after speaking with students and finding that they were indeed

learning and seeing that students were fully engaged, and *enjoying* class, they begrudgingly left me to my devices.

Aside from this activity, I also rejected disciplinary policies that often punished students for behaving in ways that were developmentally appropriate. I refused to require students, all of which were Black and brown, to place their hands behind their backs while walking in the hallways or chastise them when they took autonomy over their bodies and movements. I contested pedagogical practices that marginalized, and essentially disposed, immigrant, refugee and low performing students from our learning community. Instead, I set the expectation that our classroom would be a space where *all* students, regardless of ability or previous academic or behavioral performance, were valued and seen as indispensable. Students soon embodied the expectation and took it upon themselves to practice community care. And because this space *felt* good to be in, students often requested to remain after class time, frequently asking to spend their lunch and ancillary periods in our classroom. For me, being a teacher was not solely about the delivery of instructional material or ensuring students' academic achievement, an ideology that infuriated school administration. My teaching practice was guided by the values of *soulcial work*, committed to the psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of students, inside and outside of schools.

After advocating for Martha for months on campus, I took it a step further and contacted the district special education coordinator, who confirmed my inklings. She informed me that Martha was previously identified as a special needs student, eligible for life skills classes. These classes are designed to meet the needs of students whose participation in the general education program, even with modifications and accommodations is unfeasible due to significant developmental and academic delays. She also informed me that our school was out of federal

compliance and would need to develop an immediate plan to ensure proper placement for Martha.

Despite operating in the best interest of this student, I became a target for administrative backlash. The principal began to regularly surveil my classroom and my movements, often making unannounced visits to intimidate, threaten and humiliate me. On one occasion, an assistant principal conducted an observation of my teaching, during dismissal. After which, I received an unfavorable performance evaluation for “not making good use of instructional time”. I also received disciplinary action for petty offenses like sitting during the pledge of allegiance and conversing with a colleague during recess. Nearing the end of the school year, I was reassigned to teach kindergarten, in spite of my experience and expertise in upper elementary grades.

I *knew* I was not only a good teacher, but an excellent one. But the subtle, yet deliberate retaliatory actions of my administrators endeavored to make me believe otherwise. The harassment went on for months and began to weigh heavily on my spirit, as my workplace became a space of emotional and psychological harm. Revilla (2021) describes this as academic spirit murder, acknowledging the ways that discrimination and other forms of oppression have the power to spiritually and emotionally destroy not only people’s dreams but also their very essence and desire to exist (p. 37); and I would add, resist.

In hallways, during planning sessions, lunch periods, and personal conversations outside of school, my colleagues quietly comforted me, acknowledging the ways that I was being harmed. They also expressed a hyperawareness of the harms that the school regularly imposed on our students, and their deep desire to enact change. At the same time, they recognized that any resistive action might end in devastating consequences to their career, of which they could not

afford. Teachers with a single income, caring for ailing, older parents. Teachers who sent money to family members in other countries. Teachers who had bills to pay and mouths to feed. Teachers who had previously dealt with administrative backlash and agreed to behave. They were all forced into compliance. They had too much to lose, and seemingly little to gain from fighting, refusing, pushing back and speaking up.

My colleagues knew that the happenings of our school were wrong and wanted to do good. But in the process, I learned the stark difference between doing what's *good* and doing what's *right*. Doing good entails abstaining from imposing harm, while doing what's right is remedying harm in the immediate and preventing it from occurring in the future. My colleagues were not to blame for their unwillingness, or inability, to fight. They were forced into silence, enforced by an educational system that richly benefitted from their acquiescence.

After receiving so many write-ups from my school administration, I was suspended for one week. I felt unappreciated, abandoned, ambushed, and completely unsupported. I *knew*, in the core of my being, that I was an excellent teacher, but had no strength to even remember. My school administration had succeeded in wearing and weighing me down to the point where I had zero fight left in me. Consequently, I sought out union representation and an attorney who told me that it would take months to investigate. But I needed help now.

Succumbing to overwhelming feelings of defeat, my mother reminded me that this situation wasn't a fight between me and the school administration. Instead, it was a spiritual one, not to be fought with intellect, hands, or well-crafted plans. She encouraged me to meditate on God's word, calling back to my mind, body and spirit "you know what to do when times get rough". It was returning to that quiet space of just me and God, just as I had done as a little girl. Over the next week, I spent intimate time with God, praying, crying, screaming, and reading the

Word. In the process, I would come to know more about God's character and nature, namely as Jehovah Gibbor, the Lord God mighty in battle.

While suspended, I studied the story of Jehoshaphat in the book of 2 Chronicles in the Bible. Jehoshaphat was a righteous but fearful king of Judah who was up against a coalition of forces that endeavored to invade their land. King Jehoshaphat recognized that the invading army would easily overtake theirs but resolved to seek God's help. He laid out the problem in great detail before God, encouraging the people of Judah to do the same. In return, Jehoshaphat received a message saying, "the battle is not yours, but God's. You will not have to fight. Just watch and see how Jehovah will save you." Jehoshaphat relinquished control of the situation over to God, believing the word he received.

As Jehoshaphat led his army toward the enemy's camp, they were surprised to find everyone already dead, a complete massacre after turning on each other. Jehoshaphat and his army returned home rejoicing in God's timely deliverance and manifested promise. In my own battle, I had exhausted all the material options available but resolved to do just as Jehoshaphat had done: I remained in that place of quiet stillness with God, relinquishing control and taking rest in His promise to deliver me.

After my suspension, I returned back to my classroom renewed, refreshed, and recharged. Students were curious of my whereabouts but were thrilled to have me back, and to catch me up on the happenings of their lives. On Wednesday of that week, my students and I were surprised when a camera crew entered our classroom to announce that I had been selected as a statewide semi-finalist for the HEB Excellence in Education Award, designed to honor the dedication and commitment of outstanding public school professionals. They brought two dozen roses, a sheet cake, and two \$1,000 checks, one for me and one for the school. The folks from HEB were

ushered to my classroom by the same people who aimed to assassinate my character, thwart my mission, and murder my spirit. I stood there wailing as tears of thanksgiving, amazement and joy streamed down my face. Jehovah Gibbor not only fought for me but made it so that the same lips that spoke evil of me had to eat their words by speaking truthfully of the positive contributions I made to our school campus. Though I didn't win the final award, I basked in the victory that God made possible, and available to me. I also promised to remain in that space of remembrance.

Remaining in Remembrance

After leaving the K-12 classroom in 2018, I entered my doctoral program in search for a place of continued healing. While I had physically left the (work)place of harm, some of the effects, and questions, still lingered. Early into my journey, I read Love's (2019) groundbreaking text, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, effectively shaping my dissertation research. She describes education as one of the primary tools used to maintain White supremacy and necessitates abolition of the entire system as it stands, in order to build anew. Love draws on the methods of historical abolitionists in the fight for educational justice for Black and brown students and encourages those entering the field of education to remember this history in order to understand why it matters in the present-day context of education. As I delved deeper into the work of abolitionism, I began to see my trials as a teacher more clearly, noticing how the educational system operated exactly as it was intended to. I also began to see myself as an abolitionist teacher.

Love's (2019) work sparked in me the desire to know more about Black women abolitionist teachers, specifically those during the era of chattel slavery. Who were they? What are their names? How did the struggle for Black education and the abolition of slavery intersect? What did they teach? As Love (2019) warned, "Being an abolitionist means you are ready to lose

something” (p. 159), so I wondered what these women lost, and what they hoped to gain. I endeavored to answer these questions, but more importantly, I wanted to know *why*. Why did these women risk their livelihoods and lives? What impelled or propelled them into action?

As I began to delve deeper into my inquiry, I found solace and solidarity in the stories and narratives of these historical Black women teachers. Although anti-literacy laws prohibited formalized education for enslaved people during the 19th century, and placed restrictions on freedmen’s education (Aptheker, 1937), Black women abolitionist teachers persisted. They faced insurmountable obstacles but injected their abolitionist work with deeper meaning—namely, that freedom and education were not only civil and human rights, but God given rights. Spirituality kept emerging and reemerging in my preliminary exploration, demanding my full attention. So, while I initially attempted to escape *from* centralizing faith in the context of my research, it was the very space that I, and many historical Black women abolitionist teachers, escaped *to*.

Rather than being seduced into forgetting the spiritual nature of the work of teaching and learning for Black women, Dillard (2021) invites us to (re)member (Re)membering, then is not as an initial recognition but a site of radical reclamation; a way of serving notice to the world that Black women have *always* existed as beautiful containers of African knowledges, culture, history, and spirituality (Dillard, 2000, 2006, 2012). By (re)membering, I began to see faith not only as a resonant theme in the life writings of historical Black women teachers, but the very life force that rooted, empowered, and sustained their work. So, although mostly unexplored, or underexplored in the literature, my dissertation study explores the spiritual roots of historical Black women abolitionist teachers’ work.

In this introductory paper, I provide an overview of the literature at the intersections of Black educational history and the history of the abolitionist movement, offering necessary

insight into faith as a vital but often overlooked dimension. Later, I outline the methodology and theoretical framework used in this study, followed by an overview of the subsequent papers of the dissertation.

Historiography

History of Abolition

Much of the history of abolition is written about the efforts of religious, Northern whites to eradicate slavery. However, that narrative drastically changed with the publication of *Black Abolitionists* (Quarles, 1969), the first systematic study of African Americans in the abolitionist movement. Quarles shows that African Americans were not simply beneficiaries of white benevolence, but pioneers in the abolitionist movement. Yee (1992) adds necessary contour to the work of Quarles by bringing the collective will of African American women abolitionists to the forefront in *Black Women Abolitionists*. She suggests that the complexities of race, class and gender brought about a particular set of tensions that shaped Black women's involvement in the abolitionist movement. In championing both their race and gender, Black women abolitionists found themselves caught between the sexism of the male led abolitionist movement, and the racism of the struggle for women's rights. Yet, Black women abolitionists worked to establish a distinct form of activism that centered intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), coalition building, and political organizing. Following Yee, I examine the confluence of race and gender in Black women abolitionist teachers' work. This dissertation adds to what is currently known and understood about abolitionism, including the educational struggle laden in the movement, as well as Black women's dynamic role and the faith that undergirded their work.

The work of Quarles (1969) and Yee (1992) ushered in a new wave of scholarship on the roles of Black people in the abolitionist movement. *Of One Blood* (Goodman, 1998) argues that

the early contributions of Black people actually stirred white activism in the fight for racial equality during the abolitionist movement. *A Fragile Freedom*, (Dunbar, 2008) examines the experiences of Black women from the late 17th century to the Civil War to illustrate that they did not simply move from slavery to freedom, but rather from slaves to servants to political activists. Although my study centers the rise of the abolitionist movement primarily during the 19th century, I recognize the importance of sketching earlier efforts by Black women abolitionists to promote and build pioneering educational institutions for Black people. Consequently, I cut across timelines to include the abolitionist efforts of Black women teachers before, during and after the Emancipation Proclamation to determine any continuity among people and ideas. My dissertation also aims to illustrate how Black women teachers contributed to civic discourse and inspired civic engagement, which overlaps Jones' (2007) work in *All Bound Up Together*. Jones explores the leadership roles Black women played within social and political movements and how they shaped the course of Black public culture. In my study, I also explore how these public discourses inadvertently landed inside classroom spaces and curriculums.

Black Women, Faith and Activism

A full-length study on the religious and spiritual undercurrents of Black abolitionists during the 19th century has yet to be written, though it remains a significant feature of the movement. Nonetheless, scholars have documented the ways in which faith and sociopolitical activism intersected in the lives of Black women throughout history. In *Spiritual Narratives*, for example, Houchins (1988) documents the written works of four 19th century Black women, Maria W. Stewart, Jarena Lee, Julia A. J. Foote, Virginia W. Broughton, to illustrate how their Christianity gave strength in their struggle for liberation from racial and gender oppression. Peterson (1995) examines the means by which Black church women engaged in activism by

traveling to the north to preach and lecture on issues such as abolition, racial uplift and women's rights during the 19th century, effectively establishing themselves as public intellectuals, and teachers, in *Doers of the Word*.

In *Witnessing & Testifying*, Ross (2003) makes a connection between Black women, religion and Civil Rights. She begins by examining the lives of abolitionist, suffragist and revival preacher, Sojourner Truth, and teacher and school leader, Nannie Helen Burroughs and their ongoing struggle for human dignity and civil rights in the antebellum and post-Reconstruction eras. Ross reveals the womanist theology of liberation that undergirded their activism in the 19th century and presents the stories of seven Black women civil rights activists who continued in the tradition: Ella Josephine Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Way DeLee, Clara Muhammad, Diane Nash, and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson. In *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, Collier-Thomas (2010) provides a comprehensive portrait of Black women in America, religion and sociopolitical activism from slavery through the present day. She documents how Black women have always developed powerful spiritual tools for understanding and combating the societal ills that shaped their lives, with the aspiration of complete freedom and equality.

In *Black Women's Christian Activism*, Adams (2016) tracks the intersections of politics and faith, and race and gender in a New York City suburb. She highlights the strategies Black church women employed in the fight for social justice in the early 20th century. Adams' work makes clear that Christian faith made a notable impact in the lives and activism of Black women who lived, worked and worshipped on the margins of society. Finally, in the anthology *Can I Get a Witness*, Riggs (1997) documents the crucial links between faith and the struggle for justice among Black women during the 19th and early 20th century. Relevant to my dissertation study, this collection includes the written works of little known 19th century teachers including

Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Addie Waites Hunton, as well as more recognized teachers like Mary McLeod-Bethune, Mary Church Terrell and Frances Watkins Harper, making clear the faith that rooted their revolutionary educational activism.

In conclusion, the importance of spirituality in the lived experiences of 19th century Black women abolitionist teachers cannot be overstated, and merits serious consideration in the field of education. Black women's radical faith constituted a form of resistance as they dared to imagine a world that affirmed their humanity, free from the terrors of racism and oppression. My dissertation continues this work by examining the abolitionist activities and educational activism as spiritually impelled moral and ethical practices in the lives of 19th and early 20th century Black women teachers. It brings new insight to the fierce interior worlds that shaped the abolitionist movement and Black women's tireless quest for complete liberation.

African American Educational History

To date, there is a strong body of research regarding the historical transformations in Black education during the 19th century, specifically on the part of Black people. Anderson's (1988) seminal work, *The Education of Blacks in the South* reinterprets the history of southern Black education and honors the contributions of formerly enslaved people who struggled to develop an educational system in accordance with their own needs. Like Anderson, Williams (2006) argues against the beneficiary or dependence narrative, showing how Black people conceived and constructed self-education from slavery through the Reconstruction Era in *Self-Taught*. This theme is likewise at the forefront of *A Class of Their Own*, where Fairclough (2007) suggests that Black teachers were at the center of the long struggle for equality in the South. In *From Cotton Field to Schoolhouse*, Span (2009) argues that African Americans were education's most zealous supporters before, during and after the Civil War, and envisioned that schools, built

by and for them, would help ensure full citizenship. My dissertation follows this line of thought; Black people, and Black women more specifically, were not mere objects of white abolitionists' sympathy but vigorous agents of abolition, advocates of racial equality, and activists for educational equity.

The specific contributions of Black women teachers, however, has often been eclipsed by a historical emphasis on the role of the benevolent, northern white schoolmarm; philanthropic organizations; and the Booker T. Washington industrial educational philosophy (Butchart, 2010; Perkins, 1987). Subsequently, the trials and triumphs Black women encountered in obtaining an education, and later transmitting their learning to others, remains a grossly under told story. Still, Black women scholars have persisted in their efforts to center the experiences of historic Black women teachers. Perkins (1987) presents Fanny Jackson Coppin as a revolutionary educator and thinker whose ideas promoted the uplift of African American women and girls. Similarly, Johnson (2000) and Taylor (2002) both weave powerful narratives of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs in their endeavors to broaden access to education. By exploring their lives, educational philosophies, and social activism, Cooper and Burroughs are recognized as influential educational theorists, activists, and leaders of the race during the 19th century. Prior to Moss' (2009) *Schooling Citizens*, no systematic study of African American education in the antebellum North existed. She traces the rise of the common school movement alongside opposition to African American education in New Haven, Baltimore, and Boston.

Baumgartner's (2019) work, *In Pursuit of Knowledge*, continues the work marshalled by Moss as she uncovers the history of Black women and their quest for schooling and teaching opportunities in the Northeast. She suggests that the activist efforts of little known historical actors such as Sarah Parker Remond, Rosetta Morrison, and Susan Paul set in motion equal

school rights victories at the local and state levels and laid the groundwork to democratize schools the during 20th century. The collection, *African American Women Educators* (Johnson, et al., 2014), demonstrates 19th and mid-20th century Black women educators' deep commitment to the Black communities they served. The contributors argue that civic engagement was a pedagogical practice that enabled these women to be more effective teachers.

My dissertation research builds on each of these works by exploring the lived experiences of 19th and early 20th century Black women teachers and their roles as abolitionists to combat all forms of oppression, inside and outside of schools. While there exists a distinction in the historiographies of education and abolition, to continue this separation would ignore the ways in which Black women abolitionist teachers wed their commitments. This study purposefully places Black women abolitionist teachers at the center of analysis to bring these distinct historiographies together, which I believe will make a valuable contribution to the fields of African American educational history and the history of abolition.

Womanist Theology: A Grounding Theoretical Perspective

Womanist theology is the theoretical perspective that grounds this study. It was birthed from Alice Walker's (1983) theorization of womanism, referring to the courageous, audacious, willful behavior of Black women committed to the flourishing of the entire Black community, and all of humanity (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2004; de Royston, 2020; Hill Collins, 1996; Paris, 1993). Katie Cannon (2006), celebrated as the foremother of womanist theology, explains that "[womanism] connects our cultural values, oral traditions, and social experiences to our spirit forces in the quest for meaning amid suffering" (p. 20). As such, womanist theology extends key womanist principles to think more critically about Black womanhood and the role of faith in their lives. It can be defined as,

...a prophetic voice concerned about the well-being of the entire African-American community, male and female, adults and children. Womanist theology attempts to help black women see, affirm, and have confidence in the importance of their experience and faith for determining the character of the Christian religion in the African-American community. Womanist theology challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women's struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women's and the family's freedom and well-being. Womanist theology opposes all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical ability, and caste. (Williams, 1993, p. 67)

Womanist theology employs works by and about Black foremothers as resources for contemporary reflection and provides a conscious background for “God-talk” (Townes, 2003). As a result, womanist theological thought and inquiry can be prominently traced in the writings, oral stories, thinking and cultural productions of Black women as early as the 19th century. These include historical Black women cultural producers, activists, speakers, preachers, teachers, and abolitionists, all resources for contemporary theological reflection. While I marshal womanist theology as a necessary and important framework, I recognize and honor that many of the historical Black women in this study did not or would not have named themselves as such. Nevertheless, I have brought them together using the framework of womanist theology in order to place their religious, theological and ethical perspectives at the center of my method and analysis (Cannon; 1985, 1988, 1996; Grant, 1989; Townes, 2003).

Womanist theology helps to better contextualize Black women abolitionist teachers' lives and how their theological understandings informed their radical actions toward liberation. It enables me to *explicitly* name the Christian faith that grounds my inquiry, viewing Black women's cultural values, religious traditions, spiritual practices, lived experiences, and biblical interpretations as sources of power. Engaging in this type of educational scholarship is both redemptive and resistive. It authenticates the various expressions of Black women teachers who

experienced fierce encounters with the Spirit of God and acknowledges the power of their stories being told and witnessed in the field of education.

Methodology: The Search for Archival Goodness

Womanist theological inquiry usually begins by examining the literary and rhetoric works of our foremothers. As such, to examine the spiritual activism of historical Black women teachers, I utilized archival methods and historical research inquiry (Craig, 2005; Wilson, 2007; Tight, 2019; Ramsey, et al., 2010). This proved a particularly difficult task given the violence of the archive, more specifically, its marginalization, fragmentation, and erasure of historical Black women's narratives, revealing power inequities in the production and construction of history (van der Merwe, 2019; Farmer, 2018; White, 1987; Harris, 1996; Gross, 2015; Hartman, 2007; Trouillot, 2015). Forced to reconcile the limits and impossibility of the archive, Black women herstorians—or Black women historians of Black women--have suggested a sort of methodological reorientation for quilting and composing alternative narratives of Black women's existence (Farmer, 2018; Fuentes, 2016; Hine, 1997; Taylor, 2008).

Farmer (2018) argues that “Black women's voices are there to be found in the casual omissions, the deliberate silences, their traces left in images, court records, bodily scars, and jail cell confessions” (Farmer, 2018, p. 293). Further, Fuentes (2016) dismantles the notion that new archival sources are required; instead, she encourages scholars of Black women's history to revisit preexisting sources, discern their richness and diversity, and engage in deep reflection and extract those aspects of their lives that remain untouched. In a similar way, Taylor (2008) suggests thinking and theorizing from preexisting documents, not only to recover voices but also to disrupt canonical discourses that have too often rendered Black women invisible. For Hine (1997), reclaiming historical Black women's stories goes beyond uncovering facts. She states,

At some fundamental level all black women historians are engaged in the process of historical reclamation, but it is not enough to simply uncover the hidden facts, the obscure names of black foremothers. Merely to reclaim and to narrate their past deeds and contributions risks rendering a skewed history focused primarily upon the articulate, well-positioned members of the aspiring black middle-class. In synchrony with the reclaiming and narrating must be the development of an array of analytical frameworks that allow us to understand *why* black women of all classes behave in certain ways, and how they acquired agency. (p. 47)

My dissertation research engages in the process of historical reclamation, but takes it a step further, as Hine suggests, to explore *why* Black women abolitionist teachers engaged in such radical actions. This requires a particular research, or (re)search as Dillard (2021) suggests. It involves seeking, looking, and searching again for something about Black heritage and/or culture that we believe will teach us something new, open to the possibility that we might be changed in this process by looking again.

Baumgartner (2019) suggests that Black women herstorians' methodological reorientation toward historical research of Black women is the method of "archival optimism" (p. 77). It recognizes how racism, sexism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression continue to shape history and the archive. Simultaneously, it embraces a commitment to utilizing what is already there, available and possible in archival collections. Heeding the call of Black women herstorians, I engaged in a *search for archival goodness* (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983), recognizing the ways that Black women are found in the shadows, interstices, silences, and negative spaces of the historical picture. While at the same time, demonstrating a commitment to (re)member the familiar, breathe new life into the archives and "mine the forgotten" (White, 1987).

In this dissertation study, the search for goodness is not a quest for an idealized portrayal of enslaved and free Black women's experience, history, faith or culture. I vehemently refuse to dismiss, temper, or romanticize the intensity and vulgarity of slavery's violence on the lives of

enslaved Black women. Instead, I aim to restore a more fuller picture of their/our humanity (Quashie, 2012). The centrality of goodness in this study, de-emphasizes the shortcomings, inadequacies, and pitfalls of historical Black women teachers to bring their visions, efforts, resilience, victories, sacrifices, successes, and spirit to the fore. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), the search for goodness is,

an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfections... a holistic concept, a complex mixture of variables whose expression can only be recognized through a detailed narrative of institutional and interpersonal processes. (p. 25)

My approach to this historical inquiry resists the typical preoccupation with documenting pathology and insufficiency in the histories of the African American experience with schools in America (Siddle-Walker, 1996; Anderson, 1988). Instead, I engage in what Dillard (2021) has theorized as (re)search, or the ways in which we search again for something about Black heritage that we believe will teach us something new about our history, humanity, and culture, as well as an openness to being changed in the process. The nuance in this (re)search is that it is a quest for beauty in the midst of terror, a “celebration of and in and through our suffering” (Moten, 2017, p. xiii). The search for archival goodness is a communal and ancestral obligation to developing methods of radically loving and (re)membering blackness in a world premised on our historical erasure, with the belief that history is our future.

Data Sources: Digital Archives

The methodological reorientation of searching for goodness in archival methods truly took shape as I completed this study during the fatal and global Covid-19 pandemic. I initially made plans to visit and make use of onsite resources from a number of archival repositories, including the Archives and Special Collections Library at Oberlin College in Ohio; The

Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University; The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York; Amistad Research Center in Louisiana; as well as the Mary McLeod Bethune National Archives for Black Women's History, and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. However, due to in-person access restrictions, I was forced to make use of the growing repositories of digitized collections, learning invaluable lessons about the ways to revise, refine and reconfigure qualitative research methods during times of uncertainty and calamity.

While the pandemic undoubtedly placed limitations on the data sources I was able to use,-- requiring an unanticipated pivot in my research--the centrality of archival goodness helped me to recognize the immense opportunity to review existing sources, and explore new technologies, namely digital humanities in education research. For this inquiry, I spent over a year engaging in the process of digital archival excavation. In that time, I explored ways to locate and interpret digital primary source materials, how to triangulate findings, ways to organize and store archival material, and how to navigate archival restrictions. It also allowed me to see, firsthand, the ways that institutional archives marginalize Black women and explore the types of methods needed to bring them from obscurity (Gaillet, 2012).

Some of the rich digital resources I relied on for this research project included The Library of Congress's online resource guide, *The African American Mosaic*, which has a distinctive collection specifically centered on abolition. The abolitionist collection features a wide range of digitized archival material that demonstrate public and private support of abolition, including minutes of early anti-slavery meetings, abolitionist publications for children, sheet music, poems, drawings, and essays, among other material. *Freedom on the Move* is a digital database of thousands of advertisements from enslavers and slave patrollers in search of and

describing fugitive slaves during North American slavery. This resource allowed me to gain rich historical context, often by learning more about the intimate details of the enslaved--as described by those who regarded them as property--including their motive for fugitivity, family life, personality, appearance, and other snippets of their life story. The University Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill sponsors *Documenting the American South*, a digital publishing initiative that provided Internet access to texts, images, and audio files related to southern history, literature, and culture. The *Colored Conventions Project* at the University of Delaware provided documents on statewide, national and international conventions organized by Black political organizations. The *Black Abolitionist Archive* housed at the University of Detroit Mercy, considered the most extensive primary source collection on antebellum Black activism, contains some 14,000 digitized documents, which helped me to locate the speeches and writings of Black women abolitionists.

In this study, I purposefully read against one-sided historical accounts and rely on a variety of archival sources. More importantly, however, I center Black women's own writings and words-- speeches, autobiographies, sermons, memoirs, diaries, and poems. Robinson (2017) poignantly captures my inspiration for centering Black women's own narratives.

So, while the sources within the archive and the reproduction of these sources can inflict what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls epistemic violence, which reproduces the lived subjugation and silencing of enslaved and free(d) Black women, by seeing these women as historical actors, we can allow them to speak for themselves. Through this process of historical production, we, as historians and consumers of history, become responsible for contesting the reproduction of their lived conditions. We can reconsider their victories, hopes, feelings, and thoughts to gain a fuller, more complex understanding of the lives of Black women. We must center Black women's own voices in their own stories, knowing that, as Fuentes writes, "we cannot redeem or rescue them, but we can reconsider their pain".

This purposeful reconsideration and reproduction of Black women's own words helped me contextualize and understand, more intimately, how they felt about their own experiences. It also

provided me the opportunity to interpret their lives in nuanced, multi-layered and dynamic ways that preserves the authenticity of their stories. The triangulation--or crosschecking the accuracy of data (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999)--of primary sources with important secondary sources then provided the evidence needed to substantiate my historical interpretation and analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

Listening

Hartman (2007) poses the following questions, further pointing us toward methodological reorientation in archival and historical research.

How does one *listen* for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and then assign words to all of it? Is it possible to construct a story from “the locus of impossible speech” or resurrect lives from the ruins? Can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor, and love a way to “exhume buried cries” and reanimate the dead? (p. 3)

While Hartman recognizes the impossibility of the archive to fully restore, or restory, the lives of enslaved people, and women more specifically, she simultaneously invites us to listen to the archive as a restorative practice. As such, to analyze archival data about the praxes of historical Black women teachers, I utilized the process of finding, developing and analyzing emergent themes in portraiture methodology, which Hill-Brisbane (2008) describes as a process of listening.

Emergent themes are constructed by first *listening* for repetitive refrains that are spoken frequently and persistently. Then, the researcher *listens* for resonant metaphors, poetic and symbolic expressions that reveal the ways participants experience and illuminate their realities. The qualitative researcher may also *listen* for the themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals that seem to be important to organizational continuity. (p. 646)

Developing emergent themes is an iterative and generative process that requires openness to all material in the data set, as well as flexibility to change direction as one moves from a review of the literature, to data collection, and through data analysis. Listening, as a data analysis method,

reflects the researcher's ongoing effort to bring interpretation, insight, and aesthetic order to the data set, often through a process of deep reflection, memoing, and synthesis (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In the context of this study, listening meant sitting in the company of historical Black women's words and writings, letting them marinate, and allowing them to speak back to me. It meant reading their narratives and taking time to pause, and sometimes step away, because of the emotional heaviness and unbelievable trauma of their lives. It also meant returning to my long lost love of poetry, often writing through tear filled eyes, after experiencing the lyricism of their words. It also meant lifting my hands in praise in their tragedies, and our triumphs, seeing my own stories mirrored in theirs. It also meant spending time listening to their images, moving beyond the literary to attune to the affective frequencies that their photographs register (Campt, 2017). Listening as method of analysis also meant sometimes being up all night with them, because their stories wouldn't leave my mind, body and soul, and surrendering to their call. It required attunement to the Holy Spirit, abiding in the Word of God, and relishing in activities that feed my soul. Thinking with and listening for, and to, these women for this extended amount of time enabled me to develop an intimacy with them and their stories; it allowed me to hear deeper than words.

Intimacy

Typically, qualitative research suggests member checking as a technique for exploring the credibility of results. Data or results are returned to participants to check for accuracy, credibility, validity and resonance with their experiences (Birt, et al., 2016). However, because of the intentional centering of historical Black women during the era of enslavement, and its afterlives,—and the impossibility of member checking—data analysis required a particular

sensitivity. Brown (2010) encouraged scholars of 19th century Black history to “behold the intimate” and to “value the private that is exhibited in public buildings and private spheres and make history *hers* in as many ways as we can” (p. 138). (Re)searching historical Black women necessitated a particular ethic of care. I found myself reflecting on how each woman might view my reconstruction of their narrative. It also required creative means to be in relationship and in community with the “participants” in my study.

According to Benjamin and McKay (2015), when it comes to Black women as subjects of inquiry, intimacy must be patiently cultivated.

Intimacy as a methodology is invisible trust-building work that initiates or facilitates the recovery and reconstitution of the lives and literature of black women. This methodology also invites others to become intimate with the Black women whose work has been [recovered]. For example, [Alice] Walker enacts intimacy as a methodology when she retraces the final years of [Zora Neale] Hurston’s life in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983). At the same time that Walker’s quest is driven by a desire to elevate Hurston from a footnote “to the white voices of authority” (p. 11) to a model for aspiring writers. Walker is also driven by her desire to memorialize an extraordinary human being who was in danger of being misinterpreted, distorted or lost. Intimacy is a generative practice that inspires others to connect closely with recovered ephemera... (p. 17)

Analyzing the words and works of historical Black women was a deeply intimate, ancestral, communal work that required holistic (mind, body and spirit) listening, as well as reflection, introspection, isolation, and the “sovereignty of quiet” (Quashie, 2012). To sit with the words of foremothers was a reclamation effort; an expression of gratitude for their tenacity, boldness and radical refusal; a space of remembrance and reverence. I agree with Hartman (2008) when she said, “Loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive” (p. 3-4).

Dissertation Overview

My dissertation “Black women abolitionist teachers and the spirit of our work” is an effort to tease out the link between abolition, educational activism and faith. It examines the ways in which 19th and early 20th century Black women actively participated in the fight to abolish slavery and its afterlives (Hartman, 2007) and simultaneously, engaged in the struggle for educational equity, bolstered by spiritual convictions. It is presented in a three-paper format in order to ask distinctive research questions and engage with a range of interdisciplinary bodies of literature.

In paper two, I explore *why* Black women abolitionist teachers engaged in the fight for educational equity and abolition. I theorize a theo-ethic of abolition to illustrate that historical Black women teachers were guided by and rooted in deep moral, ethical and spiritual values, igniting them into radical action. I place a call to the field of education to move beyond maintaining the status quo in education to allow ethics to guide our work. In paper three, I explore *how* historical Black women abolitionist teachers contended with ongoing white supremacy and racialized terror. I argue that constructed liberatory spaces of healing for Black students, even in the midst of it. I theorize hush harbors as praxis to demonstrate the ways that historical Black women syncretized intellectual and spiritual pursuits, and to highlight how their methods can inspire and inform the practices of contemporary teachers in their efforts toward restoring Black humanity and joy in schools.

The final paper offers my practical reflexivity as an educator to explore the implications of this historically situated research on contemporary education. In short, this paper answers the question, *now what?* What do we do with the knowledge gained by historical Black women teachers? Using the framework of (Re)construction, I argue that the historical struggles for

freedom and education are inextricably linked to the contemporary demands for abolition and equitable education. I make important distinctions and connections between the past and present in order to forecast freer futures in education.

In conclusion, my dissertation study suggests that there exists a radical womanist tradition of Black women teachers subverting oppressive structures to ensure educational justice and Black liberation. It argues that for these historical Black women teachers, abolition persisted in slavery *and* in freedom; as such, it was an ethos, praxis and a way of being. This conceptualization highlights that if true educational justice is to take place—within the current sociopolitical, economic, and cultural arrangements that perpetuate white supremacy, capitalism, antiblackness, patriarchy, and other related forms of oppression—abolition must become a way of life and must be guided by something deeper, by the Spirit.

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CHAPTER 1

“GOD MEANT I SHOULD BE FREE”: HISTORICAL BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS AND
THE THEO-ETHICAL IMPERATIVE OF ABOLITION

Abstract

Historically, Black women abolitionist teachers actively participated in the fight to abolish slavery while simultaneously, struggling for educational equity. Espousing a liberatory notion of education, they expanded the roles and responsibilities of a teacher and broadened the aims and scope of the abolitionist movement after the Emancipation Proclamation from eradicating slavery to abolishing all forms of oppression and injustice, inside and outside of schools. More importantly, these Black women abolitionist teachers injected their work with deeper meaning—namely, that freedom and education were not only human and civil rights, but God given rights. Drawing on close analysis of archival documents, this paper reclaims the radical faith of historical Black women teachers that allowed them to move from deeply intimate, inward yearnings of freedom, to outward expressions of radical sociopolitical action. Ultimately, what is revealed is a transcendent, lived theo-ethic of abolition that responded to their existential realities, and informed their notions of education, freedom, and justice, constituting a very particular form of resistance. In conclusion, I suggest that in order to enact radical social transformation within the field of education, and beyond, contemporary teachers must first embody an ethic of abolition. Gratefully, historical Black women abolitionist teachers have provided a prophetic witness on how to do so.

Keywords: Black women teachers, archival research, (re)membering, ethics of education

Introduction

Anticipation filled the room as attendees gathered at Franklin Hall on Friday, September 21st, 1832 to discuss the state of enslavement in the United States. Franklin Hall was the site of regular monthly meetings of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, which advocated for the immediate, uncompensated abolition of slavery. One of the primary tactics of the Society was moral suasion, persuading and informing the general public on the immorality, evils and horrors of slavery. The speaker for the evening was a woman, the first recognized to deliver a public address to an interracial crowd, a monumental, controversial and potentially dangerous feat. In an era when the cult of true womanhood hinged on docility, silence, and domesticity (Welter, 1966), Maria W. Stewart, a Black woman, teacher and political activist, boldly mounted the podium to speak truth to power in front of a promiscuous audience, one which contained both men and women (Page, 2007).

As an abolitionist, Stewart's public speeches condemned the inhumane institution of slavery in the South and the white supremacist ideologies that envisioned Black people as non-human chattel property. In this address, she critiqued the "liberal" North's relegation of Black people to menial service jobs as a great injustice to their intellectual potential. "What literary acquirements can be made, or useful knowledge derived, from either maps, books, or charts, by those who continually drudge from Monday morning until Sunday noon?" she asked. Stewart offered a scathing rebuke of the U.S. racial caste system that effectively dispossessed Black people, both enslaved and free, from not only acquiring literacy, but the liberatory knowledge needed for their advancement. In describing its destructive impact, she professed, "Continued hard labor deadens the energies of the soul, and benumbs the faculties of the mind; the ideas become confined, the mind barren".

But what would inspire a Black woman to wholly defy the social mores of the time—and risk public ostracization, arrest or assault—to advocate for educational equity and social justice? What gave her the audacity as a woman to speak publicly? Who gave her the authority? Surely, the urgency of abolition and the gravity of slavery often outweighed the stringent social conventions that restrained women, of all races, from assuming a public speaking role. But, what undergirded Stewart’s boldness of speech and action was not only her own lived experience with educational exclusion, gender inequality and anti-Black racism, but a particular ethical and theological understanding.

At the beginning of her Franklin Hall lecture, Stewart revealed that just two years prior, she underwent a life-changing, religious conversion that would change the trajectory of her life. She remembered this divine encounter, which she felt ordained—or called—*her*, a Black woman, to go forth and articulate the horrors of slavery and the desolate existence of her enslaved, and free, brothers and sisters. “Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?” the Spirit interrogated. Stewart’s heart humbly replied, “If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!” (Stewart, 1832, in Richardson, 1987, p. 45). By daring to accept the call of the Holy Spirit, Stewart became a living witness, embodying the very equity she called for in her public speeches and writings.

In the October 8th, 1831 publication of *The Liberator*, Stewart wrote,

This is the land of freedom. The press is at liberty. Every man has a right to express his opinion. Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such. He hath formed and fashioned you in his own glorious image, and hath bestowed upon you reason and strong powers of intellect. He hath made you to have dominion over the beasts of the field, the fowls of the air, and the fish of the sea [Genesis 1:26]. He hath crowned you with glory and honor; hath made you but a little lower than the angels [Psalms 8:5]; and according to the Constitution of these United States, he hath made all men free and equal. Then why should one worm say to another, "Keep you down there, while I sit up yonder; for I am better than thou?" It is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but it is

the principles formed within the soul. (Richardson, 1987, p. 29)

The contents of Maria W. Stewart's writings and speeches were often religious in nature, citing scriptures and using Biblical references. She reminded the Black community of their rights, as outlined in the United States Constitution, that *all* men—including those racialized as Black--were *created* equal and free. Even further, she reminded Black people of their divinely conferred humanity, as well as God's ultimate rule and reign, which took precedence over oppressive laws, rules, and regulations.

Despite the nation's rendering of Black as slave--barbaric, uncivilized, heathen-like, inferior--(Sharpe, 2016; Wilderson, 2010; Patterson, 1982; Hartman, 1997, 2007), Stewart reminded them that God, the creator of the entire universe, didn't see them as such. Instead, He fashioned Black people in His own glorious image. Stewart's radical ways of knowing, being and believing completely inverted prevailing social order, not just to remind Black people who they were not, but to help them (re)member (Dillard, 2012) who they were, and had always been. Her religious fervor inspired her radical actions and she became "a strong advocate for the cause of God and for the cause of freedom" (Richardson, 1987, p. 52). Stewart spoke urgently and passionately, advocating for abolition, racial and gender equality, and educational equity as a social witness of her strong Christian faith, helping us to better understand the multivalent forces that shaped resistance movements in the early 19th century (Henderson, 2013).

Moving beyond the overt, tangible, and public demonstrations of the historical abolitionist movement, this paper explores the multivalent forces. In particular, the spiritual impulses that animated the radical abolitionist efforts and educational strivings of historical Black women teachers. Drawing on close analysis of archival documents, I argue that their radical actions can be attributed, in large part, to their faith. Historical Black women teachers

were grounded in deeply intimate, ethical and spiritual values, driving them to outward expression. Theoretically situated in womanist theology, I argue that Black women teachers utilized the methods of the abolitionist movement to eradicate oppressive conditions, but more importantly, relied on fierce spiritual tools to actualize the freedom that they already knew was theirs. What is revealed is a transcendent, lived theo-ethic of abolition that responded to their existential realities, and informed their notions of education, freedom, and justice. In conclusion, I suggest that in order to dismantle oppressive systems and enact radical social transformation within the field of education in contemporary times, our work must first, and foremost, embody an ethic of abolition. Gratefully, historical Black women abolitionist teachers have provided a prophetic witness of what it entails.

Contextualizing the Relationship Between Religion and Radicalism

...between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason but the most deceitful one for calling the religion of this land Christianity.

- Frederick Douglass (1845), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

Such was the false, pernicious and demoralizing Gospel preached to the American slave for two hundred years. But bad as this teaching was, it was scarcely so demoralizing as the Christian ideals held up for the negro's emulation. When mothers saw their babes sold by Christians on the auction block in order to raise money to send missionaries to foreign lands; when black Christians saw white Christians openly do everything forbidden in the Decalogue; when, indeed, they saw, as no one else could see, hypocrisy in all things triumphant everywhere, is it not remarkable if such people have any religious sense of the purities of Christianity?

- Fannie Barrier Williams (1893), "Religious Duty to the Negro"

Before an exploration of the faith inspired social action of Black women abolitionist teachers, I find it crucial and instructive to briefly discuss the ways in which religion, and in particular, Christianity, was used as an oppressive white supremacist weapon against enslaved Black people.

Weaponizing Religion: Christianity and the Peculiar Institution

As arguably the most contentious issues in United States history, chattel slavery was undoubtedly the foundation of American progress, especially in the South. The development and prosperity of the Southern region is directly linked to mass market cash crops like sugar, tobacco and cotton produced by the soul-crushing and back-breaking labor of enslaved Africans. They endured a system of brutal slavery that is barely comprehensible, and as Baptist (2016) argues, “the half has never been told”.

Enslaved Africans were wholly regarded as property, given the same rights as inanimate objects. In practice, this meant that enslavers possessed ownership over their entire lives and bodies, often resulting in forced dehumanizing sexual activity. Daughters, mothers, sisters, nieces, and wives endured horrific suffering and were treated as breeders and incubators for future generations of captive people, making them more susceptible to sexual torture and violence at the hands of their enslavers (White, 1999), and to losing their children through sale. In addition to the compulsory labor, that was often equal to male slaves, enslaved women and girls in antebellum American were no stranger to brutal lashings, whippings, and other forms of horrific physical punishment. Yet, they weren't just physically at-risk, but psychologically and emotionally vulnerable as well.

Enslavers denied any rights that might confuse the status of their property as human. Enslaved people were often restricted from marrying, learning to read, and practicing native

spiritual practices. Slave holders endeavored to quench any ambition or dreams of freedom in the future as their lives were to be spent enslaved, from the womb to the tomb. Slavery enabled whites to completely harvest and harness the wealth of the institution of slavery, and all it took was a tweaking of their consciousness and the twisting of Christian dogma.

Slaveholders used a wide range of methods and strategies to maintain control and domination over the enslaved population, including stringent federal legislation, local codes, and violence of all kinds. One of the most pernicious tactics, however, was religion. Christianity—a religion whose doctrine is deeply rooted in salvation, equality, unconditional love and freedom—was used as a justification for enslaving African people and to reinforce racial hierarchies. Many churches published slave catechisms—or a series of questions and answers that explained the basic beliefs and teachings of a faith—to be read orally to the enslaved population. Religious indoctrination was weaponized against the psycho-spiritual functioning of the enslaved (Muhammad, n.d.), so the object lesson of the slave catechisms was to teach and reinforce the role of the enslaved in society, and in particular, in relationship to their enslavers. They instilled inherent white superiority and Black inferiority, and that the government, and God Himself, condoned slavery (Lawrence-McIntyre, 1987). Other recurrent themes revolved around the wages of sin; slavery in the afterlife; engaging in chaste behavior; obedience and the acceptance of consequences for disobedience; and God’s omniscient and ever-watchful eye (Muhammad, n.d.; Episcopal Church, 1862; Byron, 2008). One of the most prominent themes, however, was instilling forbearance, forgiveness, no malice of thought, and harboring no ill will, in particular against enslavers (Muhammad, n.d.)

In addition to the slave catechism, white evangelical “Christian” slave holders utilized the bible in highly selective, and perverted ways. They plucked liberating verses from the bible to

justify owning human beings as their natural, God-given right. Excluded from enslaved people's religious instruction were such verses as Galatians 3:28 (NIV), which reads "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus", and Jeremiah 22: 13 (AMP), which says "Woe (judgment is coming) to him who builds his house by [acts of] unrighteousness And his upper chambers by injustice, Who uses his neighbor's service without pay And does not give him wages [for his work]". Instead, they emphasized bible verses that called on enslaved people to obey their masters while conveniently neglecting the bible's radical insistence that all people were created in the divine image of God, and equally precious in His sight. Yet, according to Raboteau (2004), enslaved people received a drastically different message from the religious instruction they received.

They hated the Gospel they were being taught, got tired of the White folks' preaching and *knew* that there was more than the slave catechism: Slaves frequently were moved to hold their own religious meetings out of disgust for the vitiated Gospel preached by their masters' preachers. (p. 213, emphasis added)

The slave catechism and religious teachings of the enslaved were meant to buttress the horror of slavery and repress rebellion, but, as the next section documents, was ineffective in its aims.

Liberatory Faith: (Re)membering Rebellions and the Invisible Institution

When enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the United States, they were not mere *tabula rasas*, or blank slates. They brought with them rich cultural traditions and spiritual sensibilities that miraculously survived the Middle Passage. These included the ring shout, spirit possession, syncopated and poly-rhythms, herbal remedies, reverence of ancestors, call and response, singing, dancing, and oral storytelling (Raboteau, 2004), which according to Lester (1997), acted as the spiritually strong balancing force to counter the pain of slavery" (p. 10). Christianized enslaved people did not simply acquiesce to the religion of their oppressors,

despite popular belief, but syncretized and incorporated their African sensibilities into their own distinct embodiment of Christianity.

Although slave owners worked diligently to strip enslaved Africans of their cultural and spiritual practices, often using religion—Christianity more explicitly—as the means by which to ensure physical subservience and psychological inferiority, paradoxically, the message of democracy and equality resonated with the enslaved and fed the flames of their desire and struggle for both physical and spiritual liberty. Rather than being satisfied with the “slaves obey your masters” catechism and the vision of a pro-slavery God preached by white slaveholders, Christianity engendered a spirit of racial independence, spiritual equality, and a theology of liberation among enslaved and free Black people, which they leveraged to maintain hope, personhood joy, and faith. It likewise produced “righteous rage” in Black Christian abolitionists who leveraged their faith in radical ways to eradicate the institution of slavery. Some slave holders were averse to all religious instruction with the fear that exposing enslaved people to the Bible and biblical stories about emancipation would inspire insurrection, and it did.

Refusing to assuage the moral consciousness of white America, some enslaved Christian abolitionists instead showed that America would not just pay for the wages of their sin of slavery as an arbitrary prophecy against their immorality, but as a warning for impending violence. In 1800, Gabriel Prosser, a literate, enslaved blacksmith, and preacher planned a large slave revolt in Richmond, Virginia. He devised his plans during religious meetings of the slaves (Muhammad, n.d.). Information regarding the revolt was leaked prior to its execution, and as a result, he and his followers were taken captive and hanged. Similarly, Denmark Vesey, a formerly enslaved carpenter and preacher, allegedly inspired and led the most extensive effort to organize a slave insurrection in U.S. history (Spady, 2011). He “fashioned a theology of

liberation that fused the demanding faith of the Israelites with the sacred values of Africa”, and in so doing, “his lessons were employed as a means by which to produce a profound sense of racial identity among his adherents” (Egerton, 1999, p. 299). The plan called for Vesey and his followers to kill slaveholders in Charleston, South Carolina, liberate the enslaved, and flee to the Black republic of Haiti for refuge. By some accounts, the revolt would have involved thousands of slaves in the city as well as others who lived on plantations nearby. However, just days before the calculated attack on July 14th, 1822, their plans were exposed, and a militia was sent to arrest the leaders and suspected accomplices. In the cases of Prosser and Vesey, plans for insurrection were interrupted prior to its implementation, however, in other cases, elaborate plans actualized.

In 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, slave preacher Nat Turner led one of the bloodiest slave rebellions in United States History, killing between 55 and 65 people, the majority of whom were white. Turner always understood his revolt in religious terms, and when captured, compared himself to some of the Old Testament prophets in the Bible. Further, he rejected the notion that Biblical scripture was the only source of guidance on matters. Turner believed in a God that communicated with the world, and more explicitly, with him. In his confession after being captured, he is cited as saying,

I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. (Gray, 1831, p. 11)

Turner embodied a radical Christianity, considering himself a modern day prophet and instrument of vengeance, elected by God to free enslaved people from the yoke of slavery through violent means. Yet, what lies at the core of each of these examples is a deep understanding about humanity, the being of God, and His relationship to Black people. Each slave rebellion demanded that Black people be treated as equals because of an understanding that

God had created them equal. Consequently, social justice activism, abolitionism and violent insurrections were seen as ethical *and* spiritual imperatives.

Contextualizing the Relationship Between Black Women, Faith and Resistance

Throughout history, religion and spirituality has always been fundamental to the project of social transformational change for the Black community (McCutcheon, 2021; Raboteau 2004; Murphy, 2000). Indeed, Black people leveraged their religious capital (Park, Dizon, & Malcom, 2020) in order to navigate and transgress oppressive social, political, and institutional conditions (Coles & Stanley, 2021). However, scholarship making these critical historical connections between Black radicalism and Black religion not only privilege overt, demonstrative acts of resistance but is often posited from an androcentric point of view, neglecting the distinctive and dynamic roles of faith-filled Black women. Kevin Quashie (2012), author of the groundbreaking text, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, profoundly stated,

Resistance is hard to argue against, since it has been so essential to every black freedom movement. And yet resistance is too broad a term—it is too clunky and vague and imprecise to be a catch-all for a whole range of behaviors and ambitions. It is not nuanced enough to characterize the totality of black culture or expression. Resistance exists, for sure, and deserves to be named and studied. And still, sometimes, when the term “resistance” is used, what is being described is something finer. (p. 4)

I argue that the “something finer” that Quashie speaks to may be found in the subversive spiritual practices of historical Black women.

Camp (2004) argued that enslaved women’s everyday acts of resistance created a whole culture of opposition. This subversive culture actually helped to incite and sustain the more visible resistance among enslaved men in their individual acts of fugitivity. In the quiet of their homes, enslaved Black women developed an alternative consciousness about their material condition that allowed them to maintain their humanity, dignity, and hope. The brutality of enslavement did not snuff out the spirit of enslaved Black women. In fact, laden in this history of

Black women's resistance is a rich, radical *womanist* tradition among Black women utilizing a faith-centered approach in the struggle toward liberation from all forms of oppression.

Historical Black Women's Spiritual Activism

Indeed, spirituality in the Black community has been the effectual foundation upon which many African Americans have built projects of resistance (Dantley, 2005). But at the core of Black women's transformational undertakings is a distinctive form of resistance. This form is sometimes overlooked in histories that rely on more formal definitions (Baumgartner, 2019). What historical Black women often engaged in *spiritual activism*, a practice that draws on the inward-focused work of spirituality to inform the outward-focused work of sociopolitical activism that deals with the conditions of the material or physical world (Sheridan, 2012; Lysack, 2012; Keating, 2008). Despite the dearth of scholarly attention, the spiritual and religious impulses to effect social change have constituted the core narratives of many historical Black women (Weisenfeld & Newman, 1996). As Williams (1993) suggests, any attempt to discern meaning from Black women's radical actions would be incomplete without reflection on their faith. Consequently, this paper explores the spiritual activism of historical Black women abolitionist's teachers in their struggle for full freedom. I argue that historical Black women's spiritual activism constituted a form of resistance that informed hope, freedom-dreaming, and conscious-raising educational praxis.

Abolition, Education and the Spirit of Their Work

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

- Acts 2:17-18 (NIV)

I am black *and* beautiful,
O daughters of Jerusalem,

like the tents of Kedar,
 like the curtains of Solomon.
 - Songs of Solomon 1:5 (NRSVSE)

God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved;
 God will help her when the morning dawns.
 - Psalms 46:1-3, 5 (AMP)

As a theoretical framework, womanist theology involves searching for expression among women who are not typically seen as “worthy” of the call and in alternative locations not otherwise seen as theological or religious (Thomas, 2004). For this study, womanist theological reflection is examined in the lives of Black women not typically viewed as intellectuals or teachers, in the formal sense, but who taught generations of people through their words and actions, setting the moral, ethical and spiritual stage for assorted acts of freedom. It also brings 19th and early 20th century Black women abolitionist teachers’ social, religious, cultural and educational experiences into the discourse of theology, religious studies, biblical studies and educational research. Womanist theology likewise helps to frame a more explicit interrogation of how their Christian faith and distinctive theological perspective shaped the broader struggle for Black humanity, gender equality, educational justice, and the abolition of slavery.

“I can’t read, but I can hear”: The Development of Womanist Literacies

History recounts the struggle on the part of African Americans to gain equal access to quality education in the United States during the 19th century. In the antebellum south, whites prohibited enslaved Black people from learning to read and write and implemented policies and laws to restrict education for free Blacks (Anderson, 1988; Williams, 2006). The mere existence of a literate slave contradicted the justifications of inferiority used to enslave them (Williams, 2006). Nonetheless, enslaved people did learn to read, often as a result of the efforts of Black women teachers.

In 1779, Catherine (Katy) Ferguson was born on a boat while her mother, an enslaved woman, was being transported from Virginia to New York City (Hartvik, 1996). From an early age, Ferguson's mother instilled in her all she knew about the Christian faith and bible scriptures, which made a great impression on her. At age 8, however, Ferguson's mother was sold, a profoundly traumatic separation which produced a deep compassion and care for destitute and needy children later in her life. She continued to attend church services and eventually became a member of the Murray Street Church in New York City. Ferguson always desired to learn how to read and write, though her longing never came to fruition. Around age 10, she inquired of her enslaver about literacy and freedom, promising to live a life serving God, but was refused. She was also refused by her mistress, who claimed that Ferguson was already smarter than her own children. At age sixteen, Katy Ferguson's freedom was purchased by a white abolitionist for \$200, under the conditions that she would repay the remaining \$200. After almost a year of paid labor, Ferguson earned \$100, then someone from her church paid the remaining debt. By age eighteen, she was finally free.

Almost immediately, Katy Ferguson got married and began to have children, however, both of her babies died in infancy, and her husband soon thereafter. In grief and loneliness, she threw herself into her work as a caterer and laundress but felt wholly unsatisfied and unfulfilled. She often noticed the homeless children around her neighborhood, many of whom were European immigrants or the children of ex-slaves (Greene-Hayes, 2020). The children roamed around the city, stealing food and trying to leverage other means of survival. Ferguson settled in her mind, and heart then that she would do something to help. In 1793, she established the first documented Sunday school in New York City, inviting neighborhood children into her home on Sundays, and providing physical nourishment and spiritual edification.

Historically, Sunday schools in Black religious communities were “the chief avenues for transmitting knowledge of the Bible and teaching reading and writing” (Collier-Thomas, 2010, p. 48). It was a space of communal learning for children and adults, and a place of leadership for Black women, particularly those barred from preaching in historically Black denominations and excluded from teaching in more formal settings (Greene-Hayes, 2020). In 1814, the pastor of her church invited Ferguson to relocate the school into the lecture room of the church, which thereafter became known as the Murray Street Sabbath School (Hartvik, 1996).

Katy Ferguson welcomed all people: adults, children, Black, white, immigrants, citizens, etc. into her Sunday school and provided them Christian education, just as her mother had provided for her. Much of her students’ learning involved the memorization and recitation of scriptures and hymns, as she had committed much of the Bible to memory (Hartvik, 1996). However, Ferguson also invited literate community members to the Sunday school to instruct on the rudiments of reading and writing (Hartvik, 1996). Reports from the school documented that on average, about forty to fifty students were instructed by eight to fifteen teachers (Hartvik, 1996). Throughout her life, Katy Ferguson housed almost fifty homeless or neglected children in her home until she found suitable placements for them, half of which were white (Hartvik, 1996), demonstrating a compassion and care for the material conditions of children that transcended race.

Not only did Katy Ferguson pioneer an interracial Sunday school, but challenged the systemic displacement and disposal of poor and working-class children (Greene-Hayes, 2020). She moved beyond the color line to create a revolutionary space where *all* children were loved, protected, and nourished, while at the same time, providing Christian instruction that would aid them in the struggle of their life’s journey. Her quotidian actions demonstrate the true spirit of

abolitionist teaching: acknowledgement of the negligence of the state, commitment to action, and deep care for the human condition. Ferguson did not seek or receive widespread recognition for her humanitarian efforts, and is rarely recognized by contemporary scholars, partly because illiteracy prevented her from writing about her experiences. However, she represents an earlier group of Black religious women whose faith inspired them to respond to the physical, economic, sociopolitical and educational conditions of the enslaved and free Black population during the antebellum period.

Maria W. Stewart engaged in spiritual activism by traveling to the north to preach and lecture on issues such as abolition, racial uplift and women's rights during the 19th century, effectively establishing herself as a public intellectual (Peterson, 1995). Stewart represents early iterations of Black feminist thought and is often identified as a proto-Black feminist, one of the earliest documented to struggle on behalf of Black women during the antebellum era (Guy-Sheftall, 1995; Hill-Collins, 1990). In her 1831 tract, *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality*, Stewart inquired, "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" She called to conscious the stringent domestic labor that defined life for Black women and brought to light the specificity of Black women's experiences, regularly defined by both gender and racial oppression. She encouraged Black women to break free from the stifling gender definitions and reach their full potential by pursuing formal education and careers, particularly in teaching and other leadership roles.

Stewart is likewise a proto-*womanist*, placing the lived experience of Black women at the center of her theological interpretations and understandings. According to Douglas (1993),

[Maria] Stewart shows Black women have believed that God, especially God's presence as the Holy Spirit, has been with them to shield them and their community from death

and destruction. These women frequently testified that the Holy Spirit upheld them in their daily efforts to keep going. Their belief in the sustaining presence of God's spirit is perhaps indicative of what Alice Walker means when she says that a womanist 'loves the spirit.' (p. 298)

Stewart could not imagine a God who was not intimately concerned with the spiritual, emotional and sociopolitical needs and desires of Black people and Black women, more specifically. She effectively staked a claim for Black women as leaders of the anti-slavery and abolitionist movements, which she believed God himself ordained. She would go on to write prayers, meditations, newspaper articles, and political essays in which she challenged white Americans to become active abolitionists and encouraged Black people to take their political, economic, and educational futures into their own hands, in accordance with her theological interpretation of God's reparative justice. Likened to the writings of her mentor, staunch abolitionist, David Walker, and other Black male abolitionists, Stewart incorporated the Black jeremiad tradition into her works, condemning the sins of white supremacy and racism and prophesizing retribution for slavery. Yet, Stewart's usage of this rhetorical strategy is unique, what some would call a paradoxical theology (Harrell, 2008), as she combined Christian mercy, grace and radical love with retributive violence, demonstrating a unique form of abolitionism that did not fit neatly into the abolitionist traditions of the time (Henderson, 2013), and particularly for women.

Reception of her (often militant) public sermons and published writings was not what Stewart had hoped it would be. Her message attracted some followers but drew ire as well. Her attempt to speak as a female prophet resulted not in reformation, but in scorn and rejection from both Black and white Americans. Criticized by whites who rejected her abolitionism, she also faced backlash from some in the Black community who thought that in publicly admonishing Black men to work harder for equality, she overstepped the boundaries of acceptable woman behavior. Stewart recognized that her radical message would likely land on deaf ears and be ill-

supported by her contemporaries, but she was wholly undeterred. Emboldened, empowered and endowed. She declared,

The frowns of the world shall never discourage me nor its smiles flatter me; for with the help of God, I am resolved to withstand the fiery darts of the devil, and the assaults of wicked men The righteous are as bold as a lion, but the wicked fleeth when no man pursueth. I fear neither men nor devils; for the God in whom I trust is able to deliver me from the rage and malice of my enemies, and from them that rise up against me. (Richardson, 1987, p. 50).

Stewart was eventually forced to abandon her public platform as a speaker after only a few years. Despite her limited formal education, Stewart found willing ears and open hearts in the private audience of the students that she taught, serving as a schoolteacher in New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. for nearly three decades, and later in life, as a Sunday school teacher.

Other notable historical Black women can also be viewed as proto-womanists, as they challenged traditional doctrines that characterized Black women's racial and gender oppressions as part of God's divine racial-gender hierarchy (Moody, 2001). Enslaved women, like Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) and Harriet Tubman (1820-1913), developed fierce understandings about themselves, their conditions, and their God, which shaped their character, convictions and courage, inspiring them to become remarkable agents of change and justice. Harriet Tubman (1820-1913) is widely regarded and admired for her courageous anti-slavery activism and her work as a conductor on The Underground Railroad. However, less is known, or recognized, about the religious basis for her abolitionist work (Humez, 1993). Tubman was renowned as the “Moses of her people”, a reference to the biblical story of Moses in the book of Exodus, who bravely leads his people from the yoke of slavery under Pharaoh, as commanded by God. Led by the Spirit, Tubman declared, “God’s time is always near. He set the North Star in the heavens; He gave me the strength in my limbs; *He* meant I should be free” (Tubman, 1859, emphasis added).

Tubman returned to plantations dozens of times to help free Black men, women and children, demonstrating a commitment to the survival, liberation and wholeness of *all* Black people, regardless of age, class or gender. While these activities made her prominent in American memory, her service as a Union spy, scout, nurse and teacher during the Civil War, as well as her activism and philanthropy after the war, cemented her reputation. Tubman was also a passionate suffragist, attending conventions and becoming more active throughout the mid and late 19th century. She likewise fought for civil and political rights for those disabled and aged, establishing a nursing home for African Americans on her property in Auburn, N.Y. Tubman's life and radical action is a testament of her Christian faith and commitment to actualizing the God-given human rights of *all* Black people, particularly during an era when their humanity was contested.

Tubman and fellow proto-womanist, Sojourner Truth are often mistaken for each other because they were both enslaved, and born and raised in the north (Painter, 1997). However, while Tubman engaged in radically subversive and fugitive faith work, Truth made a vocation of speaking aloud and using her voice in the public sphere. Sojourner Truth linked the movement to abolish slavery and the movement to secure women's rights in her "Ar'n't I a Woman?" speech, delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention. She argued that for Black women, race and gender were inseparable. Inspired by her communion with God, often held alone in the woods, Truth walked to freedom in 1826 with her infant daughter Sophia. Although tempted to return to her enslavers, she had an encounter with the Holy Spirit, from which she gained the strength and confidence to continue on. Painter (1997) states,

Pentecostal that she was, Truth would have explained that the force that brought her from the soul murder of slavery into the authority of public advocacy was the power of the Holy Spirit. Her ability to call upon a supernatural power gave her a resource claimed by millions of black women and by disempowered people the world over. Without doubt, it

was Truth's religious faith that transformed her from Isabella, a domestic servant, into Sojourner Truth, a hero for three centuries--at least. (p. 4)

In this way, Truth was like countless Black women who called on the supernatural for the power and strength to survive one of the greatest human atrocities in world. Surviving the soul crushing institution of slavery was undoubtedly rooted in the power of the Holy Spirit on her life, as well as a set of soul values, or “the myriad ways enslaved people fought for their lives and how they valued themselves by recognizing that they could be enslaved in body yet free in their souls” (Berry, 2021, p. 202).

According to Braxton (1989), 19th century Black women expanded the religious conversion narrative within their autobiographies, often utilizing tools such as sass, criticism and biblical imagery. She also suggests that Black women’s quest for freedom was inextricably linked to her quest for literacy. To read and write was to develop a public voice and embody significant aspects of freedom. However, because Tubman and Truth never learned to formally read written or printed texts, their stories were marshalled by proxies who often found it difficult to convey the depth of their spiritual interiorities, divine encounters and prophetic visions. In Tubman’s case for example, the stories of her spiritual experiences were collected by white interviewers who found her religiosity powerful but unsettling, foreign, and strange, in comparison to their own experience (Humez, 1993). Nonetheless, both Tubman and Truth embodied immaculate literary skills in their ability to “read” the world, and in their hermeneutical ability to interpret and apply the Bible to their own lives. Truth proclaimed,

I can’t read, but I can hear. I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well, if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The Lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right. When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept and Lazarus came forth. And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and the woman who bore him. Man, where was your part? But the women are coming up blessed be God...

Truth condemned the relegation of women to the margins of society, recognizing that it was God and woman who bore Jesus, whereas man, had nothing to do with it. She heard the stories of biblical women like Mary and Martha as a driving force for seeing the nature, personhood and role of Jesus, specifically in the lives of women. In her actualization, Jesus was deeply touched and compassionate toward the sorrows and suffering of women, not one who despised, marginalized or discarded them.

Though not recognized as a formal teacher because of her illiteracy, proto-womanist Sojourner Truth used the podium to teach the general public about the riles of slavery--often sharing personal experiences-- to testify about the roots of her abolitionism. Grounded in her faith, Truth's abolitionist rhetoric and biblical references proved pedagogical in nature, establishing a culture of teaching and instruction among the public audience with whom she encountered. An article published in the *National Magazine* on October 16, 1892, spoke of Truth as "keen and quick witted, with a memory that never dropped a single thread, she was always ready with an answer that went straight to the mark, and often withered her opponent into silence." Demonstrating this discursive power, Truth (1863) delivered a moving speech before a group of white parents, teachers and students at a Sunday school convention where she spoke about the role of the educator in instructing Black and white children. She states,

Children, who made your skin white? Was it not God? Who made mine black? Was it not the same God? Am I to blame, therefore, because my skin is black? Does it not cast a reproach on our Maker to despise a part of his children because he has been pleased to give them a black skin? Indeed, children, it does; and your teachers ought to tell you so, and root up, if possible, the great sin of prejudice against color from your minds. While Sabbath-school teachers know of this great sin, and not only do not teach their pupils that it is a sin, but too often indulge in it themselves, can they expect God to bless them or the children? Does not God love colored children as well as white children? and did not the same Savior die to save the one as well as the other? If so, white children must know that if they go to heaven they must go there without their prejudice against color, for in heaven black and white are one in the love of Jesus. Now, children, remember what

Sojourner Truth has told you, and thus get rid of your prejudice and learn to love colored children that you may be all the children of your Father who is in heaven.

Sojourner Truth lived through a childhood where slaveholders separated her from her parents, family members, and loved ones, and at various times, severely beat her, sexually abused her, and left her educationally neglected. They, through their words and actions, taught Truth that she was unlovable, unworthy, incapable of learning, and disposable. Yet, she experienced personal intimacy with God who disrupted these ideals and showed her who she was in Him. Truth heard from the Holy Spirit, who certified her to preach publicly and challenge convention, even amongst children. She recognized that racial prejudice was maintained because children were being taught to adopt horrible ideals. Instead, she insisted that children be instructed about God as much as adults, and how He had fashioned all people in His image. Truth recognized it as a great injustice that Sabbath School teachers, and teachers more broadly, failed to teach children, of all races, about the personhood and character of God, who loved Black people just as much as white people, and that in maintaining racial prejudice disparaged the works of a perfect God who made them with no mistakes. In essence, she argued that for someone, especially those who claim to be Christian, to hate a Black person, is to hate God. Thus, in order to truly embody Christian faith, one must get rid of racial prejudice.

These early Black women teachers fully recognized that their actions might result in grave consequences, but found strength, fervent faith, provision and divine protection through their relationship with God. Their revolutionary activities demonstrated a radical, self-sacrificial, agape love of Black people, and by proxy, all of humanity, which can only be compared to the love demonstrated by the life sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This type of unconditional, transcendent love disregards reciprocity, but acts as a mirror for the society they envisioned.

These teachers also recognized that education was a vital force in defeating racial prejudice, and further, that adults played a dynamic role in the shaping the minds of subsequent generations. Each of these women, despite being excluded from formal education, contributed greatly to Black feminist thought (Hill-Collins, 2000) and womanist theological thought as teachers, utilizing various methods to teach about slavery, abolition, and freedom. At the core of all of their words and activities, though, was a depth of understanding about God, His relationship to and with Black people, and more specifically, Black women. They each knew that slavery was a deplorable sin and accepted the call to enact God's will for all of humanity: freedom. While this section explored the being, knowing and believing of proto-womanist teachers, the next section explores a cadre of Black women educators who aimed to dismantle racism and patriarchy within the church.

“Put your trust in the God of the oppressed and go forward!” Challenging Racism and Patriarchy in the Church

In *Spiritual Narratives*, Houchins (1988) documents the written narratives of 19th century Black women preachers and evangelists who each demonstrated the power of their Christian faith to give strength in the struggle for liberation from racial and gender restrictions inside and outside of the church. Former servant and itinerant preacher, Jarena Lee (1849) challenged the patriarchal dogma within the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Formerly enslaved Methodist minister, Richard Allen established the African Methodist Episcopal church in 1794, the first independent Protestant denomination to be founded by Black people as an act of self-determination and protest against the racial discrimination in the church (Andrews, 1993). The social themes of Allen's preaching were abolition, colonization, education, and temperance (George, 1973), informed by religious and spiritual beliefs that Black people

were equal in the sight of God. Simultaneously, Black clergymen and historically Black denominations, like the AME church, often excluded women from being ordained in the ministry and from preaching from the pulpit. Jarena Lee (1849) advocated against this marginalization, stating,

If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one? As those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear. Did not Mary *first* preach the risen Saviour, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity—hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? for she preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God.

Lee would go on to become the first woman ordained to preach by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1819 after impressing Richard Allen with her unrehearsed speaking skills one Sunday morning when the scheduled male preacher was overtaken by stage fright. She spoke and operated humbly, yet with great confidence—often referencing women disciples from the bible—with the recognition that her ordination was not given by man but was call of the Holy Spirit of God.

In a similar way, Julia Foote relied on the Holy Spirit to give her the confidence to challenge stringent social and denominational norms that restricted the ministry calling of Black women. After converting to Christianity at the age of fifteen and later joining the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church, Foote began to testify about her experiences of conversion and sanctification (the process of achieving salvation; going from the sinful nature to the perfect nature of Jesus Christ). Her husband and the pastor condemned her messages, and later ex-communicated her from the congregation. Despite their opposition, Foote went on to preach in cities and towns across the United States, and on one occasion ministered to more than 5,000 people. In 1894, she became the first woman ordained a deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, and continued offering religious instruction on concepts such as

redemption and righteousness, but from a womanist interpretation. While Black women like Jarena Lee and Julia Foote challenged the patriarchy laden within the Black church, some women, like Sarah Mapps Douglass, challenged the racism within a long celebrated abolitionist and religious sect.

Quakers, or the Society of Friends, have been long heralded as the first organization to take a collective stand against the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery in the Americas (Aptheker, 1937). They were convinced that slavery was incompatible with Christian values and condemned its immorality. In 1754, a Quaker, John Woolman, published a statement addressing his fellow Quakers in *Some Consideration of the Keeping of Negroes*, in favor of emancipation. Woolman's publications influenced the Society of Friends to recognize the evil of slavery (Plank, 2009). Soon, Quakers became some of the most outspoken critics of slavery, writing pamphlets, issuing statements, and giving lectures condemning the practice. In 1758, the annual meeting of the Philadelphia Society of Friends voted to exclude members who traded slaves, which became one of the first acts of an active abolition movement (Klein, 2002). In 1759, Quaker, Anthony Benezet's pamphlet, *Observations on the Inslaving [sic], Importing and Purchasing of Negroes*, became the first of many works produced by one of the most influential anti-slavery writers of 18th century America (Plank, 2009). Benjamin Lay, a Quaker and staunch abolitionist quoted the Bible stating that all men were equal under God and often led dramatic protests and demonstrations against slavery (Jackson, 2010). On one occasion, he temporarily kidnapped the child of slaveholders to demonstrate how Africans felt when their relatives were sold (Fleming, 2001). Nonetheless, Sarah Mapps Douglass testified about the staunch racial discrimination that often contradicted their abolitionist claims.

Sarah Mapps Douglass was the daughter of a prominent free Black Philadelphia family. Unfortunately, neither her social status, generational wealth, educational attainment, abolitionist activities nor religious convictions protected her from being treated as a second-class citizen within Quaker meetings. As a child, Douglass often attended Philadelphia's Arch Street Meeting of the Society of Friends with her mother, Grace Bustill Douglass, and the other Douglass children. While her children were still young, Grace endeavored to become a member of the Society of Friends so that her children could receive religious education, but was dissuaded by a Friend, as to not get her feelings hurt (Bacon, 2001). Sarah noticed the discrimination against her mother as a child, as they were often asked to sit under the stairs or on a back bench during meetings. Douglass described how "even when a child my soul was made sad with hearing five or six times during the course of one meeting this language of remonstrance addressed to those who were willing to sit by us." Unfortunately, her subsequent experiences as an adult did not improve. Attending a Society of Friends meeting in New York, no one spoke to her except one white woman who asked if she was a housekeeper (Clifford, 2014). She lamented her feelings to fellow Quakers and abolitionists, the Grimké sisters; and in 1839, Douglass provided the material for their famous "Letter on the Subject of Prejudice against Colour amongst the Society of Friends in the United States". She became the first African American, man or woman, to protest publicly regarding the racial discrimination within the Society of Friends (Bacon, 2001).

Despite the engrained racism of the Quakers, Douglass remained grounded in her religious faith and believed that her work as an abolitionist educator was part of a larger spiritual mission. She followed in her parents' footsteps, serving as a teacher at her mother's school beginning in 1825. Douglass was certain that education opened a path to civil rights and economic advancement, declaring, "Our enemies know that education will elevate us to an

equality with themselves. We also know, that it is of more importance to use than gold” (as cited in Baumgartner, 2019, p. 6). She was also deeply invested in the education of Black girls, teaching briefly at the Free African School for Girls in New York before establishing her own school for African American girls in her hometown of Philadelphia (Clifford, 2014). In a public letter, she offered a powerful motto to guide African American girls and women: “Be courageous; put your trust in the God of the oppressed and go forward!” (as cited in Baumgartner, 2019, p. 1). According to Douglass, Black women and girls had a distinct purpose, as given by God: to help free those oppressed by slavery.

Black women iterant preachers like Jarena Lee and Julia Foote traveled across the United States proclaiming the Gospel, or good news, of Jesus Christ to those who didn’t know Him, and increasing the knowledge and understanding of those who did, but from patriarchal standpoints. As preachers, public intellectuals *and* teachers, these women demonstrated in refusal to adhere to the restrictive androcentric rules of the Black church that God was no respecter of persons and could use women in service of the Christian ministry. Their lives and actions bore witness to the public, serving as its own form of curriculum and instruction. Sarah Mapps Douglass challenged the hypocrisy within the Society of Friends, who taught equality in theory, but in practice, continued to implement discriminatory practices. She likewise utilized her literacy and teaching skills to advance the education of the Black women and girls, grounded by a belief in a “God of the oppressed” who wholly supported abolition. Yet, Black women abolitionist teachers’ impact extended well beyond the pulpit and the podium. The next section explores Black women neo-abolitionists, those motivated by the spirit of early abolitionists to continue in the struggle to abolish all forms of oppression, inside and outside of schools, even after the legal abolition of slavery in 1863.

Neo-Abolitionist Teachers in the Afterlife of Slavery

Contemporary historians and scholars insist that slavery effectively established a racial calculus that persistently and permanently devalues Black life, legitimates violence against Black bodies, and reinscribes non-humanness upon those of African ascent (Sharpe, 2016; Hartman, 2007). As such, even after a deadly Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the abolition of slavery, Black people continues to exist in slavery's afterlives which includes "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). While slavery was no longer an official state policy and practice, it endured in the American social imagination, and consequently, in the everyday suffering experienced by African American people (Sharpe, 2016). Yet, in the midst of slavery's enduring presence, Black women teachers broadened the aims and scope of the abolitionist movement after the Emancipation Proclamation, from eradicating slavery to eradicating all forms of oppression and injustice, inside and outside of schools.

During March 1894, Frances Joseph-Gaudet was on the way to visit a sick member of her church but was arrested by the anguished cries of an elderly Black woman at the train station. Moved by her tears, Gaudet stopped and attempted to console her, to which the woman replied that it was "too late". Gaudet would learn that her son was charged with breaking into a store and stealing \$80 worth of goods and was subsequently sentenced to five years hard labor at the State Prison of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Later that evening, Gaudet read the newspaper and noticed a glaring headline "Twenty-four Negros sent to the Pen!" followed by a long list of names,-- including the elderly woman's son--the crimes committed, and the length of time to be served. Some were to serve a few months, some a few years, some decades and others were never to return home from prison. Feeling that something should be done to stop "this march to the

prisons” (Joseph-Gaudet, 1913, p. 13), Gaudet prayed and asked God to comfort the elderly woman, and to be with those families facing the incarceration of their loved one. It was during her prayer that she felt an urge in her spirit to go to the prisons and teach those in need.

Although Joseph-Gaudet attempted several times to banish the thought of teaching in prisons, during a church service, the Pastor read the parable of the Sheep and Goats from Matthew 25. It encourages Christians to take action to help those in need; but certain verses resonated in her spirit,

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. (Matthew 25: 34-36, NIV)

In the parable, Jesus makes clear that helping a person, regardless of their condition, is the same as helping Jesus Himself, and is thus, the duty of all those who profess to be Christians. Taking the sermon as confirmation, Frances Joseph-Gaudet “promised God if He would open the way I would strive to do His bidding” (Joseph-Gaudet, 1913, p. 14).

Frances Joseph-Gaudet would spend many years in prisons ministering to New Orleans’ most discarded, forgotten and forsaken; fueled with religious fervor that they would experience a freedom in Christ that the penal system and society effectively denied. As a teacher, she taught at the Boys’ House of Refuge, a reformatory established for juvenile delinquents. Following one of her lessons, she received a letter from a 12-year old Black boy who wrote passionately about his reading and writing skills, talents in map-making and the desire to return to Africa as a missionary, inspired by the international travels of Mrs. Joseph-Gaudet. The child concluded the letter with a desperate plea, “When you come here Wednesday please take me out” (Joseph-Gaudet, 1913, p. 124). Upon further investigation, Joseph-Gaudet learned that the child arrived

in Louisiana from Canton, Mississippi, where he had no family outside of his aged grandmother. He innocently believed that in coming to the reformatory, he would be provided with industrial education to help support her. In reality, however, he was charged with juvenile vagrancy and sent to the juvenile reformatory as punishment. As Joseph-Gaudet learned the background of all her students, she soon became acutely aware of the subjective nature of criminal law and its systemic willingness to incarcerate Black youth.

The House of Refuge, in deplorable condition and considered a “stain upon the character of the city... more suitable for cattle than humans” (Moran, 1971, p. 58), closed after four years, and the boys were then indentured to landholders in nearby parishes. In her 1913 memoir, Joseph-Gaudet rebuked the system of convict leasing that effectively placed Black people into a brutal labor system that eerily mirrored that of slavery. She wrote, “I would to God every State in the Union would abolish the leasing of its convicts to contractors. No more diabolical plan was ever hatched to punish the erring citizens” (p. 50). In full awareness of the nature of the criminal (in)justice system, Joseph-Gaudet increased her engagement beyond the prison classroom, often appearing in court to advocate for defendants who had no representation in an effort to protect incarcerated people against the state’s violation of their human dignity and civil rights. She argued,

Wardens and jailers become callous through seeing so much misery, and are apt to consider a man guilty because he is a prisoner, and being guilty, in their opinion, he loses all claim to kind treatment... I tell them that a man does not lose his humanity because he is a prisoner, that he still has rights which the deputies should respect. (p. 17-18)

Whenever a child was arrested for vagrancy or a petty misdemeanor, instead of being sent to a reformatory, which Joseph-Gaudet considered “resting places on the road to state prison” (p. 136), she brought them to her home.

Joseph-Gaudet's home soon swelled with Black children and teenagers victimized by the penal system. So, in 1902, she purchased a farm on Gentilly Road and founded the Colored Industrial Home and School, which later became she established the Colored Industrial Home and School, a boarding school for vulnerable children. She taught them the industrial skills to make a living, as well as the knowledge to survive in a world meant for their utter destruction. In addition, she likely provided Christian instruction grounded in an understanding of a Christ who not only cared about the human condition, but cared about Black people specifically, and endeavored for them to be free, physically and spiritually.

After a white woman commented on how intelligent and articulate Joseph-Gaudet was, saying that she "ought to be a white woman", she replied

"I would not insult my God who made me by finding fault with this swarthy skin. He knows what is best and placed me where He had need of me, and I am grateful to Him for the opportunity to show the world that I can serve Him well where He has placed me". What a pity some people worship color! It is not color that God looks at but character... How foolish are some of the people of this earth! The wisest king that ever ruled a people was black... David was great, but his black son Solomon was wise and a better king. God seemed to love the dark skins best for he made two-thirds of the earth's population dark skinned... I believe He [Jesus Christ] was colored... What does it matter, for we are told in the Bible, we shake awake in His likeness, we shall be like Him. Blessed book that assures us eternal life, that breathes one gospel for all! (p. 141)

Indeed, Frances Joseph-Gaudet embodied a Christology that saw Jesus Christ as Black, but simultaneously, as a savior expansive enough to reach and save all people. Because of her distinctive Christological perspective of a Black Jesus, Joseph-Gaudet's ministration began with Black prisoners, but soon expanded to all imprisoned people, irrespective of race, class, gender, age, nationality, or condition.

Frances Joseph-Gaudet dedicated her life to social work, prison reform and Christian education, attending to the temporal and spiritual needs of those imprisoned. She hosted weekly prayer meetings, furnished reading materials, led hundreds to Christ, and distributed clothes to

those not prepared to appear in the courts for trial. She also secured assistance for those unable to secure proper defense, acquittals for those unjustly accused, and brought to the attention of the judges and attorneys the cases and conditions of many whose cause would have gone unheard. Some of those Joseph-Gaudet ministered to were resistant to her radical teachings, especially given their dire circumstances, but she reminded them that regardless of the severity of their actions, God was faithful and just to forgive their sins (and crimes), heal their unrighteousness, and wash them completely clean. As a devout Christian and teacher, her prison ministry represented a radical abolitionist doctrine that suggested that no one was disposable or beyond salvation, undergirded by a theological understanding in a God who wanted all to come to Him, and to be made whole. Frances Joseph-Gaudet's lifelong dedication and spiritual commitment to prison reform, juvenile justice, and education earned the respect of prison officials, city and state authorities, and the Episcopal Church, where she is honored as a saint. Still, the afterlife of abolition was not only a time characterized by a system of convict leasing and juvenile incarceration but lynching and race riots were also prevalent throughout the Post-Reconstruction south, to which one teacher endeavored to instruct the general public of its ills.

In 1893, Ida B. Wells argued, "The Convict Lease System and Lynch Law are twin infamies which flourish hand in hand in many of the United States" (Harris, 1991, p. 67). Well beyond her years, she exposed what we now recognize as the prison-industrial complex (Davis, 2003), which received vast amounts of capital from the system of convict leasing and the exploitation of prison labor. Imprisoned men and women during the Post-Reconstruction era worked on railways, in mines and on plantations, the majority of whom were Black, to which Wells (1893) offered the following reason.

The religious, moral and philanthropic forces of the country – all the agencies which tend to uplift and reclaim the degraded and ignorant, are in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon. Not

only has very little effort been made by these forces to reclaim the Negro from the ignorance, immorality and shiftlessness with which he is charged, but he has always been and is now rigidly excluded from the enjoyment of those elevating influences toward which he felt voluntarily drawn. In communities where Negro population is largest and these counteracting influences most needed, the doors of churches, schools, concert halls, lecture rooms...have always been and are now closed to the Negro who enters on his own responsibility. Only as a servant or inferior being placed in one corner is he admitted. The white Christian and moral influences have not only done little to prevent the Negro becoming a criminal, but they have deliberately shut him out of everything which tends to make for good citizenship... The Negro is shut out and ignored, left to grow up in ignorance and vice. Only in the gambling dens and saloons does he meet any sort of welcome. What wonder that he falls into crime?

Wells exposed the hypocrisy and immorality of white Christians who not only excluded Black people from all opportunities for enfranchisement but created the societal conditions for criminal activity. She also recognized that the system of convict leasing and the lynch laws of the south were the result of white judges, juries, police, and other court officials who enacted prejudicial laws and policies against Black people, while at the same time, granting clemency to white criminals for the same or more severe crimes. Throughout Wells' life, she would bear witness and personally experience the various layers of systemic injustice and oppression imposed upon the Black community, to which she responded with deep religious conviction, moral agency, and social responsibility. While Wells is predominately recognized as a civil rights activist, journalist, and fierce anti-lynching crusader, less is known about how her faith inspired her neo-abolitionist work and how her career as a teacher actually helped catapult her transformational journalism career.

On July 16th, 1862 in Holly Springs, Mississippi, Ida B. Wells was born into slavery, six months prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. She was the eldest of eight children born to James and Elizabeth Wells, who were both active in the Republican Party during the Reconstruction era and exposed their children to leading Black figures, sociopolitical action and biblical instruction. James Wells was also involved in the Freedman's Aid Society, a group

geared primarily toward ensuring freedmen's education. His commitment to education is evidenced in his foundational efforts in establishing Shaw University (renamed Rust College), a historically Black college founded in Holly Springs, Mississippi in 1866, where he served on the inaugural board of trustees. Shaw is also where Ida Wells received schooling, advancing from the elementary level to the college department. In her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice*, Wells (1970) wrote that when she and her siblings were younger, "Our job was to go to school and learn all we could". All this changed in 1878, when a fatal yellow fever epidemic took the lives of both of her parents and one of her siblings. Refusing to allow her siblings to be separated, 16-year old Wells took on the financial responsibility of her five younger siblings, who stayed with her grandmother, friends and other relatives during the week, while she took on a job as a teacher.

Wells taught at a rural school located six miles away from the family home, returning home on the weekends to visit and take care of her siblings. After one term, however, she and her two sisters went to live with a maternal aunt in Memphis, Tennessee. While Wells waited to take the teacher's examination to instruct in the public schools, she accepted a job in nearby Woodstock, a rural Black community outside of Memphis, where an important incident occurred that would indefinitely impact her life path.

In 1884, Wells boarded the train and seated herself in the ladies' car. The conductor refused her paid ticket and ordered her to sit in the segregated car for Black people, which was also the smoker's cabin. Some eighty years before Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, twenty-two-year-old Wells refused to bend to racist and discriminatory Jim Crow laws and was subsequently dragged out and thrown from the train when it stopped at the next station. The Supreme Court, which paradoxically ruled the Civil Rights Act

of 1875 unconstitutional, encouraged Black people to fight in state courts for redress of maltreatment, which Wells did. She hired an attorney, sued the railroad company for damages, and was awarded \$500; however, the judgment was later overturned in federal courts. Her response to this injustice revealed how her faith in justice was inextricably tied to her faith in a just God, lamenting, "I felt so disappointed because I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people... O God, is there no ... justice in this land for us?" Still, Wells appealed to God to "show us the way, even as Thou led the children of Israel out of bondage into the promised land" (Wells & Duster, 1970, p. xviii). Delayed but not denied, Wells began to gain publicity in Memphis when she published an article chronicling the incident in *The Living Way*, a Black church weekly newspaper. Despite the devastating outcome, she encouraged Black people to stand up for their rights, as granted to them in Reconstruction legislation.

As a teacher, Wells often doubted her capability, partly because she had not received much formal teacher education, and because of her young age and limited life experience. However, because members of the local Black community saw teachers as leaders, they often consulted Wells for assistance and advice. Wells critiqued the teachings of the preachers in town, whom she felt had failed the educationally excluded Black community, believing that biblical and religious instruction should be applicable to everyday living. So, when she was offered an editorial position for the *Evening Star*, she gladly accepted, and began writing under the pseudonym, Iola. She intentionally wrote in a simple and digestible manner, with an understanding that the readership's literacy was limited. She primarily penned political columns on incidents of racial segregation, inequality, and other general concerns within the Black community.

Early writings from Wells reveals growing concern over the brutalization of Black people at the hands of white lynch mobs. Incidents of lynching upsurged during the 1880s as violent white mobs regularly brutally murdered Black people suspected of crimes, regardless of their innocence, wholly disregarding due process of law. In March 1885, she reflected on the shooting of thirteen Black men in Carroll County, Mississippi, once again appealing to God stating,

O, God when will these massacres cease—it was only because they had attempted to assassinate a white man (and for just cause I suppose). Colored men rarely attempt to wreak vengeance on a white one unless he has provoked it unduly. (cited in Townes, 1993, p. 113)

In recognition of the prejudicial nature of the justice system to punish Black people for their “crimes” of self-determination and self-defense, Wells cried out to God. She seemed to embody an understanding about the intrinsic nature and humanity of Black people not to impose harm, unless justifiably, and challenged the myth of Black criminality. She likewise embodied a theological understanding about a personal God who cared about the material conditions of Black people.

By 1886, Wells had taught in three states: California, Missouri, and Tennessee, and although she had a reputation for thoroughness and discipline, teaching in classrooms was not her forte, as the “confinement and monotony of the primary work began to grow distasteful” (Wells & Duster, 1970, p. 31). However, her writings gave her another outlet for instruction, which she found the most joy in. Having secured a teaching job in Memphis public schools, Wells saved her money and in 1889, became editor and co-owner of *The Free Speech and Headlight*, a Black-owned church newspaper, along with Reverend Taylor Nightingale, pastor of the historically Black Beale Street Baptist Church. All was going well, with hundreds of copies of the newspaper being sold on a weekly basis at churches, until Wells wrote an editorial about the conditions of the Black schools in Memphis. Though she knew her dismissal might be

imminent if the article was somehow connected back to her, she risked it all as she felt “some protest should be made over conditions in the colored schools” (Wells & Duster, 1970, p. 36).

Wells wrote about the unsafe and inadequate buildings for Black children, inequitable school funding, and the immorality of the teachers being sent to teach in Black schools. In 1891, Wells’ fears actualized as the Memphis Board of Education failed to renew her teaching contract, not because of her lack of ability or her character, but because her articles publicly condemned the internal happenings of the schools. Unapologetically, Wells stated,

Of course I had rather feared that might be the result; but I had taken a chance in the interest of the children of our race and had lost out... But I thought it was right to strike a blow against a glaring evil and I did not regret it. (Wells & Duster, 1970, p. 37)

Despite the inherent consequences, Wells saw it as a moral evil to subject Black children to inhumane conditions in segregated schools. She also felt that truth telling, whether in the classroom, or in the press, were moral necessities, part and parcel of her Christian duty. Wells (1892) later insisted “...there is no educator to compare with the press...” (Royster, 1997, p. 70). Wells’ termination actually worked out in her favor, as she then devoted all of her time and energy becoming a journalist, exposing all forms of violence and oppression against the Black community, in schools and beyond.

Ida B. Wells would continue her work after her tenure in the classroom, moving between the press, the print, and the podium. For the rest of her life, she would be an outspoken and courageous voice for civil and human rights, fighting educational inequity, gender inequality, economic disenfranchisement, segregation, and lynching. She also remained active in church and in the field of education and was a regular teacher of Sunday school classes. Importantly, her resolute faith continued to influence her mission, which she saw as a moral, social, educational and spiritual responsibility. For Wells, Christianity was not an arbitrary practice or frivolous

belief system, but an ethos that guided the happenings of all life. “The nation cannot profess Christianity”, she argued, “which makes the golden rule its foundation stone, and continue to deny equal opportunity for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to the black race” (Wells, 1913, p. 574).

As neo-abolitionists, both Wells and Joseph-Gaudet challenged the horrific systems of convict leasing and lynching that emerged in slavery’s afterlives. Wells (1895) recognized these as remnants and reformations of slavery, stating, “In slave times the Negro was kept subservient and submissive by the frequency and severity of the scourging, but, with freedom, a new system of intimidation came into vogue; the Negro was not only whipped and scourged; he was killed”. Yet, the distinct methods, refusals, and tenacity of neo-abolitionist teachers Frances Joseph-Gaudet and Ida B. Wells in the afterlife of slavery serve as an enlightening and hopeful guidepost. Whereas increased access to literacy provided these women with the material weapons to defend themselves against the system of enslavement and its afterlives, their Christian faith offered the necessary spiritual context through which to frame their experiences.

Discussion: A Theo-Ethical Imperative of Abolition

We take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life, and the unnaturalness and injustice of all special favoritisms, whether of sex, race, country, or condition... The colored woman feels that woman’s cause is one and universal; and that not till the image of God, whether in parian or ebony, is sacred and inviolable; not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as the accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman’s lesson taught and woman’s cause won — not the white woman’s, nor the black woman’s, not the red woman’s, but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong.

- Anna Julia Cooper (1893)

Black women are and have historically been at the forefront of liberation efforts through both formal and informal education...teaching resistance in various capacities as community activists, ministers, midwives, artists, and healers, and in

a plethora of settings such as in homes, churches, schools, parks, community centers, libraries, museums, on street corners, and through media.
- Perlow, et al. (2018, p. 1)

Black women played an undeniably significant role in the shaping of the 19th century abolitionist movement, many of whom were teachers. They lived during a time when the humanity of African American people was under systemic assault; yet, they were acutely aware of the promise of education and “inevitability associated their [educational] knowledge with their people’s collective battle for freedom” (Davis, 1983, p. 105). Enslaved and free Black women teachers resisted the institution of slavery in many ways to help Black people achieve freedom, education and equal rights. They broadened the agenda of the radical abolition movement in antebellum America to include equitable education, contested the discriminatory policies within the Black church, preached on the pulpit, testified against gender inequality in public forums, published pamphlets and articles in the press, participated in the Underground Railroad, and advocated against lynching and convict leasing after the abolition of slavery, among many other strategic approaches. Indeed, the commitment of Black women to the teaching profession was a natural extension of their work in the abolition movement, just as their abolition work was evidence of their faith. Through their narratives, we learn “the ways of survival, resilience, and struggle for liberation. And, [how] their Christian faith has sustained them while inspiring them to preach, pray, sing, shout, and press through the most difficult times in their lives” (Smith, 2012, p. 223).

Historical Black women teachers created liberatory spaces where inspirational teachings were shared and African cultural sensibilities (re)membered (Dillard, 2012) through spirituals, hymns, bible verses, oral storytelling and ancient folk tales (Williams, 2006). The Black church was the classroom, preachers were teachers, and the congregation was filled with eager students,

ready to learn. So, while access to literacy was purposefully withheld, or restricted, Black people gained literacy, not in formal public schools, but in Sabbath and Sunday schools, church basements, and secret religious spaces (Williams, 2006). Black women working in these spaces aimed not only to combat illiteracy among Black people, but the ideological misconceptions of Black people as inferior, depraved or damned. As such, historical abolitionist teaching aimed not only to free Black people from the visible chains of slavery, but to liberate their minds from the invisible chains of Black inferiority and white supremacy as God's will for their lives, and for society. As such, literacy equated to physical, educational and spiritual freedom.

Black women abolitionist teachers saw abolition not merely as moral or sociopolitical concept, but as an ethical and theological imperative, igniting them into radical action. As the root of many Black women abolitionist teachers' work, a theo-ethic of abolition emerged from this research. I have conceptualized this theo-ethic of abolition as the complex interplay of social, cultural, ethical and theological perspectives that are leveraged in the fight against oppressive structures. As evidenced in the lives, thoughts, and actions of historical Black women abolitionist teachers shared here, a theo-ethic of abolition includes several important tenets:

1. A spiritually impelled mission or divine calling for abolitionist education work;
2. An understanding that Black women, regardless of their background (literate, illiterate, enslaved, free, etc.) are particularly situated to speak about oppression and liberation, and are qualified by God, not man, to enact His mission;
3. Quest for spiritual meaning amid suffering;
4. Recognition of the symbiotic relationship between God and humanity;
5. Commitment to the survival and wholeness of all people and a continued struggle for liberation from all forms of oppression;
6. Acknowledgment of the limits of the "Christian state" and the hypocrisy and contradictions laden therein;
7. A saving grace that holds space for redemption and a refusal to discard even one person;
8. A fierce theology of liberation that envisions God as just, one who stands on the side of the oppressed and is an advocate for freedom, and at times, retributive violence;
9. Education as a civil, human and God given right;
10. Love as central to the work of abolition, as in Alice Walker's (1983) definition of a womanist, "loves the folk, loves struggle, and loves the Spirit".

As evident in the lives of the Black women abolitionist teachers presented here, they embodied a radical, transcendent, theo-ethic of abolition that points to customs of care and loves all people, but especially Black people. This type of agape love loves Blackness enough to go against all proscriptions of the time, and engages in outrageous/courageous behavior, willing to lay down their livelihood and lives. Importantly, Cone (1969) makes a critical delineation between sentimental love and the radical love of Jesus that demands justice. He states,

Love without the power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless. Indeed, there is no place in Christian theology for sentimental love, love without risk or cost. Love demands all, the whole of one's being. Thus, for the black [person] to believe the Word of God about [God's] love revealed in Christ, he/she must be prepared to meet head-on the sentimental "Christian" love of whites, which would make him a nonperson... It seems that whites forget about the necessary interrelatedness of love, justice and power when they encounter Black people. Love becomes emotional and sentimental. This sentimental, condescending love accounts for their desire to "help" by relieving the physical pains of the suffering blacks so they can satisfy their own religious piety and keep the poor powerless. But the new blacks, redeemed in Christ, must refuse their "help" and demand that blacks be confronted as persons. They must say to whites that authentic love is not "help," not giving Christmas baskets but working for political, social and economic justice, which always means a redistribution of power. It is a kind of power that enables the blacks to fight their own battles and thus keep their dignity. (p. 53-54)

Cone insists that one cannot practice love and at the same time practice racism. As such, good intentions, good deeds and philanthropy alone are not enough to actualize justice. The type of radical love central in a theo-ethic of abolition demands all and costs everything.

Lessons for Contemporary Education

On June 4th, 2020, Black sixth-grade English teacher Zakia Jarrett led her class in an in depth analysis of Nikki Giovanni's (2013) poem "Allowables". It reads,

I killed a spider
Not a murderous brown recluse
Nor even a black widow
And if the truth were told this
Was only a small

Sort of papery spider
Who should have run
When I picked up the book
But she didn't
And she scared me
And I smashed her

I don't think
I'm allowed

To kill something

Because I am

Frightened

On the surface, the poem revolves around the death of a spider and the offender's subsequent reflection. However, it articulates subliminal messages about the kind of responses that fear creates. Citing the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, Jarrett informed her students that his assailants responded to their interpretation of his Black skin, and not due to something he did. She exposed the irony of the poem's title to illustrate the ways in which police brutality, racialized terror and state sanctioned violence had indeed been allowed in the U.S., existing throughout history and persisting in modern times. But Jarrett refused the cultural hegemony that determinedly marks Black death as normal (and necessary) (Sharpe, 2016), and used the curriculum as requisite for the transformation of her students. Amid nationwide calls for racial reckoning, Zakia Jarrett radically engaged in the praxis of abolitionist teaching.

Love (2019) defines abolitionist teaching as the practice of pursuing educational freedom for all students, grounded in the methods of historical abolitionists. Rather than a singular approach, it is a way of being, evidenced in ideologies, everyday interactions, curricular practices and school-wide policies. Abolitionist teaching encourages teachers to "transgress" normed structures within education to focus on restoring humanity and freedom in schools

(hooks, 1994; Love, 2019). Yet, Love warns that because abolitionist teaching is a way to dismantle the systems and structures that perpetrate harm and injustice in education, and in society writ large, it always involves risk.

After her lesson, Zakiya Jarrett was suspended and placed on administrative leave, accused of “presenting inaccurate or inappropriate material about racial prejudice” (Young and Raphaelson, 2020).

The ruling came at the beginning of a growing national debate over the ways that concepts like race, racism, and white supremacy should be taught in schools, effectively censoring what teachers teach about the nation’s past. States across the country have since implemented various sanctions for teachers accused of teaching prohibited concepts: revocation of educator’s teaching license, fines, termination, and legal action.

Given the financial, emotional, and intellectual stress experienced by teachers who actively engage in abolitionist work, *why* do they do it? What would make anyone do it? Even further, with chronic divestment in public education, a corporate reform model that punishes student poverty, and the pandemic’s disruption of school life, why would anyone want to become a teacher, let alone welcome the inherent consequences that abolitionist teaching brings? As historical Black women teachers exemplify, something deeper must guide our practice. Abolition goes well beyond sociopolitical activism and public engagement, and actually begins with interiority, showing that outer change requires inner work, first and foremost. As such, ethics must guide our abolitionist praxis.

A theo-ethic of abolition helps us to examine our lives critically and evaluate what guides our everyday decision making, choices, actions and commitments, what inspires us to work toward freedom. These decisions are often difficult, uncomfortable, and completely against

normed practices and values. They can also be risky, as Zakia Jarrett's case shows, resulting in repercussions. Yet, while ethics have typically been characterized as a moral philosophy for assessing right versus wrong, a theo-ethic of abolition requires us to move away from this dichotomy to assess good versus right. In Jarrett's case for example, it was *good* practice to diversify the curriculum by including the works of Black women writers like Nikki Giovanni. Yet, *right* practice was using curriculum to refuse the cultural hegemony that determinedly marks Black death as normal (and necessary) (Sharpe, 2016). She understood this liberatory work as requisite for transforming the critical consciousness of her students, in hopes of moving toward critical action. Black women teachers, in history and in present times, help us to reconsider abolitionist praxis in a more robust and expansive manner to centralize the inner workings that are central to our actions.

One cannot begin to obliterate racial hierarchies without the recognition and understanding that even "the least of these"--those society has deemed as inherently less human, less valuable or worthy--actually matter. One cannot begin to protest in the name of #BlackLivesMatter in a way that moves beyond a trendy hashtag without first seeing Black people as God sees us, as beautiful, whole, capable, and human. One cannot begin to imagine a world without police and punishment without understanding the radical, agape love of a Creator who offers grace and mercy to all of humanity. One cannot build cooperative communities of care in schools, without first unearthing the ways that we may have internalized antiblackness. A theo-ethic of abolition helps us to develop an alternative consciousness about our material conditions that holds space for joy, blessed assurance and radical hope, even in the midst of persistent terror. It requires us to make new covenants with the self, God and humanity to do what's right, versus what's good. Gratefully, Black women abolitionist teachers have provided a

prophetic witness of the radical possibilities of a theo-ethic of abolition for transformation in our contemporary schools and well beyond.

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CHAPTER 2
THE FUGITIVE SPIRIT OF HISTORICAL BLACK WOMEN TEACHERS: THEORIZING
HUSH HARBORS AS PRAXIS

Abstract

Throughout history, U.S. schools have often operated as a site of Black suffering, destroying the inherent genius and spirit of Black students. As a result, it is vital for teachers to not only develop the competencies and pedagogical skills necessary to teach Black children, but create spaces of healing for their mind, body and spirit. In this theoretical article, I explore how historical Black women teachers subverted oppressive laws and policies, namely through the praxis of hush harbors. Historically, hush harbors were clandestine worship grounds where enslaved people stole away to commune with God, ancestors and each other, all outside of the panopticon of whiteness. In the hush harbor, they were safe and experienced freedom, helping them to neutralize the psychologically and spiritually annihilating effects of enslavement. To illustrate its cultural, spiritual and theoretical underpinnings, I draw on archival research of historical Black women teachers who not only survived during the most brutal time in American history—the era of chattel slavery and its afterlives—but created sacred spaces for Black students to thrive holistically, even in the midst of staunch antiblackness and racialized terror. I highlight how these, often fugitive, ways of knowing, being, and believing can challenge the material conditions of antiblackness in contemporary schools, and society, by radically cultivating sites of sanctuary--within, without, underneath, and beyond the state—to restore Black humanity, spirituality, and joy in schools.

Keywords: hush harbors, fugitivity, Black women teachers, archival research, sanctuary

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. Marginality as a site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.

- bell hooks (1989), “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”

Introduction

Schools for whites were in operation for decades, but the mere existence of schools for Black people during the Reconstruction era aroused anger, violence, and jealousy. While white supremacists didn't attempt to abolish public schools for Black people, they employed various tactics including intimidation, harassment, terror, fraud and bribery to pull back the widespread progress that the Black community leveraged (Alexander, 2020; Butchart, 2010, 2013). An 1868 issue of the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* details the repercussions of Black education in Wartrace, Tennessee.

... the house was undoubtedly set on fire by certain white men who had been heard to swear recently that the negroes should not have a school and get ahead of the white children. The house was an excellent one, and well furnished. A number of the colored people wept bitterly when they saw their school house in flames. (*Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, February 15, 1868)

Paramilitary and extrajudicial terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, Knights of the White Camelia, and the White League regularly enacted violence to drive Black teachers and students from schools and used every weapon at their disposal (Butchart, 2013; Williams, 2006). They poured vitriol into newspapers about Republican Party officials, incited riots, and abetted insurgents who attacked Black communities. They also used physical assault to suppress the voices of those who dared to take part in civil society, and work toward Black education and liberation. Arson was frequently used as a mode of suppression. In fact, schools taught by Black teachers were at a greater risk for terrorism, arson and violence than those taught by white teachers (Butchart, 2010). Givens (2021) notes “Between 1866 and 1876 well over six hundred

black southern schools were burned” (p. 4). Being a teacher during the Reconstruction era of the United States required much more than dedication and commitment. It demanded fierce courage and undying sacrifice (Butchart, 2013).

In Search of Refuge

Black women teachers Mary E. Perry and Martha L. Hoy were assaulted in 1865 and 1866 in Maryland (Butchart, 2010). Several white men physically assaulted Julia F. P. Dickson, another northern Black woman teacher, around the same time, resulting in her being totally unconscious for two days, and in recovery for weeks (Butchart, 2010). Edmonia Highgate (1866) was assaulted twice at school in 1866 and described her experience in this letter.

There has been much opposition to the School. Twice I have been shot at in my room. Some of my night-school scholars have been shot but none killed... The rebels here threatened to burn down the school and house in which I board before the first month was passed. Yet they have not materially harmed us... *I trust fearlessly in God and am safe.* (emphasis added)

Though emancipated by law in theory, physical and psychological violence against formerly enslaved people was not uncommon and continued to subject them to horrifying acts of terror, oppression and educational suppression in slavery’s afterlives (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016). These acts of backlash attempted to frustrate the educational progress of freed people, and destroy the cultural, sociopolitical and educational independence Blacks gained. Nonetheless, they were ineffective in suppressing the educational strivings of faith-filled, Black women teachers.

Edmonia Highgate testimony demonstrates that the violent attacks hadn’t harmed her or her students materially or physically. Moreover, from the remainder of her statement, we can also presume that they had not been harmed *spiritually*. Highgate, like many historical Black women teachers, cultivated a secret hiding place, a well of peace whence to draw. So, even

whilst her external environment was being attacked, she remained calm and moved “fearlessly” in the dangerous struggle for Black education.

Making a Way by Stealing Away to the Hush Harbor

Because of a dominant system that situates Black people and women to the margins of society, Black women have *always* developed and relied on transformational tools of resistance to sustain their/our spirit (Bassard, 1999; Dillard, 2021; Wade-Gayles, 1995; Coleman, 2008; Pierce, 2021). Yet, the history, or herstory, of Black education is filled with similar narratives of radical faith, communal wellbeing and wholeness. This subversive history documents the ways that Black people survived, thrived, imagined and etched out spaces of freedom in the midst of their/our enslavement and limitations, often by stealing away. One underexplored manifestation of such a space of radical freedom--which provides important lessons for the contexts, pedagogy and policies on behalf of Black students—arises from the sacred space and work of hush harbors.

During antebellum America, a hush harbor was a place where enslaved people retreated to practice cultural and spiritual traditions, in secret. It was a space of “refuge from the frustration, denigration, and barbarity that interposed itself recurrently into black life” (Murphy 2005, p. 137). In this article, I return to this history to explore the characteristics and outcomes of historical hush harbors to theorize its potential as praxis. To illustrate the theoretical and historical underpinnings of hush harbors as praxis, I draw on archival research of Black women teachers who not only survived enslavement and persistent racialized terror, but created sacred, subversive, liberatory spaces to restore the joy and spirit of Black students.

A Brief History of Antiblackness and Racialized Terror in Schools

History documents that any time white supremacy and hegemonic structures are challenged, it riles emotional, violent and regressive responses. Anderson (2016) traces the

history of a phenomenon she coins as white backlash, arguing that whenever Black people gain a modicum of sociopolitical or economic power, it is met with anger, hostility, and resentment amongst White Americans. She poignantly describes the Jim Crow era as a reaction to the Union victory in the Civil War, implementing dehumanizing segregationist practices, policies, and laws to circumvent perceived Black progress and enfranchisement. The Southern strategy was a policy implemented by the Republican Party to gain political support among white voters in the South. In addition to the issue of segregation, the party utilized their values of religion, gun control, and anti-Black racism to appeal to white voters. This policy essentially served as a retort to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting. In modern times, this phenomenon was shockingly demonstrated as white supremacists stormed the capital on January 7th, 2021, inarguably as a response to the democratic presidential win.

White backlash is also evident in the structure of schooling. During the 1960s, for example, schools across the nation shut down as a method of refusal to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court mandate to desegregate schools. Whites also retreated to the suburbs as a response. Rather than attending schools with Black children, white families abandoned former neighborhoods and established new ones where whiteness could continue to reign supreme (Bell, 1980, 2005; Clotfelter, 2004; Kluger, 1975). We see in modern times, as Anderson (2016) documents throughout history, that white backlash is not a new phenomenon. It is a violent, white supremacist strategy that has always been utilized to halt, thwart or evade justice and liberation for Black people.

Silencing as Backlash in the History of Black Education

Although it is impossible to capture the entire history of silencing as a white backlash tactic against Black education, I (re)member (Dillard, 2000, 2021) with both carefulness and

intentionality. I recall the monstrosity of violence toward Black people not for shock value or to center Black pain. Instead, to locate the light in the darkness. I return to the space of racialized horror and unimaginable pain with the expectation, and knowing, that something greater is there. I also provide this history to contextualize the forces of evil that historical Black women teachers were up against, and to further illustrate their/our incessant strivings toward racial, social and educational justice. Finally, the horrors of history provides a larger context in which to capture the essence, and necessity, of hush harbors.

Antebellum Strategies (1619-1860)

Prohibition. Fearing that literacy would prove a great threat to the financially lucrative slave system, whites in the Deep South passed strict laws, otherwise known as slave codes, prohibiting enslaved people from learning to read or write, and making it a crime for others to teach them (Rasmussen, 2010). In 1740, for example, South Carolina passed the following legislation regarding the education of slaves:

Whereas, the having slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe, in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person or persons shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds, current money.

These legislative responses were rooted in the deep fear of literate Black people spreading abolitionist materials, reading the Bible, furthering slave insurrections, and forging freedom papers and other writings (Albanese, 1976). Restrictive anti-literacy laws and policies were used as a tool to not only restrict literacy but prohibit certain emancipatory curricula from being spread among both the enslaved and free Black population. At the same time, the Common School Movement, which gained notable traction in the 1830s, was explicit in its exclusion of Blacks from its program that ushered white youth into their rightful inheritances of national

citizenship (Moss, 2009; Tyack, 1974; Givens, 2021). Some free Black people had provisional access to education in the North, but their experiences were undoubtedly shaped by antiblackness (Givens, 2021).

Dampening Desire. The insubordinate literate slave was treated just like the rebellious, fugitive slave, effectually criminalizing literacy, and making both acts of resistance highly punishable offenses (Williams, 2006; Givens, 2021). While the consequences for whites were mostly financial in nature, the penalties for Black people were much more severe. A common punishment for enslaved people discovered reading or writing included dozens of lashes, amputation and even death. Doc Daniel Dowdy, an enslaved man in Madison County, Georgia remembered, “The first time you was caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine-tails and the third time they cut the first jint offen your forefinger” (cited in Cornelius, 1983). Lizzie Williams voiced another story of a woman named Nancy, who could read and write, but after discovered by her enslaver, Oliver Perry, was stripped naked, whipped and branded (Cornelius, 1983). These public demonstrations served as methods of deterrence to dampen any desire of education among enslaved people.

Reconstruction Strategies (1861-1869)

Suppression. Even as the project of Black education formally developed after the abolition of slavery, the belated access to education continued to be riddled in antiblackness through subpar school structures, limited supplies, and prejudiced white teachers. Yet, in the ashes of a deadly Civil War,--rooted in the maintenance of Black subjugation and white dominance—Black people leveraged their newfound freedom and began to vigorously search for education. Even with limited means, the newly emancipated Black community compiled their collective resources to create, build and maintain schools that reflected their cultural values and

future aspirations (Givens, 2016, 2021; Siddle Walker, 1996; Webber, 1978; Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1903). Their strivings, however, were often consequential.

In an interview with Black Civil War veteran Colonel Douglass Wilson, he poignantly describes the sociopolitical issues that remained after the abolition of slavery, referring to the year 1866, as a "perfect reign of terror" (Albert, 1891, p. 138). He details how this haunting terrorism was not exclusive to Black adults, but also extended to Black children.

The children at school were also the object of the same murderous spirit. When we sent our children to school in the morning we had no idea that we should see them return home alive in the evening. Big white boys and half-grown men used to pelt them with stones and run them down with open knives, both to and from school. Sometimes they came home bruised, stabbed, beaten half to death, and sometimes quite dead. My own son himself was often thus beaten. He has on his forehead to-day a scar over his right eye which sadly tells the story of his trying experience in those days in his efforts to get an education. I was wounded in the war, trying to get my freedom, and he over the eye, trying to get an education. So we both call our scars marks of honor. (Albert, 1891, p. 139-140)

Douglass Wilson and his young Black son radically reconceived the bodily wounds of their struggle for freedom and education as "marks of honor". Yet, to teach toward Black freedom was to regularly face death as white terrorist groups enacted fatal violence to drive teachers and students from Black schools (Butchart, 2013; Williams, 2006), and sometimes successfully.

Jim Crow Era Strategy (1870-1965)

Annihilation of Articulation. During the early Jim Crow era, states created a dual educational system, strictly based on race. These separate and unequal educational provisions proved taxing for African Americans, many of whom were devastatingly impoverished due to centuries of subjugation, denial, and suppression. At the same time, the physical acts of white terrorism against formerly enslaved people continued to subject them to horrifying, inhumane acts of violence and oppression. In 1874, the *Central Christian Advocate* newspaper provided an account of the brutal murder of Julia Hayden, a 17-year old Black teacher.

It was on Saturday, August 22, at 2 o'clock, that two white men called at the house where she was boarding and asked to see the teacher for a few minutes. By some means they succeeded in shooting her while in bed, killing her almost instantly. Miss Hayden's only crime was that of being a colored teacher, and earnestly engaged in trying to aid her people in their struggle for elevation. She was, during the past two years, a student in the Central Tennessee College, where her fidelity to her studies and Christian and ladylike deportment won for the high esteem of her teachers and associates. Her family are highly respected at Spring Hill where they reside, and her untimely death casts a shadow over the hearts of a large circle of acquaintances. (*The New Northwest*, Portland, Oregon, 25 Sep 1874, Fri, p. 4)

The newspaper article humanizes Hayden, describing the impact she had on her classmates, associates and friends, as well as her desire to impact her community through education. At the same time, it clearly highlights the crime of being a Black teacher and struggling for Black education. While the attack against Hayden that claimed her life was aimed at one individual, it was part and parcel of a much broader move against Black enfranchisement through education, further, against the Black spirit. Her murder was a vicious tactic that sent the message—to Black and white teachers alike—that a similar fate could and would be actualized for those who worked to establish and teach at Black schools. It also worked to prevent anyone from engaging in liberatory Black education in the future.

The Liberatory Potential of Black Education

During the 19th and early 20th century, common white citizens, white terrorist groups, and powerful legislative bodies used a variety of silencing tactics to invoke fear and intimidation to destroy the Black educational agenda. The level of horror and anti-Black violence throughout this history begs the question of what whites understood and possibly foresaw in the practice of Black education that would make them resist so fiercely? What could possibly spur such vicious, lethal, exhaustive backlash? For Black theorists like Frank Wilderson (2003), antiblackness is “ontological and gratuitous” (p. 229), meaning that it is not contingent or based on any prior

transgression (Wilderson, 2010). Yet, I can hypothesize that whites, and Blacks, were crystal clear about the liberatory potential of Black education.

Given that the mere existence of Black being in school warranted death, it warrants serious scholarly consideration. Indeed, Black educational history is wrought with gut-wrenching narratives of anti-Black violence, white terrorism and educational exclusion. Simultaneously, it contains beautiful histories of emancipatory, self-determined, fugitive educational strivings, even in the midst of terror (Williams, 2006; Webber, 1978; Givens, 2021). Heeding Kirkland's (2021) recommendation to attend to that which has been rendered invisible: the indomitable, Black spirit, in the next section, I return to the historical hush harbors, where enslaved African Americans constructed a space of healing for their mind, body, and spirit.

The Invisible Institution: A (Re)turn to the Heart of the Hush Harbor

One time, I remember, we all were having a prayer-meeting in my cabin, and marster came up to the door and hollered out, 'You, Charlotte, what's all that fuss in there?' We all had to hush up for that night. I was so afraid old marster would see Aunt Jane. I knew Aunt Jane would have to suffer if her white people knew she was off at night. Marster used to say God was tired of us all hollering to him at night...none of us listened to him about singing and praying. I tell you we used to have some good times together praying and singing. He did not want us to pray, but we would have our little prayer-meeting anyhow. Sometimes when we met to hold our meetings we would put a big wash-tub full of water in the middle of the floor to catch the sound of our voices when we sung. When we all sung we would march around and shake each other's hands, and we would sing easy and low, so marster could not hear us. O, how happy I used to be in those meetings, although I was a slave! I thank the Lord Aunt Jane Lee lived by me. She helped me to make my peace with the Lord. O, the day I was converted! It seemed to me it was a paradise here below! It looked like I wanted nothing any more. Jesus was so sweet to my soul! Aunt Jane used to sing, 'Jesus! the name that charms our fears.' That hymn just suited my case. Sometimes I felt like preaching myself. It seemed I wanted to ask every body if they loved Jesus when I first got converted. I wanted to ask old marster, but he was Creole, and did not understand what I said much. Aunt Jane was the cause of so many on our plantation getting religion. We did not have any church to go to, but she would talk to us about old Virginia, how people done there. She said them beads and crosses we saw every body have was nothing. She said people must give their hearts to God, to love him and keep his commandments; and we believed what she said. I never wanted them beads I saw others have, for I just thought we would pray without any thing, and that God only wanted the heart.

- Charlotte Brooks cited in Albert, 1891

Fugitivity

The journey into the heart of the hush harbor requires attuned eyes to the “invisible institution” (Raboteau, 2004), often hidden in the woods, brushes, hollows, valleys, and swamps (Harvey, 2011). Connecting the significance of the natural environment for Africans, Metzger (2019) writes, “The sacred grove figures prominently in religio-spiritual traditions throughout the Africa... [it] is a physical place distinguished by the fact that it provides a forested enclave for the enactment of sacred ritual activities. (p. 32). hooks (2009) also describes the significance of the secluded natural environment for enslaved people, stating,

Reclaiming the inspiration and intention of our ancestors who acknowledged the sacredness of the earth, its power to stand as witness is vital to our contemporary survival. Again and again in slave narratives we read about black folks taking to the hills in search of freedom, moving into deep wilderness to share their sorrow with the natural habitat. We read about ways they found solace in wild things. (p. 48)

Temporarily escaping into the night, enslaved Africans stepped out from under the surveillance of the visible institution of slavery to take rest in the shadow of the Almighty (Psalms 91:1).

Hush harbors became their sacred, and secret, worship grounds (Raboteau, 2004; Harvey, 2011).

Formerly enslaved Simon Brown characterized this space clearly, stating,

They cherished meetings of their own where they could relax and enjoy the form of worship that pleased them and uplifted their spirits. ...they would steal away into the woods and meet in what they called the invisible church, or the hush harbor, where they constructed meeting places made from the branches of trees...there was no pretending in those prayer meetings. There was a living faith in a just God Who would one day answer the cries of His poor black children and deliver them from their enemies. *But the slaves never said a word to their white folk about this kind of faith.* (cited in Erskine, 2014, p. 133, emphasis added)

According to Hopkins (2000),

To be with their own oppressed kind where they could walk, talk, and have pleasure signified the risk of their surreptitious gathering suffering from discovery and punishment. Yet talking among themselves brought them power to be themselves alone

in the midst of God's created nature – “on the branches”. They could only talk when they were isolated in the space of nature's surroundings...But talking and walking in nature without the permission of the plantation authorities granted a true freedom and place for pleasure in the midst of their faith in a protective power greater than themselves. In this time and space, one sees and hears illegally created new creatures communing in holy greenery and speaking in a liberated tongue unknown to the masters. (p. 177).

Consecrated in the wilderness, enslaved people created a ground-swelling rupture to the slave system by running away from, and to, something else (Stovall, in McNeil, 2021).

Subversion

Enslaved people engaged in a variety of subversive activities to avoid detection of their hush harbors. They huddled underneath wetted quilts and rags; bending in a circle on the floor; or speaking into a vessel of water to drown out the sound. An overturned iron pot or kettle near the hush harbor served a similar purpose, to soften the sound of their liberated voices from reaching the ears of their captors (Raboteau, 2004). To locate the clandestine hush harbor, subtle guideposts, such as bent branches on the ground, led the way (Raboteau, 2004). A “look out” typically monitored the surroundings around of the hush harbor, sometimes climbing into trees to alert congregants of any impeding danger, including slave patrollers (Evans, 2008).

Congregants of the hush harbor also created an innovative system of codes, chants, and subversive activities. Spirituals, for example, a genre of music created by generations of enslaved Black people, merged African cultural heritage, oral traditions, biblical themes and stories, and everyday life into song (Johnson & Johnson, 2009; Barker, 2015). They provided a way for enslaved people to express the sorrows and horrors of their material conditions, as well as the faith that sustained them within it (Evans, 2008; Jones, 1993). Abolitionist and orator, Frederick Douglass (1845) described these songs as “tones, loud, long and deep, breathing the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains”.

Spirituals like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", "Roll, Jordan, Ross", "Go Down, Moses", "Wade in the Water", and "Steal Away to Jesus" were also laced with multiple meanings, signals, and hidden messages about the spiritual journey of faith, as well as a physical journey of escape (Barker, 2015). Wash Wilson (1937), a formerly enslaved man in Louisiana and Texas, stated,

When de niggers go round singin' "Steal Away to Jesus," dat mean dere gwine [going to] be a 'ligious meetin' dat night. Dat de sig'fication of a meetin'. De masters 'fore and after freedom didn't like dem 'ligious meetin's, so us natcherly slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewheres. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.

Syncretization

Once arriving in the sanctuary of clandestine worship, congregants cultivated cultural memory. Whether immediate or generational, they had embodied memories of freedom in Africa coursing through their veins. In reclaiming the richness and reach of such rooted memories, Erskine (2014) writes,

Enslaved people remembered Africa, and the memory of Africa became a controlling metaphor and organizing principle for Africans in the New World as they countered the hegemonic conditions imposed on them by their masters. They remembered the forests and they relived this experience of the forests through the practice of religious rituals in the brush arbors, often down by the riverside. (p. 28)

When enslaved Africans were forcibly brought to the United States, they brought with them rich cultural and spiritual traditions that miraculously survived the Middle Passage. These included the ring shout (or circle dance), spirit possession, syncopated and poly-rhythms, herbal remedies, reverence of ancestors, call and response, singing, dancing, and oral storytelling (Raboteau, 2004). Lincoln and Mamiya (2005) note,

the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath...black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and world views as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests. (p. 2)

Christianized enslaved people did not simply acquiesce to the religion of their oppressors, in fact, they *hated* the vitiated Gospel being preached (Raboteau, 2004). Instead, they syncretized their African spiritual and cultural sensibilities into their own distinct embodiment of Christianity.

Communion

Gathered in beloved community, enslaved Africans intimately communed with each other, and with God. According to a formerly enslaved attendee,

...everybody's heart was in tune, and when they called on God they made heaven ring. It was more than just Sunday meeting and then no godliness for a week. They would steal off to the fields and in the thickets and there . . . they called on God out of heavy hearts. (cited in Raboteau, 2004, p. 217)

Everyone in attendance gathered with a single purpose and all on one accord, knowing that when they called on God, in community, He answered. As a result, they made their collective petitions and lamentations known to God. They heeded the invitation that said,

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

Yet, their communal fugitivity was much more than a stealthy routine, or “Sunday meeting”; it was an embodied stealing away that gave way to a spiritual stealing away. Metzger (2019) writes,

More esoterically, the grove is metaphorical also a spiritual “place” where humans and deities interact and for some, it may also a place where spiritual dimensions overlap or where one leaves the mundane and enters spiritual realms, often to return to the mundane transformed. (p. 32).

In speaking of his experience in the hush harbor, Richard Carruthers (1937), a formerly enslaved congregant in Tennessee and Texas, remembered,

Us niggers used to have a prayin' ground down in the hollow and sometime we come out of the field ... scorchin' and burnin' up with nothin' to eat, and we wants to ask the good

Lawd to have mercy ... We takes a pine torch ... and goes down in the hollow to pray. Some gits so joyous they starts to holler loud and we has to stop up they mouth. I see niggers git so full of the Lawd and so happy they draps unconscious. (cited in Raboteau, 2004, p. 218)

Famished and physically exhausted from toiling all day in the hot sun, enslaved people gathered at night in the hush harbor to worship, often until the sun came back up. Getting “full of the Lord” in the hush harbor resulted in a sort of metaphysical heart transplant where hunger was exchanged for fullness, grief was exchanged for joy, exhaustion for rest, and despair for hope. Happiness, pleasure, and joy are rarely, if ever, associated with an institution so entrenched in horror, degradation, and brutal dehumanization. Yet, as Carruthers’ account suggests, in the presence of God and community, was the fullness of joy.

Prophesying

As part of their worship, attendees of the hush harbor also contemplated the futures of Black people. George Womble, a formerly enslaved man from Georgia, recalled,

...slaves would go to the woods at night where they sang and prayed and some used to say, “I *know* that some day we’ll be free and if we die before that time *our children will live to see it.*” The father of Jacob Stroyer, before his family went to bed, would pray that the time which he predicted would come, that is, the time of freedom when . . . “the children would be [their] own masters and mistresses.” (cited in Raboteau, 2004, p. 219, emphasis added)

Enslaved people, though having radical faith, believing in the unseen, for physical freedom in the present, prophesied the freedom that their descendants would leverage, even if they didn’t.

Taylor (1902) remembered her grandmother singing hymns in the hush harbor, recalling,

Oh, how these people prayed for freedom! I remember, one night, my grandmother went out into the suburbs of the city to a church meeting, and they were fervently singing this old hymn,--

 "Yes, we all shall be free,
 Yes, we all shall be free,
 Yes, we all shall be free,

When the Lord shall appear,"--
when the police came in and arrested all who were there, saying they were planning freedom, and sang "the Lord," in place of "Yankee"... Grandmother never forgot that night. (p. 8)

Shall, in the first person, connotes a future tense. For Taylor's grandmother, freedom for her descendants was inextricably linked to her own freedom. She might have heard Deuteronomy 7:9 (NLT), which says "Understand, therefore, that the Lord your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands". Hope for enslaved people was not only a discipline (Kaba, 2021), but an abolitionist spiritual practice; a faith-filled, optimistic, futuristic, supernatural habit of mind to foresee, and expect, greater than what currently is.

Habitation

The material reality *outside* of the hush harbor was that evil was always present, danger was always lurking, and death was imminent. Adeline Cunningham (1937), a formerly enslaved woman in Texas, stated,

No suh, we never goes to church. Times we sneaks in de woods and prays de Lawd to make us free and times one of de slaves got happy and made a noise dat dey heered at de big house and den de overseer come and whip us 'cause we prayed de Lawd to set us free.

Fannie Moore (1937) also remembered her mother being punished for her spiritual practices, stating,

One day she plowin' in de cotton fiel. All sudden like she let out a big yell. Den she sta't singin' an' a-shoutin', an' a-whoopin', an' a-hollerin'. Den it seem she plow all de harder. When she come home Marse Jim's mammy say: "What all dat goin' on in de fiel's? Yo' think we sen' you out there jes' to whoop and yell? No siree, we put you out there to work and you sho'betta work, else we git de overseeah to cowhide you ole black back." My mammy jes grin all over her black wrinkled face and say: "I's saved. De Lawd done tell me I's saved. Now I know de Lawd will show me de way, I ain't gwine grieve no more. No matter how much yo' all done beat me an' my childun de Lawd will show me de way. An' some day we never be slaves." Ole granny Moore grab de cowhide and slash mammy cross de back but mammy nebber yell. She jes go back to de fiel' singin'. (Webber, 1978, p. 125)

The spirit of the hush harbor was too powerful, too deep, too omnipresent, and too abiding to be confined to or contained in clandestine worship services in the woods. It was a secret and sacred place of refuge, rooted, grounded and divinely deposited *into* the enslaved. In bringing their material conditions to the alter of their hearts, they garnered supernatural strength to endure, and received spiritual salve for their aching emotional and psychological wounds. Hush harbors, then, were not only a location, destination, or visitation, but a *habitation*. Hush harbors were sacred spaces to commune directly with God with only a whisper, or a thought, emanating from the hush harbor to the field, and beyond.

In essence, hush harbors were secret hiding places to resort to, find safety in, and security in the midst of turmoil. This way of knowing, being *and* believing freed enslaved people to live joyful, vibrant, abundant, faith-filled lives, even while in physical bondage. As Fannie Moore's remembrance posits, violence was often the price for transgressive Black life beyond the reach of whiteness. Yet, stealing away continued, and took on new forms, while retaining old ones, as I later document, in the liberatory and fugitive Black spaces of teaching and learning.

Fertile Ground: Important Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual threads and theoretical frames that I weave together to theorize hush harbors as praxis emerge from marginality and Black educational fugitive space. While each are distinct, they are all rooted in Black radical traditions (Robinson, 1983), acknowledging the historical ways that Black people have struggled, and continue to struggle for freedom. In this section, I briefly highlight these perspectives as they are central to later explication of hush harbors as praxis.

Marginality

Since the founding of these United States, Black people have been relegated to the margins of society. Yet, it is in this liminal space, as Smith (1999, 2005, 2014) suggests, that we might locate possibilities for freedom. bell hooks' (1989, 1990) concept of marginality revisions the margin as more than just a site of deprivation, abandonment, and exclusion. She suggests that the margin is not a space that oppressed people should eschew, neglect, or surrender as part of their (re)location from margin to center. Rather, they should cling to it because it nourishes the capacity to rest, resist, and reimagine. It is from this central location that marginalized people engage in counter-hegemonic discourse, not found just in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. It is a space to create alternatives and transform our world by crafting new ones.

Marginality as a conceptual framework helps me to understand its duality. In particular, it helped me understand, theorize and articulate how Black women constructed hush harbors as both a space of resistance *and* redemption. In the context of this study, marginality also honors historical Black women who organized against hegemonic power structures, always from the margins of society, to create radical spaces of freedom, wholeness, and wellbeing.

Black Educational Fugitive Space

Relatedly, ross (2021) conceptualized Black educational fugitive space to explore the ways that Black students and teachers enact educational fugitivity by their social production of Black space, in the margin. She suggests that this space is both departure and refuge, created by and for Black people, to escape the conditions of anti-black racism in schools. ross's theorization draws on Afro-pessimism, a critical perspective that acknowledges the depth and breadth of violences enacted on Black people, from the past, to the present and toward the future (Wilderson, 2010; Hartman, 2007). Afro-pessimism understands the ontological positioning of

Black people as one of inescapable social death, with the recognition that anti-Black racism is not only pervasive, but *permanent* in U.S. and global society. Afro-pessimism in ross' (2021) conceptualization of Black educational fugitive space suggests that a strong understanding of the impossibility of reparation for Black people in schools helps us to develop the necessary tools to both survive and thrive.

Like Black educational fugitive space, hush harbors are created for and by Black people, specifically in the areas of teaching and learning. However, while my conceptualization of hush harbors recognizes the gratuitous violences against Black people in the history of our educational strivings, I choose to abide in the space that redress and redemption is not only possible, but was already made available, through faith. Hush harbors, as similar, but distinctive from Black educational fugitive space, are sites to envision our material worlds differently, specifically by shifting our perspective from the natural to the spiritual. Spirituality, then, is central to the work hush harbors as praxis.

Theorizing Hush Harbors as Praxis

In the next section, I outline some of the defining characteristics of hush harbors, as exemplified in the praxes of historical Black women teachers. These include communion, fugitivity, subversion, sanctuary, (re)membering and awakening. At the same time, I leave my theorization of hush harbors as praxis open for further scholarship exploration.

Communion

Sarah Mapps Douglass, a free-born 19th century abolitionist, teacher, and public lecturer taught at the African Free School in New York, a school for the children of enslaved and free Black people. Soon thereafter, she established her own school specifically for African American girls with the belief that the education and wellbeing of Black women and girls was central to the

development and advancement of the entire community. Douglass's school also provided students the opportunity to receive a high school education, the only such school in the nation at that time (Hine & Thompson, 1998). Yet, Douglass had a depth of understanding that the project of abolition went beyond individual efforts and necessitated community, just as in the hush harbor.

In September 1831, Sarah Mapps Douglass and her mother, Grace Bustill Douglass, helped co-found the Female Literary Association of Philadelphia (FLA), which encouraged self-improvement through education (McHenry, 2002; Dionne, 2020). Each meeting usually began with an address prepared by a member, followed by scripture reading, silent reflection, and prayer. Members then read aloud essays and stories that they had written and anonymously placed in a box (Lindhorst, 1998). However, the happenings of the enslaved population permeated discussion in their meetings to the point where they were no longer content with merely educating themselves. The Female Literary Association soon narrowed its focus from the mental improvement of free Black women to becoming wholly devoted to the plight of the enslaved, namely through education and abolition.

Female Literary Association members regularly submitted their writings for publication and were primary contributors to the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator's* Ladies Department section. Their constitution was published in the December 3rd, 1831 issue of *The Liberator*, proclaiming,

Conscious that among the various pursuits that have engaged the attention of mankind in the different eras of the world, none have ever been considered by persons of judgment and penetration, as superior to the cultivation of the intellectual powers, bestowed upon us by God of nature; it therefore becomes a duty incumbent upon us as women, as daughters of a despised race, to use our utmost endeavors to enlighten the understanding, to cultivate the talents entrusted to our keeping, that by so doing, we may in great measure, break down the strong barrier of prejudice, and raise ourselves to an equality with those of our fellow beings, who differ from us in complexion, but who are with

ourselves, children of one Eternal Parent, and by his immutable law, we are entitled to the same rights and privileges.

The constitution of the Female Literary Association illustrates a covenant, with God and humankind, to use their status as free Black women in the collective work of struggling for freedom, embodying a communal commitment to the wellbeing of the entire Black race (Lindhorst, 1998). As such, it was the duty of literate Black women to use those abilities to struggle against all forms of oppression. Douglass was likewise part of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS), whose constitution stated that their duty as Christian women was “to manifest our abhorrence of the flagrant injustice and deep sin of slavery, by united and vigorous exertions for its speedy removal, and for the restoration of the people of color to their inalienable rights” (Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, 1838, as cited in Schomp, 2007, p. 14). The founder of *The Liberator*, prominent white abolitionist and co-conspirator, William Lloyd Garrison, wrote to Sarah Mapps Douglass on March 5th, 1832, appreciative the abolitionist efforts of the FLA, stating,

The formation of this Society is a source of unspeakable satisfaction to my mind. 1st. It is a proof of the appreciation of knowledge by your sex. 2ndly. It is a concentration of mutual affection, of friendship and love, of moral influence, of intellectual strength, which, like a seven-fold cord, cannot easily be broken; and which is capable of changing the entire aspect of society. 3dly. Its effects upon the members of the association must tend to stir up in each breast ... not a vain ambition but a laudable spirit of emulation, and to perpetuate and enlarge the desire for improvement. 4thly. It cannot fail to attract the attention and induce the imitation of your sex in other places. 5thly. It puts a new weapon into my hands to use against southern oppressors. Most fervently do I bid you, as a Society, "God speed."

On the one year anniversary of the Female Literary Society, an anonymous member published an address in *The Liberator* on October 13th, 1832, insisting that free Black women persevere in the fight for abolition, recognizing the unity and sanctity in the collective struggle for freedom. She states,

To continue this association will be one way of showing our gratitude and of aiding the cause. I presume none of you doubt this; if there is one here so skeptical... I would bid her, if she wishes the enfranchisement of her sisters, to sympathize in their woes, to rehearse their wrongs to her friends on every occasion, *always remembering that our interests are one, that we rise or fall together*, and that we can never be elevated to our proper standing while they are in bondage. Too long has it been the policy of our enemies to persuade us that we are a superior race to the slaves, and that our superiority is owing to a mixture with the whites. Away with this idea, cast it from you with the indignation it deserves, and dare to assert that the black man is equal by nature with the white, and that slavery and not his color has debased him. Yet dare to tell our enemies, that with the powerful weapons of religion and education, we will do battle with the host of prejudice which surround us, satisfied that in the end we shall be more than conquerors. (cited in Robbins and Gates, 2017, p. 4, emphasis added)

Black women teachers built “communities within communities”, founding their own literary societies, schools, and clubs to mobilize and strategize against enslavement. In this “dialogical space” (Murray, 2018, p. 109), like-minded Black women communed with each other, “exchang[ing] knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and beliefs, and prepar[ing] for an increasingly public role in abolition” (Lindhorst, 1998, p. 267). They remembered their collective commitments--that our interests are one and that we rise or fall together—and established new covenants based on communal wellbeing. The FLA, as a hush harbor, became a radical space for Black women to produce new knowledge about the material conditions of Black people, as well as a space to imagine, and plan, new worlds.

The unique contributions of free, literate, Black women broadened the agenda of the radical abolition movement in antebellum America to include education. Indeed, the commitment of free Black women to the teaching profession was a natural extension of their work in the abolition movement, and vice versa. Deeper even, the ability to wed their commitments to education and abolition was a key characteristic of their lived lives and experiences at the intersections and margins of society. And because they lived dynamic, inseparable intersectional lives in the margins, they were fully equipped to engage in

intersectional activism. Berry and Gross (2020) suggest that such activism exists on a long historical continuum, as Black women teachers have always been powerful change agents who have indelibly shaped the Black community and the entire nation. They argue that “Black women have used their formidable ability to collectively organize both to battle systemic oppression and create unique sisterhood spaces all their own” (p. 3). The members of the FLA, as well as other Black women led organizations, served as a space of remembrance; to remember the promises of God, honor communal commitments, and gather the supernatural strength to sustain their collective work against oppressive systems, just as in the hush harbors.

Fugitivity

For Black people, learning to read and write was not merely a pathway toward economic mobility, but an assertion of their own humanity and resistance to being propertied (Anderson, 1988; Dumas, 2016). As such, literacy was both an instrument of resistance and liberation. The imminence of danger and death meant that Black women acting as “rebel literates” (Anderson, 1988), often ran great risks to share the education they procured. As a result, they escaped and constructed makeshift schools, very reminiscent of the hush harbor. Historical Black women teachers convened classes during the late hours of the night (Davis, 1983), often in “remote stable lofts, canebreakers, and swamps beyond the milieu of vigilant whites. Others held pit schools in gullies and concealed them with removable ceilings of brush or veins” (Snodgrass, 2015, p. 103).

In the 1860s, in Natchez, Mississippi, Lily Ann Granderson (or Milla Granson), an enslaved Black woman, established a clandestine night school in the slave quarters, holding classes from eleven o’clock at night until two o’clock in the morning, for seven years (Lerner, 1973; Davis, 1983; Neal & Dunn, 2020). Through her efforts, hundreds of students became

literate and used their newly acquired literacy skills to pen their own freedom papers, read abolitionist materials and stay abreast of current political events (Lerner, 1973). Fugitivity, as a covert activity of escape, wholly violated the prescribed parameters of Black American citizenship (Givens, 2021).

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Ann Jacobs (1861) documents her life being born into slavery and how she gained freedom for herself, and her children. She appeals to the heart of the reader by centering Black humanity, offering her own story as a testimony. Jacobs details her efforts to thwart repeated physical and sexual abuses by her enslaver for many years, all while trying to maintain her spirit. Her honest and heartbreaking narrative helped to expand knowledge about the horrors of slavery as an institution, groundbreaking to the literary genre of fugitive slave narratives. And by illuminating the intersectional experiences of enslavement for Black women and girls, she helped contour the abolitionist cause.

While many accounts of Jacob's life center her corporeal fugitivity in 1842, she had already engaged in the practice of educational fugitivity in her covert efforts to instruct fifty-three year-old, Fred. She wrote,

I knew an old black man, whose piety and childlike trust in God were beautiful to witness. At fifty-three years old he joined the Baptist church. He had a most earnest desire to learn to read. He thought he should know how to serve God better if he could only read the Bible. He came to me, and begged me to teach him. He said he could not pay me, for he had no money, but he would bring me nice fruit when the season for it came. I asked him if he didn't know it was contrary to law; and that slaves were whipped and imprisoned for teaching each other to read. This brought the tears into his eyes. "Don't be troubled uncle Fred," said I. "I have no thoughts of refusing to teach you. I only told you of the law, that you might know the danger, and be on your guard." He thought he could plan to come three times a week without its being suspected. I selected a quiet nook, where no intruder was likely to penetrate, and there I taught him his A, B, and C. Considering his age, his progress was astonishing. As soon as he could spell in two syllables he wanted to spell out words in the Bible. The happy smile that illuminated his face put joy into my heart. After spelling out a few words, he paused, and said, "Honey, it 'pears when I can read dis good book I shall be nearer to God... I only wants to read dis book, dat I may know how to live, den I hab no fear 'bout dying." I tried to encourage

him by speaking of the rapid progress he had made. "Hab patience, child," he replied. "I larns slow. I had no need of patience. His gratitude, and the happiness I imparted, were more than a recompense for all my trouble. (p. 111-112)

Jacobs was well aware of the dangers of the law which restricted literacy for enslaved people. Despite these restrictions, however, she effectively etched out a small, quiet space to deaden the dehumanizing system of enslavement. Jacobs described this solitary space as impenetrable to these forces, allowing Fred to progress at a more rapid pace. For Jacobs, being able to support and instruct Fred in his covert effort to steal liberatory education was worth the risk. Though accounts of Jacobs mention in passing that she was a teacher, a closer examination shows that she taught during and after the Civil War in the Washington, D.C. area and built what became known as the Jacobs School, continuing to carve out space for Black humanity and freedom.

In other cases, fugitive Black education took place within more established structures. In 1835, for example, Catherine Deveaux began secretly teaching freed and enslaved children at church, and later, in her home in Savannah, Georgia. Deveaux believed that Black children should be rightly taught about God, and later passed the teaching torch to her daughter, Jane, who expanded the curriculum (Johnson, 1992). When Union troops captured Savannah in 1864, they were surprised to find their school in operation. The Freedmen's Bureau subsequently hired Jane Deveaux to teach in the school they established for freedmen in the area. Together, this mother-daughter teaching duo instructed Black pupils for thirty years (Snodgrass, 2015; Johnson, 1992; Woodson, 1919), beginning with their fugitive efforts.

Scholars in Black studies have utilized the trope of fugitivity from the historicity of slavery to characterize the assorted actions of enslaved Black people resorting to other areas through various modes of escape. These include running away, the furtive actions of the Underground Railroad, and the establishment of maroon societies across the African diaspora

(Givens, 2021). However, Ford (2015) defined fugitivity as “a critical category for examining the artful escape of objectification, whether said objectification occurs through racialized aesthetic framing, commodification, or liberal juridico-political discourse” (p. 110). Using Ford’s conceptualization, fugitivity in the context of hush harbors as praxis denotes escape in both a physical and spiritual sense. Fugitivity was not an avoidance strategy, rather a mode of refusal by escaping, albeit temporarily, to create something radically different. Fugitivity, as evidenced in the praxis of historical Black women teachers, is grounded in the belief that freedom was indeed available, and a deep spiritual commitment to leverage it, by any means necessary. For these teachers, fugitivity referred to embodied, intellectual *and* spiritual escape, constructed and operating wholly *outside* of oppressive systems, and often times transpiring in secret.

Subversion

Despite the legal restrictions placed on formal education, members of the slave quarter community constructed a distinct informal learning culture, knowledge production system and teaching strategy, all through subversive means (Blassingame, 1972). While seemingly instructing enslaved youth on the basic skills pertaining to plantation labor and the upkeep of their own homes, enslaved grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters taught the skills needed to survive under the brutal slave system. Regardless of slaveholders’ efforts to instill in enslaved children a conception of themselves as inferior to whites, Black youth received an alternative message within the slave quarters (Webber, 1978).

Through secret religious teachings, spirituals, dance, oral storytelling, and other subversive means, enslaved children were reminded of their humanity and superior morality compared to the planter class (Webber, 1978). Enslaved women transmitted lessons like collective work and responsibility, antipathy toward whites, spirituality, the value of freedom,

and a strong impulse for literacy (Webber, 1978). The high valuation of literacy was attributed to the belief that such skills could greatly expand their world, only amplified by the fact that these skills were persistently withheld. Subversion then, as an essential element of hush harbors as praxis can be characterized as secret teachings and ways of being that undermine dominant structures, all while seemingly blending in.

Susie King Taylor was a nurse and teacher in the first Black regiment of the Civil War. Her 1902 autobiography, *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp*, chronicles daily life on the battlefield, and her efforts to educate Black soldiers. It likewise details her early schooling experiences, in particular, attending secret schools taught by Black women teachers. Taylor was born enslaved in 1848 but was permitted to live with her free grandmother in Savannah, Georgia at age 7. Taylor's nominally free status released her from physical labor and enabled her to pursue an education. The port city of Savannah afforded free and enslaved Black people relative mobility and boasted the state's largest free Black populace (Johnson, 1992). However, they were "constrained to learn in secret and with a patchwork of teachers because both the state of Georgia and the city of Savannah made it illegal to teach enslaved or free people of color to read or write" (Williams, 2005, p. 19). As a result, Black teachers and students engaged in education, often by utilizing subversive techniques and creative methods of evasion.

Black students took special care to avoid detection while going to and from school.

Writing of her experiences Taylor (1902) stated,

My brother and I being the two eldest, we were sent to a friend of my grandmother, Mrs. Woodhouse, a widow, to learn to read and write. She was a free woman and lived on Bay Lane, between Habersham and Price streets, about a half a mile from my house. We went every day about nine o'clock, with our books wrapped in paper to prevent the police or white persons from seeing them. We went in, one at a time, through the gate, into the yard to the L kitchen, which was the schoolroom. She had twenty-five or thirty children whom she taught, assisted by her daughter, Mary Jane. The neighbors would see us going in sometimes, but they supposed we were there learning trades, as it was the custom to

give children a trade of some kind. After school we left the same way we entered, one by one, when we would go to a square, about a block from the school, and wait for each other. (p. 5)

As Taylor's narrative suggests, Black children were co-conspirators in the fugitive project of Black education, working alongside Black women teachers. While it was normal and mundane for Black children to learn a trade, what actually took place was the struggle for literacy. Indeed, both the Black women teachers and the Black students operated in good faith and trust in each other, with a shared understanding of the practices, purposes, and penalties of their evasion.

According to Williams (1992), Black children,

... loitered around the playground, then individually walked off inconspicuously to a designated place; they carried buckets as though on an errand; they wrapped their books in newspaper; they picked chips on their way to school (the poor used chips as fuel); and they took circuitous routes to and from school (p. 278).

After a few years with Mrs. Woodhouse, Mary Beasley, another Black woman in Savannah, secretly instructed Taylor, and the other Black children in the area in what could be considered an upper-level elementary curriculum (Taylor, 1902). In speaking on the significance of Black women teachers in Savannah, Williams (1992) states,

Female black teachers were in the vanguard of efforts to educate black children in Savannah. It was a challenging job, but the burning desire to learn, which many of their pupils brought to school despite public officials' efforts to keep them ignorant, and the high value that the black community placed on education made teaching a rewarding experience. Although their schools lacked up-to-date books, chalkboards, and maps, teachers created a wholesome learning environment and provided their pupils with educational experiences that left a lasting impression. This training was especially important because many of the pupils, the first generation in their families to receive schooling, subsequently became community leaders. Without question, female teachers performed a valuable service to the black community (p. 278-279).

Indeed, the literacy skills, creativity, ingenuity, and sheer determination of these Black women teachers proved invaluable to generations of Black people.

Subversion, as a central element of hush harbors, challenged normed protocols of racial domination and educational exclusion, by working *within* it. Therein lies a creative, performative mode of resistance among Black women teachers, and students, to engage in quotidian Black life, while radically destabilizing oppressive systems. It is in these corporeal practices of evasion that Black people, enslaved and free, evaded the violence enacted on Black minds, bodies, and spirits. As their stories document, Black women began their literacy campaign during the antebellum period and expanded it even as the Civil War ended (Anderson, 1988). As a result, they *continued* to develop subversive strategies to create safe and free learning spaces for Black children.

Sanctuary

After the emancipation of slavery and in the ashes of a deadly Civil War, Black people began to vigorously search for education. Yet, states created a dual educational system, strictly based on race. These separate and unequal educational provisions proved taxing for African Americans, many of whom were devastatingly economically and educationally impoverished due to centuries of oppression, denial, and confinement. Yet, they had a fierce understanding of the ways in which Black people had been abandoned, discarded, and disregarded by the promised protections of U.S. democracy, and as a result, constructed liberatory spaces of their own. With limited means, the newly emancipated Black community compiled their collective resources to build and maintain schools that reflected their cultural values and future aspirations (Siddle-Walker, 1996; Anderson, 1988).

Lucy Craft Laney (1854 –1933), for example, a Black woman educator and educational activist, founded the first school for Black children in Augusta, Georgia in 1883, Haines Institute for Industrial and Normal Education, where she served as the principal for 50 years (Leslie,

2003). Prior to opening her own private boarding school, she graduated from Atlanta University's (later Clark Atlanta University) teacher preparation program in 1873, and went on to teach Black children in Macon, Milledgeville, and Savannah, Georgia for ten years (Yenser, 1933). Emboldened by her firm Christian faith, Laney protested the heartless treatment of her students by two white physicians who came to Haines School to vaccinate the children against smallpox (McCluskey, 2014). Though historical documents are unclear as to what exactly was said or took place, the children were sincerely frightened to the point where Laney asked the doctors to leave the school. The two white men became enraged that a Black woman would even dare question their professional judgment, and subsequently, had Laney arrested. She was charged for "impeding vaccination" and resisting arrest and was subsequently forced to pay a fine.

Though sanctioned, Laney's actions demonstrate a tenacious, no-nonsense attitude when it came to the protection and wellbeing of her "Black babies", as she called them (Laney, 1899). She ensured that Black children not only *felt* safe from the outside happenings of the world but were sheltered from the perpetuation and infiltration of violent anti-Black practices inside of school. There are also reports of Laney standing up for, defending, and shielding her students against law enforcement. Laney is said to have hidden a Black man falsely accused of shooting a white man from a lynch mob in one of the dormitories until he was cleared of the crime (McCluskey, 2014).

Lucy Craft Laney's emphasis on the schoolhouse as a sanctuary and space of refuge for Black students likewise extended into her fundraising efforts. In an early report to the Presbyterian Board, she describes her resolve,

We are sadly in need of a comfortable schoolhouse, not only to meet the demands of the increasing number of applicants, but to improve classification and a comfortable shelter. A comfortable room, besides being indispensable [sic] to health, with suitable furniture and appurtenances, has much to do with the discipline and progress of the school... This is especially true when children come from ... such poor homes (it pains me to say) ... We are striving to teach them to care for, to love, and to make home pleasant. We can have no success in this unless we can make the school surroundings pleasant, or at least decent (Laney, 1983, cited in McCluskey, 2014, p. 41).

What Laney describes here is what hooks (1989) refers to as a homeplace. hooks explains,

We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that “homeplace,” most often created and kept by Black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. (p. 42)

Laney viewed the schoolhouse as both an extension of the home and a defining civil and humanizing space. She endeavored to curate a space of physical, psychological and spiritual refuge; a space for Black children to feel and *be* safe. The physical space needed to be clean, warm and welcoming, not simply for aesthetics, but because it needed to be a place where Black children wanted to be. The school, as Laney argued, was a space of reflection of how Black children are seen by the teacher, and by society, more broadly; a space that influenced how they in turn saw themselves. Historical Black women teachers like Lucy Craft Laney created educational spaces, reminiscent of the hush harbor, built on the love of Black people, radical faith in God, and the protection of the minds, bodies *and* spirit of Black children.

(Re)membering

Widespread dominant ideology during the era of slavery maintained that Black people were innately unintelligent, hypersexual, animalistic, and uncivilized. They were incapable of learning to read, vote logically, or contribute to the job market economy. Essentially, Black people could never become American citizens because they/we were not even human beings.

Robert Knox (1850), an anatomist and ethnologist, offered a harrowing prediction in his book, *The Races of Men*, stating,

The past history of the Negro, of the Caffre, of the Hottentot, and of the Bosjeman, is simply a blank--St. Domingo forming but an episode. Can the black races become civilized? I should say not: their future history, then, must resemble the past. The Saxon race will never tolerate them--never amalgamate--never be at peace. . . . Wild, visionary, and pitiable theories have been offered respecting the colour of the black man, as if he differed only in colour from the white races; but he differs in everything else as much as in colour. He is no more a white man than an ass is a horse or a zebra. (p. 168)

Knox not only argued that Black history was blank, but Black futures were equally as bleak.

Across the nation, whites embodied and passed down similar destructive ideologies about their inherent supremacy as well as the innate inferiority of Black people. According to Murphy (2005), “slavery left a legacy of behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge deficiencies that needed to be addressed and reshaped if blacks were to be equal to the duties and promises of free citizenship” (p. 134). And it was Black women teachers who accepted the challenge, and spiritual calling, thus posed.

The institution of slavery endeavored to permanently erase the rich cultural traditions, histories, and contributions of African people. When not implicated in the project of erasure, mechanisms of antiblackness and white supremacy worked to distort, mischaracterize, and marginalize our ways of knowing and being, seducing us into forgetting (Dillard, 2012). Yet, Dillard (2012, 2021) offers (re)membering as both an act of resistance, and radical reclamation of our ruptured memories. She suggests that the prefix (re-) in parentheses is not an initial recognition of Blackness. Rather, it is a way of (re)minding Black people that we have always existed as beautiful containers of African knowledges, culture, history, and humanity. The hush harbor represents one such place of remembrance.

The slave *forgets* all his sufferings, except to *remind* others of the trials during the past week, exclaiming: 'Thank God, I shall not live here always!' Then they pass from one to

another, shaking hands, and bidding each other farewell ... As they separate, they sing a parting hymn of praise. (cited in Raboteau, 2004 p. 217, emphasis added)

In this way, hush harbors were spaces of both of deconstruction and reconstruction; a space to wholly disregard the bad faith teachings of white dominant culture and a space to reconstruct dreams of freedom. According to Erksine (2014),

It was primarily through religious rituals and the carving out of *black sacred spaces* that enslaved persons were able to affirm self and create a world over against the world proffered by the master for their families. With the creation of the Black church through the memory of Africa engendered by the African priest and the medicine man, they prevented slavery and the enslaved condition from dominating their consciousness and robbing them of their creativity to dream a new world... (p. 28)

Historical Black women teachers, hyperaware of the gratuitous violence against the minds, bodies and spirits of Black children, carved out hush harbors as Black sacred space to wholly reject what white dominant culture taught them to ignore and silence about themselves. Their refusals and remembrances manifested in various forms.

Leila Amos Pendleton was born in 1860 in Washington, D.C., where she attended local schools. After completing her own education, she dedicated her work to helping Black youth receive quality education, serving as a teacher in Washington's public schools and community activist during the late 19th century. She founded the Alpha Charity Club of Anacostia and the Social Purity Club of Washington, as well as serving in leadership roles within the Northeastern Federation of Women's Clubs. Based on her personal experiences as an educator and activist, Pendleton wrote and published *A Narrative of the Negro* (1912), which attempts to present a comprehensive, chronological and readable history of African and African-descendant peoples. In the preface, she describes the book as a sort of "family story to the colored children of America". The first chapter, "A Talk with the Children" begins stating,

MOST girls and boys, who are from twelve to fourteen years old can tell, if one should ask them, many interesting things about America, the country in which we live and most

children whose foreparents came from Europe or Asia have been taught to love those countries just because their kinfolk once lived there. Many little colored children can draw a map of Africa, tell some of its products and describe some of its people; I wonder how many have been taught to think of Africa with interest and affection, because our great, great grandparents came from that continent? Perhaps if we talk awhile about our Motherland and some of the notable things which have happened there, we shall all learn to love that wonderful country and be proud of it. (p. 5)

The book was not only written about Black people but directed specifically to an audience of Black children, whom America had taught little about the accomplishments of African people and the glory of their Motherland. According to Pendleton, being African, or Negro, was not something to be ashamed of; it was to be embraced with honor and pride.

Pendleton (1912) begins her historical overview with descriptions of early African civilizations and ethnic groups, including the Dahomey, Ashanti, Yoruba and the Kingdom of Abyssinia. She outlines the vast geography, history, climate, cultures, and wildlife of the African continent, illustrating the richness and diversity of the diaspora. Pendleton also reinforces for Black children, many of whom were offspring of formerly enslaved people, that our history did not begin with enslavement. At the same time, she provides honest and heart-wrenching accounts of the institution of slavery in order to challenge the dominant discourse of Black inferiority and inhumanity. She writes, "I want you to know how old and how evil a system slavery was, how in ancient times it covered the then known world, and how none of the races of the earth have escaped its effects" (p. 75). Pendleton provided a sort of *curricular fugitivity* to help students escape the psychological, emotional and spiritual residuals that slavery left, and escape to a space of empowerment by (re)membering.

In the book, Pendleton (1912) provides numerous accounts of resistance among Black people, before, during and after the Civil War. In this way, she not only (re)members enslaved

people's persistent refusal to being propertied, but the continued freedom struggle. In speaking of the Civil War, she writes,

War brought little relief; indeed many who had fought with great Bravery were returned to slavery, and the beginning of the nineteenth century found hope almost dead in the breast of slaves. Almost, but not entirely, for there have always been those among us whose faith and trust in God has never wavered and whose belief in the final triumph of justice and right has remained unshaken. (p. 107)

Pendleton had a fierce understanding that state action and intervention did little to bring enslaved people to full freedom. However, she encouraged her young readers not to lose hope, instead remaining steadfast, unmovable, grounded in a radical faith in the authority and justice of God. Pendleton's multidimensional approach to (re)membering Black history was lauded by Black schools; the 1971 edition of her book adopted as a textbook in Washington, D.C. public schools (King, 2015).

(Re)membering is an essential element of hush harbor as praxis and was central to the work of historical Black women teachers. Aware of the anti-Black climate that Black children lived and existed in, Black women teachers not only contemplated ways to abolish systems, but the thinking, mindsets, ideologies, and internalized oppressions that persistently held Black people bound. These women helped Black children to both forget and unlearn dominant ways of being and knowing, in order to uplift them and help them (re)member who and whose they are. This exemplifies the brilliant ability and imaginative tendency of historical Black women teachers to both deconstruct and reconstruct, and often simultaneously. It is from the space of the hush harbor that we (re)member our history, our culture, our humanity, our Motherland, and our God, giving rise to a spiritual awakening.

Edification

Nannie Helen Burroughs was a teacher, orator, religious leader and women's suffragist who gained national recognition for her 1900 speech "How the Sisters Are Hindered from Helping" at the National Baptist Convention, admonishing the sexism within the organization. She was born on May 2nd, 1879 during a time when social, economic and educational opportunities for Black women were severely limited by Jim Crow segregation. After graduating with honors in 1896 from the M Street School in Washington, D.C., Burroughs, the daughter of formerly enslaved parents in Virginia, endeavored to become a teacher to combat these societal ills. Her ambitions, however, were squelched as she faced racism, classism, and colorism in her job search and was unable to secure a teaching position. The denial however, prompted Burroughs to start her own school, and in 1909, she did. With funds secured by the National Baptist Convention and its auxiliary group, the Women's Convention, Burroughs founded a private school, the National Training School for Women and Girls (NTS), with the aspiration of training young Black women in the early 20th century. For Burroughs, the impartation of knowledge and skills characteristic of education was not merely enough, her Black female students needed edification, the instruction, development and improvement of a person spiritually *and* intellectually.

Burroughs was an admirer of educational greats W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington (Johnson, 2000). However, she is identified as being more closely aligned with Washington's emphasis on industrial education rather than DuBois's focus on classical training and development of the intellect. However, Burroughs' educational philosophy cannot fit squarely into a box as she believed in both philosophies (Brooks, 1978; Easter, 1995; Johnson, 2000). Burroughs recognized that the one-size-fits all approach was ill-suited for her students,

and highlighted this in a speech to the Women's Convention stating, "We believe that an industrial and classical education can be simultaneously attained, and it our duty to get both" (cited in McCluskey, 2014, p. 106). In actuality, Burroughs work is situated within the Black activist tradition (Brooks, 1978; Gyant, 1996; Lerner, 1973; McClusky, 1997), exemplifying a depth of understanding of the complex realities that Black women faced in the first half of the 20th century, as well as the necessity to create a space for both/and.

Although different in scope and purpose, private schools founded by Black women during this period were all intended to address shortcomings in the public system available to Black students (McCluskey, 1997). Burroughs, like other Black women school founders such as Lucy Craft Laney, Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Janie Porter Barrett struggled with the need to prepare their students for the economic realities of the day while equipping them with the skills, knowledges, and understandings needed to transform those realities. Like her contemporaries, Burroughs' work is situated in a radical tradition of self-help and racial uplift, grappling with the question of how best to educate and prepare Black children for the future (Bair, 2008). Johnson (2000) suggests that for Burroughs "working for race uplift and education became intertwined" (p. 114). But unlike other Black school leaders, Burroughs had the freedom to implement a school vision to support and develop the intellectual and spiritual identities of Black women and girls without the fear of reprisals from white philanthropists (Murray, 2018), operating wholly outside of traditional power structures. As such, Burroughs crafted a mission that was responsive to the oppressive forces confronted by her students, attracting Black young women from many different parts across the United States and the African diaspora (McCluskey, 2014). For Burroughs, a deeply spiritual woman, her task was one of racial, intellectual *and* spiritual uplift.

To speak about the work of Nannie Helen Burroughs would be remiss without an understanding of the ways she thought about God, Christianity, Black people and society (Graves, 2019). In a lecture printed in the December 23rd issue of the *Black Dispatch*, published in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, Burroughs stated,

Organize yourself inside. Teach your children the internals and externals, rather than the externals. Be more concerned with ‘putting in’ than ‘getting on.’ Ye have been too bothered about the externals--clothes, money. What we need are mental and spiritual giants who are aflame with a purpose...But we’re not going to get them as individuals. The day of individualism is past. We’ll get them as a great race or group... We’re a race ready to crusade, for we’ve recognized that we’re a race on this continent that can work out its own salvation. A race must build for nobility of character, for a conquest not on things, but on *spirit*.

For Burroughs, edification, not education was to “teach the internals”; it was work of the spirit. Consequently, the curriculum at the National Training School was unique in that faith was infused in every aspect of the school. Burroughs utilized the Bible, biblical teachings and religious understandings to instruct students. Students explored female Bible characters in depth and were trained to explain the significance of their actions throughout human history (Jackson, 2015). At the same time, Burroughs drew specifically on the importance of Black women in the fight for justice and equity, effectively establishing an alternative Black curriculum (Bair, 2008; Johnson, 2000; Murray, 2018). Burroughs expected the young women graduating from the NTS to do their part in improving conditions in Black homes and communities. Because of this belief, education was no longer just about imparting knowledge and skills to make a living but edifying their spirit as a weapon against the obstacles of race, class, gender oppression that they would undoubtedly encounter in society (McCluskey, 2014). In a 1934 article written for the *Afro-American* newspaper, Burroughs stated, “the American Negro has enough weapons in his own possession right now, to use effectively, [and] serve notice on the world that he is taking himself

seriously and means to fight his battles with the only weapons he has". For her, these weapons were spiritual.

Burroughs emphasized Black history at the NTS because she wanted to instill a sense of racial pride in her students. Indeed, Burroughs had white supporters and was a staunch believer in Christian principles but believed that Black people were uniquely equipped with spiritual weapons, or gifts, to navigate an oppressive society. She implored Black people to stop imitating the materialism of early 20th century Whites and to return to their spiritual roots. In a 1927 *Southern Workman* article she wrote,

When the Negro learns what manner of man he is *spiritually*, he will wake up all over. He will stop playing white even on the stage. He will rise in the majesty of his own soul. He will glorify the beauty of his own brown skin. He will stop thinking white and go to thinking straight and living right. He will realize that wrong-reaching, and wrong-bleaching and wrong-mixing have "most nigh ruin't him" and he will redeem his body and rescue his soul from the bondage of that death...I believe it is the Negro's sacred duty to spiritualize American life and popularize his color instead of worshipping the color (or lack of color) of another race. It can be done in Negro life, in pictures, in plays, in books, in spirit...

Burroughs believed that once her students understood who they were spiritually, they would "wake up all over", completely transforming their thinking, knowing and being in the world. For Burroughs, this awakening is facilitated through an understanding of who they are as African people, and who they are as God's children. As they learned about the character of God, His love for Black people, their African ancestors, cultures, histories, and futures, they would develop confidence and boldness. Even further, they would take their knowledge into their homes and communities, equipped to confront and combat white supremacy and anti-Black violence with their spirits intact. Recognizing full well the destructive impact of racial segregation, Burroughs spoke of it this way,

Men and women are not made on trains and on streetcars. If in our homes there is implanted in the hearts of our children, of our young men and of our young women the

thought they are what they are, not by environment, but of themselves, this effort to teach a lesson of inferiority will be futile. (Hine & Thompson, 1998, p. 191)

One of the primary goals of the National Training School was to equip students with the ability to confront all forms of oppression without losing their identity, humanity, or dignity. Burroughs endeavored to help Black women remember who they are as African ascendant people, *and* whose they are as God's people through edification, just as in the hush harbors. Delphine Harper, a Washington resident and a cousin of Burroughs stated, "The secret of her success was really no secret at all. In times of turmoil, she would find a quiet place to pray and meditate. When she emerged, her foresight and determination would be restored" (quoted in Milloy, 1992). In conclusion, Burroughs created a sacred space for Black women and girls to be edified, syncretizing intellectual, racial, and spiritual pursuits.

Cultivating Hush Harbors in Contemporary Times

Historical Black women abolitionist teachers survived and thrived, in the midst of enslavement and persistent racialized terror. They boldly subverted hegemonic structures, through furtive or clandestine means, placing their Black students, families and communities above restrictive laws and looming material consequences (Givens, 2021). As a result, they not only created liberatory space to resist the antagonism toward Black being but constructed spaces of Black *wellbeing*. I argue that hush harbors were, and remain, spaces of fierce resistance. Hanh (1975) suggests,

Resistance, at root, I think, must mean more than resistance against war. It is a resistance against all kinds of things that are like war. Because living in modern society, one ... is robbed permanently of humanness, the capacity of being oneself. So perhaps, first of all, resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted, and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly. This may sound as though it falls short of a positive act of resistance. Nevertheless, it is very basic. I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness. (in hooks, 2004, p. 171-172)

The praxis of hush harbors, I suggest, is an act of resistance, as much as it is a space that nourishes one's capacity to resist. It is in this space that Black people located and repaired the parts of themselves that they had been seduced into forgetting (Dillard, 2012). They are likewise a mode of attending to both the imminence of Black death and the intimacy of Black aliveness (Quashie, 2021), often simultaneously. This complex configuration ruptures boundaries and binaries, such as slavery/freedom, secular/spiritual, individual/community, ancestral wisdom/biblical understanding and education/edification. Hush harbors then, are a space where the mind, body *and* spirit of Black people reunite, returning back to a place of wholeness.

In the context of teaching and learning, hush harbors serve as a refuge, an enclosure, a sanctuary to uplift Black children in ways that affirm their/our dignity and humanity. They are similar to what abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1853) called "A Nation in the Midst of a Nation", because they often exist in a liminal space of exception within, but wholly existent outside of dominant culture. They act to counter the psychological, epistemological and spiritual violences of slavery, and its afterlives (Hartman, 2007) that Black people continue to be forced to bear (Dunbar, 2017; Lester, 1968). As this paper documents, historical Black women teachers cleaved to this marginalized space, not as a site of exclusion or abandonment, but one of spiritual groundedness, supernatural freedom, and radical (im)possibilities. The liberatory praxis of hush harbors coupled with the fugitive spirit of historical Black women teachers can teach us much about the legacy and significance of Black subversive resistance, Black women's pedagogical excellence (Acosta, 2019), and the radical Black faith traditions that have sustained the Black spirit for generations. It also holds bearing on how we historicize current educational crises and how we conceive of our educational future.

Considerations for Contemporary Education

As these radical Black women teachers demonstrate, hush harbors are self-constructed spaces to heal and nurture the whole Black being; a space that moves beyond the material and taps into something deeper. They are usually constructed subversively, but can be located anywhere: in books, classrooms, curriculum, organizations, practices, in a quiet nook, and in homes, among other locations. Perhaps more importantly, however, they are embodied. I agree with bell hooks (1994) when she stated, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the *souls* of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13).

If Black children are to achieve their full potential in education, and in life more broadly, it is of upmost importance to create spaces of physical, psychological and spiritual refuge. Spaces that shield Black students from the panopticon of whiteness, and the evils of the world system that deem them hedonistic, ineducable, reprobate, or to some degree morally incapacitated (Givens, 2016). As such, teachers *must* root their praxis in the belief that Blackness already has value and humanity, without the need for achievement, excellence, or evidence. Hush harbors then are a response to anything that violates that value, and a space to mobilize, strategize, and organize against it.

Hush harbors, in the contemporary education context, is considered a neo-abolitionist pedagogy, a “‘third space’ to process emotional responses and discuss social positionalities to prevent unproductive feelings of guilt or pity that function to further otherize” (Blum et al., 2021). It is an embodied praxis of radical resistance, restoration and redemption that attends to the material, just as it adheres to the spiritual, enacted in people, practices, policies and programs inside and outside of school. They enable Black students with the tools to hold fast to the

seemingly disparate areas of their identities and lives, and learn from historical exemplars, all with the purpose of seeing themselves as capable of living abundant lives and effecting change on an individual, communal, and systemic levels. Hush harbors serve as a divine interruption and intervention against the conditions that delegate Black people to the margins of society. Yet, it is the shadows, alleyways, undergrounds, and irregulated spaces that make way for creative cultural and spiritual expressions of love, joy, creativity, freedom dreaming, and power, in knowing, being, and becoming fully free.

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CHAPTER 3

TO BE AN ABOLITIONIST TEACHER: (RE)CONSTRUCTING EDUCATION IN THE
AFTERLIFE OF ABOLITION

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Abstract

Abolition has always been a dual project, and remains as such in our present time, in that it demands the complete destruction of oppressive structures, as well as *reconstruction*. In this final paper, I extend the abolitionist trajectory of historical Black women teachers to examine how they responded *after* the abolition of slavery. With their newfound freedom, what kind of world did they imagine? What worlds did they create? What obstacles did they face? Through an examination of the revolutionary Reconstruction era, I offer implications for contemporary abolitionist teachers with the belief that this history is instructive and provides lessons for how we might reimagine and reconstruct education once oppressive structures are eradicated in our current times. As a framework, (Re)construction helps us to see how historical Black women built alternatives in their relentless pursuit for full freedom, invites us to explore these alternatives, and to construct a New World full of radical (im)possibilities.

Keywords: Reconstruction, afterlife of abolition, abolitionist teaching, Black women teachers

Introduction

In the first two papers of my dissertation research study, I sought to establish the significance of historical Black women teachers in the fight for abolition. I argued that they were not only active participants in the fight to abolish slavery but broadened its aim and scope to include education. Historical Black women abolitionists also expanded the role and responsibility of a teacher by providing instruction to pupils in the pulpit and the podium, in prisons and the press, in home schools and churches, Sabbath and Sunday schools, in a quiet nook, and in secret. More importantly, Black women abolitionist teachers injected their work with deeper meaning—namely, that freedom and education were not only human and civil rights, but God given rights.

These understandings allowed them to move from deeply intimate, inward yearnings of freedom, to outward expressions of radical sociopolitical action, like their creation of hush harbors. Historical Black women abolitionist teachers constructed sacred, sanctuary spaces for Black students to thrive holistically, even in the midst of slavery, staunch antiblackness and continued racialized terror. In this final paper, however, I seek to extend the abolitionist trajectory of historical Black women teachers to examine how they responded *after* the abolition of slavery. With their newfound freedom, what kind of world did they imagine? What worlds did they create? What obstacles did they face after the abolition of slavery?

In this paper, I return to the words, thoughts, and actions of historical Black women teachers who struggled to disrupt all forms of oppression during the Reconstruction era. Through an examination of this revolutionary period, I offer implications for contemporary abolitionist teachers with the belief that this history is instructive and provides implications for how we might reimagine and reconstruct education once oppressive structures are eradicated. As we

imagine a world where Black people are thriving, not merely surviving (Love, 2019), we must not only address our current societal ills, but return to the past to gather lessons for freer futures.

The Radical Reconstruction Era

At the end of the deadly Civil War, the conquered Confederate states were in ruins. Plantations and farms were abandoned or burned to the ground, railroads were destroyed, and the wealth and power of the Southern slave aristocracy was in dissolution. It was a time in American history marked by efforts to reintegrate Southern states from the Confederacy as well as nearly 4 million formerly enslaved people into the United States. Reconstruction called for the full enfranchisement of newly freed Black people and the enactment of progressive legislation including political rights, citizenship, suffrage, and equal protections under the law. The U.S. government made concerted efforts to ensure the rights of African Americans: legal frameworks helped to elaborate upon and reinforce emancipation, Union troops occupied the South and radical Republicans dominated Southern governments. They enforced the deconstruction of Confederate political structures and the total transformation of southern society. For Black people, this period marked a time of tremendous hope and continued strivings for full freedom.

“The Negro Rule”: Black People During Reconstruction

The Reconstruction era led to the formation of the U.S. nation-state as we currently know it. Vital changes to the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the United States Constitution during this time in history would indisputably alter the entire course of the nation. Known as the Civil War amendments,--passed between 1865 and 1870, the five years immediately following the war--they were intended to restructure the United States from a country that was racially stratified, to one in which the Constitution guaranteed liberty for the entire U.S. population, including formerly enslaved people and their descendants. The Thirteenth

Amendment (proposed and ratified in 1865) abolished slavery; the Fourteenth Amendment (proposed in 1866 and ratified in 1868) provided a broad definition of national citizenship, overturning the Dred Scott case, which excluded African Americans; and the Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) granted voting rights regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude". For Black people, the Reconstruction era represented a world of impossibilities made possible, and they leveraged it at every turn.

For the first time in U.S. history, Black men held political office in every state of the former Confederacy, helping the Black community gain political power. With the advent of Black male suffrage, more than one hundred Black men won election or appointment to state-level government positions, ranging from superintendent of education, secretary of state, and state supreme court justice. Pinckney Pinchback, the son of a white Southern planter and a formerly enslaved woman, became the first African American to serve, albeit briefly, as the governor of Louisiana. A great deal more served in the state legislatures; however, the largest number of Black officeholders were at the local level throughout the South. White conservatives of the time termed this phenomenon, "Negro rule".

It captured in the most direct way their view that the dreaded revolution of the [mid-nineteenth] century came neither with the military defeat of the Confederacy nor with the abolition of slavery but with the enfranchisement of the freedmen and their participation in state and local government. Nothing seemed more menacing or illegitimate, nothing more vindictive or humiliating, than the installation in positions of official political power of former slaves, of abject and "ignorant" dependents belonging to an "inferior race"... The ruled had become the rulers and the rulers the ruled. (Hahn, 2003, p. 237)

In essence, the presence of Black politicians helped to turn society, as Hahn (2003) suggests, "bottomside up".

The "Negro Rule" also included Black people's continued search for humanity. During Reconstruction, they sought out and reunited with family members long separated by slavery,

married and started new families, and formed new relationships between newly freedmen and previously free men (Williams, 2012). They also created their own banks, organizations, churches and schools. In actuality, freed people's universal demand for education was so great that every southern state would revamp its constitution to include provisions for common schools for *all* children (Williams, 2006; Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 2010). Some even suggest that "public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea" (Anderson, 1988, p. 6). The relationship of newly freed African Americans to the economy was also altered as Black people started their own business, hired Black employees, and built social and financial capital in their communities, even in the wake of state-sanctioned segregation. Southern whites, however, were unwilling to accept defeat in the Civil War and attempted to prevent and halt Black enfranchisement by any means.

Redeeming the South

The Reconstruction era was interpreted as lawlessness, corruption, and mayhem by many Whites in the South (Fairclough, 2012). Rather than Reconstruction, they called for Redemption, "the quest for a new racial equilibrium, a racial order that would protect their economic, political, and social interests in a world without slavery" (Alexander, 2020, p. 40). Their quest manifested in massacres carried out against the Black population by former confederates, police, state officials, and vigilantes across the North and the South. When white supremacists overthrew radical Republican governments in the 1870s, the crusade for Black enfranchisement stalled, accompanied by the loss of political rights and influence. Many of the laws aimed at protecting the civil and human rights of African Americans were circumvented by local courts and legislatures, thus, continuing their disenfranchisement.

With the demise of Black enfranchisement during Redemption, criminal law essentially replaced slave laws as the means to restrict newly freed Black people and return them back to a condition of quasi-slavery (Davis, 2005; Alexander, 2020; Gilmore, 2018; Foner, 1988; Gates, 2019; Franklin, 1994). The implementation of Black Codes imposed severe punishments and labor restrictions on African American men and women, while convict leasing gave birth to new forms of slavery,--namely mass incarceration--protected by an exception clause to the Thirteenth Amendment. These reforms essentially transformed American slavery into a system of peonage that, in some cases, surpassed the horrors of the Antebellum period. Other consequences of this era include the strengthening of the police, promises of land reform being unfulfilled, increased white supremacist violence and diminished educational opportunities for the Black community (Tyack & Lowe, 1986).

The Importance of Rightly (Re)membering Reconstruction

Popular White historians of the Reconstruction era highlighted the alleged horrors of the time, praised the old South, and glorified plantation owners and former Confederates (Foner, 2013). At the same time, they downplayed the human and civil rights efforts of formerly enslaved people, and when they were mentioned at all, were disparaged (Dunning, 1901; Fleming, 1906; Du Bois, 1935; Foner, 2013). Historians sought to justify halting enfranchisement for the formerly enslaved community by proving that Black people were incapable of governing themselves (Lemann, 2007; Novick, 1988). Black people appeared in this history either as passive victims or an ignorant, lazy class of people whose animalistic natures completely destabilized civil society (Foner, 1988).

This portrayal is eerily similar to the mischaracterization of Black people during the civil unrest and protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Rather than centering Black

people's relentless demand for humanity, justice, and freedom, widespread news outlets, politicians, and law enforcement instead focused on arson, looting, and violence. For others, however, protests, uprisings, and looting were anti-capitalist and anti-white supremacist demonstrations of civil disobedience against a system that deemed Black death normal and necessary.

For decades, the anti-Black characterization of the Reconstruction era dominated historiography and persisted in academic works (Novick, 1988; Stamp, 1965; Foner, 2013). Yet, DuBois' (1935) analysis of the Reconstruction era represents a rupture in this skewed perspective. In a tribute to the work of Du Bois in *Black Reconstruction in America*, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968) stated,

To understand why his study of the Reconstruction was a monumental achievement it is necessary to see it in context. White historians had for a century crudely distorted the Negro's role in the Reconstruction years. It was a conscious and deliberate manipulation of history and the stakes were high. The Reconstruction was a period in which black men had a small measure of freedom of action. If, as white historians tell it, Negroes wallowed in corruption, opportunism, displayed spectacular stupidity, were wanton, evil, and ignorant, their case was made. They would have proved that freedom was dangerous in the hands of inferior beings. One generation after another of Americans were assiduously taught these falsehoods and the collective mind of America became poisoned with racism and stunted with myths.

DuBois emphasized Black people's agency in their continued search for freedom to showcase how they were vital to the era's radical policy changes and in shaping the course of history (Foner, 1982).

The Ambition for an Abolition Democracy

DuBois (1935) also argued that the abolition of slavery was only accomplished in a very narrow sense. The complete and total deconstruction of the institution of chattel slavery required *comprehensive* abolition. The ambition for an abolition democracy, Du Bois suggested, required the construction of a host of new practices, new commitments, and new social relations that would

afford Black people the economic, political, and social capital to live as equal members of society (Davis, 2005). To establish the truly egalitarian society across color, gender and class lines that an abolition democracy demanded, it required the full and unflinching reconstruction of American society (McLeod, 2019). One where the collective experience of freedom becomes wholly untethered from race, class and gender. In essence, an abolition democracy is not just about the fight to destroy oppressive institution, but the right to construct new ones in its place (Du Bois, 1935; Davis, 2005).

For DuBois, these democratic ambitions would be achieved by the establishment of three democratic institutions, ones that formerly enslaved people struggled for immediately after the abolition of slavery: land, political rights (voting, representation, fair laws, etc.), and education. According to professor and prison abolitionist, Angela Davis (2005),

Slavery could not be truly abolished until people were provided with the economic means for their subsistence. They also needed access to educational institutions and needed to claim voting and other political rights, a process that had begun, but remained incomplete during the short period of radical reconstruction that ended in 1877. DuBois thus argued that a host of democratic institutions are needed to fully achieve abolition—thus abolition democracy. (p. 95)

While Du Bois does not explicitly name Black women, the ambition necessary to achieve a more just society can be found in the words, thoughts and actions of historical Black women teachers, who provide implications for the construction of an abolition democracy in contemporary times.

Beginning Again: The Need for a Third (Re)construction in Black Education

The United States has confronted two crucial moments of moral reckoning where we faced the challenge, and opportunity, of beginning again (Glaude, 2020). The first was during Reconstruction, an era which constituted a second founding for the country. The next opportunity for beginning again was during the Civil Rights Movement and is considered the second Reconstruction era. This movement involved a decades long campaign to uphold the

promises thus posed during the first Reconstruction era. It made its largest legislative gains in the mid-1960s after years of direct actions and grassroots protests, preaching nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience to secure protections in federal law for the human rights of all Americans. In both instances, however, the United States essentially failed to uphold its promises of freedom and civil rights by merely reforming instead of wholly eradicating oppressive systems. But Reconstruction also represents the opportunity for an abolition democracy, in that it calls for a total rethinking of the social landscape (DuBois, 1935; Stovall, 2018). The ambition for an abolition democracy was realized then, and the promise of one still guides us today.

A Third Reconstruction

We have been presented with a third opportunity to begin once again, and to complete the unfinished work of justice, freedom and truth. With the growing resurgence of post-Reconstruction style white supremacist tactics, Black lives remain in peril, under constant surveillance and shadowed by the ongoing threat of assault by federal, state, and local entities. Militarized police, destructive urban renewal and gentrification projects, voter suppression, and recent attacks on Critical Race Theory have all worked on halt, thwart, or frustrate Black enfranchisement, liberation and education. Our current moment calls for the complete abolition of oppressive structures and a radical reimagining to meet the urgency and demands of our time. Roy (2020) suggested that the devastating Covid-19 pandemic also offered us a portal to reimagine the very fabric and future of our society. I add to her assessment to argue that the long overdue racial reckoning of 2020, as well as the pandemic, set the course for a third Reconstruction, offering us an opportunity to not only reimagine new worlds, but wholly (re)construct it.

(Re)construction as a Framework

Scholars have utilized the analogy and allegory of Reconstruction to trace threads between the historical and contemporary struggles for freedom (Codrington, 2020). In this paper, I take up (Re)construction as a framework for (re)minding us of the ways in which we have *always* built, created and constructed again. As Dillard (2021) suggests, marshaling the prefix (re) in parentheses is not an initial or original recognition, but a way of calling back to mind.

In conducting this dissertation, I have been reminded that abolition has always been a dual project and remains as such in our present time, in that it calls for the complete destruction of oppressive structures, Reconstruction is what happens once oppressive structures are abolished. (Re)construction as a framework, then helps us to see how historical Black women built alternatives and struggled for an abolition democracy. (Re)construction also invites us to explore these same alternatives in our contemporary time, with the aim of constructing a New World full of radical (im)possibilities. The following section speaks to the ways that important lessons about (re)construction can be drawn from historical Black women teachers' lives and work and are applicable for education today.

(Re)membering the Educational (Re)constructions of Black Women Teachers:

Invitations for Contemporary Education

In the years following the abolition of slavery, abolitionist activities continued, though on a greatly reduced scale. The American Anti-Slavery Society, for example, one of the most prominent abolitionist organizations in the United States of America during the early nineteenth century, disbanded in 1870 with the idea that the equal rights goals of abolition had been realized (Sinha, 2016). Whereas African Americans emerged from slavery with a belief that schools would educate them for full citizenship, the schools afforded them in the Reconstruction era

primarily cultivated them for domestic and agricultural servitude. Concurrently, governments instituted a new system of racial subordination, greatly impacting educational provisions for Black students. For Black women teachers, however, this reformed system brought about a transformed educational philosophy with the harsh realization that the abolition of slavery did not guarantee full freedom, just as education would not guarantee equality. As a result, Black women teachers *continued* to struggle for freedom, even after the abolition of the slavery. In the following sections, I outline several important (re)memberings of historical Black women teachers' educational (Re)constructions, as well as invitations for contemporary educational (Re)constructions.

Historical (Re)construction #1: Black women abolitionist teachers continued in the abolitionist struggle *after* the abolition of slavery

In 1867, abolitionist and women's rights activist, Sojourner Truth spoke at the Church of the Puritans in New York for the first anniversary of the American Equal Rights Association. In her speech, she exposed the limits of the abolition of slavery, stating,

My friends, I am rejoiced that you are glad, but I don't know how you will feel when I get through. I come from another field—the country of the slave. They have got their liberty—so much good luck to have *slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it root and branch destroyed. Then we will all be free indeed...* There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again. (emphasis added)

Truth documented that the victory in the Civil War, which led to emancipation of millions of formerly enslaved people, had its limits. As a result, the Black freedom struggle was not dependent on state action, or inaction. It was grounded in the quest to actualize the comprehensive abolition of slavery. Truth drew her audience's attention to a subject they had

begun to ignore in the celebrations of abolition: the rights and material conditions of formerly enslaved Black women. Truth embodied an understanding that being set free from the legal, social, and political restrictions of enslavement did not guarantee the same rights and equality as Whites, just as it did not guarantee the same rights as men. She claimed that the movement for equal rights after the abolition of slavery led to Black men achieving new and more rights but excluded Black women. As such, Truth advocated for suffrage and equal rights to also be granted to Black women. She necessitated intersectionality in our quest for freedom, with the belief that the abolition of parts of oppressive structures was wholly insufficient.

Historical Black women teachers like Sojourner Truth had a depth of understanding about the limits of state sanctioned freedom. Truth recognized that with abolition, slavery had only been “partly destroyed, not entirely”, and called for a total uprooting of the entire system of oppression. Then, and only then, she suggested, would freedom be actualized. As a result of this firm understanding, Black women teachers continued to agitate for the complete and total abolition of slavery, grounded in an intersectional, Black feminist understanding that until we are *all* free, none of us are truly free. The “stirring” that Truth speaks of refers to the continued struggle to attain full freedom after the abolition of slavery. The work of historical Black women teachers demonstrate an independence from state intervention and institutional support that is instructive for contemporary teachers.

Contemporary Invitation #1: Today’s abolitionist teachers cannot be distracted by reforms

During the summer of 2020, in the midst of calls for justice, abolition, and defunding the police, we saw mayors doing the cupid shuffle in Black neighborhoods, Congress in kente cloth, street and school renamings, and beautiful #BlackLivesMatter murals. While some expressed excitement and hope in these actions, others were leery yet undeterred, continuing in the struggle

for justice. They seemed to understand that performative acts of solidary and support did very little to actualize the cause of justice. Contemporary abolitionist teachers, while celebrating incremental “progress”, cannot rely on or look to the state for freedom. And by state, I am referring to the government, institutions, authorities, establishments, politics, systems, etc.; the powers that be. This means that whether your school district implements liberatory curriculum or not, *you* must. This also means that whether school administrators praise or criticize your teaching skills, the work of freedom and justice must continue. Contemporary abolitionist teachers cannot place faith in institutions to enact liberatory and humanizing systems of practice and thus must have tunnel vision about their task at hand. To be clear, this does not absolve the state from answerability, but clearly recognizes the limits, contradictions, and hypocrisies therein.

Black women abolitionist teachers had a fierce tenacity about abolition, one where partial freedom and small, performative changes were insufficient to the greater cause. As such, one of the tasks of contemporary abolitionist teachers in the (re)construction of education is to remain focused on the task of educational justice, unfazed by state action or inaction, or promising, new educational reforms. It requires a (re)cognition that state provisions are always provisional and bound to be reformed or pulled back. With or without institutional support, the struggle for abolition and educational equity *must* continue, until we see liberty and justice for all. Some questions contemporary abolitionist teachers might consider are:

1. What educational strivings have we discontinued in our celebrations of progress?
2. What reforms are currently in place to actualize the cause of educational equity?
3. Who benefits from these reforms, and to whom are they consequential?

4. What “progress” has been made toward educational equity in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic? What still needs to be abolished?

Historical (Re)construction #2: Black women abolitionist teachers conceived of full and perfect freedom

One of the most salient themes in the words and writings of historical Black women teachers is how they radical conceived of freedom. While abolition generally spoke of enslaved people’s movement out of physical bondage, freedom for Black women teachers took on new meaning. Leila Pendleton (1912) for example, an African American community activist and a teacher in Washington, D.C. public schools, admonished the horrors of lynching that erected *after* the abolition of slavery. She wrote of a particular freedom that Black people still needed to actualize, stating,

As has been suggested, the conditions just spoken of and similar ones have had a discouraging effect upon the colored people, but, "nothing is settled until it is settled right." We know that for two hundred and fifty years our forefathers endured the yoke of a cruel slavery; but they hoped and prayed and trusted for the day of freedom. Thousands died before that day dawned, but millions were here to greet it and multiplied millions are now enjoying it. We have the advantage of our foreparents; we may not only hope, pray and trust, but with all the power that is in us we must faithfully and earnestly work in whatever direction our abilities and convictions lie, for the *full and perfect freedom* which will one day be ours. (p. 179-180, emphasis added)

Pendleton recognized that the conditions that remained in the afterlife of abolition had discouraging and deleterious effects on the African American community. She also acknowledged that the freedom that her enslaved ancestors prayed for centuries had not been actualized. In the same way that Sojourner Truth spoke of slavery being partially abolished, Pendleton spoke to a partial freedom in the afterlife of abolition. Being freed from physical enslavement was an incomplete and wholly insufficient freedom.

As with other historical Black women teachers, Pendleton encouraged the continued struggle for “full and perfect freedom”, even after the abolition of slavery. For Black women teachers, freedom was also about liberation from the invisible chains of slavery, including internalized inferiority, antiblackness, white supremacy, dehumanization, and despair. Full freedom was being free in mind, body and soul. And as my chapter on hush harbors suggests, historical Black women teachers created sacred spaces to restore and nurture Black people back to a place of wholeness.

Contemporary Invitation #2: Abolitionist teachers of today must move students toward full freedom or wholeness

Historical Black women teachers believed that in order to actualize full freedom, it required a comprehensive education; one where the binaries between school, home, community, and church ruptured. Pioneering educator, school founder and philanthropist, Mary McCleod-Bethune, for example, endeavored to train Black students in “head, hand, and heart. Their heads to think, their hands to work, and their hearts to have faith” (McCluskey, 2014, p. 61). Black women teachers taught toward full freedom, which they conceived as wholeness. They seemed to have a fierce understanding of the parameters of state sanctioned education to facilitate it. As such, their praxes delineate education from edification. Education is typically the impartation of knowledge and skills; while edification is the instruction, development and improvement of a person spiritually *and* intellectually. In order to nurture Black students back to a place of wholeness, and full freedom, edification is needed. Consequently, it must be a central tenet of the praxes of contemporary abolitionist teachers who desire, and dare, to teach toward full freedom.

To (re)construct contemporary education, the abolitionist teacher must remember that our practice must be one of *full* freedom. It requires an awareness of the ways that schools have

operated as, and remain, sites of racialized trauma and suffering for Black students (Dumas, 2016). It also requires a critical consciousness of the ways that schools police, surveil and punish the whole Black child, in mind (intellect), body (physical movement) and soul (emotions, desire, personality). As such, edification is a spiritual work in that it has the potential, and possibility, to restore Black students to a place of wholeness and fully reclaim Black humanity. So, outside of the methods and mechanics of our teaching job, our *work* as educators, or *edifiers*, must be restorative in nature. Some questions contemporary abolitionist teachers might consider are:

1. What does “full freedom” mean to you?
2. What might it look like, feel like, smell like, sound like, or be like to experience *full freedom* in schools?
3. How can Black students experience physical, intellectual and soul freedom in schools?
Might the construction of hush harbors facilitate this?
4. What structures are needed to make this a reality? What structures still need to be abolished?
5. What programs, methods, practices, and interpersonal engagements help Black students to feel, and be, fully free in school?

Historical Black women abolitionist teachers also understood that before edifying the whole Black child, teachers needed to first engage in some critical interior work.

Historical (Re)construction #3: Consecration was always necessity for teachers of Black children

Between 1864 and 1870, Edmonia Highgate worked as a teacher and fundraiser for the American Missionary Association (AMA) whose purpose was the abolition of slavery, education of African Americans, promotion of racial equality, and the spreading of Christian values

(Hobson, 2010). In a speech from 1870, she exposed white teachers' racism within the AMA stating, "The teachers sent out by the evangelical organizations do very little to remove caste-prejudice, the twin sister of slavery. We need *Anti-Slavery* teachers who will show that it is safe to do right" (quoted in Weisenfeld, 1991, p. 499, emphasis in original). A friend of Highgate and fellow teacher with the AMA, Sara Griffith Stanley, also traveled south to teach newly freed Black people. Stanley actively supported interracial collaboration, but after a number of racist incidents at the hands of her white co-workers, she sent a letter to the Superintendent of the Norfolk AMA. She criticized the behavior of White teachers as doing immense injury to the cause of freedom as a result of their prejudiced attitude toward Black students, and Black people, more generally (Weisenfeld, 1991). Their stories illustrate how some White teachers who migrated to the south to teach in Black schools were not motivated by religious convictions or abolitionist zeal, but by efforts to conserve social control and maintain economic class status (Butchart, 2010).

Lucy Craft Laney, on the other hand, was a pioneering Black woman school leader who endeavored to build an educational institution independent from the whims and interests of public school funding or paternalistic White organizations. She argued that Black people needed to own and control their own schools, with its own liberatory agenda, in order to overcome White domination and Black subordination (McCluskey, 2014).

[Her] purpose has been all the time and first of all to develop self-respecting colored people of intelligence, honesty, and Christian zeal. Whether they show genius or attain popular distinction she cares not all; her purpose is to mold good Christian citizens, to awaken in young people the ambition to do whatever they choose to do well, to be enlightened teachers and ministers, lawyers, ad doctors and business men who can hold their own in the world and serve their race and their God. (Notestein, n.d., cited in McCluskey, 2014, p. 60)

In order to actualize this purpose at her pioneering school, Laney aimed to hire Black teachers of moral character, with the belief that in order to mold it, one must first possess it. In 1917, she argued,

These boys and girls, if they would take the place of men and women, must not only be thoroughly educated as teachers, but must . . . have character, and mission teaching in order that they be thoroughly consecrated before they can do the service for themselves. This is my plead for the Negro teachers of the city. (cited in McCluskey, 2014, p. 28)

Laney, a deeply spiritual woman, seemed to recognize the spiritual nature of the work of educator as edifier. She suggested that teachers of Black children be “thoroughly *consecrated before*” entering the field of education and being in service to the community. Laney trained and mentored Black women teachers in this same educational philosophy. Teachers like Mary McCleod-Bethune, Janie Porter-Barrett, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Charlotte Hawkins-Brown, prominent Black women educators who would subsequently founded schools aimed at liberating African American youth from disadvantaged futures in the segregated South (McCluskey, 2014). While speaking to different demographics of teachers, Laney, Highgate and Stanley each document the necessity of teachers of Black children to engage in important self-reflective work, or else they could cause harm to Black students, and the Black community. For the contemporary abolitionist teacher, consecration must be a necessity.

Contemporary Invitation #3: Abolitionist teachers *must* (re)member the spiritual nature of the work

Consecration means a dedication to a higher purpose, to declare sacred, and to devote irrevocably. Historical Black women abolitionist teachers believed that teaching was a sacred duty, and often felt called by God to actualize the cause of full freedom. It required them to get into, and remain in a space of quiet stillness, with the belief that teachers must do the necessary inner work. This work is one of unlearning and re-learning, deconstructing what we thought we

knew, to reconstruct new knowledge and understandings. As such, contemporary abolitionist teachers must be willing, and well enough, to interrogate the condition of their soul. Palmer (2017), in speaking on the spiritual nature of teaching, argues,

Teaching, like any truly human activity emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look, self-knowledge and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching is as knowing my students and my subject. (p. 2)

What Palmer describes here as interrogating the condition of the soul is what I call consecration. It means recognizing that who you are spills into the classroom, for better and for worse. If a teacher's background, experiences and perceptions impact their teaching practice, then it is important to give time and attention to the deep exploration and engagement into the inner being. I suggest that the interiority of teacher development and training is just as important, if not of greater importance, as anything learned in teacher preparation, including theory, methods classes, student teaching experience, curriculum development, etc.

For the contemporary abolitionist teacher, consecration requires the archaeology of the self which Sealey-Ruiz (2018) defines as a deep excavation and exploration of the beliefs, biases, and ideologies that shape who we are and how we engage in the world and in our work. Consecration is an iterative process toward acknowledging one's own racialized experiences and worldviews, unearthing preconceived ideologies, and disrupting power and hegemonic structures at both the personal, interpersonal and systemic level. And because consecration is not a destination, but an ongoing journey, educators engage in active reflection and reflexivity *prior* to entering the field and continue throughout and thereafter. The opposite of consecration is desecration, or to defile or secularize, to dissociate or separate from religious or spiritual

concerns. As such, consecration is a call to (re)member (Dillard, 2012, 2021) the spiritual nature of the work. Some questions contemporary abolitionist teachers might consider are:

1. Who am I? What do I believe?
2. How do you know what you know?
3. What is the purpose of education?
4. What are my motivations for entering the field?
5. What do I believe about my Black students, and Black people in general?
6. How do my beliefs manifest in my teaching praxis?
7. What ways of thinking and believing do I need to unearth and undo before entering the field?
8. Since being in the classroom, what ways of knowing, being and believing have I adopted that I need to reject? Or adopt?
9. How has being in the classroom shaped my worldview?
10. How can teacher education and professional development courses take up the interiority of teachers?

Abolitionist teachers recognize the interconnectedness between critical reflection, consciousness and action; that personal transformation is just as imperative as societal change.

Historical (Re)construction #4: The experiential knowledge and potential of Black women teachers matters

In a previous paper, I illustrated how historical Black women abolitionists like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth were not traditionally trained teachers, or even recognized as teachers because of their illiteracy. Yet, they used various abolitionist methods to *teach* toward full freedom. So, while not formally trained as teachers, many historical Black women operated

as radical embodiments of abolitionist praxes, inviting us to explore and reconsider the untapped potential of “uncertified” Black women teachers.

Growing up, my mother worked part-time as a noon-day lunch aide while my siblings and I were in elementary school. She ensured the safety and welfare of students for non-classroom activities during lunch periods, in the cafeteria, at the outdoor lunch tables, and on the playground. My mother easily made connections and quickly built rapport with my fellow classmates, and hundreds of students throughout the school. Students gravitated to her because of her kindness, warmth, and sincerity. For some, she provided the motherly attention and affection that they so desperately needed. Indeed, my mom was known as an incredibly kind-hearted woman, but also as one who could, and likely *would*, get you together in a heartbeat.

Teachers also praised my mother because, while emitting warmth to the school community, she *demand*ed respect and held students to a higher standard. She made students accountable for their actions, showing them how the decisions of an individual can impact the entire community. She often took the time to debrief with troubled students, supporting and counseling them, and offering corrective feedback and opportunities for redemption. My mom was what scholars call a warm demander, a teacher who expects great things from their students, convinces them of their own brilliance, and helps them to reach their full potential in a disciplined, structured environment (Delpit, 2013; Hammond, 2014; Siddle-Walker, 1996). My mother helped to transform our elementary school and operated graciously in her position and gracefully in her purpose, intentional about students’ social-emotional learning, as well as their spiritual development.

My mother often tapped into her spiritual gift of discernment--understanding and knowing through the power of the Holy Spirit--to read body language and tone of voice, observe

the character of a person, and evaluate complicated scenarios with fierce moral insight. She embodied this beautiful ability to get to the heart of the matter and used her gift to uplift and encourage. Her wisdom and savvy in the workplace clearly stood out and was noticed by school administrators. Our school principal, Mrs. Jackson, told my mother, “Mrs. Neal, you’re a natural; you’re a teacher”, encouraging her to go to college to obtain her bachelor’s degree and teaching license. Mrs. Jackson believed that my mother was *already* an incredible teacher and saw the practical application of her lived experience and knowledge to the school community, and to the field of education, more broadly. My mother embodied in modern times what Black women teachers did during the Reconstruction era: Important knowledge and radical abolitionist praxis, though not formally or traditionally trained as a teacher.

Contemporary Invitation #4: Abolitionist teachers honor the ancestral wisdom and experiential knowledge of Black women

The field of education is currently in dire condition, as teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. However, this condition has offered a portal to (re)construct teacher education. In my home state of Michigan, for example, schools are now relying on “non-teachers,” like cooks and bus drivers, to work as substitutes teachers because of the critical teacher shortage. This means that substitute teachers are no longer required to have an associate degree or 60 semester hours of college credit to work in schools. For some, this maintains the idea that teaching is something that anybody can do. For teachers, however, this is yet another attack to de-professionalize the field of education.

This Great Resignation across the United States has offered us a chance to place value on the experiential knowledge that Black women teachers may contribute to the field, knowledges that are seldomly acknowledged as viable or valuable for the improved understanding of

teaching. Our contemporary condition provides the opportunity to (re)member the minds, heart, talent, tenacity and spirit of our grandmothers, mothers, and sisters, many of whom did not have the opportunity to attend college, but established radical education philosophies, and institutions, that were used against oppression and helped to construct an abolition democracy. Some questions contemporary abolitionist teachers might consider are:

1. What independent ideas and subjugated oppositional knowledges concerning oppression (Hill-Collins, 2000) do Black women bring to the classroom?
2. How can frameworks of (re)membering, Black feminist theory, or womanist theology be taken up as theoretical and pedagogical approaches in teaching?
3. What might the embodiment of a theo-ethic of abolitionist teaching produce?
4. How might the transformation of alternative certification programs enable Black women to enter the teaching profession?
5. How can we diversify the teacher workforce by actively recruiting Black women, while providing sufficient preparation and continued support for their retention?

To be clear, I am not suggesting that *all* Black women are suited or equipped for the art and science of abolitionist teaching. But I *do* ask us to consider that Black women have a long history of understanding and living the realities of Black students that spill into the classroom, realities that some traditionally trained teachers are ill-equipped to handle. Black women should be considered with potential, promise and possibility. To (re)construct contemporary teacher education, we would be helped to reconsider, or (re)member (Dillard, 2012, 2021), Black women teachers as fierce embodiments of abolitionist praxes.

Historical (Re)construction #5: Black women abolitionist teachers were willing to encounter imminent risk and the imminence of death

During the Reconstruction era, Redeemers didn't attempt to abolish public schools for Black people. Instead, they employed violent tactics including intimidation, harassment, terror, fraud and bribery to pull back the widespread progress the Black community leveraged (Alexander, 2020; Butchart, 2010, 2013). By 1877, Northern troops withdrew from the South; state funding for Black schools was minimal; the Freedmen's Bureau and Northern aid societies removed support; and white teachers returned to the North, complaining of poor facilities and bouts of sickness (Weisenfeld, 1991; Butchart, 2010). Thus, Black women teachers bore the brunt of educating southern Black children and were often the ones who remained in the classroom (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 2010). To be an abolitionist and advocate for full freedom through liberatory, democratic Black education during the Reconstruction era required much more than dedication and commitment. It meant facing not only imminent risk but the imminence of death (Butchart, 2013).

In *A Slave Girl's Story*, published in 1898, Kate Drumgoold tells the story of her enslaved life in Virginia and the continued search for freedom after the abolition of slavery. She declared,

...for every time that I saw the newspaper there was some one of our race in the far South getting killed for trying to teach and I made up my mind that *I would die to see my people taught*. I was willing to go to prepare to die for my people, for I could not rest till my people were educated. (p. 24, emphasis added)

Education for Black people was the hill that Drumgoold, and many other Black women teachers were willing to die on. In an undated speech, abolitionist teacher, civil rights activist and religious leader, Nannie Helen Burroughs, declared,

The Negro must serve notice on the world that *he is ready to die for justice*. To struggle and battle and overcome and absolutely defeat every force designed against us is the only way to achieve. Men must have life, the opportunity to learn, to labor, to love. Without these fundamental virtues we cannot achieve. We must not give up the struggle until this is obtained (emphasis added).

Indeed, abolitionist teaching is born out of a radical love that “loves Blackness to death” (Johnson, et al., 2017). And while not highlighted in this dissertation, history also contains important narratives of White men and women who actively participated in the fight against educational exclusion; and similarly, faced grave consequences.

Myrtilla Miner, a White abolitionist, established the first school in Washington, D.C. to provide education beyond the primary level to African American girls in 1851, when slavery was still legal in the District of Columbia. Although the school offered a variety of courses, its emphasis from the beginning was on training teachers. In 1857, the Mayor of Washington, D.C., Walter Lenox, argued against Miner’s school in an article of the *National Intelligencer*, stating the school was

...not humane to the colored population, for us to permit a degree of instruction so far beyond their political and social condition... With this superior education there will come no removal of the present disabilities, no new sources of employment equal to their mental culture; and hence there will be a restless population less disposed than ever to fill that position in society which is allotted to them.

As a retort for Miner’s liberatory efforts, local Whites set the school on fire, stoned her home windows, and terrified students to and from school. Despite constant bombardment, Miner indignantly proclaimed, “Mob my school! You dare not! If you tear it down over my head, I shall get another house. There is no law to prevent my teaching these people, and *I shall teach them, even unto death*” (O’Connor, 1885, p. 56, emphasis added). Her progressive methods in education, struggles against significant opposition, and dogged determination were remembered amongst Blacks and Whites alike. Leila Pendleton (1912) declared,

When we remember the trials and sacrifices of Miss Miner, Miss Crandall and a host of others, it does seem that not a colored child in the whole country should be tardy or absent from school without grave cause and that no colored child should ever play truant. (Pendleton, 1912, p. 121-122)

Educational justice and full freedom was of utmost importance to historical Black and White abolitionist teachers, so much so that they were willing to fight to the death to accomplish it.

Contemporary Invitation #5: Abolitionist teachers of today recognize and welcome the risks associated with teaching toward full freedom

To be clear, I am not advocating for contemporary abolitionist teachers to be martyrs, superheroes, saviors, or to place their lives on the line for Black education. I am, however, imploring teachers to take into serious consideration the risk that inevitably comes with the struggle to upend unjust systems in education. For historical Black women teachers, this meant the imminence of physical hurt, harm or danger. For the contemporary abolitionist teacher, however, this may not involve the risk of physical harm or death but may demand a social death.

In histories of slavery, the concept of social death is commonly attributed to Patterson (1982), who described it as the condition of not accepted as fully human by wider society; or being alienated from all citizenship rights or birthrights. Enslavers pardoned enslaved people from physical death but replaced it with social death. This death manifested both physically and psychologically, with the enslaved person ceasing to belong, in his own right, to any legitimate social order. In the context of this work, however, social death involves a series of losses, some of which include a loss of social connectedness, social identity, social engagement, and social status (Králová, 2015). It often occurs when a person is abandoned by or isolated from others, and in situations in which verbal and nonverbal communication would be expected to include all participants but in which one or more individuals are excluded (American Psychological Association, 2021). As a result of their abolitionist efforts, contemporary teachers may

experience a social death, one that requires letting go of some of privileges and benefits you've held onto and benefitted from in order to hold onto Black life and humanity.

Social death may be a consequence of teaching toward full freedom, where teachers are likely to be ostracized, mischaracterized, misjudged, marginalized, targeted and punished. In recent times, we've seen several states implement restrictive policies censoring and, in some cases, eradicating any discussion of systems of oppression in schools, all under the guise of critical race theory. This tactic of silencing the horrors of U.S. history is not due to patriotism, but deep devotion to the profits associated with upholding hegemonic structures. With the looming threat of professional and legal repercussions, teachers are now forced to re-evaluate, reaffirm or renew their teaching commitments. They/we stand at a crossroad, understanding that education has the potential to serve divergent purposes: a tool in the white supremacist nation building project, or a revolutionary force toward liberation. Struggling in the cause for educational justice, then, runs the risk of social suicide, willingly participating, and fully aware of the imminence of social death. Here are some questions teachers might consider as they work to engage in abolitionist practice:

1. Who or what do you teach for? Why engage in abolitionist teaching?
2. What oppressions do you see, but ignore day by day? How do they weigh on you?
3. What words are you afraid or unwilling to speak?
4. Who or what has seduced you into silence? What are the consequences of your silence?
5. What are the risks in the struggle for full freedom? Are they worth it?

To speak about death when the contemporary conditions of U.S. schools and society more broadly are already quite bleak is admittedly rather dark. And this reality is not lost on teachers. I have seen the ways that teachers have been demonized, hospitalized, and stretched beyond

capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have read stories of teachers living in poverty, work-life imbalances, working second and third jobs to make ends meet. I have also experienced firsthand the unrealistic expectations and incessant demands by school administrators, as well as the trauma and compassion fatigue of working within a system intended on the demise of Black people. In an era where teachers are leaving the field at an alarming rate, it would be remiss to ask teachers to willingly risk their social lives and livelihoods for the Black freedom struggle. In the next section, however, I shift my gaze back to the source of my research inquiry, to the very source that gave historical Black women teachers the boldness and sustenance to continue in the fight against injustice. In this final implication and invitation, I shift my gaze to (re)member our mothers' faith.

Historical Implication #6: Black women abolitionist teachers existed in the Upside Down Kingdom

In *An Emancipatory Pedagogy of Jesus*, Sales (2021) provides an in-depth analysis on the life, pedagogy, and praxis of Jesus Christ. He provides a unique perspective of Jesus as the quintessential critical educator, ultimately resulting in a pedagogy that reconciles humanity back to God and God to humanity. Sales argues that an in-depth examination of the ethics, theological offerings, and teachings of Jesus—who was likewise demonized, marginalized, and oppressed—offers foundational insight into historical and contemporary movements for social justice. As such, I examine one of Jesus' most renowned teachings (Vaught, 1986) in order to further understand the abolitionist praxes of historical Black women teachers, whose radical Christian faith undergirded their radical actions.

In Matthew chapters 5-7, Jesus Christ gave a moral teaching to His disciples, or students, referred to as the Sermon the Mount. It includes some of the most well-known teachings of

Jesus, including the Lord's Prayer, which taught Christ's followers how to pray. Nevertheless, Jesus' teaching in this sermon was not a list of strict religious rules or directives to follow, but an invitation to experience life under grace and intimate relationship with Him. The Bible relates how some of the people who came to learn from Jesus feared that He was opposed to the teachings of the Old Testament, or the law; which they had been following for a long time. However, Jesus explained that He did not come to reform, reestablish or even *abolish* the law; rather, He came to fulfill it. In this way, Jesus is an embodiment of radically subversive teachings, and points us to the dawn of a whole new system of operation.

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is a revelation of God's kingdom, and a distinctive delineation from the world's system. The Beatitudes, for example, describe the ideal heart condition and character of a citizen of God's kingdom, and speaks of the divine favor, or blessings, bestowed upon those who possess said qualities. One of the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3) says, "blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven". The phrase "poor in spirit" speaks of spiritual poverty; it describes a person who makes a declaration of their dependence on God. The "kingdom of heaven" refers to God's kingdom, the spiritual realm; where God reigns and rules as king and manifests His authority in the earth. So, while the world's system, or dominant culture, taught independence and self-sufficiency, Jesus taught that those who acknowledge the authority of God and recognize their need for Him are the ones who would enter His kingdom. In this way, the Sermon on the Mount is a way of establishing a "kingdom ethic": a set of practical and theological ideals grounded on the concrete teachings of Jesus (Gushee & Stassen, 2017).

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount demonstrated that there are two kingdoms in operation in the earth: the kingdom of God and the world's system; as such, all ideas, beliefs,

values and methods operate under one of these categories. The system of the world is utterly corrupt, self-serving, and diametrically opposed to God's system. In fact, many of the principles found in the Kingdom of God make no sense to the world, and is considered backwards, or upside down. Robinson (2018) states,

None of this makes any sense. Weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution, and difficulties cause us deep pain and suffering. Yet it is often in our pain and in our torment that we experience God's grace, and the painful experiences strengthen and refine us. This is what some scholars and theologians refer to as *the upside-down kingdom of God*: what makes sense, looks right, or feels good to us is often not the Lord's way. (p. 18)

The context of Jesus' radical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is put into question by Pharisee detractors who asked when the kingdom of God would come. In Luke 17:20–21, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, *the kingdom of God is within you*" (NKJV). Jesus implies that the Kingdom of God is already present and spread out upon the earth, although people often fail to recognize it. I argue that the notion of the upside down kingdom, and the ethics therein, can be found in the life writings of historical Black women abolitionist teachers.

In 1913, Fanny Jackson Coppin, a renowned educator and principal of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, wrote,

Slavery made us poor, and its gloomy, malicious shadow tends to keep us so. I beg to say, kind reader, that this is not spoken in a spirit of recrimination; *we have no quarrel with our fate*, and we leave your Christianity to yourself. *Our faith is firmly fixed in that "Eternal Providence,"* that in its own good time will "justify the ways of God to man." (Coppin, 1913, p. 36, emphasis added)

In Coppin's writing, she makes clear that nearly 50 years after the abolition of slavery, its afterlives (Hartman, 2007) continued to cast a dark shadow over Black people. Yet, she refuses to retaliate or even complain. Instead, she claims that her faith is rooted and grounded in the sovereignty of God, knowing that in time, God would make it all clear, and bring about good

from the evils of mankind. Coppin demonstrates a kingdom ethic, showing God as the administrator of divine justice, even if we don't see it in our lifetime. In a similar way, abolitionist Sojourner Truth boldly stated in a speech,

O friends, *pity the poor slaveholder, and pray for him*. It troubles me more than anything else, what will become of the poor slaveholder, in all his guilt and all his impenitence. *God will take care of the poor trampled slave*, but where will the slaveholder be when eternity begins? (Truth, 1851, emphasis added)

Sojourner Truth's thoughts on slavery and justice are powerful in and of themselves, but even more so in the context of her circumstances. She was born Isabella Baumfree in Ulster County, New York around 1797, and experienced horrific physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her enslaver. After running away from the plantation in 1827, Truth found hope and refuge in Jesus Christ and converted to Christianity. In 1843, she changed her name to Sojourner Truth as a symbol of her newfound identity in Christ. In her speech, Truth encourages her audience to pity and pray for the very people who abused her, and enslaved millions of other Black people like her. She recognized that slaveholders felt no shame or remorse for their insurmountable crimes against humanity but encourages her listeners to have compassion for them. It is virtually impossible to even *imagine* the kind of wherewithal it takes to have this kind of mercy; one that refuses to enact revenge or harbor bitterness. Yet, Truth's statement "God will take care of the poor trampled slave" showcases a fierce knowing and assuredness about God and His loving relationship to the oppressed. She recognizes that the happenings of the world are only temporal, and that eternity is truly what matters, wholly exhibiting a radical ethic that works in direct contrast to the world's system of operation. In each of these examples though, Coppin and Truth are motivated by this kingdom ethic to actualize God's kingdom here on earth. While this section may have read like a Bible study, it is a moral teaching, benediction, or invocation of divine

help. It is a call to truly consider what a total transformation of our *spirit* might mean in the struggle for social justice in our society.

Contemporary Invitation #6: Abolitionist teachers, turn the world upside down!

Indeed, the entire concept of the Upside Down Kingdom, or a kingdom ethic is a tough pill to swallow. Yet, by operating under God's system, and aligning our thoughts with God's Word, it results in a complete transformation from the inside out. As I renewed my mind by reading God's Word, I no longer saw a kingdom ethic as a compliant, submissive position, rather, I began to see the ways that social justice and spirituality actually worked together and are inseparable. The message and mandate of Micah 6:8 reads as a powerful appeal for Christians to forge a necessary bond between the inner principles and ethics of the Kingdom of God, with outward conduct for social (Re)construction. It requires Christians to love mercy, walk humbly with God, and "do justice". The justice that this verse speaks to is not necessarily associated with any political, economic or judicial entity. Instead, it is the construction of a world where all people have an opportunity to fully develop the talents and gifts that God gave them, and to manifest His will for their lives here on earth. In essence, I argue that justice without righteousness is incomplete. Without God's guidance and decrees, humanity will inevitably destroy itself. Thus, if we are to (re)construct education, it may require us to renew our minds, and function under a completely different system of operation. Some questions contemporary abolitionist teachers might consider are:

1. Do you recognize the spiritual poverty of humankind?
2. Do you see the need for God in your life? In our nation?
3. What does "one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" mean?
4. How can we begin to enact social transformation without spiritual transformation?

5. How can we talk *about* God, without even knowing Him, His word, or His ways?
6. What has God called you to do? What is your purpose in this life?
7. What mark will you leave on the world?
8. How does God see your students? How does He see oppressed people?
9. Do you see your students or your school community, as Christ sees them?
10. What ways of operating have you deemed as normal? How can you turn it on its head?
11. How can we reprioritize society from the bottom up?
12. How can you step outside of your comfort zone to explore other areas that God might be desiring for you?
13. What does it mean to follow Christ, who traded victory and power for communion with the poor, marginalized and discarded?
14. What are the implications of this great exchange?
15. Are you ready for the world to change?

Conclusion

In 1892—nearly 30 years after the abolition of slavery—renowned educator, activist and Black feminist, Anna Julia Cooper declared, “the fundamental agency under God in the regeneration, the re-training of the race, as well as the grand work and starting point of the progress upward, must be Black women” (p. 28). A century later, Derrick Bell, the father of Critical Race Theory, stated that Black women would be America’s soul salvation (Bell, 1993). Indeed, we see in modern times, as we’ve seen in historical times, a radical womanist tradition of Black women teachers subverting oppressive structures and uplifting future generations through education, leaving us a roadmap for the contemporary fight for social justice. As Pendleton

(1912) argues, “the women of our race have from the beginning taken part in every movement which has sought to uplift” (Pendleton, 1912, p. 126); a freedom struggle for all of humanity.

For historical Black women teachers, the freedom struggle persisted even *after* the abolition of slavery; as such, it was an ethos, praxis and a way of being. This conceptualization highlights that if true educational justice is to take place—within the current sociopolitical, economic, and cultural arrangements that perpetuate white supremacy, capitalism, antiblackness, patriarchy, and other related forms of oppression—abolition must, then, become a way of life. As Gilmore (in Petitjean, 2018) argues, abolition is not just absence; it is a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently; it is a theory of change. I also suggest that abolition is also a deeply spiritual practice that requires faith and the belief in something that’s not yet humanly visible. It requires you to radically believe in *other* than what is proposed. It also requires divine insight to see things that aren’t yet here and have a blessed assurance that things won’t always be the way they currently are.

We now find ourselves facing a moral reckoning of the same magnitude as the Reconstruction era. And historical Black women abolitionist teachers remind us that our modern moment can be a third Reconstruction era. This moment must become a revival of our commitments to liberatory and humanizing practices and morally just laws, policies, and programs that can truly transform rather than reform the nation. It must be rooted in community, reparations, safety, care and transformative justice (Winn, 2020). Equally, our movement for full freedom must also be grounded in something deeper than presentism and material conditions. It must be grounded in a kingdom ethic that promotes wholeness, divine justice, redemption, radical faith, and the *spirit* of our work (Dillard, 2021).

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APPENDIX

ART-OF-FACTS IN THE COLOUR OF AMBER

The appendix is typically the section at the end of a manuscript that gives additional information on the topic explored in the contents of the text. In this final section, I offer artistic, cultural, spiritual and creative expressions to reflect on the significance of the arts in the struggle for freedom, foreground the arts as legitimate knowledge production, and demonstrate creativity as abolitionist praxis as art making as radical imagination as world making. I intentionally carve out this abolitionist art space to (re)present my thinking and theorizing throughout the dissertation project, and as a site of remembrance. Enjoy!

And I looked,
and,
behold!
A whirlwind
came out of the north,
a great cloud,
and a fire
infolding itself,
and a brightness
was about it,
and out of the midst
thereof
as *the colour of amber*,
out of the midst of the fire.
Ezekiel 1:4 (KJV)

Dissertation as a Site of (Re)membrance (12/30/2021)

(Re)membering who I am, and my purpose in this life
(Re)membering it's not based on my being a scholar or a wife
(Re)membering the people who fought and overcame for me to be here
(Re)membering who God is and that He'll always make my path clear
(Re)membering the rights, the wrongs, and how to write for pleasure
(Re)membering that my reward is in heaven, and not on earthly treasures
(Re)membering what I believe, about myself and the world
(Re)membering the questions I've had since I was a little girl
(Re)membering what feels good to my soul, my mind, will, and emotions
(Re)membering humility and to give Him my devotion
(Re)membering that He called me, what a promise to behold
(Re)membering that this is just a small piece, of my story being told.

Statement of Commitment (05/09/2020)

My name is Amber Monáe Neal.

Black woman, student, sojourner, soulcial worker, believer, friend, sister, daughter, partner.

Though there are many other identities that I ascribe to my being, teacher is one that is most salient in my life at the moment. Though several letters trail my name and teaching certifications imprint my resume, associated with my “professional expertise”, I come from a long lineage of teachers and scholars.

Black women who acquired new languages in the treacherous waters of the Middle Passage, helping to enable future generations to untie their tongues in order to speak up and out.

Black women who, denied literacy and bound for a life of servitude, secretly obtained reading and writing abilities, and used these emancipatory tools to free themselves and their community, writing to freedom.

Black women groittes who, embodying that sacred oral tradition, taught their children about African and African American history, heritage and cultural ways of being, refusing to be seduced into forgetfulness.

Black women who trained other Black women and girls on how to be woman, in a world not meant for her, discontented with their caricaturization as mammies, welfare queens, and Jezebels; instead seeing us and our stories in the lives of Queen Vashti, Queen Esther and Hagar.

Black women who instructed sons, some of bone, some of blood and some of heart, on how to be man, while staring in the face of dehumanization, emasculation and degradation, walking tall and proud.

Black women who envisioned education as a pathway toward ending all systems and practices that kept their people socially, politically, economically and psychologically bound, education as abolition as freedom as a work of the Spirit.

I am the daughter of these women.

Teaching, for Black women was, and remains, a political activity; one with material, psychological, and cultural implications. Black women teachers felt a deep communal, moral, and spiritual to teach their community, developing a critical consciousness impacting what they felt about their condition and how they came to these understandings.

I come from a lineage of Black women that have always been revolutionary, abolitionist teachers, even without formal certifications, and transmitted vital life lessons by explicit and subversive means. Black women who used their writings to right the wrongs of the world and used their pens to write new visions.

I use my own research and writing as a way to talk back—as bell hooks and Black mamas would say—against injustices, oppression, the powers that be, antiblackness, and racialized terror. It is an I feel immense honor to exalt the trials, triumphs and herstories of fierce Black women before me.

I write to those in the ivory towers who have yet to recognize the expertise and brilliance of Black women. Yet continue write *for* those who never had access to such spaces. I write with the Black women, of the past, present and future, ever mindful, and holding us all near to my heart.

I render this project a comprehensive act of (re)membering.
Our sacred traditions, poetics, aesthetics, passion, and faith propel me,
both backward, and forward.

Worthy to Be Praised (06/19/2020)

Oluwatoyin Salau.
We say your name.

Oluwatoyin.

The name with the 5 syllables
Of unfamiliar tongue
A Yoruba name that means
“God is worthy to be praised”.

Passionate. Loving. Spiritual. Caring.
The words friends associated with your
name.

Oluwatoyin.

A creative artisan,
Skilled in sewing, painting and design.
Described as a happy soul,
With a lot of pain.
Yet, you transformed that pain
To speak truth to power.

Oluwatoyin.

The girl with the big name
And the big mouth
And bigger dreams of freedom
Sounding the alarm of our oppressions.
You refused the suppression of your voice

In the streets you yelled
“Black Lives Matter!”
Yet, yours didn’t, Oluwatoyin.

Dead a week after you went missing.
Sexually assaulted by the same men
You advocated for

The same men you believed would help you
Men of the same hue.
The same men you thought were believers
Like you.
Disguised as men of God

Wolves in sheep's clothing.

Oluwatoyin.

You sought refuge in a church building,
But no sanctuary could be found.

Homeless.
Destitute.
Searching.

Father, do you hear me?

You went to the police,
But they needed more evidence
To corroborate your narrative
Because your story wasn’t enough

Your pain
Your shame
Your weeping
Weren’t enough.

You foresaw your own demise.
Saying you would die by your skin.
And you did.
Murdered by your own kin.

Unprotected.
Unloved.
Unsupported.
Unseen.

But I see you sis.

In your protest, you didn’t want
Their names gone in vain
So, in the same grain
We speak yours

Oluwatoyin.

A name worthy to be praised.

The Washerwomen (2021)

The deeper I get into my work
 on / with enslaved Black women
 the more I'm starting to have these
 weird
 no,
 divinely timed, interactions.

 Today
 while doing laundry
 that I let get to a whopping two baskets full
 I found myself complaining about back pain.
 The back and forth / up and down / side to side
 mechanical motion
 of sorting laundry
 sent unrecognizable pains up my spine.

 As I leaned back
 placing the palm of my hand
 on the small of my back
 as if to straighten and unloose the kinks
 I immediately start to think
 about / with
 enslaved women
 who did laundry.

 Standing up
 reminiscing
 or reminiscent
 of
 somebody's grandma
 I'm transported.
 Back.
 to the 19th century.

 Not a washing machine in sight
 just the sight
 of Black women.
 Melodiously orchestrating the process
 entirely
 by the works of her hands.
 An experience that'll make you look
 at your washing machine
 and dryer in pure admiration.
 Adoration. In remembrance.

I remember
 African women washing
 their clothing
 by hand
 in Tanzania.
 Small basins and tin tubs
 African women wading in the water
 stirring the pot with her hands
 a sort of hypnotic, circular motion.
 a perfectly set dial on the metronome
 a steady song
 playing on the player of their minds.

On their faces
 a peculiar sense of ease.
 Ease in their temple.
 Sitting on their golden stools
 of tree stumps and plastic chairs
 these women set the tone
 and tempo of their day
 and their lives
 in these cauldrons.

Muddled memories of their own mothers
 longings for distant adult children
 dreams of future descendants
 (re)membering the days of old
 and new
 bathing their own in those same
 tubs and tins.

After the stew was stirred to satisfaction
 she fashioned the soaking material
 in her steady, sturdy hands
 and wrung them out
 exorcising any remaining
 dirt and grime
 that lay in the crevices
 to rise to the surface.

Like a sinner
 dipped
 fully
 wholly
 completely
 in the cleansing water

of the blood
 resurrected
 arising anew.
 Fresh / clean / pure.

I remembered you.
 Working for your keep
 Keeping
 One eye on the babies
 One on the stove
 One on your work.
 Gathering
 Dirty laundry of
 White misters and mistresses.

Domestics is what they called
 You.
 Bringing their dirty laundry,
 Home.
 To your sanctuary.
 Here, you cleansed
 Them.
 The shit stains in mister's drawers
 The red stained panties of the missus.
 You cleansed
 With the work of your hands.

Palms together
 As in a posture
 Of prayer
 kneading out their sins
 your own hands raw.
 Your own blood
 Quickly washed away.
 You washed them
 And made them
 white as snow.

I'm doing my laundry today
 loading the massive cargo
 of towels
 into the washer
 separating the remains.
 Lights in one pile / darks in another.
 Lace from lycra
 silks from synthetic

wheat from tare.

Conscious of my back pain
from before
I anchor myself
holding steadfast
onto the side of the laundry basket.
Then
I spring up
Remembering
no, forgetting
the hand towel in the bathroom.
Quickly, I run and grab it
and open the mouth of the washer.

Thinking to immediately chuck the cloth in
I selah.
I notice the neglected cloths
already overtaken
beginning
the purification process...
and I interrupted.

I couldn't simply
dump
that long lost towel
into the belly of the beast
without some assistance,
permitting it to float
on the surface
while the others had felt its depths.
So.

I grab my broom in one hand
and haphazardly toss the towel in
with the others.
Instinctively
with the handle of the broom
I begin pounding the towel
into the sea of forgetfulness
dirty made clean.

With the tempo
of my Tanzanian *dada*
pounding yam and callalou
the syncopated cadences

of my *kaka* hammering coffee beans.
The back muscles of
Ghanaian brothers hammering
Tree bark
for ink.
My shoulders / my back / my body
remembered.
And kept the score.
A meta-physical return.

Like Avey
Her story still
sitting with me
refusing to unhand me.
a series of paranormal events
dreaming
fighting
with a maternal ancestor
hands
shaping her life.
forced to recon with
past / present / future
the disturbing dis-ease
in the pit
of her stomach.
seeing things that weren't there
hearing things that weren't said
understanding things beyond human
comprehension.
Remembering
things she'd forcefully forgotten.

I remember
Not when I lost
My mind
But when
It slipped away
From me.
isolated and misunderstood
unsure
about my worth
the value of my work
not knowing
unknowing

I found myself

moping
sulking
“woe is me” dis-position.
Frustrated / tired / weighted
loads
too hefty
too heavy to carry.

Clearly
somebody had enough
minding my Black owned business
I hear
Granny’s voice
so clearly
“Girl, if you don’t get up and get going!”
and I feel a pat
on my thigh
as if to jump start the process.

Like a crane
descending down
hoisting the heavy yoke
and burdens of my heart
I lift my head.

As I ascend
I feel the sun.
Balm
on my weary soul

lighter.

Overcome with laughter
like I usually was
when I spent Saturdays
with her feisty / bold self
I remember her.
In remembrance of.

Her unwavering determination
impeccable work ethic
no-nonsense nurturing.
Her audacity.

The audacity of her
to dip into my dirty laundry.
The blood / sweat / tear stained
cloth at the very bottom
of my heart’s hamper.
The audacity of her
to come
and see about me
with those steady, sturdy hands
and wash me clean
bathing me anew
with those healing hands
Thank God for the washer women.

Dedicated to Verilia Mae Neal
(1936-2020)

A Seat at the Table (03/01/2021)

I've recently been invited
to take a seat at the table.
But I would send a word of caution,
because the legs aren't that stable.

How intimate! A hefty menu
waiting just for me.
To come and take a seat
with crippling anxiety.

He knew just how to entice me,
had seen the struggles, its truth.
But when he served up insecurity,
I acted so aloof.

Always was a quite quiet girl
With a fierce imaginative interior
Til' I bit that bite of covetousness
Which turned to feeling inferior.

"That ain't me, I know who I am"
.... But what's that feeling in my gut?
When offered bloating imposter syndrome
I accepted with no rebut.

Hearty servings of writer's block.
to get me where he delighted.
So seductive was that depression
to have my mission blighted.

The turbulent inner turmoil,
The ways I tried to resist,
But once he found that tiny opening,
He went for the chef's kiss.

"I've had enough, I'm full, I'm done
I can't it anymore!"
with a devilish grin and stock, he said
"No worries, there's *always* room for more"

And so they came out one by one
This determined legion of ten
Forced fed me sabotaging thoughts,
"This would surely be the end!"

Help
Help
Help
Help!

But then I remembered the word of God.
 He heard me when I prayed
 Even in a tiny whisper
 When all my hope was frayed.

“Reject it, Amber
Here’s the table
 Waiting just for you,
 Full of love
 and hope
 and grace
 and peace
 and mercy
 each day new.”

“Why suffer at that table
 Being fed lies and deceit,
 Remember who you are in me
 And come worship at my feet.”

“I’ve prepared a table just for you
 And anointed your head with oil
 I’m with you even to the end
 Through all the spills and the spoils”

And so, I grabbed my things and left
 With newfound liberty,
 He picked me up and filled my cup.
 And completely restored me.

So, when that invitation to the table
 comes knocking once again,
 I’ll gladly defer to Jesus Christ,
 “I decline, but here’s my friend”.

The Great Dichotomy: World's System vs. God's Kingdom (Neal, 2022)		
Other Names	World's System, dominant culture, the kingdom of darkness, "Right Side Up Kingdom", Old Testament	God's Kingdom, The Kingdom of Light, The Kingdom of Heaven, New Testament
Functions	Kill, steal and destroy; control behavior, maintain the status quo	Give life, transform lives from the inside out, advance God's will on earth, against the status quo
Conceived by the dominant culture	Deemed as normal, standard, natural	Seen with disdain, the things we avoid, eschew, marginalize, ignore, prejudice
Perspective	Worldly, temporal, based on what you can experience with the senses	Eternal, spiritual, Bible based, seeing the beginning from the end
Governance	Laws, politicians, presidents, rules, capitalism governs decisions, Satan	Kingship of Christ, God as the ultimate authority figure, God's Word (the Bible) supersedes
Interests	Individualism, independence, selfishness; one's own interests, ability and will; ownership	Total dependence on God, devotion to God, sacrificing one's own interests, stewardship, community service
Territory	The material and physical world, the Earth, nations, Western culture, states, cities	The entire universe, all of creation
Values	Class, comfort, status, wealth, education, power, success, influence, recognition, popularity, recreation, entertainment, optics (I John 2:16)	Faith, unconditional love, grace, weakness, sacrifice, discomfort, grief, suffering, salvation, a person's heart, righteousness, freedom, transformation, serving others
Mindset	Binary thinking, right vs. wrong, fragmentation, on earthly or material things	Wholeness, holistic, nuanced, complexity, mind, body and spirit, focus on heavenly things
Provision	Financial independence, accumulation	God's provision
Love	Transactional, conditional, based on prior relationship	Transformational, unconditional, loving as Christ loved, going the extra mile (Matthew 5:43-48)
Possessions / Finances	Hoarding, competition, greed, store treasures on earth, can be stolen, save up money from a rainy day, capitalism, buying and selling, anticipating hard times	It all belongs to God, sharing, collaboration, equity and equality, generosity, store treasures in heaven, seedtime and harvest, whatever you sow, you will reap, (Luke 12:16-21; Proverbs 19:17; Matthew 6:19-24)
Stratification	White supremacy, wealthy at the top, interested in advancing the interests of one group	Biblical equality, those most impacted by oppression at the top, "the last shall be first", universal, for social and public good

Citizenship	Nation, birthrights, laws, policies, limitations, restrictive	Only by accepting Christ as Lord as savior are you granted citizenship into God's kingdom
Resources	Limited amount, scarcity, operating from lack, supply and demand, the highest bid	God's abundance and provision, trust that God takes care of those who serve Him (John 1:16)
Time	Limited, urgency, deadlines, linearity, presentism and now-ness, instant gratification, reality, temporary pleasures, "this life is all there is"	Flexibility, "life happens", eternity as more important than temporality, time as a continuum
Response in Times of Chaos	Fear, battle, conflict, turbulence, chaos, disarray, worry, keep the issue to yourself	Give it to God, peace, fearlessness, trust, protection, stillness, assuredness, radical rest, laughter (Job 5:22; Psalms 91; Matthew 6:25-34)
Response to Violence	Tit-for-tat, an eye for an eye, return violence for violence, retaliation	Love your enemies, bless those who persecute you, trust in God's divine justice, turning the other cheek, vengeance belongs to God (Matthew 5:38-39)
Response to Crime	Punishment, jail, prison, abandonment, marginalization, ostracization, exclusion	Repentance, mercy, forgiveness, salvation, redemption, restoration, community, righteousness, grace, non-violence, God's divine justice
Qualifications, Talents and Gifts	College degree, intelligence, good genes, personal development, nepotism, networking, bootstraps, hard work, one's own ability	God given, the favor of God, blessings, grace, endowed by the Holy Spirit, getting what we don't deserve
Freedom	Regulated by the law, can be taken away by actions, conditional	Given by God, free from the cares of the world, cannot be taken away

DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Carl T. Rowan Community Elementary School
8085 Doyle
Detroit, Michigan 48234
(313) 866-3830 Fax: (313) 866-7413

June 21, 2001

Irma J. Hamilton, Ed. D.
Principal
Renaissance High School
6565 W. Outer Drive
Detroit, Michigan 48235

Dear Dr. Hamilton:

Please accept this letter of recommendation for Amber Neal. Throughout her tenure as a student at Rowan School, she exhibited excellence in every phase of her school involvement. Our staff learned early that it could rely on Amber as a student leader and as a high academic achiever. She was the student most likely to be chosen when an outstanding student was needed to perform a special task or to represent our school.

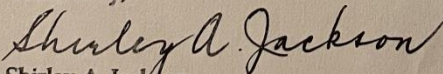
What stands out most about Amber is her maturity. Even as a fifth grader she was focused on distinguishing herself academically. She seemed to know instinctively which course to take when tough decisions needed to be made. Because of the wisdom she demonstrated and the good judgement she displayed she earned the respect of both students and staff. She received high honors each card marking and left our school as one of our highest achieving students. Amber's willingness to work hard along with her intelligence and pride in accomplishing her goals make her a perfect candidate for Renaissance High School.

Finally, supportive and loving parents, an essential element in student success, have helped shape Amber into a wonderful, caring human being who carries out her responsibilities and shares their traditional values. They have taught her to be kind and to be a person for others.

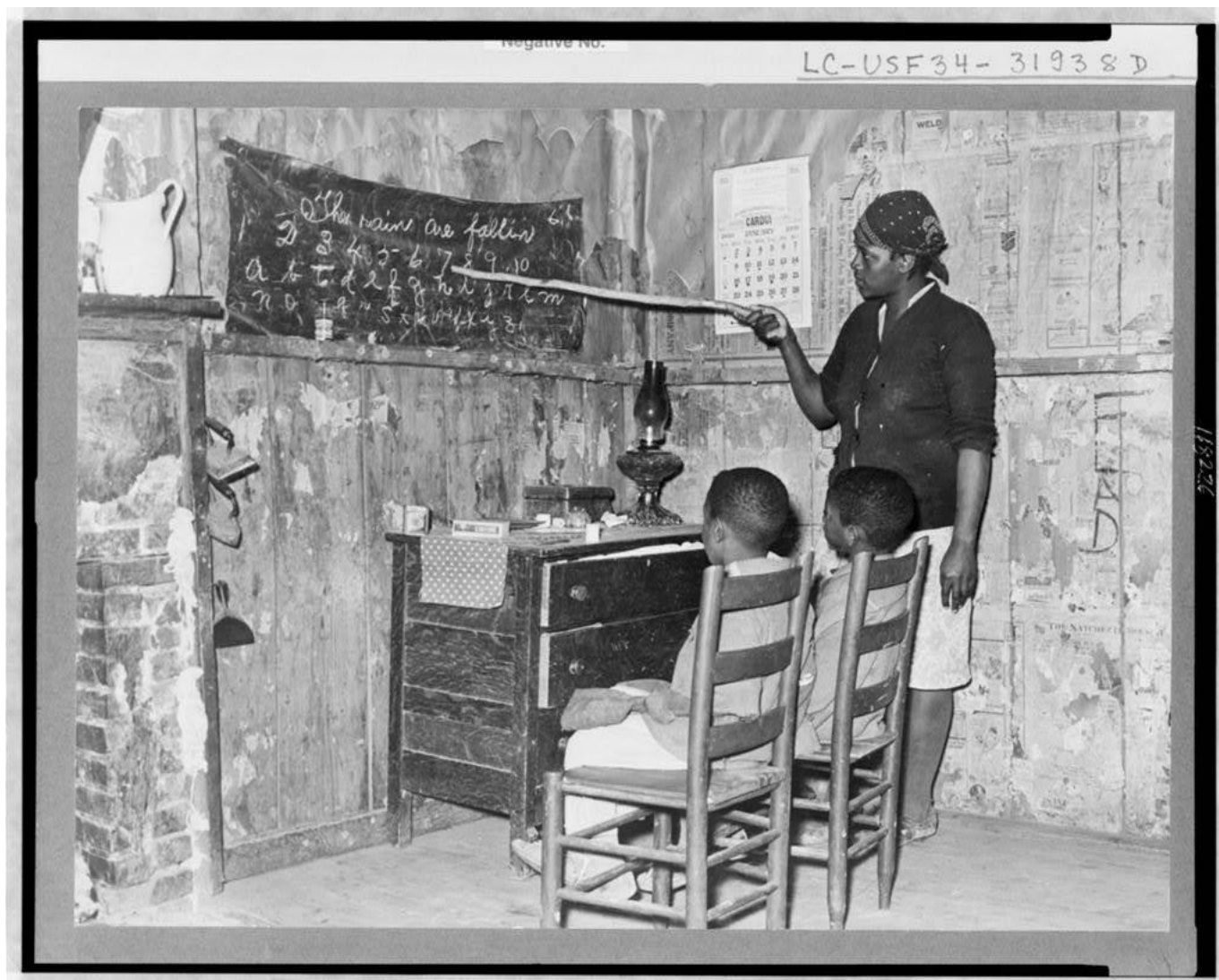
I cannot imagine any student more suited to matriculation at your school. I sincerely hope that Amber will be given an opportunity to show you what we have been privileged to witness at Carl T. Rowan Community Elementary School.

If I can answer any questions about Amber or assist the process in any other way, please feel free to telephone me.

Yours truly,



Shirley A. Jackson
Principal



**Negro mother teaching children numbers and alphabet in home of sharecropper.
Transylvania, Louisiana.**

Lee, R., photographer. (1939) *Negro mother teaching children numbers and alphabet in home of sharecropper. Transylvania, Louisiana.* United States Louisiana East Carroll Parish Transylvania, 1939. Jan. [Photograph] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017781947/>.



Knox Institute (Founded in 1868) – First Black School in Athens, GA

Earnest, David Lewis, -1956 (1900/1956). Knox Institute (African-American school).

Retrieved from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/earnest/do:e109>



Knox Institute – First Black School in Athens, GA (2020)



Jehovah Gibbor
February 21, 2018
Houston, Texas



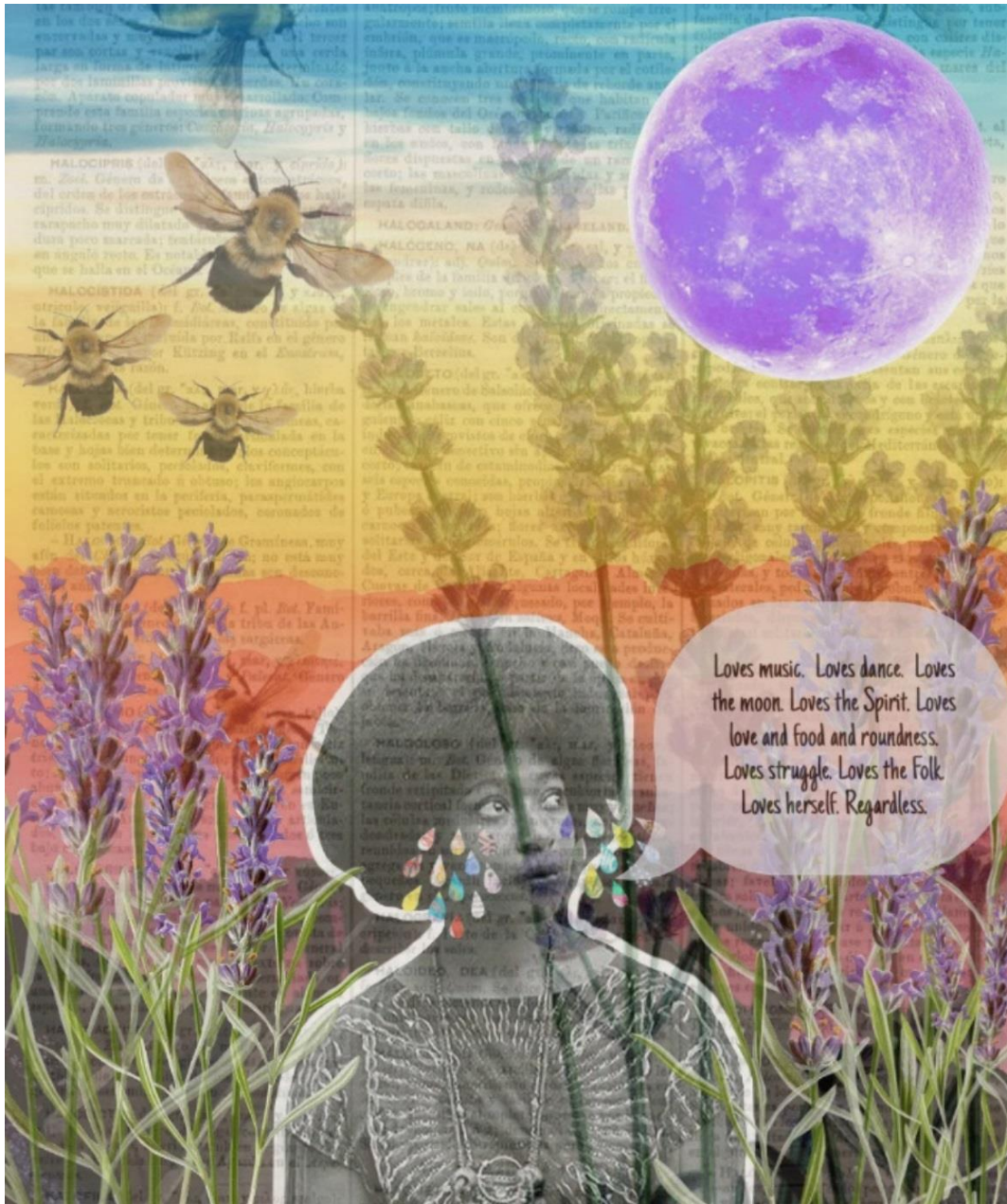
New Jim Crow
Digital Collage
Amber M. Neal, 03/19/2021



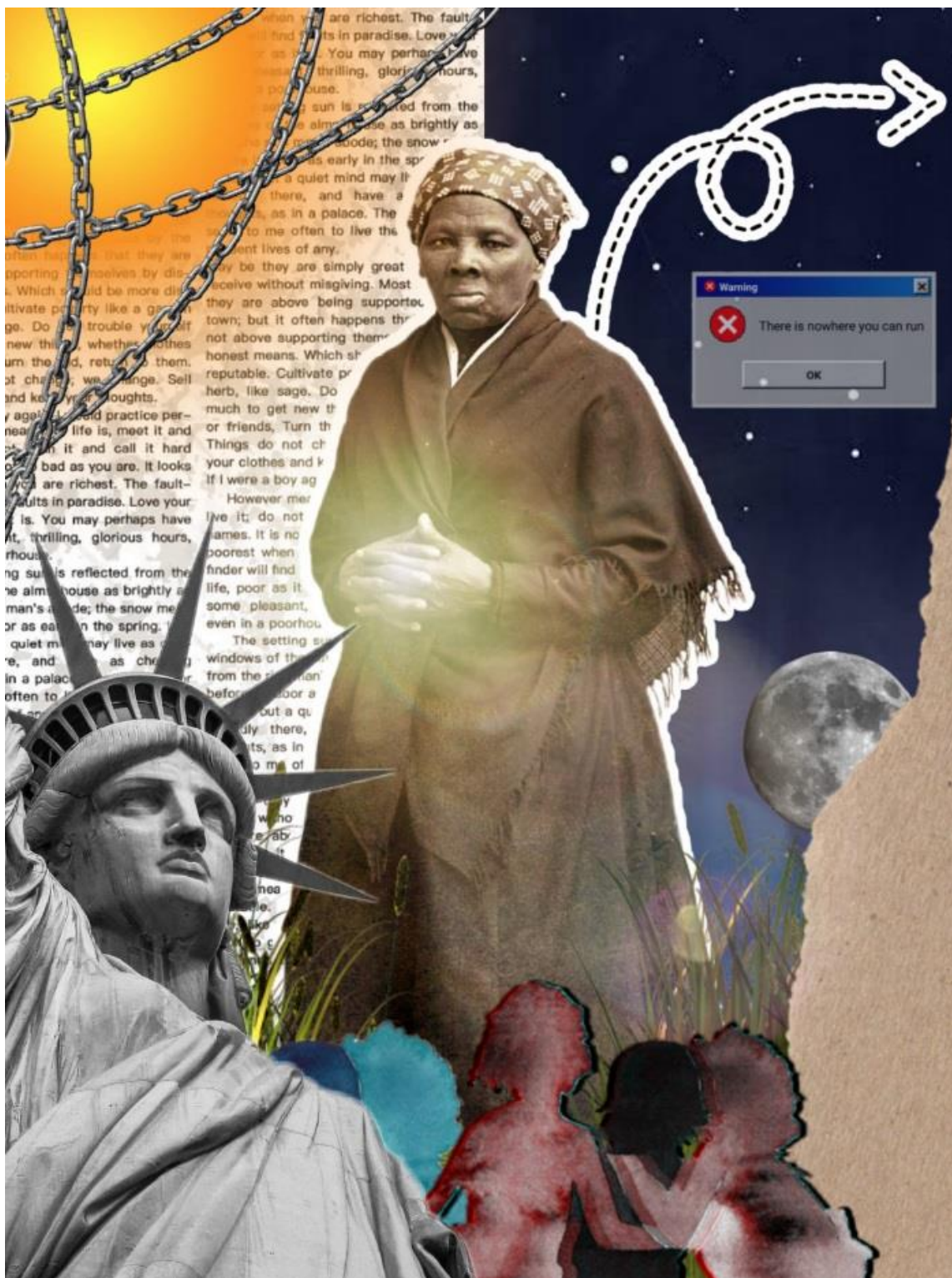
Whose Gaze Is It Anyway?

Digital Collage

Amber M. Neal, 02/26/2021



(Re)membering Our Mother's Gardens
Digital Collage
Amber M. Neal, 02/27/2021



Lady Liberty
Digital Collage
Amber M. Neal, 03/05/2021



(Re)construction 3.0
Digital Collage
Amber M. Neal, 03/03/2021

Bless the LORD, O my soul;
 all that is within me, bless His holy name.
 Bless the LORD, O my soul,
 and *do not forget* all His kind deeds—

He who forgives all your iniquities
 and heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the pit
 and crowns you with loving devotion
 and compassion,
 who satisfies you with goodness,
 so that your youth is renewed
 like the eagle's.

The LORD executes righteousness
 and justice for all the oppressed.
 He made known His ways to Moses,
 His deeds to the people of Israel.

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion.
 He will not always accuse us,
 nor harbor His anger forever.
 He has not dealt with us
 according to our sins
 or repaid us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are
 above the earth,
 so great is His loving devotion
 for those who fear Him.
 As far as the east is from the west,
 so far has He removed
 our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children,
 so the LORD has compassion
 on those who fear Him.
 For He knows our frame;
 He is mindful that we are dust.

As for man, his days are like grass—
 he blooms like a flower of the field;
 when the wind passes over, it vanishes,
 and its place remembers it no more.

But from everlasting to everlasting
 the loving devotion of the LORD
 extends to those who fear Him,
 and His righteousness
 to their children's children—
 to those who keep His covenant
 and *remember* to obey His precepts.

The LORD has established
 His throne in heaven,
 and His kingdom rules over all.

Bless the LORD,
 all His angels mighty in strength
 who carry out His word,
 who hearken to the voice of His command.

Bless the LORD, all His hosts,
 you servants who do His will.
 Bless the LORD, all His works
 in all places of His dominion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!