

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES OF
BLACK WOMEN EDUCATORS IN NEW YORK CITY ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION

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We hereby approve the Dissertation

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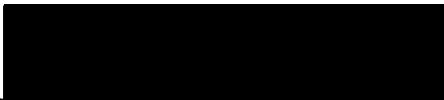
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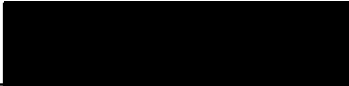
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Abstract

INSTITUTIONAL RACISM AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES OF BLACK WOMEN EDUCATORS IN NEW YORK CITY ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

by Gail M. Perry-Ryder

How does a teaching practice meet structural violence and oppression? And, how do teachers navigate systems they wish to change, in which they are also participating? This study is a qualitative investigation of institutional racism and power in U.S. alternative educational settings, and the knowledge and experiences of six Black women educators working to counteract the problem from the inside. There is a vast literature on preparing teachers for diverse classrooms; however, it has not adequately represented teachers who deploy transformative practices to directly challenge institutional racism in nontraditional educational settings, nor has it addressed the costs associated with doing this work. This study was informed by Black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) and critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012), which account for the macro and micro level phenomena simultaneously influencing Black women's personal and professional lives. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit Black women educators from established social justice and activist-oriented teacher networks in New York City. Six Black women educators teaching marginalized youth 13-24 years old in New York City alternative educational settings were selected. Data was collected through two phases of in-depth semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. Findings: first, teachers' biographies and professional journeys were the frames through which they learned to understand, navigate, and defend against structural violence and oppression. Prior life

experiences, family/community, and nontraditional education were more influential in shaping their professional trajectories and teaching them how to be transformative educators than much of their formal teacher preparation. Second, teachers' knowledges about institutional power and critical ability to recognize its operation in their respective work environments were key factors driving their resilience, navigational creativity, and clarity about the purposes of their activism against forms of institutional racism and structural violence. It was teachers' critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and resulting intentionality about dismantling systemic racism that both enabled their work and distinguished their practices from those of other educators. Third, the chosen nontraditional teaching environment of each educator was a powerfully mediating force for transformative work. Participants regularly witnessed trauma, violence, and internalized oppression suffered by students, while also enduring their own feelings of fragmentation and invisibility at the hands of their institutions. Their work was a way to attend to students' humanity and move them toward liberation, interrupt harmful institutional practices, and also to heal and restore themselves.

Keywords: black women teachers, alternative settings, institutional racism, New York City, transformative education

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to be used as instruments of change—often above cost to Self— that I was also writing about you. All you give to others is immeasurable and can't be quantified. But I do want you to know that it's changing lives. It has certainly changed mine.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated with loving appreciation to my husband, Tafara. You have been my strongest supporter throughout all the years of this doctorate, by my side through every stage, good and bad, with unwavering positivity and encouragement. Thank you for always seeing the bigger picture and pushing me to stay the course. You've made many sacrifices so that I could fulfill this dream, and never once made me feel guilty about it. Well, *we finally done did it*...we graduated! You enabled me to get the most out of a wonderful opportunity. I really could not have asked for a more unselfish partner. Thank you for supporting me through it all. Now... let's move on to our next dream!

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

How does a teaching practice meet the structural violence and oppression in a racist institutional system? And, how do teachers navigate systems they wish to change, in which they are also participating? This dissertation addresses these questions through an examination of the knowledge and experiences of black women educators who try to counteract forms of structural racism inside their teaching environments every day.

I undertake this study because in the context of research on teaching and teacher education, there is a vast literature on preparing white teachers for educating students of color, and about the experiences of teachers of color in U.S schools. Less prevalent is research on the experiences of black women educators whose work directly addresses the larger problem of institutional racism in schools and other types of educational settings, despite facing significant opposition and threats to job security.

I am a black woman and former teacher. I chose to focus on the experiences of black women, and in particular an understudied group of black women educators who teach in alternative and community-based education. Because while there is a precedent for studying anti-oppression activism in K-12 teaching (Nieto, 2000; Picower, 2011, 2012a, 2012b; Ladson-Billings, 2009), understanding what successful teachers are able to do within the constraints of larger, more complex institutions than K-12 schools is valuable. I examine what these educators know about school-aged youth “on the margins of the margins” with the view that the research might help inform K-12 teachers’ and administrators’ work with these students *before* the point of their absolute disengagement from school. I seek to interrogate nontraditional teachers’ thinking about their students’

victimization from institutional systems as well as their own experiences of victimization. Where for some teachers being “transformational” is more of a conceptual activity, here I offer the testimonies of women who attempt to translate their consciousness into institutional change. The voices of black teachers who are also community-based and alternative educators have not been traditionally centered in teacher education, so I conducted this study to uncover the conditions and constraints of their work lives.

I entered high school teaching in my early twenties with good pedagogical content knowledge and the same affirming views of my majority black and brown students that many teachers of color are known for (Lee, 2012; Lee, Guyden & Watkins, 2012; Sheets & Chew, 2002; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). What I did not yet grasp was the pervasiveness of racism in U.S. institutions in general. I lacked a critical anti-racist framework against which to test the policies and practices taking place in my school and in my own teaching. Therefore, I was unaware of the ways I was a participant in the normalizing and mechanizing machine of schooling I write about today. After leaving the classroom to teach in community-based alternative settings with youth enmeshed in multiple systems—criminal justice, social services, mental health, education—I started to more critically perceive the relationship between structural-institutional processes and individual outcomes. As I observed how institutional racism stifled the potential of black students, I began to recognize it was the same racism embedded inside institutional processes that was also sabotaging the efforts of the educators working alongside them. Most of us felt fulfilled by our work, but were struggling on the receiving end of the very same structural and symbolic violence inside our organizations that we sought to buffer students from.

During my time as a teacher, I was also observing my more veteran black women colleagues and the scope of their institutional knowledges. I came to appreciate their navigational strategies, which tended to be broad, contextual, and nimbly adaptive to the circumstances at hand. Many seemed to have a confident understanding of the insidiousness of institutional racism in students' lives and over their own work. Neither were their views about students' lives ever simplistic; instead they seemed to believe that there was the "institution's way" of handling black children and families, and this other unwritten, uncodified way. The veteran black educators with whom I worked through the years were of different backgrounds and did not agree on every approach or perspective, but most shared a level of nuance about the purposes of our work. There was a kind of "knowing" about the ways racism was being masked behind institutional operations, and with it a certain urgency to dare not "sleep" and make the (professionally) fatal mistake of forgetting this hidden enemy at hand—all while being a good, collegial employee. bell hooks (1986) characterizes this unique standpoint as "living on the edge" ...looking "both from the outside and in from the inside out...we understood both" (1986, vii). This kind of explicit, parallel dialogue— "real talk" about the racism around us was something with which I was familiar from having lived with, worked alongside, and interacted with black women over the course of my life, but I had to enter the workforce myself to witness how we deploy these taken-for-granted funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) at work as well. Black women doing transformative and activist work in the domain of education in ways that reflect these funds of knowledge have also been constrained by those same ideological and institutional structures of power and privilege that seek to retain power by any means necessary (Bullock, 1997; Howard, 2006; Larkin,

2013; Milner, 2010; Price, 2001; Price & Ball, 1998; Rodriguez & Berryman, 2002; Yerrick & Hoving, 2003). Still, I learned something about stamina and clarity of action from watching the navigational creativity of these women working in some of the most implacable of spaces. I saw many buffer their students from bearing the brunt of organizational negligence, and push for improved policies that helped countless families. Many times, our students learned to self-advocate as a result of these teachers' engaged caring. At the same time, I also felt their weariness over countless battles lost—the tears and disappointments when they saw their students being mishandled and degraded despite their protestations. I watched these mentors suffer professional losses and workplace retribution from colleagues and supervisors who resented their courage to tell the truth as they saw it inside of their organizations.

Teacher education research gives sparse attention to these educators who are typically not certified, although working successfully with school-age students. These are professionals who teach, but do their work in settings not commonly investigated in the teacher education literature. Some community-based and alternative educators would not necessarily identify primarily as teachers and are called by other titles: advocates, program coordinators, youth workers, community educators, and more. Many have formal training in social work, human services, law enforcement, counseling, or else were hired for their relevant life experience. Their students may be off of the K-12 radar, depending upon which systems the youth are now simultaneously enmeshed: i.e., juvenile justice, child welfare, etc. So, the field of teacher education does not get the chance to learn from their experiences. Yet, these educators are potentially valuable sources of knowledge.

Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) writes about the ways in which black women have always had to simultaneously work within *and* in opposition to every major U.S. institution: labor markets, schools, legal systems, housing, banking, insurance, and media. Due to the racism, gender discrimination, and poverty historically perpetuated by those institutions, black women necessarily developed mechanisms for resolving personal, legal, social, and community issues themselves (Crawford, 1990; Crawford, Rouse & Woods, 1990; Giddings, 1985; Hill-Collins, 1986, 2000). In the U.S, the most prominent sites of domination and resistance for black women in U.S. society have been institutions; these intersect to form a “distinctive U.S. matrix of domination” (Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 276) that simultaneously generates new opportunities and constraints for U.S. Black women’s activism. In education settings, black educators constrained by bureaucracy and institutional power have pushed against both ideological and institutional structures of power and privilege that loomed over them (Milner, 2010; Price, 2001; Price & Ball, 1998; Rodriguez & Berryman, 2002; Yerrick & Hoving, 2003). Today, black women’s particular knowledges still inform the ways we navigate institutions and work as insiders with some measure of bureaucratic power and influence. Black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) centers black women’s experiences and assumes that our work in formidable spaces is always being mediated by individual standpoint as well as the structural forces at play. And in the end, my study participants were found to be just as vulnerable to microaggressions and retaliation for their activism at work as black women would be in any other settings. Five of the six are no longer employed in their jobs, having either quit, or were pushed out after longtime differences with leadership. These are the pedagogical implications of teaching as a black woman in

a context of oppression. Therefore, this investigation centers their thinking and lived experiences, right at the intersection of biography, structure, and practice.

Historical Background

It is important to contextualize some of the prevailing ideas surrounding educating African American children and what is presumed to be necessary to successfully teach them. Unfortunately, popular rhetoric positions educating black children as *the* problem of the 21st century—and one best addressed by corporate philanthropy, charter school proliferation, and aggressive disciplinary enforcement. Black youth are at the center of a dangerous discourse that pushes for new standards, increased testing, and zero tolerance policies to the exclusion of deeper thinking about fairer resource allocation and quality teacher distribution to the most poorly funded school districts. Policymaking appears to deprioritize decades of research supporting the merits of high educational quality and improved teacher preparation for diverse classrooms. But when policies invariably effect minimal change, it reinforces falsehoods that black and poor children are simply harder to educate and require more technical, restrictive strategies to learn than do other children (Dumas, 2016; Emdin, 2016).

Such notions are ingrained in the American cultural memory in part because of romanticized narratives about *Brown v. Board*, 1954 that have effectively erased the historical origins of the so-called achievement gap. These ideas place blame squarely on the shoulders of black children and their families, teachers, and schools, when in fact, the decision never challenged the separate and unequal structure of our nation's public schools. *Brown v. Board*, 1954 sought only to physically redistribute students rather than

reconfigure the race-based system of housing and school districting patterns which organized educational opportunity for black and white Americans for decades (Dixon & Rousseau, 2006; Katznelson, 2005). It was this dual structure of housing and education that needed to be overhauled in order to cause lasting change, but that was not the aim of *Brown*. Enough improvements were made to lead to some social mobility for a black middle-class minority, but not enough to create equity on a mass scale (Bell, 2004; Katznelson, 2005; Ogletree, 2004). *De jure* segregation was made the focus of the debate, but the *de facto* segregation of neighborhoods and schools was left in place and continues today (Brown et al., 2003).

To give a local illustration of the residual effects of this policy problem, in 2019—some 65 years after *Brown*—students from five public high schools in Detroit sued the state of Michigan for its failure to educate them. The lawsuit cited untenable learning conditions: decades-old textbooks, freezing building temperatures, faulty plumbing, and the profound failure of the state-controlled schools to provide even a grade-level education for their oldest students. Student testimonies included graduating from high school without writing a single essay, carrying home a textbook, conducting a biology experiment, taking college preparatory material, or reading a grade-level text. Unbelievably, a federal judge ruled against instituting change through the courts, citing a little-known U.S. Supreme Court decision which held that access to literacy was *not* actually a constitutional right (*San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, 1973). Detroit students, parents, and school leaders had already written letters to the Michigan governor that went unanswered, so the lawsuit was actually a last-ditch effort by black communities to save their children's educational futures.

There are other current examples. In my home state, The New York State Equity Coalition (2018) has called upon state officials to turn around our alarming school suspension rates, which consistently show higher incidences of in-school and out-of-school suspensions for black students than other groups. And almost 30 years after the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act* (1990) was passed, poor and low-income black students continue to disproportionately make up the majority of referrals to special education. As recently as March 2019, a federal judge ruled that U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos had illegally delayed an Obama administration rule requiring all states to address racial disproportionality in their special education programs under the Act. Despite this federal requirement for states to investigate districts with the worst racial disparities, members of the concerned public still had to rise up and forcibly activate the federal government to end its inexplicable two-year hiatus, during which time thousands of special education students did not receive services.

Recent news is replete with accounts of student abuses: schools struggling as public funds are siphoned to support new charters and private religious schools; police being called to handcuff six-year olds; schools without physical education classes; other schools where wet ceilings are falling *during* physical education classes...and so on. To be sure, U.S. schools can be dangerous places, and their dehumanizing characteristics have been well documented (Giroux, 1988; Haberman, 1995; Herr & Anderson, 2003; Kozol, 1991; McLaren, 1998; Noguera, 2003, 2009; Oakes, 2005; Price, 1999; Weis & Fine, 2004). Scholars have long critiqued the structural policies and practices that disproportionately subject low-income youth and youth of color to disciplinary procedures, funnel them into special education, and deprive them of access to college

preparatory curricula (Anyon, 1980, 1997; Haberman, 1991; Kohl, 1994; Kozol, 1991; Noguera, 2009). Deploying methods-driven “best practices” or “techniques” may help to undercut some of the blatant teacher bias in school buildings, and selecting teacher candidates with the dispositions to teach all children (Haberman, 1995) is an important step toward safeguarding marginalized students’ futures. However, these cannot replace the robust systemic changes needed to sustain environments where all students could thrive on a mass scale. Today’s educational inequalities are traceable back to the racially discriminatory practices governing real estate and property ownership in the United States that historically ordered racial group access to home ownership and public education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Disparities in academic success and college-going between students from high income and low income families have persisted and are widening over time (Bailey and Dynarski, 2011; Reardon, 2013; Wyner, Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2007).

Disproportionate lack of access to high quality education and resources is caused by a combination of state, local and district spending, property taxes, and resource-allocation decisions. Poor schools are further impacted by the distribution of the least qualified and lowest paid teachers available (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2005; Goldhaber, Lavery & Theobald, 2015). Some of the largest districts in the United States even have income disparities between their own schools, with gaps increasing since the 1990s (Hall & Ushomirsky, 2010; Owens, Reardon & Jencks, 2016). These factors continue to perpetuate contrasting outcomes between generations of white students, and all others.

Therefore, it is critical to connect discussions about ground-level racism in our individual schools and districts to larger conversations about structural racism across U.S. institutions in general (Kendi, 2016). According to the Aspen Institute (2013), structural racism is:

a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.

The definition goes on to say that structural racism attends also to the historical, cultural, social, and psychological aspects of our race-based society (2013). Such formations are “a template for the processes of marginalization that continue to shape social structures as well as collective and individual psyches” (Omi and Winant 2015, p. 107). Racial phenomena are then mistakenly regarded as “normal” or natural outcomes of society when all racial phenomena can, in fact, be traced right back to the earliest efforts to racially order U.S. society (Woodson, 1933). When we organize contemporary policies and practices around any of these old familiar constructs of race, racialized people, or racial phenomena, they become institutionalized.

Moreover, public education is merely *one* system in the United States where structural racism disproportionately impacts black populations. The criminal justice

system is also guilty of some of the most egregious institutional violence. New York City just reached a settlement with the family of Kalief Browder, who, at the age of 16, was accused of stealing a backpack and was incarcerated at the notoriously violent Rikers Island jail, where he languished for three years with no case against him, unable to make bail. Two years after his release, he died by suicide likely as a result of the documented abuses he sustained while in solitary confinement as a minor. The tragedy sparked tremendous public pressure to permanently close Rikers. As a result, New York City ended solitary confinement for underage youth and moved toward providing them separate jails. Despite decades of similar incidences of unjust confinement and torture, it required a publicized death and public outcry for New York City to finally offer an institutional response to the lives it already had destroyed for decades. With government reform efforts and corrections oversight failed, citizen protest was still necessary to win even these most basic of gains. (Update: New York State will finally eliminate cash bail and pretrial detention for some misdemeanor and non-violent felony offenses in year 2020).

U.S. healthcare and medicine, meanwhile, similarly devalue black lives (Bailey, et. al, 2017; Feagin & Bennefield, 2014). Our nation has the highest maternal mortality rates of any developed nation, and black women are still 12 times more likely than white women to die from birth-related “medical error” (Bartholomew, Harris, & Maglalang, 2018; Del Rio, 2019; Hogue & Hargraves, 1993)—a euphemism for physicians ignoring the needs of black mothers during pregnancy and childbirth. The swell of testimonies of impacted families, data evidence, and lots of bad publicity from celebrities like tennis

player Serena Williams' near death experience post-childbirth have helped force states and insurance companies to hold hospitals and medical staff accountable (Jones, 2019).

I have referenced systemic racism across three different public institutions— education, criminal justice, and healthcare— to demonstrate the extent to which each is infected by historically embedded racism that, reliably, produces uneven gains. All of these illustrations implicate state and local policies in the harm of poor and black populations. Poor implementation notwithstanding, it appears that policies must still be accompanied by collective action time and again from those most harmed. I offer this research as an investigation of individuals who feel driven to try and push back the corrosive effects of racism in policy and practice through their work inside of educational institutions. Challenging institutional racism is not a job for one individual, and this study traces their continuous efforts to engage with both visible and invisible manifestations of racism and power. While their practices differed from one another, none of the six participants appeared to separate the political functions of their teaching from the embodied practice of being a teacher itself (de Royston et al., 2017), and this is detailed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six.

New York City Alternative Education

New York City is home to the largest public school system in the United States, with 1,135,334 students in approximately 1,840 preschools and K-12 schools serving children 0-24 years of age (New York City Department of Education, 2018). Of this 40.5 percent are Hispanic/Latino, 26 percent are black, 16.1 percent are Asian and 15 percent are identified as white. English Language Learners (ELLs) make up 13.5 percent of

students, and 19.7 percent of all students are on record as having disabilities. 74 percent of New York City public school students are considered low income, or eligible for free/reduced lunch. Thousands of these school-aged children, adolescents, teens, and young adults are also served by an undocumented number of educational programs outside of their traditional K-12 schools: after-school programs, weekend supplementary programs, community-based organizations, court mandated programs, and various other nonprofit and commercial extracurricular options ranging from arts, athletics, technology, cultural, academics, and more. For purposes of this study, alternative educational settings are defined as spaces other than traditional K-12 public schools in which academic and/or skills-based subjects (including state-tested subjects) are being taught to school-aged marginalized youth. “Marginalized” is defined here as low-income, court-involved, currently out-of-school or otherwise academically at-risk, and/or youth of color. (Study participants’ informal and formal preparation for working in these settings, as well as their motivations and experiences, are discussed in Chapters Four and Five).

Research Questions

In this study, I endeavored to understand how a teaching practice can address structural violence and oppression, as well what it looks like to try to navigate and change oppressive systems of which one is also a part. I asked the following research questions:

1. What are the ways black women educators understand the intersection of identity (biography), larger structural forces (structure), and their work (practice)?
2. How do black women educators in alternative educational settings understand and describe the conditions and constraints of their work lives?

3. What are the strategies with which they navigate these conditions and constraints in their work with marginalized youth in alternative settings?

In this introduction, I have explained the roots of my interest in institutional racism in U.S. education and the activist perspectives of black women teachers in alternative and community-based education sites. I provided a definition for structural racism and discussed its foundations in U.S. public education and persistence in other major institutional systems. This was done in order to demystify prevailing notions about African American children and the racial achievement gap, as well as contextualize pressing problems like the school-to-prison pipeline, overrepresentation in special education, and teacher quality for working with youth different from themselves. I have also defined the structure and history of alternative and community-based education related to this study, provided context for these settings in New York City, and discussed reasons for limiting this study only to educators in these environments.

Chapter Two presents analytic frameworks that have shaped my perspective that all human experience is anchored in dominant social, political, and ideological systems. My aim here is to use theory to help amplify, rather than replace, the voices of my participants. I am also interested in expanding as much as possible what can be counted as theory in teacher education. Since this study is chiefly concerned with gendered racism and class-based stratification in U.S. educational structures, I will first discuss the relevance of my theoretical frameworks, black feminist epistemology and critical bifocality. Next, I will present some of the classic social theories, including the research and literary contributions of African American social scientists and writers. I then will discuss some other more recent theoretical work that has strongly influenced my thinking

about how institutions, teaching, and social change are situated in a nexus of systems that work together to reinforce each other. This is followed by a discussion of the significant role of nontraditional forms of education in the successes of black children historically. I will also address research that offers a critical perspective on these sites falling victim to the same shifts in neoliberal policies and funding priorities that are systematically devouring U.S. public schools, something experienced by some of the study participants. I conclude the chapter with a survey of current literature for its treatment of black women's intersectional experiences of race and gender within U.S. education and nonprofit organizations.

In Chapter Three, I provide a detailed explanation of the study methodology and rationale for the study design, including my positionality, the theoretical frameworks that undergird my methodological choices, and the data collection and analysis processes.

Chapter Four addresses the first research question by explaining the ways black women educators understand the intersection of their identities (biography), larger structural forces (structure), and their teaching (practice). This chapter presents each participant's biography as a case study to frame the perspectives and life experiences that continue to inform her work.

Chapter Five addresses the second research question, which asks how black women educators in alternative educational settings understand and describe the conditions and constraints of their work lives. This chapter explains each participant's critical awareness of institutional power through the lenses of colonization, racism, and neoliberalism. Chapter Five also explains the salience of each woman's teaching

environment on possibilities for doing transformative work, and documents some of the tensions that arose in each of their settings.

Chapter Six responds to the third research question, which examines the strategies participants used to navigate the conditions and constraints of their work in alternative settings. While each educator was charged only with the teaching of academic and/or life skills, they described their activities in terms of gatekeeping, systems-navigating, and interrupting status quo activities in an effort to reduce or eliminate harm to students both inside and outside of their classrooms. Here, I will also describe the traumas engendered by institutionalized racism on participants and their students, including the residual effects of having to continually resist and challenge multiple oppressions.

Finally, this dissertation concludes with a summary of chapters, discussion of implications, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Because black women educators' thinking and actions stand at the intersection of biography, practice and structure, the two frameworks I used to understand our work lives against the backdrop of U.S. racism are black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) and critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012). In this chapter, I will first discuss these frameworks. Next, I present classic social theories that connect human phenomena to dominant social systems. These ideas include the scholarship and writings of African American thinkers whose exploration of the black experience as it is lived inside of social systems have influenced this dissertation. I will also reference newer scholarship that grapples with the mutual influence of structure and agency on the other.

Next, I will briefly discuss the historical significance of community-based education spaces as sites of liberatory education for communities of color. I will also touch upon the impact of the modern education reform movement on these sites, which was part of the experience described by some of the study participants. Last, I discuss the research on black women's intersectional experiences of race and gender in U.S. educational settings, including alternative education.

Black Feminist Epistemology and Critical Bifocality

Black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) centers African-American women's experiences as the lens through which to understand our oppression *and* our empowerment. Although black feminist epistemology is grounded in black women's

experiences, it argues that by grounding ideas and actions in the particularities of black women's experiences, one can approach universality.

According to Hill-Collins (2000), the most prominent sites of domination and resistance for black women in U.S. society are institutions; namely, structural domains (large-scale institutions), disciplinary domains (bureaucratic hierarchies and technique of surveillance), hegemonic domains (tactics that reinforce subordination), and interpersonal domains (intersecting oppressions). These intersect to form a "distinctive U.S. matrix of domination" (p. 276) that constantly gives rise to new opportunities for black women's activism. This so aptly speaks to some of my participants' experiences as they both strained *against* and successfully navigated *through* their organizations. Both were true at the same time. Hill-Collins (2000) describes African-American women's navigational knowledges of this matrix as also a part of our empowerment because it invokes all of our histories, formal and informal educational ways, self-definitions, activist traditions, and community development skills. In short, when black women integrate all of these parts in opposition to any externally imposed definition of themselves, a black feminist standpoint emerges to empower the entire collective (p. 289). Thus, black feminist epistemology emphasizes the *ongoing* interplay between black women's oppression and their agency and how this duality has been used as a tool of forward momentum. For this study, I read the lives and the institutionalized work practices of black women educators through this lens.

Critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012) is a methodological and epistemological approach to examining social phenomena that attempts to tell a deep, intimate story, and then connect that story to larger history, structure, and ideology. By always accounting

for small peculiarities within their larger scope, critical bifocality is multi-tiered and simultaneous. This is an approach that cuts across many parts. According to Weis & Fine (2012), “observed, macro-level, globally induced phenomena are produced and reproduced at the lived level on a daily basis, whether by explicit design or by virtue of what Bourdieu refers to as ‘habitus’” (p. 181). This framework is concerned with the ways that interrelated systems of domination (racism, patriarchy, and classism, among others) order human relations in educational settings, yet are also mutually influenced by human actors. By highlighting the interrelationships between macro and micro-level phenomena, critical bifocal lenses can keep teachers cognizant of the significance of systems and institutions in their personal and professional lives. Educators need lenses that consider the many interconnected, moving parts of their settings as units of analysis— from historical patterns, to the hidden ways that these permeate day-to-day actions and relationships between people. To that end, critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012) offers an alternative to the structure-versus-individual agency binary, as it rejects partiality and “either-or” binaries in favor of porousness and permeability.

In the following sections, I present a selection of influential classic social theories relevant to the problem of institutional structure versus individual agency, as well as other more recent approaches that shaped the direction of this paper.

Classic Social Theory and Foundational Theories of Structure and Agency

Social theory insists upon the systematic study of education as a social process (Wexler, 2009) and challenges positivist and interpretive approaches dominant in the twentieth century. The pervasive influence of hegemony— the “invisible” power of belief

systems, values, and ideologies—has its roots in the thinking of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. But it was Antonio Gramsci (1971) who explicated in practical terms the ways in which power is expressed and maintained through ideas and knowledge, not brute force, in industrial capitalist societies. In fact, Gramsci envisioned teachers as potential revolutionaries given that schools are one of the primary sites of cultural hegemony. These materialist perspectives no doubt influenced Bowles & Gintis' (1976) highly structurally deterministic arguments about the root causes of uneven educational outcomes between social class groups. They claimed that schooling contributes very little to the kinds of cognitive development that would ostensibly lead to higher earnings later in life. However, this view teeters toward overdetermining the influence of structures and institutions over human lives.

For example, Paulo Freire's (1973) *conscientizacao* or "critical consciousness" is still a guidepost for many classroom teachers who seek to develop solidarity with the communities in which they work (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Katsarou, Picower, & Stovall, 2010). This includes Freirean notions of liberation and emancipation, which ultimately lead to humanization for students (Freire, 1970, 1998a, 1998b). Some scholars have critiqued these concepts as not only sexist and "phallogentric" (hooks, 1994, p. 49) but also untranslatable to classroom application (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993; Bartolomé, 1994; Brady, 1995; Macedo & Bartolome, 1999; Roberts, 2000). Others remain faithful to Marxism but manage to frame issues in ways that better highlight the intersections of race and class privilege (Anyon, 1980, 1995, 1997, 2005; McLaren, 1998, 2008). Freire's work remains in the realm of the conceptual for some, but it offers an important

counterpoint to current discourses in education that tend to overemphasize behavioral-psychological explanations for educational problems (Payne, 2005; Tough 2006).

Credit must be given to pioneering African American thinkers who have contributed to structure-agency scholarship from across a variety of disciplines. These scholars were documenting the ways racist superstructures and black lives are intertwined as a fact of life in the study of their own and other oppressed peoples globally. W.E.B. DuBois, for one, was the antidote to theorists like Hegel, who totally ahistoricized racism and racialized populations. DuBois' (1903) "double consciousness" is a tool for understanding the bifocal (Weis & Fine, 2012) view and simultaneous "double vision" that enables marginalized people to perceive social inequalities in ways dominant groups cannot. Later research made use of political economy to deconstruct problems in urban education (Anyon, 1997; McLaren, 1998; Picciano & Spring, 2013). W.E.B. DuBois had clarified the problem of racial capitalism some 100 years earlier when he wrote about "the income-bearing value of Negro prejudice..." (DuBois, 1940, p. 48). He sharply opposed the ahistorical, biological racism of white scientists of his time, as well as the assimilationist views of many of his sociologist contemporaries. DuBois (1933, 1935) applied Marxism as a frame for analysis of the entire span of the African experience in the Americas despite Marx's own inattention to racism and its implications for the marketplace. The DuBoisian legacy is still traceable in the texts of social scientists writing today (Harrison & Harrison, 1999; Mullings, 2005).

Although anthropologists Franz Boas and Melville Herskovitz dominate the U.S. cannon taught in contemporary schools of anthropology, both had colleagues of color that devoted their lives and scholarship to telling the stories of African American, indigenous,

and other groups ignored or misrepresented by social science researchers in the United States (Davis & Warner, 1939; Drake & Clayton, 1945; Foster, 1936). Their work to theorize narrowly conceived Eurocentric research on African American lives was largely ignored by the American academy:

We must...view anthropology from the perspectives of the colored peoples, from Richard Wright's "frog perspectives" of looking upward from below. When we do this, the importance of color erupts, and the world of E.B. Tylor, Franz Boas, and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown becomes articulated with the world of W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, and Frantz Fanon. The "frog perspectives" reveal surprising insights about anthropology, and these insights are the skeletons in the anthropological closet (Willis, Jr., 1972, p. 243).

Drawing from the sociology of DuBois, the political literature of Wright and the postcolonial writings of Fanon, one can see that African American scholars early on understood the need to theorize our lives simultaneously through the lenses of structural oppression and collective self-determination. Black writers of the twentieth-century used cultural and political critique to dissect the intersections of social oppression and racial capitalism (Baldwin, 1985; Ellison, 1952; Hansberry, 1959; Robeson, 1978; Wright, 1940), racism and sexuality (Baldwin, 1956), and racism and patriarchy (Hansberry, 1959; Hurston, 1935; Morrison, 1992) during what were arguably some of the most dangerous time periods in U.S history to do so.

Several of the study participants used metaphors from plantation colony structure to describe forms of institutional power in their workplaces and their engagement with it (detailed in Chapter Five). Postcolonial studies in education connect deeply with

Gramscian notions of educational hegemony, describing how vestiges of colonial structures still live on in former colonial “subjects” (Achebe, 1958; Chatterjee, 1993; Fanon, 1965, 1967; Minh-ha, 1995; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Said, 1993; Suleri, 2005). Eric Williams (1946) put forward a particularly strong decolonizing vision for the plantation societies of the Caribbean that emphasized political action as a form of anti-colonial education. Postcolonial theory is a useful explanatory tool for understanding U.S. school discipline practices, curricular choices, and standardized assessments.

Contemporary Perspectives on Structure and Agency

Critical race theory (CRT) has provided a means for understanding how U.S. student pathways are ordered by structural racism that is endemic, pervasive, and permanent (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). Originally created by legal scholars, Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) were the first to use CRT in an analysis of the U.S. education system. It has since been called everything from overly pessimistic to totally imagined. Nevertheless, it enables us to challenge dominant claims of colorblindness, race neutrality, objectivity, and meritocracy often used as a rationale for scientific measurements that assess student aptitude. Scholars outside of the United States use critical race theory to analyze contemporary race relations in their own national contexts. CRT, however, tends to ignore gender, class, or intersecting identities as part of its race-central focus, and some scholars have attempted to redress these partial constructions (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Patton, McEwan, Rendon & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). CRT offspring like LatCrit, AsianCrit, TribalCrit and whiteness studies still center the structural analysis, but have pushed CRT beyond its black-white paradigm (Chae, 2005;

Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Fuentes, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Solorzano & Yasso, 2001).

Zeus Leonardo (2012) argues that theories of race or class separately are incomplete because both equally contribute to oppression in schools. For example, Marx's class analysis fails to account for the power of racism to disorganize the working classes, and totally ignores the nonmaterial currency of whiteness in the U.S. Critical race theory is also at fault for failing to account for intersectional identities. Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) explains how "race and gender may be analytically distinct, but in black women's everyday lives, they work together" (p. 269). Leonardo points out that even theories of intersectionality can be manipulated to diminish the significance of racism (2012), and so proposes a critical "race-class" theory to center both race and class together.

Contemporary black scholars have continued to add their insights to understanding the dynamic interplay between institutional power and young black lives. Perry, Steele & Hilliard (2003), for example, show how young black people as individuals in U.S. schools may be interacting daily with the school itself, but simultaneously are forced to interact with negative ideologies *about* black people. Claude Steele's (1997) well-known "stereotype threat" illustrated how black students' location on the spectrum between confidence and self-doubt is mediated by everyday encounters with institutional expectations of their failure.

A very different analytical frame is Ogbu & Fordham's (1986) "acting white" hypothesis, a cultural-ecological attempt (Ogbu 1987, 1992; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) to theorize black students' resistance to schooling. Ogbu hypothesized that variability in

minority school performance could be directly correlated with each group's classification as either "autonomous," "involuntary," or "voluntary" immigrant-minorities. His work has been called essentializing and was critiqued for its failure to account for school-level contributors to academic failure for marginalized groups. Ogbu's theories have been dismissed as too overly deterministic and as an oversimplification of the role of structure on the individual. However, I credit him for attempting to connect two concepts as broad as historical oppression and a people's resistance behaviors.

Some scholars have further broken down determinism in social theory by critiquing the meanings people make of institutions, rather than hyper-focusing on the institutions themselves (Apple, 2008). Within contexts of schooling, scholars have interrogated social interactions, teaching practices, technologies, and educational institutions in light of culture, context, custom, and history (Davies, 1994; Giroux, 2005; hooks, 1994; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; McLaren, 1998). As with Mica Pollock's (2008) deep analysis, cultural-historical theory means to capture "moving" constructs that occur in real time in an activity system.

Teachers that draw from their shared cultural-group membership with students and capitalize on those insights to improve students' experiences are using situated pedagogies (Delpit, 2012; Foster, 1998; Henry, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Educators with pedagogical stances such as culturally responsive teaching (Neito, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2014), and sociocultural/political consciousness also attempt to integrate their knowledge of language, culture, society and justice into teaching, sometimes with subversive intentions (Ladson-Billings, 2000;

Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In research on U.S. classrooms and teacher-student interactions, these and other pedagogies including Community Cultural Wealth, and Funds of Knowledge are offered as alternatives to relying on cultural deficit perspectives (Cooper et al. 2002; Gay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Monzo & Rueda, 2003; Rodriguez, 2013). Similarly, Emdin (2016) draws parallels between the colonization of indigenous children and that of U.S. “neoindigenous” urban youth, whose authentic selves are diminished to the extent that “they can only be smart when they are not who they are” (p. 14).

Finally, while critical theorists in general seek to dismantle structures, postmodernists focus on disrupting current forms of thought to introduce new and explicitly political epistemologies. Devine, Savage, Scott, and Crompton (2005) write, “dealing with the ‘postmodern condition’ involves attempting to make sense of our lives in a context of multiple, open-ended, ever-proliferating narratives and language games... incoherence in society and social relationships” (p. 165). In education, for example, poststructural feminists have documented the ways in which schoolchildren reenact gender at the level of discourse during play (Davies, 1994) and English Language Learners’ meaning-making in schools, workplaces, and at home (Norton, 2000). Others have expanded this to look at gendered racial constructions in schools (Wright, Weekes & McGlaughlin, 1999).

In this section, I have reviewed theoretical literature concerned with the connection between ideological and organizational structures, and individual actors. Next, I will briefly discuss current research about black women’s intersectional experiences within U.S. education.

Black Women's Intersectional Experiences in U.S. Education and Nonprofit Organizations

Black women teachers in contemporary K-12 schools are well represented in the literature as teaching with very particular humanistic pedagogies: “warm demanders” (Delpit, 2012; Ware, 2006), “other mothering” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Irvine, 1999), and culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Most are said to combine these strategies with strong moral and ethical beliefs about teaching, responsibility, and community (Dingus, 2008; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Lee, Guyden & Watkins, 2012; Loder-Jackson, 2012; Robinson & Baber, 2013; Shealey, Watson, & Qian, 2010; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Others showcase the transformative teaching practices and sociopolitical perspectives of black and non-black women educators that teach black students in U.S. and Canadian schools (Acker, 1995; Casey, 1993; Carver & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Foster, 1993, 1998; Henry, 1998; Picower, 2004). Even black women school administrators have been studied for their feminist styles of leadership (Dillard, 1995).

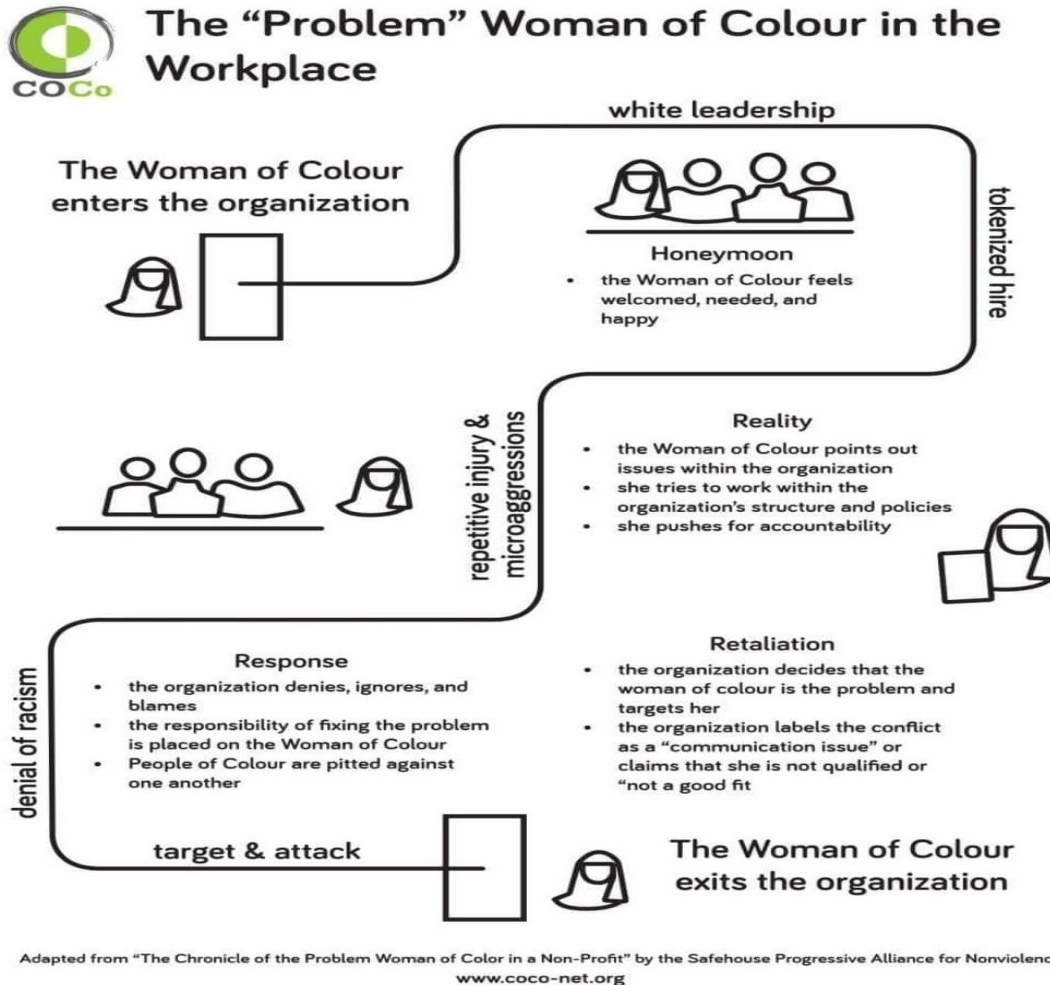
However, there is little on the black women who teach in alternative settings as the subjects of analysis, and what exists is not so easily synthesized. The search is made more complex by the variable and diverse nature of those alternative educational settings in which we often work. To that end, critical race feminism and intersectionality (Hill-Collins, 1986, 2000) remind us that there are always crisscrossing layers of human experience amidst shifting economic and social relations. So, I searched for literature about black women educators' transformative practices in alternative settings understanding that educators may be called “practitioners” or human services

“providers,” in the literature, and could be employed in a variety of settings such as nonprofit organizations, community agencies, alternative schools, or more. What I found was that research about black women as subjects and practitioners in alternative education settings was not as plentiful as it was for K-12 schools. With a few exceptions (Arches, 1997; Healy, 2000), when black women were the subjects of research in nontraditional settings, they were the clients, consumers, participants or recipients of proposed transformative interventions. Seldom were black women being written about as the agents of transformation specifically in alternative education. There were related literatures about the racialized nature of organizational containment and its long-term impact on the careers of black educational leaders (Berry, 2014), as well as the increasing racialization of specific professions for African Americans across different types of U.S. institutions (Beasley, 2012; Collins, 1993). In other words, black women were being relegated to non-executive roles and heavily relied upon for expertise relative to lower-level school functions. They were getting pigeonholed in student services positions, and excluded from leadership roles (Madsen & Mabokela, 2000).

In fact, there is more recent literature about black women’s experiences with these negative patterns across different nonprofit workplaces. The report, *Race to Lead: Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector* (Biu, 2019) a national survey of more than 4,000 women of color, showed deeply embedded discriminatory practices and systemic obstacles that negatively impact the career advancement and daily experiences of women of color in U.S. nonprofit organizations. Survey respondents described multiple instances of blatant and subtle racism in workplaces that matched many of the experiences cited by my study participants. For example: being passed over for promotions and new jobs in

favor of white and male others with less experience, tenure, or high performance on the job; receiving less compensation for similar work; feeling that contributions and ideas are not valued and frequently stolen; and, increased feelings of tension and stress resulting from mistreatment. And while the survey did not explicitly ask respondents about gender combined with race, many respondents brought up the subject of intersectionality on their own, reporting that their race and gender together have been barriers to career advancement.

Another relevant survey of black women nonprofit employees was conducted in Canada by the Centre for Community Organizations (2018) and had similar findings. 30% of survey respondents said they had left a job due to an unwelcoming racial environment. But what was most striking was their depiction of the cycle of push out, *The 'Problem Woman of Colour' in the Workplace*. The process described the way institutional conditions cause black women employees either to leave their organizations, or ultimately be pushed out for their efforts to improve it. After learning more about my study participants' work lives, it became more apparent that working in these institutions is incredibly complex for participants and, in point of fact, the cycle described above absolutely mirrors the experiences shared by five of my six participants who described working in particularly oppressive settings:



In general, reviews of research decades apart found U.S. women teachers and their work were not a part of any broad analyses of gender, teaching, education, or schooling (Acker, 1995; Gallman & Mallozzi, 2012), with a few exceptions by U.S. feminist researchers. Gender was still only superficially highlighted and often pushed to the side in favor of race analyses. Gender did become important vis-à-vis students, like with girls’ math anxiety (Gautreau, Kirtman & Guillaume, 2011) or preparation for STEM careers. Or, where women teachers’ gender appeared, it was sometimes itself constructed as the problem; for example, the “feminization” of the profession negatively affecting labor markets (Bacolod, 2007) or categories like “marriage” and “motherhood”

cast as reasons for women teachers' career choice and instability (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004).

Overall, scholarship about gender in education favored girl students over their women teachers. But boys and their experiences with schooling, one another, and with girls, plus analyses of their representations in the literature, are rich (Epstein, 1998; Rowan, Knobel, Bigum, & Lankshear, 2002; Weaver-Hightower, 2003). *Black* boys in particular are well represented in current research (Beaudry, 2015; Bristol, 2015; Dumas, 2016; Noguera, 2003, 2009; Price, 1999), coinciding with the tremendous philanthropic and policy attention to black and Latino boys and youth (i.e., The Black Male Initiative, George Soros Foundation, Echoing Green Fellowship, Robin Hood Foundation, NYC Education Policy Institute, New York City Men Teach, Obama Foundation/My Brother's Keeper, among others). Black girls' increasing marginalization and criminalization have also received attention in the K-12 literature (Blake, Butler, Lewis & Darenbourg, 2011; Crenshaw, Ocen & Nanda, 2015; Morris 2007; Morris 2012, 2016; Wun, 2016) although the public policy and philanthropic response to girls has not matched that given to black boys. One noteworthy observation is that black girls and young women in the K-12 education research are shown to speak of themselves as eager and ambitious learners, while school officials tend to cast them as unteachable or at fault for their own limited opportunities (Neal-Jackson, 2018).

In the next section, I briefly review research on U.S. alternative and community based education, its historical significance for U.S. black communities, and the impact of current education reform movements on their structures and practices.

U.S. Alternative and Community-Based Education

As previously discussed, current scholarship specifically about black women educators teaching in U.S. alternative settings is scarce. Again, alternative settings in this study are defined as any nontraditional spaces typically outside of K-12 public schools in which academic and/or skills-based subjects (including state-tested subjects) are being taught to school-aged marginalized youth. These are usually nonprofit or volunteer organizations but can focus programming on community development, academic enrichment, criminal justice, social services and much more. Social learning and intellectual development in these spaces has been widely regarded as very beneficial to low income youth because they are engaged in a variety of formal and informal activities that engender high levels of trust, engagement, and opportunities for growth (Eccles & Appleton-Gootman, 2002; Ginwright, 2009; Heath & McLaughlin, 1994). Historically, nontraditional education has taken up many of these roles, and I will discuss some of them here.

The earliest examples of nontraditional education in U.S. black communities were the remarkable efforts of enslaved African Americans to educate themselves in the American South during slavery, through to the post-emancipation and migration periods (Wilkerson, 2010; Williams, 2005). Several texts, including the *American Slave Narrative* genre, chronicle the enslaved community's commitment to self-educating even under extreme social and political conditions (Bennett, 1962; Franklin, 1956; Genovese, 1976; Wilson, 1859; Woodson, 1933). Many self-taught black women teachers showed an unwavering commitment to teaching literacy as a form of resistance to state-sanctioned violence (Delaney, 1988; Jacobs, 1861; Jackson, 1866; Prince, 1831; Wilson,

1859). Some interesting scholarship has chronicled black educators' work in various nontraditional spaces before, during, and after the sweeping changes instigated by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Foster, 1998; Siddle-Walker, 1996). Historically black colleges and universities, too, have served as important sites of both traditional and nontraditional education. Prior to *Brown*, generations of African Americans had exclusively attended historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). *Brown* most notably expanded higher education opportunities for war veterans like my father, who was able to take courses at the University of Illinois through the GI Bill although he was barred from using campus facilities or living in dormitories. HBCUs redefined possibilities for emancipated black communities, even while being shaped by the economic and political limitations imposed post-*Brown* (Allen et. al., 2007).

Baldrige (2014) describes nontraditional programs like the community schools of the post-*Brown* era and during the 1960s and 70s freedom struggles as central to black civil society. Teachers were free to create curricula tailored to students' lives, and openly discuss political strategies for self-determination. This was exactly what one of my participants described about her many summers spent as a volunteer youth worker in the community-based summer program in Detroit (discussed in Chapter Four). Students like her developed leadership skills through meaningful local activism, while also gaining a sense of the power of collective action for community empowerment. Unfortunately, however, community spaces like these have not all been able to escape the intrusion of neoliberal reforms which in the late 1990s-early 2000s began ushering in the same accountability programs that were systematically undercutting public education (Baldrige, 2014). In fact, Dumas (2016) argues that some community-based education

programs have become so dependent upon corporate reforms and private philanthropy that their formerly innovative models have been compromised.

In this chapter I discussed various perspectives on structure and agency to provide theoretical context for the type of work in which my participants were engaged. Next, I reviewed scholarship about the lives and historical experiences of black women educators in U.S education and nonprofit organizations, most of which lacked an explicit gender analysis, save for a smaller subset with feminist and/or intersectional analytical frameworks. Last, I presented a brief overview of the historical importance of nontraditional education sites for U.S. black communities, which recent research suggests are struggling with the same institutional racism as K-12 schools. Hellerstein and Neumark's (2008) workplace analysis of employer-employee patterns found extensive levels of racial workplace segregation between blacks and whites, and between Hispanics and whites, that could not be fully attributed to the educational differences between whites and others. So evidently, American workplaces in general, like our schools, still have much progress to make along the racial divide.

In the following chapter, I will outline the research design, data sources, and also discuss discoveries made during the research process.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the qualitative methodology used for this study. The meta-inquiries guiding my investigation were *how does a transformative teaching practice meet structural violence and oppression? And, how does a teacher navigate or change an organization in which she is also participating?*

My specific research questions were as follows:

1. What are the specific ways black women educators in alternative education settings make connections between their identities (biography), larger structural forces (structure), and work (practice)? (Addressed in Chapter Four).
2. How do black women educators in alternative educational settings understand and describe the conditions and constraints of their work lives? (Addressed in Chapter Five).
3. What are the strategies with which black women educators navigate these conditions and constraints in their work with marginalized youth in these settings? (Addressed in Chapter Six).

In the following sections, I first provide a general overview of the study and discuss the rationale for the study design. Next, I discuss my positionality and the theoretical frameworks which undergird the methodological choices made for this study. This will be followed by a detailed explanation of the study design, beginning with recruitment, participation selection, and including a description of each of the six participants' demographic data and respective teaching contexts. I will then discuss data sources and tools and their relevance to the theoretical frameworks used here. Finally, I will explain

the data analysis process, share insights learned during the interviewing and analyses phases, and conclude with a brief discussion of ethical and methodological concerns and limitations of the study.

Rationale

This study is a qualitative examination of “ruling relations” (Smith, 1987), or, the forms of social consciousness and organization enacted in black educators’ workplaces as they work with marginalized youth. My interest in examining the dynamicity of institutions alongside black women’s practices was influenced by the work of feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987), who developed an ethnographic method for studying complex and variable environments. I wished to capture the richness of the insights black women educators could offer about working with severely marginalized youth while managing complex institutional systems as workplaces. While I did not utilize Smith’s ethnographic techniques (these techniques and my explanation are detailed later in this chapter), I have drawn conceptually from her understanding of how institutions can shape the ways meaning is made about individual identities.

First, I aimed to understand the meanings black women’s intersectional identities acquired inside their alternative education settings (biography). Second, I wanted to explore the ways black women teachers read, navigated, and made meaning of their work, and how that work was mediated by ruling relations (institutional and ideological structures) (Smith 1987). Third, I wanted to illuminate the ways these teachers negotiated the influential social knowledges that their respective institutions were producing about marginalized students (transformative practice) (Smith, 1987).

The two constructs that directly informed my approach were black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) and critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012). The teachers in this study had critical gazes that extended outward from their classrooms and institutions of work and toward larger society. Each regarded her work setting as complex, with macro and moment-by-moment activities that simultaneously influenced her teaching (Anderson & Scott, 2012; Smith, 1987; Weis & Fine, 2012). I was curious about how these types of educators would describe the complex systems that impacted day-to-day practices in their institutions, and the connections between those structures and ground-level activities.

My desire to understand these teachers' thinking stems in part from my general interest in how *all* teachers think, make decisions, and use their talents and skills to navigate rocky, unpredictable, and rapidly changing terrain. The more I have talked with different teachers, the more I have been struck by how they processed the events of their work lives. I have met educators who describe *seeing* and also *not seeing* deep linkages between their professional activities and our society's multiple structures. This included how teachers read culture or power inside schools, but also how sensitively they read others' identity politics, standpoints, and positionalities, or understood the fluidity of their relationships at work (Devine et. al., 2005). These teachers modeled the practice of "above and below" teaching, because what they were doing extended well beyond their classrooms. Ultimately, I wanted to get each of the teacher participants in the study to articulate and name their own unique approach(es). I hoped to draw out from each woman specific explanations of her thinking and practice. It seemed that they could be the teachers to answer Paulo Freire's critics, who have argued that his "critical

consciousness” has little practical application in schools (Aronowitz & Giroux 1993; Brady, 1995; Roberts, 2000).

Another purpose of this study is to put a spotlight on the practices of teachers in nontraditional, youth-serving educational settings and explore their work cross-comparatively with that of like-minded K-12 educators. I wanted to make a contribution to the literature by documenting the thinking and decision-making of diverse practitioners across different institutional contexts who have developed some working strategies to navigate the effects of systemic forces. I was especially interested in understanding any disjunctures between these teachers’ everyday lives and the institutionalized work processes of their agencies. I believed that much could be learned from how these unique thinkers “read” and navigated their teaching environments.

Merriam (2009) writes that qualitative research helps us understand how people interpret their own experiences, construct their worlds, and assign meaning to those experiences. To do this, my study design required the use of open-ended questions to discover how participants explained particular phenomena. It also required a robust selection process to find and recruit candidates who, first: exemplified critical pedagogy; second, were able to articulate what distinguished their practices as transformative from the practice of any teacher; third, possessed an ability to recognize and interpret structural and institutional phenomena influencing their practice; and last, had the critical self-awareness to recognize and also clearly describe the impact of phenomena on their lives and work. I chose to undertake a classic qualitative study of six women teachers rather than single ethnography or single case study to present a mixture of breadth and depth of such experiences in a cross-section of diverse participants. However, I was examining

more than one process; first, how each woman became a transformative educator over the course of a lifetime; and second, the ongoing interplay between each woman's practice and the values of the institution in which she worked. Therefore, this study documents both the lifelong journey of formal and informal learning to become a transformative educator in contexts of conflict and oppression, and the experience of actually being a full-fledged transformative educator working in said contexts. The use of two in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions elicited my data, so I elected to include a detailed case study in Chapter 4 of each participant's life to highlight her journey as it related to her future choice to become a teacher in an alternative education setting. I discovered during the interviewing phases that informal education was more influential in shaping most participants' professional trajectory than their formal postsecondary schooling.

Positionality

Black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) and critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012) posit that black women educators' work is mediated both by individual standpoint and by ruling relations. Likewise, the questions I posed, my beliefs about this research, and the methods I chose were built upon my own individual standpoint and experiences within U.S. institutions. I approached this study as a black woman who is also a product of public and alternative education, and my personal and professional experiences inspired my interest in studying other black women teachers. Denzin (1986) writes that "interpretive research begins and ends with the biography and self of the researcher" (p.12), so there is no separation between what I believe about this research

and my own identity (Harding, 1987). I believe my insider perspective was an advantage as a researcher. Part of the value in studying black women's insights is that these are typically not available for public knowledge, mostly voiced privately in safer, informal contexts, outside of work environments. Therefore, my identity afforded me the ability to be privy to participants' typically more privately-held knowledge. Unfortunately, black teachers in schools are not typically the first ones consulted as intellectual leaders or thought partners on matters of teaching effectiveness as much as we are on issues of student management. So, I carried out this research to center our voices right alongside other scholarship on teaching, especially the literature about teaching black children.

For example, the participants in this study knew that black children are just like any other children. That, if black children are to be distinguished from other children, it is only by the burden of being subjected to racism and denigration in ways few other children are, and well before developing any contextual understanding of why. With this research, I aimed simply to unveil these and other taken-for-granted insights of black women teachers. When I revisited my file of meta-memos written in 2015 about the participant interviewing process and its effect on me. I found this exemplar of my own positionality in this work:

Doing these interviews with people that share how I feel about oppressive schooling is therapeutic for me. I am interested in these rare teachers in the first place because they care passionately and what they are saying matters. It's a release for me because I believe they should be heard, yet no one is listening to the valuable things they have to say, yet people around them should pay attention to the ways they solve problems in their schools. They are taking the risks to do

what's right because they understand the stakes. I can't deny that to hear them briefly gives me my release from the pessimism and anger I feel about the fact that no one seems to care about black children or how they are being treated.

Today, four years after writing this, I am now a mother of two elementary school-aged children, and my commitment to uplifting the work of black women teacher-activists feels even more urgent. Now, I spend my teacher meetings and principal visits talking with these professional educators, trying to discern: are you *committed* to handling my son's humanity with loving care? Do you have the capacity to really *see* my daughter? Will you be *able* to believe and remember that my children are valuable, worthy, precious human beings—in *exactly the same way you can see your own children*? These are the hopes that I have for my children's teachers and for all adults privileged to teach children. I took on this project to show that the work of valuing black children's lives can be done, and to listen to the perspectives of those engaged in doing it.

Study Design

Recruitment of Participants

I used a multi-tiered search and recruitment process, employing purposive and snowball sampling to draw from three social justice-oriented teacher networks: two in the New York metro area and one with national reach. Combined, these organizations have memberships totaling nearly 1,000 educators from diverse school settings, geographies, disciplines, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Teacher members have a shared interest in social justice and activism in education. I sent an email containing the call for

participants to network administrators asking them to disseminate to member lists, and sent the same to my own colleagues and former students (See Appendix A).

Preliminary Phone Screening

I needed participants with the ability and willingness to articulate how and why they did transformative work through the use of explicit examples of themselves engaging in it. In order to screen potential participants for these qualities, I included in the call my contact information to conduct a preliminary telephone screening with each candidate. I used a script of prepared questions for the call (See Appendix B) and took notes from participants' responses. A secondary aim of the phone screening was to verify basic eligibility, reiterate study parameters, confirm interest, and schedule a first in-person meeting.

12 teachers responded to the call for participants and were contacted for the phone screening. During the screening, I asked open-ended questions about teachers' interest in and motivation to participate in the study in order to gain a sense of how they understood connections between their individual practices and the larger structures around them. This preliminary screening filtered the pool down to eight candidates for inclusion in the study. Of the eight, one participant did not follow up to schedule a first interview, leaving seven eligible teachers for the final participants. Finally, one of these candidates was not selected after two interviews were undertaken (data collection explained below) as she was unable to describe any examples of her own transformative practices or beliefs in critical pedagogies. Therefore the remaining six participants were the focus of the data analysis presented here.

Participant Demographics

Of the six educators, two were New York State certified teachers; the remaining four had formal academic training in other disciplines (discussed in detail in Chapter 4) but were delivering instruction in educational settings. All were teaching in alternative educational settings where credentials to teach and employment requirements varied and were decided by their respective agencies.

Table 1
Participant profile: Amelia

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	JOB TITLE/ AGENCY TYPE	STUDENT POPULATION	PARTICIPANT'S ROLE
<p>AMELIA</p> <p>34 years old</p> <p>Born/raised in Detroit MI</p> <p>Black-American</p> <p>Currently resides in Brooklyn NY</p> <p>Female/bisexual</p> <p>Single; never been married</p>	<p>BA Communications Private university in Detroit, MI</p> <p>MFA Nonfiction Writing Private college in Westchester County, New York</p> <p>MAT English Language Arts Alternative certification program between private college and New York City DOE.</p>	<p>English Teacher</p> <p>A public transfer high school serving overage and under-credited students from all over New York City.</p>	<p>18-24 years old</p> <p>No high school credits or diploma</p> <p>Low income, receive free/reduced lunch</p> <p>Some have young children; most have extracurricular employment</p>	<p>Certified New York State 7-12th grade, English Language Arts</p> <p>Teaches English composition, writing, literature, and electives. Assists with portfolio assessments for graduation requirement.</p>

Table 2
Participant profile: Tarsha

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	JOB TITLE/ AGENCY TYPE	STUDENT POPULATION	PARTICIPANT'S ROLE
<p>TARSHA</p> <p>41 years old</p> <p>Born/raised in Brooklyn, NY</p> <p>Black</p> <p>Female/straight</p> <p>Single; never been married.</p>	<p>BA Dual major in English Literature; Education Private college in Pennsylvania</p> <p>MA Urban Education Private university in Philadelphia</p> <p>Ed.D. Educational and Organizational Leadership Private university in Philadelphia</p>	<p>Senior Director of Middle School Programs</p> <p>Nonprofit after school program in New York City.</p>	<p>11-14 years old</p> <p>Harlem residents who attend New York City public middle schools.</p>	<p>Certified in NYS and Pennsylvania; 7-12 English Language Arts</p> <p>Leads a program in a historical community center with deep roots in the community.</p> <p>Program supplements middle schools with afterschool and weekend academic support programs for students both onsite and in schools. Oversees middle school partnerships.</p>

Table 3
Participant profile: Mariana

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	JOB TITLE/ AGENCY TYPE	STUDENT POPULATION	PARTICIPANT'S ROLE
<p>MARIANA</p> <p>33 years old</p> <p>Lives in Brooklyn NY</p> <p>Born in New York City; raised in Dominican Republic/Lower east side New York City.</p> <p>Afro-Latina (Dominican)</p> <p>Female/heterosexual</p> <p>Single; never been married</p>	<p>BA Economics</p> <p>New York State public university, college bridge Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) for promising low-income underrepresented students.</p> <p>MPA Public Administration New York State public university</p> <p>Part time PhD student in public policy at a public New Jersey state university</p>	<p>Instructor</p> <p>Public community college in New York City</p>	<p>18-24 years old</p> <p>Candidates for associates degrees and certifications in home health care, medical administration. Low-income, working class.</p> <p>Latinos, Africans, South Asian, Chinese, Black Caribbean, African-American and ethnic Whites from Poland, Ukraine, former Soviet Union. Few to no U.S.-born white Americans.</p> <p>English language learners, first-generation, some undocumented.</p>	<p>Faculty in social sciences department.</p> <p>Teaches social sciences, English remediation as part of freshman-year coursework.</p>

Table 4

Participant profile: Aylisa

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	JOB TITLE/ AGENCY TYPE	STUDENT POPULATION	PARTICIPANT'S ROLE
<p>AYLISA</p> <p>40 years old</p> <p>Lives in Brooklyn NY</p> <p>Black</p> <p>Female/heterosexual</p> <p>Born/raised in Rochester, NY</p> <p>Married (1 child)</p>	<p>BA Cultural Studies & Women's History</p> <p>New York State public university</p> <p>MA Interdisciplinary Studies</p> <p>New York State public university</p> <p>Part-time PhD student</p> <p>Interdisciplinary Studies, distance learning program.</p>	<p>Coordinator of Teen Programs</p> <p>A large museum in New York City</p>	<p>14-19 years old</p> <p>Low income, Brooklyn residents</p> <p>Recruited from neighborhood schools for college/career readiness programs and supplemental academic support.</p>	<p>Teaches subjects in youth development, does web-based education, college preparatory courses, sets up internships, manages artist residencies.</p>

Table 5

Participant profile: Shimitra

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	JOB TITLE/ AGENCY TYPE	STUDENT POPULATION	PARTICIPANT'S ROLE
<p>SHIMITRA</p> <p>33 years old</p> <p>African-American</p> <p>One parent Black from Caribbean</p> <p>Born/raised in Brooklyn NY</p> <p>Currently resides in Queens NY</p> <p>Female/queer</p> <p>Married</p>	<p>BA English & Sociology</p> <p>New York State public university, college bridge Equal Opportunity Program (EOP) for promising low-income underrepresented students.</p> <p>MSW (Social Work)</p> <p>Private university in Pennsylvania (macro policy concentration)</p>	<p>Program Director</p> <p>A prison alternative program for 16-24 year olds in NYC convicted of violent felonies</p>	<p>16-24 years old</p> <p>Court-mandated to program; convicted of a violent felony crime.</p> <p>Participating in program in lieu of prison sentence.</p> <p>Low income, out of school unemployed, some formerly incarcerated.</p> <p>Mostly young men of color, some women.</p>	<p>Licensed New York State social worker</p> <p>To give youth in Brooklyn, NY with felony records an opportunity to repair harm done by entering into dialogue with those they victimized, overseeing improvement plans and terms are met for 1-2 years. Helping participants not recidivate.</p>

Table 6
Participant profile: Lisette-Michelle

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	JOB TITLE/ AGENCY TYPE	STUDENT POPULATION	PARTICIPANT'S ROLE
<p>LISETTE-MICHELLE</p> <p>27 years old</p> <p>Born/raised in New York City</p> <p>Black</p> <p>Female/straight</p> <p>Single; never been married.</p>	<p>BA Forensic Psychology Public New York City college</p> <p>MPA Inspection and Oversight Public New York City college</p>	<p>Program Associate, Youth Policy Board</p> <p>Non profit criminal justice policy agency in New York City</p>	<p>14-18 years old</p> <p>Court-involved, or criminal justice system-impacted.</p>	<p>Teaches New York City criminal justice policy and advocacy.</p> <p>Prepares youth to become reform and policy advocates.</p> <p>Builds youths' professional skills: critical thinking, public speaking, resume writing, interviewing, legal communication and general workplace readiness.</p>

Setting

New York City Alternative Education

New York City is the largest public school system in the United States, with 1,135,334 students in 1,840 preschools and K-12 schools serving children 0-24 years of age (NYCDOE, 2018). 74 percent of New York City public school students are considered low income, or eligible for free/reduced lunch. Thousands of children, adolescents, teens, and young adults in New York City schools also participate in alternative education settings outside of their traditional K-12 schools: after-school programs, weekend supplementary programs, community-based organizations, court mandated programs, and various other nonprofit extracurricular options ranging from arts, athletics, technology, cultural, academic-focused programs, and more. Five of the six educators in this study teach in community-based educational settings, and one teaches in an alternative public transfer high school.

For purposes of this study, alternative settings are defined as spaces other than traditional K-12 public schools in which academic and/or skills-based subjects (including state-tested subjects) are being taught to school-aged youth. Represented in this sample are a New York City public transfer high school, one multiservice community agency with supplementary school programs, one public community college bridge program, one teen program based in a public history museum, an alternative-to-incarceration program for 16-24 year olds, and a criminal justice policy program for high school age youth. All of the institutions in this sample are located in three of the five boroughs of New York City: Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. Each educator teaches either academic and/or skills-based subjects to 13-24 year old marginalized youth. “Marginalized” is defined here as low-income, court-involved, currently out-of-school or otherwise academically at-risk, and/or youth of color.

Data Collection

Initial Interview Plan

In my dissertation proposal, I had originally proposed to conduct two 60-90 minute interviews and one culminating 60-90 minute focus group using *institutional ethnography*, a qualitative methodology created by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987). Looking through the lenses of black feminist epistemology (Hill-Collins, 2000) and critical bifocality (Weis & Fine, 2012), my inquiry was based upon the assumption that black women educators’ work is always being mediated both by individual standpoint and by the institutional ruling relations themselves. Institutions are deeply embedded in their own history, structure, and ideology, and institutional ethnography

seemed an ideal means of studying dynamic environments best described by multiple types of evidence. Black feminist epistemology and critical bifocality seemed more compatible with this nontraditional mode of analysis, and I had read about few other qualitative methodologies that could so accurately get to the heart of people's complex experiences inside of structures. I believed that by investigating invisible forms of consciousness and organization that are external to us (but affect us nonetheless), we could uncover knowledge that participants' institutions were producing. The teachers I proposed to study had broad perspectives on their work and about education in general—not limited to their own classrooms, but stretching outward and even globally. Institutional ethnography seemed the perfect methodology for this study.

Institutional ethnographers can utilize selected work-related “texts,” such as employee handbooks, “emergency memos,” or other types of documents that can potentially be used to map the ways in which their activities are ordered by the institution. In the school environments I was interested in studying, textual evidence for analysis could have included items such as a disciplinary referral, a mental health assessment, a teacher evaluation rubric, or a school report card. However, I felt that these could be challenging documents to acquire for interviews taking place outside of the work setting. I focused instead on a second feature of the methodology where participants are asked to render visual interpretations of various concepts, such as “agency” or “power.” As an example, an interviewer might ask the participant what institutional power “looks” like conceptually, and to assign the concept to some actual structural material, such as steel, concrete, glass, fabric, paper, steam, etc. to help researchers practically grasp its feeling and operation. The participant might be asked, “what does

institutional power ‘feel’ like in your school? ‘Smell’ like?” I had planned to ask a subset of questions (see Appendix C) to participants to draw or sketch their interpretations of their experiences with power inside of their places of employment during interviews as additional textual evidence. All of these potential data were not the objects of interest so much as potential entry points into the institutional structure under study.

I was excited to use these methods and still believe they might have yielded very illustrative details. But after attempting in the first three interviews to get the participants to sketch some visual representations of their work structures, I felt the questions were creating some amount of discomfort for them. Two participants initially attempted to appease me but with some awkwardness, and a third opted not to draw at all. It appeared that they really preferred to just have a straightforward conversation. They were fine with giving verbal descriptions and were willing to go to great lengths to provide depth and illustration through their language and use of vivid examples. Once I observed this with the first three participants, I immediately shifted to the remaining semi-structured open-ended interview questions from that point forward. I was eager to establish comfort and ease of rapport with each participant and did not want to dissuade anyone from returning for the second interview, so for the remaining participants I stopped trying to use those data collection techniques and returned to traditional interview questions.

Finally, I had initially proposed to bring the six participants together in a focus group to dialogue about the varying perspectives that undergirded their approaches, observe their cross-interactions, and encourage some interrogation of each other’s work. Through the use of discussion prompts that I would have culled from their individual interview responses, I had hoped to push them to come up with some universal themes.

Ideally, their discussion would have concluded with the teachers having codified some models of practice. As a professional aside, not having to do with this dissertation, I also had the idea that our work together could potentially form the basis for a future professional development work group or critical friends meeting we might have convened regularly in the future. However, due to the very busy schedules of the participants and the impending birth of my son in December 2014, after the second round of interviews was finally completed, I canceled plans to reconvene participants for the focus group. Another rationale for my decision was that I had already collected more than enough data to address my research questions. In total, all 14 semi-structured interviews were completed between January 2014 and December 2014 with all of the seven original participants (only six participants and data from their 12 interviews are included in the findings).

First Round of Interviews

Each educator was interviewed twice for approximately three hours each time. The expectation was 60-90 minutes, but all interviews went well over the allotted time. All interview questions were designed to illicit responses that would uncover how participants merged their biographies with their knowledge of institutional structures to then influence their teaching practices with marginalized youth. For each first interview, I scheduled to meet with the participants at a location of their choice, which I asked them to make sure was a place quiet enough to record the interview. All of them chose either their institutions of employment or public locations nearby. Before beginning the initial interviews, I thanked them for agreeing to participate, and briefly explained my interest

in her perspectives as a black woman educator, with an overview of the study. I gave a brief overview of my own background in teaching and working with youth in New York City and how this had informed my interest in pursuing a Ph.D. I said directly that what led me to her was my belief in her insights about working with marginalized youth and about constructs of power in operation in our work environments. I noticed participants relaxed considerably after I preempted in this way. After that, I presented them with the consent form and asked them to read it. I paused for a chance to answer any questions about the form, and then asked them to sign two original copies. Once they signed both forms, I handed them their copy to keep and gave them the \$20 gift card. I then reiterated that they would be recorded and asked that they try not to use real names of colleagues, organizations, or youth as they talked. However, I assured them that all names and places, as well as contexts of employment would be disguised so that I do not implicate organizations, participants, or the participants' students. I reiterated that transcriptions would only contain pseudonyms and all of their contents would be stored and password-protected on Dropbox on a secured personal computer.

The first interview began with basic demographic information, about which I also jotted notes while recording. The remaining questions focused on participant biography, identity development, early experiences with schooling, and formative personal and professional experiences. Each question was specifically aligned to at least one of those three initial categories of analysis: **biography**, **structure**, and **practice**. (See Appendix D). The interviews all went past the allotted maximum time of 90 minutes. This was largely due to the length of time of participants' responses (particularly to the questions in sections 4 and 5) and answers to follow-up questions in-between. At the 75-minute

mark I stopped to give participants a time-check, and all gave permission to continue on, despite being over the allotted time.

Second Round of Interviews

All second interviews took place between 5-6 weeks after the first interview. The intent of the second interview was to have participants provide detail about their current teaching environments, and connect their teaching practices back to their biographies, identity construction, and formal/informal teacher preparation. Again, each question was tied to one or more of the three analytic frames: biography, structure and practice. (See Appendix E).

During this second round of interviews, participants seemed more relaxed and comfortable. Our rapport was solid, and they appeared to feel heard. Overall, there was a mutual deep interest in the subject matter at hand. Again, the conversations exceeded 90 minutes, but participants agreed to continue until questions were completed.

Data Analysis

Phase One

It became clear during the interviews that all participants were able to articulate their beliefs, practices, and understanding of the operation of power structures in the work environment. The interview questions for the most part had been successful at eliciting participants' understanding of the ways in which biography, structure and practice intersected. However, other data points began to emerge early on during the interviews that seemed to hold promise for deeper analysis, which I recorded during and

immediately after each conversation in my notes to analyze for later (Burgess, 1984). I worked closely with my advisor to examine potential patterns in some observations I had noted during first and second interviews, many of which seemed to emphasize the characteristics and conditions that mattered for their transformative teaching. My noticings about teachers' responses were as follows:

1. The quality of the formal teacher preparation received does impact their successful teaching, more than whether or not it was acquired at a university-based or alternate certification program.
2. The teachers' biographies and informal preparation for teaching also seem very important, and was, in nearly every case, considered by the teacher to have been even more transformative than their academic preparation. Everyone has a background that really nurtured the development of a complex awareness about the social world.
3. The character of the current teaching environment/workplace seems important for successful teaching, and their success has a lot to do with the progressiveness of the culture of the setting, and how much freedom the teacher has to work her way in the setting.
4. The teachers seem to need to complicate and expand upon concepts like "successful teaching" and "successful student." It seems critical to their practice.
5. The integration of each teacher's multifaceted "Self" seems to be part of her successful teaching. Their practices simultaneously merge the political, relational, historical, autobiographical parts of themselves.

6. The rigorous, constant sharpening of these teachers' critical lenses onto their work also matters for their successful teaching. These teachers' stamina and perseverance for educating severely marginalized students stems in part from this point of view that is broad and complex. This lens is sharpening as they do the work.

Initially, I assumed that these insights would automatically become data chapters and headings. I also believed that the open coding still to come would neatly reflect these early discoveries. However, my advisor encouraged me to be receptive to what else might emerge by temporarily suspending my focus on identifying universal themes for cross-comparison. He suggested I instead step back, and spend more time examining each case study individually and for its own sake, to analyze what each participant had shared about how she came to be. So, I temporarily placed my general observations aside to examine participants as single cases, practicing more memoing within one text at a time, for organic discovery, rather than reading with cross comparative analysis in mind. What I discovered through this intensive closer look was that each participant possessed an important master narrative for her own life and work, one that actually could be named, and serve as a case study by itself (detailed in Chapter 4). While their lives were vastly different from one another, the powerful influence of each woman's personal biography on the development of her future teaching practice was very prominent. Biography had always been one of the analytic frames for this study in relation to participants' intersectional identities. However, I learned here about the confluence of formative life experiences beginning from childhood and stretching to young adulthood—and largely

unrelated to any formal schooling— that eventually coalesced to make each woman into the particular kind of activist, transformative educator she is today.

Phase Two

Transcriptions were completed within approximately one month after the interviews took place, and then were e-mailed for member checking to invite participants to clarify or ask additional questions. I also did this to further establish rapport, and build participants' confidence in my commitment to representing their words as accurately as possible. No one ever responded with comments or questions about the transcriptions. I had purposely avoided coding software so as not to miss any of the more nuanced features of participants' thinking that I hoped ultimately to uncover. My transcribing followed ethnographic conventions described by Blommaert & Jie (2010) to explicitly note exclamations, tonal changes, pauses, and stumbles. I stored all data in Dropbox with files named after participants' pseudonyms under "Interview 1" and "Interview 2". I also retyped all handwritten memos and saved them to a "memo" subfolder tier in each participant's main folder. Immediately after each interview was transcribed, I printed a hard copy, single-sided packet to facilitate coding.

First, I conducted an initial round of open coding to assign text into one or more of the three broad buckets of categories of analysis: **biography**, **structure**, and **practice**. Simultaneously, I also began to track potentially salient themes that did not fall neatly into one of these three categories through constant meta-memoing (Merriam, 2009). This turned out to be fortuitous; during this process of coding, a fourth category of analysis emerged. This fourth category captured the spaces in-between biography, structure, and

practice— in fact, it appeared to bind them all together. It was a repository from which participants drew their drive to teach, their strength to resist oppression, and the energy to persist even when faced with institutional pressures. The common teacher trope of “passion” did not seem to capture it. After discussions with my advisor, ultimately the unnamed category revealed itself as “transformative.” I continued coding to now identify repeating occurrences of transformative education in the text along with the three original categories of **biography**, **structure**, and **practice**. It became apparent that transformative education was a foundational tenet in each participant’s life and practice. I decided that these four buckets should be my organizing framework and perhaps title the data chapters.

Phase Three

Next, I returned to the text for a second round of interpretive coding, this time to pull out deeper meaning from text classified within each of the four buckets of biography, structure, transformative education, and practice. My meta-memos from initial interviews at this stage were key in helping to frame these and six new categories emerged from under the four analytic buckets:

BIOGRAPHY	STRUCTURE	TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION	PRACTICE
1. Biography as preparation for teaching. 2. Awareness of institutional power	1. The salience of each teacher’s teaching environment	1. Encountering students’ lives 2. Cultural trauma in teachers’ work lives.	1. Transformative practices inside and outside of the classroom.

I then decided the new categories should become the data chapters, and began an inductive re-reading of categories of text to select what to highlight within each chapter.

At this stage, it proved extremely beneficial to reference my earlier memos written directly onto the interview text during the first round of open coding, when interviews were first completed.

However, I was now unsure as to the best representation of the biographical data: whether to organize the paper around six whole case studies, or to structure my paper around the six themes and insert case study details where illustrative. Both seemed limiting. The challenge of how to best organize all of my biographical data was resolved with the help of my advisor. Participants had offered such detailed descriptions of their life's journeys that they amounted to miniature biographies. In the end, it was determined that I could combine both; i.e., for the first data chapter, I would present each teacher's case as an example of a particular perspective (described in Chapter Four), then for remaining chapters, I would lead with the larger themes to discuss all of the cases.

After I completed writing the case studies for the first data chapter and moved onto the second data chapter, I noticed there was a great deal of crossover, and decided to collapse and order the six chapters from the most "macro" to the most "micro" to eventually make three data chapters: the *making of a teacher: biography as teacher preparation, institutional power and teacher knowledge*, and *towards an antiracist pedagogy*.

Trustworthiness

During the research process, I communicated with my advisor regularly for feedback and to problem solve, most particularly with organizing the data and writing.

I member-checked transcriptions with the study participants to verify all interview data. None of the participants gave notes or feedback, but after I finished writing each chapter, I utilized four third party readers who are academics and practitioners in the field of teacher education to review the drafts and provide detailed feedback. These colleagues were people to whom I had ready access from my work in a university teacher education setting. I was also given the opportunity with these colleagues to discuss my data analysis and writing choices. After I made their suggested revisions, I sent final drafts to my advisor, who provided an additional round of feedback. When writing, I used the teacher education literature and historical data sources to support my interpretations of participants' data. Any claims offered were directly linked to the data.

Accountability

As the lead researcher, with the regular support of my advisor, I made every attempt to ensure the integrity of this process. After the initial IRB approval in 2015, I have reported annually any required updates to the protocol and requested the appropriate extensions for continuing research. I used pseudonyms to protect participants, their colleagues, and concealed names and references to their places of work in my writing.

Insider Positionality

My positionality is explained in detail on pages 39-41. Although Foster (1994) writes that researchers are neither insiders nor outsiders to the group under study, I felt that in this particular research process, I benefitted from my insider perspective. Having had the opportunity from 2011-2014 to conduct interviews for my doctoral assistantship

among predominantly white teachers in the New York-New Jersey metro area, I recalled feeling less connected to the participants' perspectives than I did for the present study. I entered this research grappling with inquiries about race and teaching— inquiries that I discovered were shared and even amplified— by the testimonies of my study participants. My own identity as an African American woman and former New York City teacher certainly helped to establish my credibility. Perhaps most of all, my empathy for their trials coupled with my obvious admiration for their work made establishing rapport very seamless. Due to the cultural congruence I experienced with participants, whenever I or the participants felt enthusiasm or became animated it seemed only to engender richer dialogue. The conversations were lively, to say the least, with humor, and at times a great emotionality.

I acknowledge, however, that this could also be seen as strong interviewer bias. To limit bias, I made sure to keep all questions open-ended to avoid implying there was one right answer. I also asked multiple follow up questions to give participants an opportunity to explain their answers more fully, to prevent from filling in the blanks on their behalf. I pressed them pretty rigorously to dig deep about what their work meant to them, but did my best to affirm that what they shared was received with unconditional, positive regard (Rogers, 1957). As I was trying to extrapolate the human experience of being a racialized being in a complex work setting, doing complex work with marginalized youth, I felt there was space for the expression of our emotionality and subjectivity. Further, these were activists— people whose lives were being lived in the pursuit of improving the world. They were intrinsically driven by hard-to-quantify motivators, which I found were better captured when participants were allowed ample

time just to tell their stories. Therefore, I committed myself to allowing them to tell their own stories as thoroughly as possible, for as long as needed without interrupting, which is centering their perspectives as black women (Hill-Collins, 2000).

Limitations

As is the case for all qualitative studies, the data collected in each setting is very context-dependent and limits the generalizability of the findings. Further, the small sample size also limits generalizability. Studying what successful black women alternative educators know about school-aged youth “on the margins of the margins,” so to speak, could help K-12 classroom teachers and administrators work more productively with these students *before* the point of their absolute disengagement from school. Understanding what successful teachers are able to do within the constraints of institutions that are larger and even more complex than K-12 schools is valuable. While not generalizable, this study has implications for an expansion of some of the simplistic theoretical constructs used in teacher preparation; i.e., a rethinking of constructs of pedagogy, and of “diverse students” in relation to pedagogy. K-12 schools are not the only sites where successful teaching and learning can take place. Further, because meaningful educational experiences occur in spaces outside of formal schools, and non K-12 teachers aid in important educative processes, this study could potentially broaden constructs about youth, how they learn, who their teachers are, and what these teachers can do.

To conclude, I began with a general overview and rationale for the study design.

I discussed my positionality and the theoretical frameworks, followed by a detailed explanation of the study design including recruitment, participation selection, participant data, and their teaching contexts. I then presented data sources, tools, and the data analysis process. Last, I shared insights gleaned during the interviewing and analyses phases, and concluded with ethical and methodological concerns and limitations of the study. What follows now in Chapter 4 is my presentation of six portraits (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005) that attempt to trace each participant's evolution from childhood into the transformative educators they are today. These are universal solidarity in the experience of oppression, other-mothering, intersectional feminism, intellectual independence, preparedness to defend freedom and justice, and the humanization of all youth.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE MAKING OF A TEACHER: BIOGRAPHY AS TEACHER PREPARATION

The aim...is to make a case for a decolonial teacher education, one that focuses on the development of teachers whose core interest is to sustain, revitalize, and nurture the identities, practices, ingenuity, agency, and humanity of youth of color, on their terms.

-Django Paris

As discussed in previous chapters, each participant discovered over time that structures of power actually ordered social relations and organizational functioning in their workplaces. They reported that their most relevant preparation for navigating and resisting oppression in these environments came from diverse combinations of personal, academic, career, and informal experiences, rather than solely from formal teacher education. As a result, each woman developed a framework from which to act on behalf of students—and also in defense of herself. It was from these experiences that participants learned not just about racism, power, and privilege, but also how to be a transformative educator. Their unique pathways disrupted traditional notions of where and how preparation for transformative teaching occurs. In fact, their unconventional pathways to the classroom suggest that an awareness of *how* one knows what one knows is equally important as *what* one knows (Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, 2003). This chapter will address the first research question: *What are the specific ways black women educators in alternative education settings make connections between their identities (biography), larger structural forces (structure), and work (practice)?* It will also define the meaning of transformative education in the context of this study.

Transformative Practice

Traditionally, becoming a transformative educator required that teachers merely examined their individual unconscious beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews through intellectual means (Mezirow, 1978). Scholars have critiqued this perspective because it excludes the domains of spiritual and psycho-emotional change (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Freirian scholars maintain that authentically transformative learning pushes beyond this toward the deconstruction of all teaching and learning, connecting back to the politics of people's lives, and ultimately leading to internal *and* external change (Giroux 1988; 2010). Even scholars of Freire agree that while it is challenging to whittle down large concepts like oppression, justice, or capital into discrete skills and classroom techniques (Aronowitz & Giroux 1993; Bartolomé, 1994; Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999), the conditions of people's lives are still at the heart of transformative education.

The educators in this study are transformative precisely because of why and how they responded to concerns about the conditions of students' lives. They took action to interrupt policies and practices that harmed youth, while intentionally engaging in other actions to facilitate restoration and healing from that harm. While participants were charged only with the teaching of academic and/or life skills, they also acted as gatekeepers, systems navigators, and interrupters trying to reduce or eliminate the impact of structural violence against students inside and outside of their classrooms. In this chapter, I present each participant's biography as the frame through which she countered the structural violence and oppression that pervaded every aspect of the educational ecosystem. Last I will discuss the major themes that guided the transformative work in each teacher's specific case: universal solidarity in oppression, other-mothering,

intersectional feminism, intellectual independence, preparedness to defend freedoms, and maintaining respect and empathy for young people.

Participant Backgrounds

The six educators in this study all taught in New York City-based alternative educational settings. Only two of the six were New York State certified teachers. The remaining four had diverse backgrounds in the social sciences, health/human services, or combinations of these that will be described later in this chapter.

For purposes of this study, alternative educational settings are defined as spaces other than traditional K-12 public schools in which academic and/or skills-based subjects (not limited to tested subjects) are being taught to school-aged youth. Represented in this sample are: a New York City public transfer high school, one multiservice community agency with supplementary school programs, one public community college, one teen program based in a public children's museum, an alternative- to-incarceration program, and a criminal justice policy nonprofit agency. All institutions were located in New York City. Each participant taught marginalized youth, defined here as low-income, court-involved, currently out-of-school or otherwise academically at-risk, and/or youth of color. Although two of the six study participants were New York State certified to teach in public schools, all six taught in alternative educational settings.

Amelia*The Global Universality of Oppression*

To Amelia, strong preparation for addressing the structural violence and oppression in New York City schools must include some framework for recognizing the ways in which powerful corporate interests and New York City government are colluding to erode public education, including higher education and other democratic institutions meant for the public good (Giroux, 1988). Globally, this is how financial networks, with the help of governments and philanthropists, operate free of constraints to exploit human capital. Having this lens onto neoliberalism in education enabled Amelia to look past simplified explanations for disparities in student outcomes, and instead see straight to their racist, capitalist roots. She was one of two participants in this study to have been formally prepared in a teacher education degree program, but she attributed none of her successes to her learnings there. In fact, she was adamant that any success she enjoyed was *in spite of* the public school system, not because of it. Everything she had come to realize that teachers needed to know about working with disenfranchised youth came from her upbringing, informal education, and formative early-career learning experiences. But while Amelia believed there was a global universality in the lived experience of oppression, she also felt that ordinary people have ultimate power to overturn their conditions through organized resistance. Effective resistance required people to acquire self-knowledge, knowledge of their community, and knowledge about the struggles of human beings outside of one's own community. Amelia's primary responsibility as a transformative educator was to keep resisting, and to transmit the importance of resistance to her students.

At 34, Amelia identified as black American, female, and bisexual. She was single, had no religious affiliation, lived in Brooklyn, but was raised in Detroit, Michigan. For two years, Amelia had been an English teacher in a New York City transfer high school (New York State certified in English Language Arts/ELA for grades 7-12). The students in her school had not been able to complete a standard NYS diploma at a traditional high school, and as a result were under-credited or overage. Students in transfer high schools are not subjected to the same rigid testing and curriculum requirements as traditional public high schools in New York City, giving teachers the freedom to choose non-standardized texts and interdisciplinary course materials. As such, her school used a portfolio performance-based assessment as the formal exit requirement for graduation instead of the New York State Regents exam.

Black Detroit: The Birth of Amelia's Self-Concept

For Amelia, her Detroit context, her own schooling, her family life, and various community endeavors all coalesced to give shape to her future teacher identity. But her strong racial self-concept and worldview really were formed at home:

Of course my education started at home with my family.... My mom was a single mom and she was really our first teacher. She really taught us to be independent... to really love ourselves, which I think that was a really important lesson...especially as a Black girl, right?

Growing up, I didn't have a lot of physical hang-ups, I think, the way that other Black girls did in my community because my mom always praised the way that I looked. She would talk about being Black a lot. We

talked a lot about race in our household. That was when I first learned about race and learned to view it as a system. That was my first education. It was from her.

This development of a positive racial self-image was simultaneously being reinforced by her African American schoolteachers, who passed down this intense pride in being a native Detroiter (and more specifically, a *black* native Detroiter). She was taught to feel a special entitlement to the city's proud African American history of radical rebellion against political and social repression:

I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, which was also part of my early education because...in Detroit, the '67 Rebellion is something we all learn about as children because all of our parents have gone through it and lived through it. We also learned a lot about the Great Migration because most of my ancestors came from the south....Our teachers, if they were black teachers, they talked to us about it and they talked to us about it as a source of pride. I remember this... 'their blood is in the soil and so this country is as much yours as anyone else's.' We learned that they literally built the country, and that was really powerful to understand. I was lucky to have this understanding because it can be true [for others] but maybe it's not taught [to them]. There is a pride that comes from growing up in Detroit that's in my veins. I'm almost as proud of being from Detroit as I am proud of being black. It's just the identity of being an underdog and knowing that even though you're an underdog, you are a very powerful force of nature that people don't recognize.

Amelia makes special reference to her black teachers having told her about this legacy of direct contribution to the building of the United States. During our conversations, Amelia repeatedly emphasized how she learned to nurture her own students by channeling how these adults once nurtured her.

At the same time as her cultural identity was being affirmed, she encountered her most formative learning experience. When Amelia was just 13 years old, local activists came to her older sister's school to recruit for a volunteer community action and educational program (today a well-respected, nationally recognized organization). Amelia's sister began participating and after about a year, pulled in Amelia. Both would remain active with the organization every summer until their twenties. Little did she realize how much her participation would shape her views about the larger purposes of schooling, the processes by which people come to learn, and ultimately, mold her future teacher identity. Initially, it was just for fun and the feeling of community. Amelia explains what these summers then began to offer that her formal education was missing:

Every summer, I would go there and we would clean up vacant lots and paint murals, and then have community dinners at the end of the day, and have inter-generational dialogues about social justice issues that were happening...not just about local issues...the criminal justice system...food justice...environmental justice. We also talked about global issues...Israel and Palestine stands out to me now. We talked about the Zapatistas. We talked about movements in a way that related to our own sense of history as Detroiters and as young people. We talked about the Zapatistas and how that related to the Black Panther Party in Detroit. We made connections like that between the movements that happened in Detroit

and movements across the country and around the world. It all happened outside of school. For me, it did. It was a completely different world that existed for me. It was a world outside of school. I would look forward to every summer. I couldn't wait until school was over. I would count the days.

Here was a serious commitment that was unpaid, involved manual labor, was not connected to school credit in any way—yet Amelia looked forward to it every summer for ten years. The organization encouraged family participation, was intergenerational, and many of the people doing the educating were local community members. Through the program's engaged community action, Amelia was also learning important lessons about her own value—that she and the other youth were necessary, important contributors to something larger than themselves. This engendered a sense of solidarity that was now about the set of universal experiences shared by youth across the nation, not just a function of racial solidarity alone:

There was a sense of solidarity that was built within us at a very young age, that my movement is everyone's movement—or your movement is my movement, too. We had young people come to Detroit from around the country...Fresno, California who came to us and we talked about the gang problems [there] and we talked about the history of gangs in the country and how it's a lot more complicated than people assume. We talked about the Young Lords and the history of the Bloods and the Crips, and Vietnam, and Black Power. It was amazing. I know I often take that experience for granted because I go around feeling as if this was just my family, because it was. It was a family for me. It wasn't just the political education I was getting. It was the social and emotional

education I was getting too. As a young person, that is as vital as any kind of academic experience. That was that.

For Amelia, it wasn't just the eye-opening politics that kept her coming back, but the social connectivity and shared experiences of brother-sisterhood. This marked the beginning of her discovery that there was something shared and universal in the experience of people's oppression, something that went beyond just Detroit.

Simultaneously, Amelia was awakening to the fact that there was much she was not being exposed to in school, and, that her capacity for learning was much greater than what could be met there. Her schooling placed artificial boundaries around her learning, while the summer program was increasingly widening her gaze onto the world around her. She was feeling increasingly frustrated by a lack of criticality in her high school coursework:

Even though there were teachers of color, specifically black teachers in school who talked about things like the Great Migration, that was great, but they didn't talk about solidarity movements globally, nationally. It was very much, "This is our [Detroiter] experience and that's what makes us great." There was no discussion about, "Okay, does this happen in other places?" and, "if it's happening in other places, should we be part of it?" and, "if we should be a part of it, how do we become a part?" There was no discussion happening like that. And if we did talk about Detroit history, we talked about it in a way that was very, very much set in the past. There was no discussion of future movements. Especially we talked about the Civil Rights Movement. It was taught in a way

where ironically, even African American teachers would talk about it as if it happened and now we're fine.

Amelia offered an important observation about teachers' limitations, and how they might unintentionally cap students' learning. In middle and high school, for example, she did not learn much about international social movements and certainly not comparatively across global contexts. Moreover, global struggles for liberation were not presented as positive, if talked about at all. Amelia was increasingly able to discern with her newfound critical lens that even her beloved teachers may have been limited in their capacity to provide students with a broad sense of global connectedness outside of Detroit:

We hear about global issues, but we don't hear about global movements in a way that's positive, that people are fighting for their rights. We didn't hear about that. Maybe they didn't either... and so they weren't able to put that in context for us. The fortunate thing is that I was taught tools in [the organization] because you cannot teach someone to think critically. You teach them the tools, right? So I was given the tools of how to think critically from [the organization]. I was not given that in high school. That was my second education.

The program's broad inclusion of the experiences of peoples from all over the world included intergenerational dialogue as well. Amelia and other youth were invited into conversations and debates with adults and treated as trustworthy, knowledgeable contributors. Just by creating room for the youth to be curious, critical, and engaged on their own terms, the adults in this community were modeling the ways a teacher might reward multiple ways of knowing that young people can bring. This would help form the open, inclusive environment Amelia would later on strive to create for her own students:

All these adults in my life outside of school were just like, "We've been building movements for the past 50 years and we're still doing it, and we have hope. That's why we're bringing you, young people into this living room to talk about, "okay, you're the next generation, so what are your ideas?" That was the most amazing thing about [organization]. Even at home, I would never walk into a space where adults really wanted to know what my ideas were about the future. I felt loved by my family. I felt cared for and protected, but I didn't feel as if I really had power to change my community in a positive way. [Organization] gave me that. That was such a gift.

Participating in the program gave Amelia early exposure to what it meant to be a critical consumer of knowledge—what might be seen as a decolonized version of preparation for future teaching. But it also showed her that young people—*any* people— can agitate to alter the conditions of their lives. Under the direction of caring and knowledgeable adults in her local community, she received all the necessary tools for unpacking her world and taking direct action to improve it.

Moving Toward a Critical Global Consciousness

After high school graduation, Amelia chose to attend a college just outside of Detroit to continue volunteering with the organization. After earning her bachelor's degree in communications, she was upgraded from volunteer to paid youth organizer, but had begun to feel pangs of wanting something more. Ironically, her work with the program had so expanded her horizons that now she longed to see the world beyond Detroit for herself. But this was met with some resistance. Amelia's confidence to

contextualize information, weigh facts and make a controversial decision independently—all skills she had learned from that experience— now put her at odds with her own mentors who tried to discourage her from going:

I told my friends [from the organization] that I was going to join the Peace Corps and they were against it. They talked about the history of the CIA using Peace Corps volunteers to spy in communities. I mean, the Peace Corps is problematic. It's problematic in so many ways. This sort of altruistic mentality is still there. It's troublesome because a lot of young volunteers don't realize. I heard that. I believed it, but the pull to travel was so much stronger. The pull to explore the worlds that were ... I mean, I could argue that they planted that desire in me at an early age talking about global movements. I wanted to see those movements firsthand. I wanted to go out there and see them for myself. I didn't know any other way, so I did it. It was pretty controversial for a while. I disappointed a lot of people. This was a big decision in my life.

After getting arrested and jailed from organizing a protest in downtown Detroit at the G8 conference incurred her a criminal record, her acceptance into the U.S. Peace Corps was delayed. After some time, Peace Corps reassessed her application and assigned her to a “quieter” location doing youth development in Wichanza, Peru. But the change turned out to be fortuitous. She immediately saw parallels to Detroit with the disenfranchised youth in Wichanza and their isolation from larger society:

I was placed in Pueblo Pove...which is like a favela [densely populated shantytown]. There was a very dense population, very urban. It was called Wichanza. I remember getting off the bus and walking to my town and seeing all

the kids hanging out on the corner, looking all tough, looking just like Detroit kids. I had traveled so many miles outside of my own country to a place that I thought was going to be so much different than my city. But there were so many similarities, it was mind-boggling. I was like, you know what? They're young people. They have nearly rough exteriors but really, really soft interiors. They're struggling so much, so many issues. They're carrying way too much on their shoulders, but they're doing it. Impossibly doing it.

Hundreds of miles away from home, Amelia was seeing Detroit all over again in the disconnected youth living under the foot of poverty and a repressive political system. She was reliving lessons in critical global capitalism all learned from the organization: that these crimes against citizens are being re-enacted everyday, in every part of the world, by powerful corporations and corrupt governments. There would never be a place she could visit that would not have the same storyline. But it was an eye-opening experience she needed to see for herself.

A Critical Gaze Toward Change-Making in New York City Education

Returning to Detroit after the Peace Corps was a culture shock. Trying to reintegrate into that small world again just proved too difficult, so Amelia applied and was accepted to a master's degree writing program in New York City. Once she graduated, she felt ready to get reengaged with youth activism, and took a job with the New York City chapter of a very high profile national advocacy organization as its community organizer for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. Immediately Amelia

found herself thick in the middle of a tougher, more aggressive kind of big-city politics devoid of the beloved community to which she had grown accustomed in Detroit:

This became my other education. I found it very hard to be an organizer in [organization]. At the same time, there was something [empowering] about knowing all about your rights. They spoke the language [of power] and they had access to institutions that other organizations couldn't get. It was a privilege. I had soft power. I was part of a very powerful institution. I never had that before. Suddenly, doors were opened into spaces like NYPD, where I could speak truth to power, face to face. I really was learning more about the system...systemic oppression, structural oppression than I had in other grassroots organizations, but for the first time I was seeing the laws that were put in place intentionally by policymakers and votes that were cast in favor of politicians... so what I was now seeing behind the curtain when it came to education and when it came to policing.

To have access to decision-makers, be privy to closed-door conversations, to understand policing and how it is used against youth and families in New York City—as painful as it was, what could have been better preparation for public school teaching? The agency was making a dent in school-level police brutality against youth. But Amelia's critical eye for discerning systemic violence was too keen to miss what she was also witnessing there, regardless of the organization's intentions. She saw power propagate itself firsthand in this workplace, and it was terrible. The same racism, classism, suppression of dissent, and “end justifies the means” intimidation tactics the organization was ostensibly fighting on the outside, were happening everyday on the inside among staff and the constituency it purported to defend:

Just like with the Peace Corps, I was surrounded by the idea that the institution is doing the “right” thing even if it’s the wrong ways. I don't even think they realized that that's what was happening, that they were acting out systems of oppression. They were like, "We're the good guys." That was the idea that permeated the whole institution....If we always keep the people of color as subordinates and ... reduce the amount of voice that [communities of color we are defending] have in the decision-making process. They're just thinking, "Okay, now, you guys don't know enough. We are the holders of knowledge, and if you are upset or if you disagree, it's because you don't know what it takes to win a movement, to win a campaign." Right? It was very patronizing, with very condescending attitude toward people of color. There was very classist attitude as well. It was usually those who could afford to go to Ivy League institutions and came out of upper middle class backgrounds that were promoted and were encouraged to have free reign over their own projects. It was poor people of color who got the short end of the stick and no one really acknowledged that. If you did, then it was because you were just trying to make trouble. You were often labeled as crazy. Then, quietly let go or encouraged to resign. It was very much, you know, power working to maintain itself.

During this period, Amelia gained a birds-eye view into the New York City criminal justice system and its intertwined relationship with the New York City Department of Education. While she participated in some important improvements, she still witnessed too many casualties of the students and their families. After nearly five years and worn down by what she characterized as a “culture of aggression and hostility in New York

City politics,” Amelia decided to leave her job position to pursue a career in teaching. Her decision to go right onto the frontlines was a *direct* result of bearing witness to the egregious behaviors perpetrated by adults inside the New York City public schools:

I worked right in the schools and it was the first time that I met teachers that hated students... saw teachers explicitly say that they didn't like young people and showed it in their teaching, in their practice. I don't even know how to describe it. Appalled is an understatement because I was learning gradually that I loved young people, loved them. It was a growing love and admiration that I was experiencing over the years. Do you know I saw teachers coming in drunk they had to shake? I saw them call students stupid. There were male teachers who were being inappropriate towards young girls, telling them what to wear, what not to wear. I got into a lot of arguments. I met teachers who I had to argue about the criminal justice system with. This is coming out of the knowledge that I gained in [organization]. That's when I was just like, "you know what? I need to be a teacher." I need to be a teacher because I wanted to be an adult that students saw everyday that tried, at least tried to understand where they were coming from in their lives. Socially, emotionally tried to get to know them. I wanted to be an adult that they saw everyday that really cared about who they were inside the school and outside. Anyway, so I left.

After seeing firsthand so much acrimony from teachers toward students and how little was being done to protect them, Amelia decided she could be of more use to students as a classroom teacher, and resigned. She was accepted to a tuition-subsidized alternate certification partnership between the New York City Department of Education

(NYCDOE) and a college in the New York City area, aimed at career changers. While studying for her teaching certificate, Amelia devoted several months to researching alternative transfer high schools, having become familiar with their portfolio assessment model, unregulated use of texts, and fairer school discipline policies more aligned with her values. She had her eye on one particular school (the one where she is currently employed) and aggressively pursued the principal to get an interview until she was eventually hired.

Teaching with a Framework for the Global Universality of Oppression

During our conversations about developing the kinds of knowledge and skills she would need to become a successful teacher, Amelia's response was unsurprising for someone with her depth of insight into the state of schooling in New York City. She addressed the NYCDOE head on:

I feel like [by being successful] I'm helping them to perpetuate this idea that it's [the school system structure] that's successful. I'm going to be one of those teachers who they will put down in their statistics, in their data, saying, "Look, this teacher was successful because she stayed in this school that she loved, and it has everything to do with our system. Nothing to do with the fact that she already knew about the public school system already.

Amelia wanted it noted that any success she enjoyed as a teacher was due to her own efforts, her students' hard work, and her school's progressiveness—not because of the NYCDOE. Simply put, she knew far too much about the system's brokenness to think that any teacher preparation could "make or break" the inservice teaching experience. But

she does criticize the NYCDOE for purposely recruiting naïve types, and the participating university's role in keeping preservice teachers ignorant by failing to be transparent about what it is to work for an inherently oppressive system:

They [NYCDOE] looks for people who have no idea what the New York City public school system is like, and they have to do that because there are teachers who are already in the system who know which schools to stay away from. They need to find people that don't know what those schools are actually like because there's a need for teachers to go to these schools, because there's such a high turnover rate. Those schools are not only already damaged, but they get other teachers who continue to damage it. Like this vicious cycle. I don't know that I'm interested in preparing [preservice teachers] for teaching without telling them what they're going to be dealing with... I'd rather just use my energy another way because there's so much that they should know up front, politically speaking. I'm not confident that I'd want to advise them to teach.

She never pointed to unruly students or poisoned neighborhoods as the reason for teacher attrition; rather, she was suggesting that deeper understanding of the systemic ruptures is at least one necessary prerequisite for long-term teacher retention.

Amelia was one of the two participants in this study to have been formally prepared for teaching in a degree program. Yet, she credited her informal preparation prior to graduate school for supplying her with the critical global capitalism framework she would need in order to identify the macro level systems of oppression operating in her institutions of employment. From working on school-to-prison pipeline prevention campaigns, she learned how to uncover racism and corruption in New York City schools.

During her time in the Peace Corps, she acquired firsthand exposure to the impact of government neglect on quality of life for poor, black urban communities. Most significantly, what knowledge she brought into her current classroom about developing and uplifting youth voice was modeled after her several years with the volunteer community action program in Detroit. And, Amelia made a deliberate choice to teach in an alternative transfer high school precisely because teachers in traditional schools had far less of the control over curricula, texts, or assessments than she currently enjoyed.

Through her diverse experiences, Amelia discovered early on that what New York City teachers *really* needed to know to work successfully was that students were being subjected to more than just poorly resourced buildings, scripted lessons, and mind-numbing standardized tests. Young people were also enduring contempt, apathy, overzealous disciplinary tactics at the hands of adults, and were routinely tracked, sorted, and mired in curricula that stifled their intellectual potential. She relied on her critical lens for understanding the root causes of problems as they occurred in her school environment. But through her work prior to teaching, she had encountered hundreds of teachers without any such lens, many of whom had become complicit in reproducing these processes. Amelia surmised that most teachers had no frameworks for analysis and certainly no set of tools to fight these conditions. Determined not to become one of them herself, Amelia kept steady in her belief that once ordinary people become educated and informed, they can liberate themselves, and take back their power—a model she herself lived out. Amelia was a transformative educator precisely because she enacted this in her classroom, and school building, every day.

In the next section I present Tarsha, the second of the only two state certified teachers in this study, after Amelia. Her paradigm for transformative practice was the lens of black teacher mentoring and “other-mothering.”

Tarsha

“Other-mothering”—Black Women Teachers as Mentor-Models

To Tarsha, being a successful educator required more than the display of discrete skills and techniques. She credited several black women teacher mentors she knew at critical junctures of her career for providing her with examples of what kind of educator she could become. Tarsha was the second participant of the six in this study to have been formally prepared in a teacher education degree program. But unlike Amelia—whose formal teacher education did little to help her become a transformative educator—Tarsha’s black female mentors were a living demonstration for how transformative practices can be effective to counter structural violence and oppression in schools. The first was a professor of education at the university; later, a group of veteran teacher mentors; last, the educational leaders at the agency where Tarsha held her longest tenure up to the time of this study.

Tarsha’s mentors provided her with continuous, culturally aligned professional coaching and emotional support. Most significantly, they modeled a particular kind of teaching persona marked by using open, direct communication, giving service through shared community responsibility, and fostering relationships with students and families. Tarsha was able to filter her own burgeoning teaching identity through their wisdom and knowledge. Scholars have characterized this “other-mothering” and “warm demander

pedagogy” as having both cultural and political significance in both K-12 and higher education settings as a tradition of care, community uplift, and high expectations for black students by their black educators (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Guiffrida, 2003; Ware, 2006). Now, Tarsha used her own blend of other-mothering in a pedagogy of caring, deep engagement, and high standards for all.

Early Lessons on the Liberal Racism of Low Expectations

Tarsha was born and educated in Brooklyn, New York in a middle class home with a working mother and father, and two siblings. She identified as a female, straight, non-practicing Christian, preferring to be called *black* over *African-American* because “African-American is contemporary, but because black is broad, I appreciate that more.” At the time of our interview, Tarsha held a senior program manager position at an established, well-regarded multipurpose community agency in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Its mission was to supplement public middle schools with afterschool and weekend academic enrichment for students. She oversaw teaching staff while still teaching herself, and was promoted to this role after several years of successful work. In this supervisory position, Tarsha was responsible for expanding the existing roster of middle school partnerships. Shortly after our final interview, however, and after nearly 10 years of service, Tarsha resigned from her job in anticipation of being terminated. This ended a long, protracted conflict about program direction between Tarsha and the new executive director who had been brought in from outside. She had just recently completed a doctorate in educational and organizational leadership at the time of this interview, and

it coincided with her departure from the agency. After about a year of temporary employment, she is now a professor of education at a large university in the New York metropolitan area.

Tarsha's early schooling in Brooklyn, New York was without the benefit of many teachers of color. She described the culture of low expectations as having somewhat influenced her choice to become a teacher, if for no other reason than to prod her to offer students something better than what she received:

Yeah, because I grew up in the city, that was what drove my desire to be in urban schools when I became a teacher, because I wanted to be able to offer some of the things that teachers, when I was coming up, didn't know to do more or didn't think to do for any number of reasons, whether it was because of who I was, then the assumptions they had about me being black and female, all those things. It could be the case, I don't know about your other participants, but I would guess that it's something that shows up often in urban schools, for sure.

Whether due to their own racism or plain ignorance, Tarsha's childhood teachers left the impression that they did not hold very high expectations of black girls. After graduating from high school, she attended a well-known private liberal arts college in Pennsylvania on track to become a computer engineer, taking some English and education courses purely out of interest alongside her technology courses. But after encountering a white male faculty advisor who made it clear that he didn't believe she was computer science material, by the end of freshman year she felt forced to drop that major:

...as a small liberal arts school the entire department consisted of exactly one professor. When that relationship goes south you're pretty much screwed, and that's what happened to me; the [computer science] professor didn't really care for me very much. Some of it was my own doing in terms of silly things that you do as a freshman; not getting up on time for class, or just screwing up and then not really having a lot of room to fix it...but some of his own stuff was couched in that too... I remember him telling me, "it's not that I don't think you can do computer science, I just don't think you can do it here." Pretty much, meaning that he had no intention of seeing me through the department.

Tarsha had assumed that when the professor himself admitted that he had to take home and study her algorithms in order to decode them, this was evidence enough to point to her aptitude. She had naively believed that ability alone was enough to earn her a coveted seat in the prestigious department. In hindsight, Tarsha believed that from the professor's position of power, in the highly regarded computer science department of this elite college—coupled with his own sexism—he simply could not see her as a future computer scientist. The experience was a painful reminder of childhood experiences with white teachers and the subtleties of liberal racism, and taught her a lesson about so-called “progressive education:”

I think the nature of my undergrad institution prepared me generally for the world. It was one of these small liberal arts schools that believes itself to be very progressive but shows you very much how people want to close a blind eye to the stuff that doesn't match up to what they want to know and that challenges their privilege.

As a sophomore, Tarsha encountered the black woman education professor who would be instrumental in turning her toward a teaching career:

When I took my first education class as a sophomore, there was something about my professor, who later became my mentor, her having done work in the desegregation of [Roxbury, Massachusetts], and being very immersed in what equitable education looked like, and hearing about all the things that I guess I was feeling, but didn't have language for when I first got to [undergraduate institution]. Talking about all of those inequities, that just clicked for me, and so it was at that moment that I decided I was going to do education.

Tarsha credited this professor for helping her understand the larger historical and sociopolitical context of teaching, which seemed designed to help her be successful in any educational context. Most importantly, after sitting through an entire year of coursework in liberal arts, computer science technology, and English, this professor's introductory education course was Tarsha's first initiation to topics of equity, racial justice, or the history of segregation in the United States. But teaching was not an isolated activity in this professor's career; her personal and professional lives were marked by activism in service to black people—her community. Tarsha points to this transformative model as a turning point in her own future career pathway. This professor would ultimately become a major influence in Tarsha's life, both because she had lived experience in educational activism and because she openly expressed that political life in her pedagogy. Besides being this radical presence in the classroom, the professor also provided a safe space for Tarsha to process her struggles with racism encountered during student teaching (further addressed in Chapter 5):

My supervising professor...she wasn't afraid to address race and gender. When I talked about my [problems with her] cooperating teacher...she was able to talk to me a little bit about it. One of the things that we had to do was we had to write some reflective essays as a part of the portfolio. I wrote one that talked about the death of the self where you feel like as a teacher of color you have to put away part of yourself. I think she saw that for the first time in my essay. I didn't necessarily have the words to articulate it in the moment. It took the reflection essay to pull it out.

Here was a moment of great vulnerability that Tarsha had not been able to process in the moment of conflict, but felt safe enough to express directly to her professor. Likely, the professor could personally identify with Tarsha's experience because she was able to help her flesh it out.

Tarsha went on to earn a master's degree in Urban Education from a mid-sized university in Philadelphia, became certified and taught in the Philadelphia public school system for three years. Her first lead teaching post was a sixth-seventh grade split classroom she inherited from a long-term sub— a commonplace situation in that school. She began by being invited to observe the classroom for a few days prior to starting to meet her mentor teacher and some of the others on her floor, all of whom were veteran black women teachers. Tarsha described the informal and formal mentoring she would receive from these women as invaluable to her personal and professional development in those first years:

As a new teacher you were given a master teacher to debrief with, and talk to about how to get better at your craft. The school had a lot of old school long

experienced teachers, and they took it seriously. There was a camaraderie and a relationship among the teachers, so a lot of what brought me through that first year were three or four black female teachers who were all on my floor, or all connected because they'd been there so long, and they just took me under their wing. One of the women was that formal role for me, but because they came as a package there were plenty of days where I spent having lunch with all of them, and they would tell me about the kinds of things they would do in their classrooms. They would laugh at some of the things they saw me doing that were good, or maybe just like, "yeah, you're brand new, like clearly," but it was in a loving way to still support me and keep me uplifted.

Several important elements can be observed in Tarsha's experience here. First, she had landed in a school environment that took mentoring seriously enough to institutionalize it. Second, she had mentors who took *teaching* very seriously, to the point that they unofficially spent time instructing her about what they knew and did in their own classrooms. Third, her formal and informal mentors were already networked together as their *own* support group but embraced Tarsha in community. After three more years at this Philadelphia school, Tarsha had decided to return to New York to re-engage with her first love, computer technology, at a new job teaching for a nonprofit technology center for youth. She did not yet realize that she would never return to teaching in a K-12 school. But the confidence she had gained from those years of consistent, strong mentoring had likely imbued her with a confidence to try out her burgeoning leadership skills somewhere new.

This next job was kind of a blend of the two [teaching and technology]. The center had school contracts where they were also accredited to teach the teachers basic technology competency classes to show them not only how to use technology, but to show them how to use it in the classroom. This was more along the lines of what I was thinking about when I was an undergrad. I was like, I could teach somebody how to use a computer, they had a curriculum. I learned pretty quickly how to follow the curriculum but also kind of make it my own.

This teaching experience was Tarsha's first in an alternative education space, and she found the independence in her classrooms exhilarating. Starting out as an instructor, she eventually rose to a leadership position managing contracts and university partnerships. The agency was located in an affluent part of New York City, so she also gained a lot of insight into the ways wealthy school districts utilized supplemental services differently than poorer ones. After some years, Tarsha moved again, this time to a new leadership position at a larger agency where she was employed at the time of this interview.

I joined my first non-profit...a multi-service program that worked with low-resourced schools in neighborhood catchment areas. Their goal was to be focused on enhancing literacy for students that predominantly came from specific [New York City public housing projects], and fed into certain schools from those areas. The program was all encompassing, it wasn't just about the education piece. We also had pieces that dealt with neighborhood services, so families could come into the office and we had what's called Single Stop.

Again, we see Tarsha's intentionality in choosing a role that enabled her to engage with issues facing her own community as just a natural byproduct of the teaching commitment. Now the service-oriented teaching framework from her mentors was becoming integrated fully into Tarsha's own identity, just as it had been demonstrated to her. Now at this new agency headed by strong female leaders predominantly of color, she would have the opportunity to learn not only mentorship, but leadership:

When I first started working with the organization, leadership was predominantly of color...the Executive Director was a black woman, the Vice President was a black woman... the Director of Finance was a black woman. There was strong leadership at the top, the Directors- of which I was one- there were three of us....we had a strong staff of well-accomplished people of color who reflected the young people we were working with when I began there, and it was like that for the majority of the years that I was there. I think in that regard when I was in this space ... I was very much able to bring to the table who I was as a black woman, who I was as a black person, who I was as a woman, who I was as a city kid. There was always an opportunity to connect with either staff or other people in that regard. We were able to have conversations with the kids on issues of race and gender and class. We definitely had discussions where people didn't agree about certain things...but the fact that we could have conversations was still in itself a positive thing.

No hard lines separated "real life" from the work of teaching. When things of direct relevance to students' lives occurred, as with the Trayvon Martin and Lamarley Graham murder cases, they were discussed both at the level of leadership and in classrooms. "We

could have conversations with kids around that kind of stuff. Once leadership changed, I think there was a shift, absolutely a shift I think. It began initially with the way that we saw how we were being engaged as staff.”

Working at this multiservice nonprofit, Tarsha discovered how much broader her reach was as a teacher and administrator than at traditional public school. She decided to remain in the nonprofit education sector, and entered a distance learning executive education (36 months) doctoral program through a large private university in Pennsylvania. She had recently completed her doctorate at the time of this interview and departed from the agency soon after.

Tarsha developed her practice from observing the habits and behaviors of multiple black women teacher mentors along her career continuum. She was one of the two participants in this study to have been formally prepared in a teacher education degree program, and credited her education professor as chiefly responsible for igniting her passion for teaching, followed by a succession of veteran black teachers and agency educational leaders. All offered themselves to Tarsha as demonstrations of the ways transformative practices can be effective even outside of classrooms for resisting structural violence and oppression in schools. These mentors modeled direct communication, service through shared community uplift, and by cultivating genuine relationships with students to show how these can effectively disrupt the status quo. Over many instances in her career, Tarsha would fall back upon these practices to counteract the negative effects of silencing, fostering artificial divisions between groups, or ignoring dissent—habits common to schools and most bureaucracies. Unfortunately, in doing so she placed herself in professional jeopardy time and again, until new leadership at her

agency eventually grew weary of her interference, and pushed her out. But for Tarsha, being a transformative educator was not something she could ever compromise, particularly when students' lives and well being were at stake.

The remaining four cases discussed in this chapter are Mariana, Aylisa, Shimitra, and Lisette-Michelle, none of whom possess New York State teacher certification or graduated from a university-based teacher preparation program. Despite this, they found rewarding teaching careers in alternative settings after having been educated through a unique blend of career, informal and academic experiences. In the next section I will focus first on Mariana, who engages in transformative practices through the lens of intersectional feminism.

Mariana

Intersectional Feminist Lens

Mariana used an intersectional feminist lens to frame her teaching practice and to address the structural violence and oppression she encountered in her work setting. In contrast to both Amelia and Tarsha, Mariana did not complete a degree program in education or acquire teacher certification. She did, however, come to her first teaching role with strong knowledge of critical social theory, field experience, and a feminist Afro-Latina cultural identity. The latter was a gift inherited from her mother and a bi-national childhood between the Dominican Republic and New York City. Mariana later studied economics and sociology, observed the pedagogy of her professors of color, gained opportunities to teach under their mentorship, and became an expert researcher on urban welfare. Although she was one of the four teachers in this study without formal

teacher preparation, she had college-level teaching experience and a strong background in critical social theory and research by the time she began teaching full-time. Importantly, she built into her pedagogical style plenty of room to integrate knowledge she gained from interacting with students. As part of her practice, she was continually merging what she learned with what she gleaned from self-observation. In Mariana's view, educators needed to possess an understanding of the complex intersectional overlay of race, class, gender, culture, and sexuality for each individual in the classroom—the teacher included. For Mariana, if a teacher does not think deeply about the complexity in her students' identities, then there will be some gaps in students' authentic learning.

For several years to the time of this study, Mariana had taught in the Educational Opportunity (college bridge) Program for low-income, underrepresented incoming freshman at a public community college in New York City. Her students lived in New York City and were a very diverse mix of first and second generation Latin Americans, Caribbeans, Africans, Southeast Asians, Chinese, Eastern Europeans, as well as white and black Americans. Mariana teaches multiple sections of Urban Sociology with a writing component. She is 33 years old, identified as female, heterosexual, and single. Mariana was not a parent and considered herself spiritual without a formal religious affiliation. She intentionally identified as Afro-Latina rather than choose between black *or* Latina. Along with an identical twin sister, Mariana was born and raised on the lower east side of Manhattan by her Dominican mother, moved back to the Dominican Republic from age 6 months to 4 years old, then returned to Brooklyn, New York. Probably the most foundational influence on Mariana's pedagogy was this grounding of an Afro-Latina identity from her dual upbringing between the Dominican Republic and New York

City. As with Amelia, Mariana credited her mother for fostering this positive racial and cultural identity.

Early Rejection of Racial and Cultural Fragmentation

At a young age, Mariana's mother encouraged her daughters to reject binary racial categories sometimes adopted by immigrants in the United States for more rapid assimilation; i.e., identifying as either the category "black" or "Latino." Mariana actually felt cultural solidarity with and kinship to both her Dominican *and* African-American neighbors in Brooklyn, New York. In her mother, she had an early role model for rejecting the anti-black sentiment common in her home country, as her mother explicitly taught her children about their country's well-documented denial of its African slave past (Howard, 2001; Sagás, 2000). The family also pushed back by refusing to go along with the ghettoizing residential patterns of fellow Dominicans who preceded them to the United States, unwilling to contribute to any more falsehoods about differences between them and black people in the U.S.:

I really understood my identity living in non-Dominican, non-Latino communities I lived in, and then Brownsville when just a small percentage was Puerto Rican, the majority was African-American. That also helped me form my identity and knowing DR's history. It was an overwhelming black country no matter what people think. But then a lot of my family didn't do the typical Dominican thing to come to Washington Heights, they went to Brooklyn. Because of that, we lived with African-Americans.

These were formative years in the development of Mariana's worldview about the significance of one's identity, and his or her right to define it as they choose.

The Salience of Identity in Professional Spaces

Mariana and her twin sister together attended a public college in upstate New York where they became students in a similar Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) as undergraduates. That program required its recent alumni to instruct incoming freshmen participants as professors' assistants in subjects related to their majors. This meant that teaching mathematics to EOP students would automatically be Mariana's first job after graduating with her bachelor's degree in economics. One of the goals of this program was to recruit more women and students of color into math and engineering, so it recruited the same as instructors to further this mission. So, due to the explicitly targeted nature of her hiring, Mariana was made to understand the significance of her racial and ethnic identity early on as part of her burgeoning *teacher identity*. This instructor role would teach her always to be intentional about inserting her identities into her teaching, as it held educational relevance for her students. After teaching, this would be her second lesson on the importance of integrating herself into her work as an educator, something that would later become the hallmark of her transformative practice:

One of the goals was, we were trying to get more students of color into math and engineering because the engineering school needed a quota. And they weren't meeting that. They didn't have enough women regardless of race or ethnicity and very little people of color. It's just getting [students] comfortable with math so they recruited young instructors of color. I was the teacher's assistant and the

teacher, the instructor, was a man of color. I went back the next summer. Those of us that went through the program or are familiar with some type of program like that in our institution, we kind of give back. It's like a family.

Beyond this, Mariana otherwise had no formal academic training to teach, instead drawing from the advice of undergraduate professors, her own experiences as a student, and by observing admired instructors. What some might regard as lack of adequate preparation for the classroom, she felt was an asset. Interestingly, Mariana viewed this unusual preparation to teach as a freedom from restraints rather than a deficit.

Technically, I didn't really receive teacher preparation at that time. Having an undergrad in economics... I never took a class that was Teaching College 101. What I did is I pulled from professors that I allowed to make a difference in my academic career. Be it the type of material they taught or how they taught it.

During her teaching appointment, Mariana re-enrolled at her undergraduate alma mater to get a master's degree in Public Administration, marrying her studies in economics with public policy, and discovered she enjoyed addressing urban housing problems from a policy perspective. She found her next job as a qualitative researcher at a think tank in Newark, New Jersey closely following the lives women on public assistance. Working there for the next four years gave Mariana the micro and macro level insight that she needed into the political and economic structures that create extreme poverty in the U.S. These years as a field researcher were formative in developing her as an applied social scientist who engaged in socially relevant research. So when a friend told her about a teaching opportunity with first-year students at the community college (where she worked at the time of this study) in the same EOP program she had been a part of as a

student, Mariana jumped at the chance to do something socially meaningful, but still in an applied field.

Like all instructors at this institution, Mariana was first required to take a semester-long workshop to qualify to teach writing intensive courses. She learned about creating assignments, grading, designing assessments, and providing feedback on student papers. She was now armed with formal training to teach adults, but continued to draw primarily from the theoretical and methodological approaches of her social science background:

One of the things I use that helps me is... "sociological imagination." It's this belief that your private troubles... you can look at them from a public perspective. The situation you're in isn't necessarily completely of your making. There were social forces and social institutions that didn't work the way the way they were supposed to that you ended up in your predicament. So we talked about teenage pregnancy. We're so quick to be like, "she was loose and she was this...." We're like, "okay let's get a little bit more critical and let's get underneath it. What institutions failed?" They'll be like, "the family. There was no sex ed or their school decided to go with abstinence." Then we'll get deeper.

Mariana used constructs drawn from social theory to respond to students' identities and lives. She then strove to place her college's pre-selected course materials in context by studying her students' cultural contexts as a means of improving her own pedagogy—an exercise in sensitivity drawn from her background as field researcher enmeshed in real people's lives:

After [beginning her teaching job at the community college], I became a student. I read the textbook like they did. I had to go and find context for what I was reading. I learned a lot about U.S. history teaching this. The history of students, like ethnic whites. I didn't know the difference between what an "ethnic white" and a "white" person you would traditionally speak about was. I had to learn that. Not only because I'm teaching it, but the students I'm teaching. For example, I have two Chinese students that just arrived. In two instances I made sure to connect with them...I became a student. One is from the North, the other one is from the South and they don't understand each other. They taught me, there's no Chinese language in China. There's hundreds of dialects... I'm like "wow." I didn't know this. I wanted to have them feel empowered in that sense.

Mariana opened herself to learning from her students as she taught. In this instance, she started using students' linguistic diversity to bridge these newcomers to the group into a broader discussion about the Chinese diaspora and its importance to the industrial development of the United States. This skill was likely taken from her time as an interviewer, where she had practiced stepping outside of her world to understand another's experience to integrate into her own knowledge. She also sought to link their histories of exploitation by the U.S. to that of other oppressed peoples here:

In the other sense, with the Chinese students in particular, which we have a lot of, we talk about how they were enslaved...and they built the railroad systems in the U.S. to have people not only see that African slavery was harsh but it wasn't the only form of slavery. It's first so that African Americans don't feel that, they're oppressed, you're not. Or for some of my other students to have this elitism like

look at those African Americans that were slaves once. No, so were you. It's making that connection historically. So if I had even one student from Tibet, let me learn about Tibet. With the ethnic white students, because of the immigration status and a lot of the ethnic white students were either undocumented or in the process of citizenship. So the connection made [between students] was there.

Even as a beginning instructor, Mariana sought to make connections between history, the sociopolitical environment, and the person sitting in front of her. She remembered all too well how it felt to be disengaged in a classroom, and tried to prevent that for students:

I think with my black and Latino students it was easier [to relate naturally] more because that's me [shared cultural context] in a sense. So I did my best with the other [non black and Latino] students because I didn't want them to feel left out. I was in their shoes. Sometimes I could be yapping about something. A professor uses a word over and over and you have no idea what the word is but that one word is going to dictate the whole lesson. If I get the vibe that the eyes are glossing I'm like, "do you know what such and such means?" They will stay quiet and I'm like, "tell me the truth." I try to remember, when you were in their shoes, you felt embarrassed to speak up. So I tried to connect as much as I could with the time I had.

During our conversations, Mariana credited her college professors for exposing her to critical social theory that would inform her field research and later approach to teaching:

I was fortunate enough to take really important courses. [Alma mater] had a number of great professors teaching all types of critical subjects in terms of

students of color and I was fortunate to take a few of those and read certain important books. That's when it shaped my identity. Then with my sister, we went to Senegal for study abroad and that was like "okay!" So my academic preparation taught me like, if I'm going to teach theory, I'm going to teach a lot of Marxism and classical theory. But for the most part they didn't train me to deal with the everyday interactions or students not respecting certain things. Just the day-to-day interactions that I know my older colleagues or the younger men of color or the white men in my department don't go through.

Mariana lamented only not having been prepared to anticipate some of the gendered and raced microaggressions she would face in the teaching environment (explained further in future chapters). Mariana was in the dissertation phase of a part-time doctoral program in Urban Policy at a public university in New Jersey at the time of this study, which she regarded as the final step in her commitment to a career advocating for fairer housing policies in New York City.

Central to Mariana's transformative teaching to address structural violence and oppression was an intersectional framework inherited from her mother, informed by an upbringing shared between the Dominican Republic and New York City. Unlike Amelia and Tarsha, Mariana did not complete a degree program in teacher education but possessed a solid foundation in critical social theory, college teaching experience, field expertise in urban welfare policy, and a feminist teacher identity strongly inclusive of her Afro-Latina cultural identity. As part of her teaching practice, she maintained a researcher stance: remaining open to learning from students, and continuously integrating what she learned about them, and about herself, back into her pedagogy.

While Mariana acknowledged her pedagogy is still developing, she believed that all educators of marginalized youth must possess both a micro and macro level understanding of students' everyday lived experiences. Ideally, having this multi-tiered view would illuminate the dynamic mix of race, class, gender, culture, and sexuality that is each student. For Mariana, without attending to these overlapping facets of student identity, very little could be understood about the student-teacher interaction, and therefore very little would be learned by anyone in the classroom—teacher included.

In the next section I present Aylisa, who used transformative practices in her classroom through the frameworks of intellectual independence and self-education.

Aylisa

Intellectual Independence and the Responsibility to Self-Educate

Aylisa's transformative teaching practice flowed from her belief that learning could happen anywhere: while digging through archives, reading science fiction, sewing a dress, or listening to an elder's stories. The formal classroom space and the teachers standing in it are not the sole keepers of knowledge. Education is a continuous and independent enterprise, always being negotiated between educators and students.

Since Aylisa's confidence and inquisitiveness seemed to make her childhood teachers uncomfortable, she realized early on that she could not look to them to meet her enthusiasm for learning. Yet this did not crush her love for education. She learned to be intellectually independent, and determined that her education would not be limited to the four walls of any school building. From Aylisa's perspective, this fluid, borderless approach to learning was really baseline knowledge for a successful, transformative

teaching practice. She essentially learned to teach while working as a museum educator teaching Jewish history and culture at a Jewish historical society, and as a black, non-Jewish woman doing this work, she could easily have felt out of place or shied away from the task. Instead, she approached the work with reverence, humility, and an expectation that she could learn to teach effectively. In doing so, Aylisa discovered that teaching any subject can work if one's approach to the material *and* the students is grounded in empathy and connection through the mutual human experience. She brought this transformative perspective into her teaching, believing it to be a necessity for effective practice, particularly with youth facing structural violence and oppression in their lives.

Aylisa was 41 years old, married, identified as a straight female, and preferred “black” over African American: “I clearly am of African descent, but ‘black’ connects me to people across a diaspora...it just connects me to other folks. ‘African-American’ is in a box.” She had one daughter in elementary school, claimed no religious affiliation, and worked as Coordinator of Teen Programs at a museum in New York City at the time of this study. The program’s mission was to provide children from neighborhood high schools with standards-aligned academic and socio-emotional programming that built upon their school’s curriculum. She facilitated all of the programs and created most of the curriculum on her own with the help of two part-time staff.

An Education from the School of Life

When it came to learning, Aylisa’s mother and grandparents encouraged her during childhood to follow her own curiosity. Her family coached her to be an active

consumer of all available learning opportunities whether inside or outside of school. The adults in Aylisa's life pushed her to pursue her natural interests and engaged her in learning experiences outside of school. As an only child, she recalled regularly hearing elders share their counter-narratives to what was written in her history texts, and counts this as her formative education. To this day, Aylisa regarded not having to rely exclusively on teachers or texts for a complete understanding of U.S. history, or African-American history, as an advantage. Many times throughout our conversations, she expressed gratitude for the criticality given her by these elders throughout childhood:

The love and the informal education that I've gotten through my family is worth more than the degrees I have, I believe. I'm a witness to all kinds of history through their eyes. I knew when we were talking about Martin Luther King in high school, or middle school, that all black people did not like Martin Luther King. I knew that as a kid. My grandfather was like, "He's a rabblouser." But my grandmother was like, "we're going to the march." That kind of thing. Even to this day ... like I said, with peers, people who have doctorates, they're all having all these conversations about race and class, and I'm like, "wait—don't you know some old people? Haven't y'all had these conversations?"

In this example, Aylisa's grandfather bucked the dominant narrative by suggesting that there is actually a wide diversity of thought and opinion among African-Americans concerning the historical actions of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She was struck by these inconsistencies in the historical record. Further, this called into question the privileging of academic knowledge over so-called "folk" knowledge, and the automatic respect accorded to those with formal degrees over the witness of people like her uneducated

grandparents. At home, Aylisa had discovered that most “facts” written in textbooks still left more untold. Like a detective, she started to search out books and artifacts at the library, and asked her elders and their friends for their stories, trying to unlock the mysteries omitted from school lessons.

Aylisa was continuously encouraged by her mother to read anything she was interested in. Nothing was off limits. “What do you like? This is what I'm here for. Whatever you like,” she recalled her mother saying. Aylisa’s mother was herself a nontraditional student who went on to become an alternative educator, setting an early example for Aylisa about the ways one’s chosen vocation can reflect one’s values:

My mom was a student at [public state university in New York] when she got pregnant with me. I lived on campus with her, I'm in her yearbook ... chilling under a tree drinking some juice. I remember walking across the stage with her. I stood up in the middle of the auditorium, "My mama!" She also, as an English Education major, taught in work release programs for folks who were at Attica. She taught poetry.

Her mother also regularly reminded her to regard adults, including teachers, as regular human beings—well intentioned, but merely flesh and blood, capable of doing both harm and good, and therefore, never above reproach.

[Aylisa’s mother] said to be myself. “You don't have to put up with anybody's anything.... I'm right there by your side.” My mother told me “never take what a teacher says about you at face value, because I went to school with nuns, and nuns lied.” So I had a way of being about myself in school, even elementary and middle. I had this, "I'm going to say what I'm going to say.” That whole idea of a

teacher ... "ou respect me just because I'm a teacher." I'm like, "No, no. It goes both ways." It was like, "I'll respect you, but I'm not going to pay you an undue respect ... minimize myself because of who you are, who you think you are." That's where it is.

Conversations like these imbued Aylisa with the self-confidence to accept nothing at face value simply because it was presented by an adult authority figure. She was encouraged to regard teacher knowledge as fluid, and the power dynamic between teachers and students as shared and actively being negotiated. If learning is a two-way street, then teachers can, in fact, learn as much from students as students can learn from them.

Creating the Formal Education You Never Received But Deserved to Have

This independent perspective meant, however, that Aylisa could never be a passive learner and would be responsible for being her own best teacher. In keeping with this, she chose to attend a college for nontraditional students that allowed for flexible learning programs based upon their interests. Aylisa thrived in this independent, unstructured environment. Once she earned her bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and Women's Studies, she twice enrolled in two private universities to pursue a master's degree, but ended up transferring out both times, ultimately to return to the same undergraduate alma mater to build a flexible course of study for a master's degree. "At [university's name], the give and take between...you are a learner, you're there. The give and take ... the respect that they have for your voice.... That's why I did my master's with them, too. This is what I wanted to do."

Aylisa had gleaned from many years of schooling that if she wanted to learn more about women or people of color, she would have to discover it for herself. She was taught the Euro-American perspective through singular exposure to the western canon, and found it beneficial in terms of learning to understand "how white people think" and process the world. But this fueled her strategic choice to center black women in her graduate studies. The flexibility of her interdisciplinary master's program allowed her to define what the "foundational classics" would be.

My formal education has taught me how white people think. Having to deal with courses on rhetoric and logic, I had to. Because I'm like "clearly they're [white people] not thinking how I'm thinking". Yeah. I mean my formal education taught me a lot of things but in terms of here, it's really taught me how white people are taught to process the world. So in my master's program I focused on black women and I got to kind of make my own courses.

Eventually, Aylisa opted to continue on for a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Studies/Humanities & Culture in a distance-learning program in the U.S. Midwest. She found in doctoral study a way to focus on her passions, and felt validated to find that her interests were also considered scholarly.

Museum Education

Although Aylisa was initially dissuaded from a teaching career because of her childhood experiences with teachers, eventually she fell in love with the profession while working as a museum educator. She actually learned to teach by creating tours for the

New York City museum-going public and teaching Jewish history during school trip visits:

People would say that [suggest she become a teacher] and I would refuse. I'd be like, " No, teach what? Teach who? Ew, literally allergic to teaching. Then... I led those tours. All outside of school. First I created turn of the 20th century leisure activities of wealthy New Yorkers through a [Jewish Museum/Holocaust Museum] internship. [Going into schools upon request], I learned how to teach. The first time I had ever met Holocaust survivors...if you have any kind of empathy in your body, you immediately feel it. I will not forget ... April 21st, they invited me to be a part of Yom HaShoah [Holocaust Remembrance Day], where they did this huge ceremony and lit candles.

Thus Aylisa's teaching career began when she learned to teach about a culture outside of her own with reverence and respect—a humanistic approach she would carry into work with future students. By jumping into the museum educator role, Aylisa learned that teaching through human connections is transformational. When asked how it felt as a black, non-Jewish woman going into Jewish day schools and community centers to teach about Jewish history, Aylisa replied:

I know who I am, so I'm not afraid of going anywhere. But to me, one of the best ways to learn about yourself is to learn about other people. Empathic connection to see yourself and others the same...so I don't have this fear. Through that internship, I learned how to teach. I was leading the tour.

Ironically, teaching in this way was something she had to learn, as she put it, “all *outside* of school.” However, this was consistent with her early beliefs about authentic education

not being limited to the four walls of any school building. Again, the influence of her mother early on was instrumental:

My mother has friends of all backgrounds. By the time I was maybe 11, I'd been to Passovers. I had been to all kinds of Italian family events. One of the first things I remember about living in Rochester, a big park is Genesee Valley Park. We're riding [bicycles] through the park ... there was a big Italian family reunion, and my mother crashes. It's me and her ... my mother's a nut!

Aylisa's mother's efforts to share her own cross-cultural interests with her daughter became lessons about cultural respect. She embodied complexity, being willing and able to move outward from her own familiar cultural context. This likely helped to influence Aylisa's perspective that worthwhile forms of "education" can potentially happen anywhere, and that she was capable of shaping hers in whatever form she needed.

Aylisa's transformative teaching practice for meeting structural violence and oppression flows from her belief that learning is not limited to a school building, and happens over the course of a lifetime. Knowledge does not live in schools or belong to teachers; rather, it is always being negotiated between educators and students. She unfortunately lost trust in teachers from early negative school experiences once she discovered many were unwilling to create space for her confident personality and high expectations for learning. As a result, she came to love the idea of being a teacher herself only much later in life. Aylisa's mother and grandparents were influential in directing her intellectual development and helped her be discerning when defining "authentic" knowledge. She literally learned to teach on the job with no formal preparation,

but approached her museum educator role grounded in the work of building connections with youth audiences. She continued to bring this transformative perspective into her work with teens in the museum at which she was employed at the time of this study.

In the next section I present Shimitra, who teaches in the pursuit of truth-telling and justice— both for herself and for the severely marginalized youth in her charge.

Shimitra

Expect to Have to Fight for What You Deserve

Shimitra graduated from college without any formal teacher preparation. However, well before college she was already acutely aware that poor people of color in the United States have to fight for the privilege to lead lives of dignity and peace. Such privileges are not guaranteed, and are hard won for people like her. This core belief continuously informed the ways in which Shimitra's transformative teaching practice met the structural violence and oppression in her work environment. From her perspective, an educator was doing intractable harm to diminish or ignore this as a fact of life in our world today. A truly transformative educator should be direct and honest in their communications with youth about the injustices they will face.

Shimitra's childhood in 1990s Brooklyn, New York was marked by rapid neighborhood redevelopment following decades of government neglect, then giving way to gentrification. She had no choice but to participate in neighborhood protests against illegal evictions, environmental pollution, slumlords, and other attacks on her home community. Shimitra learned by watching the adults around her interrupt and face down institutional and corporate bullying through direct action and a variety of organizing

tactics. Much of this activism was led by her neighborhood church and its pastor, who was also her godfather and a close family friend. His influence was critical to her personal and political development. Thus by the time she reached college, she had already developed a stomach for protest. In fact, Shimitra to this day takes protest for granted as a given fact of life. She never took any formal teacher preparation coursework, but had undergraduate courses in the social sciences, ethnic and gender studies that would further refine her future approaches to teaching. Ultimately, one of these courses, co-taught in a Philadelphia prison, would open her eyes to the specific ways her chosen major, social work, could be used as a tool to dismantle institutional oppression, and how teaching could be a perfect vehicle for helping youth develop a means for speaking truth to power.

Shimitra is now 33 years old, and identifies as a queer, black American woman, raised in the Fort Greene section of downtown Brooklyn by her mother. She is married to a Haitian-American woman. Shimitra jokes that the gentrified, trendy downtown of today is nothing like where she grew up. She was rebellious as a young child, but smart and good in school. Shimitra likened her childhood self to her present-day students in that she thought she was invincible, but had a challenge someplace deep within herself to be better. She described herself as a person of faith, having been raised in an evangelical church, but not actively practicing or conservative in her beliefs. Always, she credited black women teachers and her godfather for steering her onto the right path by maintaining high expectations of her. At the time of this study, Shimitra was employed as the Assistant Director of Programs at a small alternative to incarceration youth program in Brooklyn. Its mission is to give young men and women of color that have committed

felonies the opportunity to repair the harm they caused by entering into dialogue with those they victimized. Shimitra's specific role is to teach an extensive preparatory curriculum and oversee completion of clients' contracts for their 1-2 years in the program. This is a court-mandated "last chance" and most of the participants are low-income men of color.

About one year after our final interview, Shimitra's employer suddenly terminated her after nearly 10 years of service, citing budgetary concerns over continuing to pay her salary. This came after many years of conflict over program policies between the executive director and Shimitra, including a last incident where Shimitra had been relocated to a remote field office. Shimitra filed an appeal, citing a long history of animosity leveled toward her for resisting racist policies that had disadvantaged the staff of color and clients. She lost the appeal and was ultimately terminated with a hefty severance package. Shimitra was unemployed for almost nine months until finding a similar role managing degree-granting programs in New York State prisons (still there at the time of this writing).

Fighting for Neighborhood Justice

Growing up in Brooklyn, Shimitra's church and its activist congregation taught her to be on the offense against threats that weren't always overt, or even directed at her specifically. Members organized to crash school board meetings, protest city council hearings, and interrupt press conferences just to stay ahead of the closed-door decision making politics that usually took place without their input. As a child, Shimitra began to see relatively early in life that marginalized communities could never truly enjoy the

luxury of complacency, and that absolutely everything—however much deserved—would have to be fought for:

My church was very influential in helping me understand that you have to fight for what you deserve. No one is just going to hand it to you. You can fight in so many different ways, but you've got to fight even when it doesn't look like you need to fight because you're comfortable. You got to fight for the next person. We were always at City Hall protests and resistances or having these meetings with officials that I couldn't even name at the time, but realized that it would be the thing that needed to happen to fight, or that if we slowed down, it would eventually come. Fighting for simple things, like strip clubs being kicked out of the neighborhood and that kind of thing, because it was exposing so many community members, especially young women, to all kinds of vile behavior and eventually law enforcement, and fighting to do that.

The church inculcated in Shimitra as a youth to be prepared to fight even when it doesn't seem like it's your fight—and defy capitalism, individualism, and most importantly, the colonization (literally) of their own neighborhood by the city itself:

Also, I would say the community justice fight that my church was engaged in helped me be an activist.... That was about housing. That was about the crack that was in our community. That was about prisons. [Mayor] DeBlasio right now is trying to put some garbage incinerator on the water near Harlem. That's just like what [former Mayor] Giuliani did many years ago with this incinerator in the Navy Yard [Brooklyn]. It's just like these things always happen where poor communities are always forced to deal with the shit literally and have this

disproportionate amount of disease and illness and all that stuff and then are expected to not kind of succumb to those things, not be lawless, not be needy, not be hurt, not be disenchanting, or whatever.

Shimitra frequently makes explicit reference to the hypocrisy of the powerful, and her analysis here is no different. She has witnessed over and over again the aggression of corporations and government who targeted, displaced, and ultimately profited from the poverty of the communities in which she lived. At the same time, she witnessed the unjust criminalization of those very people who had narrowly managed to survive that aggression. There was no veil over Shimitra's eyes about the costs of being a poor person of color in New York City.

Lessons from Higher Education

Shimitra's first "away" experience was attending a public New York State college to earn her bachelor's degree in English and Sociology through the same summer bridge program as Mariana, previously mentioned. Her college years were characterized by frequent campus activism around curricular demands, tuition hikes, and issues in solidarity with the local communities surrounding the campus. Her willingness to participate, she said, was an extension of her early church activism. She was taking some liberal arts coursework, and had by sophomore year joined a very politically conscious African-American sorority. Through these experiences, Shimitra crystallized a political viewpoint which focused on the needs of specific groups:

I was pursuing "people" problems, just always studying that, being empathetic to the needs of various communities, always thinking about women and thinking

about black people. That was my focus. I studied Africana Studies, women's studies. I studied all kinds of stuff related to my major and was always on my campus protesting; you name it, I did it.

As Shimitra's consciousness expanded and her knowledge increased, so did her concerns mature for the state of women and black people. She then began teaching undergraduates as part of the same requirement for the bridge program with underrepresented incoming freshmen that Mariana also described earlier in this chapter. While Mariana became a mathematics instructor, Shimitra taught sociology survey courses in line with her interests in the social environment.

After graduating and immediately starting a social work master's degree program at a prestigious private university in Philadelphia, Shimitra connected more and more to criminal justice concerns through coursework and externships with local youth. Now living in inner city Philadelphia, Shimitra was attuned to the conditions of their lives because of the similarities to her own childhood in Brooklyn. Her sensitivity to the injustices she saw inflicted upon youth at the hands of law enforcement was fine tuned when she took a graduate policy course taught inside a maximum-security prison classroom with incarcerated classmates. This proved to be a game-changing influence on her decision to practice criminal justice social work:

Then I took a class my last semester of grad school in a local jail...we studied the same materials as the inmates, but we had to go there once a week for about three or four hours. Once I saw those conditions, I was enraged. That was the first time that it was very clear that I was going to do something, whether in policy work or direct service, where I would work with populations who had been incarcerated

or who were on the prisoner pipeline kind of trajectory. There were like five or six prisons on the yard, but they focused on this one because they had a drug and alcohol program.

For a time, to the extent possible, Shimitra and her incarcerated classmates were equalized. These men had the same ability to participate and earn a grade as she did, and Shimitra had to debate and exchange discourse as opposed to observing, studying, or reading *about* them. She was forced to contend directly with the conditions these men faced in that prison, and became outraged at her powerlessness to effect any meaningful change from her position. In reflection, Shimitra regarded her social work graduate program as groundbreaking for how well it prepared her for future teaching. She remembered bold professors unafraid to speak explicitly about racism to her and her privileged classmates. They sometimes used swear words during lectures, called on people who didn't speak up, and challenged classmates to face each other in debate. To Shimitra, these educators were preparing them to understand the gravity of their privilege, knowing the students would someday insert themselves under the guise of "helping" into the lives of people whom they had no right to try to psychologize. This pedagogy certainly helped the students to develop a clear critical race analysis of their city:

The stuff that I got in grad school, especially being a [prestigious] institution in one of the poorest cities in the country...and there's a racial divide in Philadelphia, like no other, a major class divide, I think it was interesting to be doing social work there in the heart of north Philly, in the heart of the northeast in prisons, taking classes and that kind of thing and talking about poor people's

problems left and right with a bunch of white people who all are there to do the same thing. I think they were extremely deliberate. I do think that [the grad school education] was extremely beneficial to what I'm doing now.

Eventually, Shimitra's talents for teaching and counseling youth were recognized, and just as she prepared to graduate and move into clinical practice, she was extended the opportunity to go into a fast-track alternative certification program to become a Philadelphia public school teacher. However, like the other participants described in this study who chose alternative settings over traditional schools, her prior knowledge about schooling and structures of society drew her away from, not towards, a K-12 school teaching career:

I had taught in Binghamton, the summer school programs and things like that in EOP freshman year initiative bridge program, then later ran groups when I was in social work school but I didn't think of myself as a K-12 educator. A principal who is a friend of mine thought that I would be a really good English teacher, and I just said no...I just wasn't interested. I wanted to do something that was a different kind of focus. I thought that teaching and learning could happen in different ways, so that [K-12 teaching] wasn't the way I wanted to execute it.

Instead, Shimitra took her first job in a Philadelphia women's prison, and remained there until returning to New York to help pilot the alternative to incarceration program at which she was employed at the time of this study.

For Shimitra, working with marginalized youth was never for charity or to "save" anyone; it was about justice. She entered college with the awareness that, however unfairly, everyday citizens will always have to fight for what they deserve. This belief

continued to fuel her teaching and navigation of institutions. Those formative times watching her community members organizing on the streets of Brooklyn and shouting into bullhorns from the steps of City Hall laid the foundation for regularly speaking truth to power. In the case of Shimitra, her undergraduate preparation in the social sciences and humanities heavily influenced the development of approaches she would later integrate into teaching. Her liberal arts core was also rich, particularly ethnic and gender studies courses that left deep impressions and fed naturally into her campus activism. Although she felt a career as a public school teacher would have been too confining, she had enjoyed her teaching experiences in front of a classroom as an EOP instructor for undergraduate students. Ultimately, it would be a single graduate course taught in a Philadelphia prison that connected what she already knew about power vis-à-vis the criminal justice system, to the ways social work could be a tool to deconstruct that system.

From Shimitra's perspective, a truly transformative educator is direct and honest with youth about the root causes of the conditions of their lives. An educator who ignores the presence of power and privilege in the lives of students is depriving them of tools to preemptively instigate change, and leaving them virtually impotent against attack. It is a teacher's debt to students to prepare them, if they truly desire to see students survive childhood to lead adult lives of dignity and purpose. Peace and happiness are, after all, privileges hard earned. This is the basis from which Shimitra's transformative teaching practice meets the structural violence and oppression in her work environment.

In the final section, I discuss Lisette-Michelle, whose transformative approaches arise out of shared lived experiences with the youth she served, as well as from deep

respect she has for them—something she believes they are entitled to receive from all adults.

Lisette-Michelle

Empathy and Respect For Young Lives

Lisette-Michelle drew upon lessons from having been a youth caught in the criminal justice system, and later years of professional youth development work, to inform her transformative teaching practice. She had no formal teacher preparation, but possessed great familiarity with the problems facing youth on the margins of the public education system (special education, truancy, and criminal justice involvement). Even though she admitted to not having had much academic preparation for understanding the powerful systems in which she worked, she was confident in her knowledge of youth voice. Lisette-Michelle believed that a developmental understanding of youth cognition and appreciation for their voices were critical baseline knowledge for working with marginalized youth.

Lisette-Michelle was angry about what youth are subjected to in the New York City criminal justice system, and her feelings were informed by her insider access to their issues. What she knew about their lives directly informed her teaching. She was the Youth Policy Coordinator at a well-known criminal justice nonprofit in New York City, overseeing an afterschool workshop that taught policy and advocacy skills to youth impacted by the criminal justice system. Lisette-Michelle managed every aspect of the program from proposal formation, recruitment, teaching courses, providing informal counseling, reviewing their writing products, and getting them through the youth courts

to practice being attorneys, prosecutors, judges, etc., in mock trials. She taught teens to speak the language of the same criminal justice system that had impacted their lives. In the process, students figured out their unique leadership styles, learned technical writing, conducted research, and gained plenty of practice with public speaking. Several months after our last interview, Lisette-Michelle's employment was suddenly terminated after two years and one promotion, with no reason given other than "it was not the right fit." She chose not to contest the decision.

Learning to Value Youth Voice

At 27 years old, Lisette-Michelle was the youngest participant in this study. She identified as a straight, black female who was single, never married, and a practicing Christian. She was born and raised in New York City with her two brothers, mother, and a grandmother nearby. She grew up active in church and held jobs throughout high school, but discovered a love for working with children while still young herself.

So, when I was in high school, I always attended vacation bible school in my grandmother's church and so they're like, we need counselors. I said, okay, guess I'll do it. I had the primary class. Then each year, I'd go back, for maybe three or four years until I finished high school. Then after that, I still decided to keep going back because I just liked working with them. Then after that I did private tutoring for a young lady who was autistic and I got really close to her family and really close to her. She was brilliant. I felt like she just needed me to take a little bit more time and patience...for the most part you'd explain something to her and

she gets it. That's when I was like, I really want to work with kids. That's when I decided to be a psychologist.

After years of being a summer camp counselor and tutoring a child with autism, Lisette-Michelle thought she wanted to be a child psychologist. She had observed that building connections with children and families, and really taking time to know children holistically were the building blocks for success with them. This experience spurred her on to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology at a public university in New York City.

Early Engagement With the Criminal Justice System

The personal would become the professional when a formative event at age 19 changed Lisette-Michelle's path forever:

I was working at [large retail store]. My momma told me that she needed to ... she needed groceries... we didn't have any money for groceries. I went inside [the cash register] and took the money out. In my head, the moment I get paid I'm going to put it back. I didn't think it through. It was just one of those, "okay, my brothers need food, my momma needs food. I'm going to do this." In the process of doing it I... I didn't think it through. I understand what it is to like to go, okay, you go and do something, and then you receive the consequences.

It was difficult for Lisette-Michelle to relate the details of this painful memory of having been arrested and jailed briefly at 19 years old for stealing cash from the register at her job in a retail store. The experience forever sensitized her to what it was to be marked and marginalized based upon a youthful mistake, done on impulse as a way to address terrible circumstances in her life that she had believed were beyond her control.

The experience did, however, lead Lisette-Michelle to refine her interest in child psychology to include its intersection with criminal justice. During those introductory psychology courses, she realized she was more interested in understanding the motivations behind so-called “maladaptive behavior” than in just diagnosing or treating it. She had been thinking about K-12 teaching, and even started an application for *Teach for America*, but stopped to pursue forensic psychology instead:

No, actually I told myself that I wanted to be a child psychologist, but the more I dove into it after my first year of college I realized I wanted to know why so-called criminals do what they do. I didn't want to just be someone to fix a problem. I needed to know why the problem was there. So, that's what changed my focus.

The second way in which Lisette-Michelle’s own arrest and imprisonment refined her thinking about youth psychological development is that she developed from it an analysis of youth decision-making that was both compassionate and practical. She learned that there is a difference between assuming young people make poor choices, and knowing that they are making choices using the logic of their own lenses. Her take is really a result of having walked in the shoes of her students:

It's not that young people don't understand or they don't get it, it's just a different way of getting it. It's not about sticking them with the consequences or them knowing that they're “bad.” That's not it. By connecting with them, helping them work through the decision, “okay, this doesn't make sense.” Like, “if this was like this, how would you react to it?” Or, “if somebody were to do this to you....” Just helping them place themselves not just in their own little world, but a part of

something bigger. I think that's what's missing a lot of times, especially for teens. Some of them have already been through the justice system where they have open cases. Now they see in hindsight what's going on and they're like, "man, they didn't tell me this," or, "I didn't know this." I was like, "whoa!" and then explaining it to them further so that they can get a bigger picture of what it is.

Lisette-Michelle was reinforcing here that even youth who commit crimes are still *youth*, developmentally, and ought not be “thrown away,” but understood on their own terms. What if she had been thrown away after her shoplifting mistake? She gleaned the logic from their decision-making processes, and regarded this as the only responsible assessment adults should make in trying to understand youth behavior. The gravest mistake that can be made is to assess youth too harshly in this vulnerable moment, when their lives (and futures) literally depend upon being understood by a caring, compassionate adult.

Lessons From Applied Work in Youth Development

Simultaneously, Lisette-Michelle was increasingly concerned by funding inequities in public education and felt the need to put her forensics skills to use on behalf of children in New York City. She was angry about the lack of oversight of public monies meant for special needs children in particular, and how difficult it was for families to access their educational entitlements. So, she decided to stay on at her alma mater to earn a master's degree in Public Administration with a concentration in inspection and oversight, thinking that expertise in fraud combined with her studies in human motivation could be important skills to offer to schools and districts.

I realized just from tutoring [her former student with autism] that there's so many services that are not given to special needs kids that I just felt I need to be an inspector general for the department of education, so that I can make sure the money goes where it needs to go. I just realized I'd rather be the person that's giving the recommendations instead of the person that's just working in the office. I rather be the one that's like, okay no— this isn't working, we're spending too much money here, we need to fix it and put it here.

After graduating, Lisette-Michelle's first full time job was coordinating a service-learning integration program at the New York City Department of Education. She essentially prepared resources and professional development programs for K-12 teachers, but felt so disconnected from youth that she left for another job with her current nonprofit working on a pilot truancy prevention program. The role was a perfect blend of youth development with a criminal justice component, because truancy prevention programs are designed to keep children out of family court and away from the legal system in general. During this time, Lisette-Michelle learned how to help families who often unwittingly placed themselves at risk for involvement in the pipeline to prison systems:

...because a lot of times parents are unaware that if a child misses like a month of school, even though it's like one, two days here or there if they miss ten or more days it's considered a month of school. So, they fall behind and a lot of times those kids actually they do worse in school, worse with testing and truancy continues throughout high school. So, they end up not finishing high school. It goes back to what changed the direction of me going to school. Because there are so many programs that are needed that aren't being implemented everywhere

because there's not enough money. Yet still there's a lot of money, so where is the money going? Somebody needs to figure that out. Somebody needs to address that.

Lisette-Michelle's anger at how institutional structures undermine families was fueled by her insider access to educational policies. Speaking on behalf of the youth she served that struggled in schools, she lamented:

If you're in school and you're not learning all these different things or you're not getting these resources that you need but then you're expected to get high test scores and expected to just deliver...you're just supposed to be perfect. You don't do anything. Just come to school, sit down in a chair, fight every feeling within you that tells you that you need to get up and walk and talk and be who you are and ...so you're just supposed to function in a not-so-easily-functioning system. That's just stupid to me. It upsets me, and so it's why I do what I do.

While Lisette-Michelle's formal education prepared her to be an administrator, it did little to help her develop a critical understanding of institutional power or transformative pedagogy. She strongly believed that a developmental understanding of youth decision-making and the ability to *truly* hear youth voice were critical baseline knowledge for working with marginalized students. While Lisette-Michelle was still early in her career, she already was using her prior experiences as a youth once caught up in the criminal justice system. Although she came to teaching with no formal preparation, she deeply understood youth perspectives from one-on-one work and trusted her own ability to perceive their best interests. These aspects of her background combined to form her unique pedagogy.

In sum, this chapter answers my first research question: *What are the specific ways black women educators in alternative education settings make connections between their identities (biography), larger structural forces (structure), and work (practice)?*

The participants in this study reported that they were prepared to navigate and resist oppression in their present workplaces by a combination of diverse prior experiences. From many lessons learned through the years outside of formal academic preparation, each educator developed a framework from which to understand institutional power structures and advocate for students—and also for themselves. Their unique pathways underscored the transformative value of experiential knowledge and nontraditional learning. Yet more specifically, what further separated them from other teachers was their perception that intersecting constructs of power, privilege, and racism not only existed in their work settings, but were, in fact, ordering human activities and influencing institutional practices. They believed that few—including themselves—can operate independent of these influences. Moreover, participants realized that this problem is hardly unique to schools, and exists in institutions of all shapes and sizes.

The following chapter focuses on these teachers' critical awareness of institutional power in their respective teaching environments.

CHAPTER FIVE**INSTITUTIONAL POWER AND TEACHER KNOWLEDGE**

... few...have been trained to analyze power dynamics and even fewer have been given the space to struggle with power- power to, power over, power within and power with- on a personal level as part of their professional training. This leaves us vulnerable to frustration and power abuses as we attempt to ameliorate conditions for our clients without having a full understanding of how the problems were laid down, what maintains them and what collaborative actions need to be taken to remedy the power inequities....

-Activist/psychologist Vanessa Jackson

As discussed in previous chapters, this dissertation explores institutional power and what it means in the lives of racially minoritized teachers and their students in U.S. public education. This study is specifically concerned with “ruling relations” (Smith, 1987), or, visible and invisible forms of social consciousness and power as they take shape in the everyday work lives of six black women educators who work with marginalized youth in alternative educational settings. In Chapter 4, I traced some of the pivotal moments in these teachers’ personal and professional development, which today inform the ways they navigate the racism, privilege, and exclusionary practices inside of the organizational settings in which they work.

Chapter 5 addresses the second research question: *How do black women educators in alternative education settings understand and describe the conditions and*

constraints of their work lives? This chapter explains each participant's critical awareness of institutional power through the lenses of colonization, racism, and neoliberalism.

A second aim of Chapter 5 is also to interpret the significant role played by each participant's teaching setting on possibilities for engaging in transformative practices there and documents some of the tensions that arose in each of their settings. During our conversations, participants described some of the enticements that drew them to choose employment in alternative settings over traditional K-12 schools in the first place, such as greater professional freedom, fewer pedagogical restraints, and a presumed alignment between the culture of the teaching environment and their natural selves. These were prerequisites for the kind of teaching practice they determined to have.

The final purpose of Chapter 5 is to document what happened when the might of the institution and the individual agency of the transformative educator collided. I attempt to describe what occurred when participants did their particular brand of transformative work *at work*, and what happened to their practice as it was transacted in their respective contexts. My aim is to analyze this intersection and describe ways these educators still managed to be transformative within the various limitations—and possibilities—of their physical environments.

However, a commitment to transformative teaching practice and an understanding of institutional power alone do not guarantee a successful work experience. These nontraditional spaces still fell along a broad continuum of constraints and possibilities for transformative practice, and some settings definitely enabled transformative work more than others. Because U.S. education systems still operate within larger structures of oppression, some of the workplaces discussed here merely reproduced them, while others

found meaningful ways to resist some of the more insidious forms of symbolic and physical violence embedded within institutional dynamics (Herr & Anderson, 2003; Weis & Fine, 2012). For educators who are black and women, the professional risks for doing any transformative work that falls outside the norms of institutional practices are only further exacerbated (Biu, 2019). I found that the ways teachers' pedagogies were mediated by their teaching environments was highly context-dependent. What really mattered for their work was the extent to which their organizations either reproduced or resisted negative forms of institutional power in the setting. The experiences of my participants are exemplars of how black women teachers' positions within their work contexts can be tenuous and fragmented. Institutional processes can splinter us, placing us in contradictory positions between what we know, and what we believe we can safely *do*—the proverbial “rock and a hard place.” Circumstances may arise in our work (particularly with students) where we observe an injustice or an experience tinged with racism, and have to weigh the potential ramifications of choosing to either act upon our knowledge, or stay silent. Yet it was their practice to assume that whatever problems they observed in their teaching environments were not idiosyncratic, but rather, some manifestation of institutional power. During our conversations, participants described such instances of moment-to-moment decision-making about the risks of pushing back against institutional policies or practices on behalf of students or themselves. While having an understanding of institutional power did not protect them from experiencing microaggressions or more overt institutional aggression, at least having a conscious awareness helped to inform their responses, as they automatically placed each new experience in its larger context.

In the following sections, I frame the problem of institutional power and the ways in which participants' work was mediated by what many referred to as colonization or plantation colony power dynamics.

Colonization and Institutional Power

What distinguished these six participants as early as the initial telephone screen was that every one talked about *power*—directly and indirectly— as the current running through their experiences with teaching, schooling, and U.S. society. These teachers characterized their work environments as highly variable (Weis & Fine, 2012) where many events simultaneously influenced theirs and others' pedagogical and non-pedagogical activities. So while participants were charged only to teach academic/life skills subjects, they described having to contend with problems related to power, lack of access, and privilege that pervaded every aspect of the organizational ecosystem. Antonio Gramsci (1971) explicated how it is that hegemony gets maintained through ideas and common knowledge in industrial capitalist societies. The participants' experiences support Gramsci's conviction that institutional power taking root in educational settings is not imaginary or abstract.

When discussing workplace power dynamics, it is not uncommon in black circles to hear black folks interpret power through the through the use of "plantation" metaphors to characterize its structure and function in our modern workplaces. Our purpose in doing so is to describe some of the ways U.S society still carries vestiges of its antebellum past with all its racial hierarchies, social norms, strict rules of engagement, unspoken rewards and punishments— but with a focus on the modern institutions in which we all work as

special purveyors of that social order. Traditional plantation roles are also used to connote our location within the plantation hierarchy: for example, work supervisors become “boss” or “massa,” lower level employees can be “field” or “house” slaves, and middle managers, especially managers of color, fall into the unenviable “overseer” category.

Payne (2008) refers to plantation-style organizational relations as anything that can be read in terms of the *dominant* and the *dominated*. Jones (2005) points out that modern plantation-like organizations are easily recognizable by a few distinct features. First, these institutions retain top down, Eurocentric, male-driven designs, although the subjects of their policies, and impact of those policies, are felt mostly by historically oppressed population(s). Second, policy processes in plantation models are inconsistent and paternal, with no transparent decision-making and unpredictable, punitive implementation—such as sudden termination, as an example. Racial diversity tends to decrease as authority is increased (Jones 2005). “Subjects” or employees will continually struggle to assert their humanity as their names, languages, and histories are systematically erased or marginalized (Thiong’o, 1986). My study participants frequently described experiencing plantation type experiences in their workplaces with complex outcomes that were not always known, much less validated, by the institution. This institutional harm, coupled with no effort at institutional repair, only reinforced the power of institutions (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Therefore, an inside observer’s mere conscious awareness of institutional harm can serve as a critical first step in a long process of dismantling an institution’s power and normalized forms of institutional abuse. According to Gaztembide-Fernandez (2012), to

begin decolonizing an organization in this way is to shift from “explaining or enhancing existing social arrangements...to instead seeking to challenge such arrangements and their implied colonial logic” (p.45). In sum, the very act of noticing oppression in one’s surrounding environs in a manner different from what is traditionally seen, done, or expected, is a necessary first step in rewriting the script for what is possible inside of it. Developing the awareness of how institutional power works and its harmfulness in particular can begin just by becoming conscious of institutional practices which are predicated on “logics of inclusion and exclusion that enforce social boundaries” (2012, p.49).

In the next sections, I explain the significance of participants’ decision to teach in alternative settings as a means of enabling transformative practice, and the impact of the environment on participants’ work.

The Salience of the Alternative Teaching Environment

This sample includes six alternative education settings: a public transfer high school, a multiservice community agency with supplementary school programs, a public community college bridge program, a teen enrichment program housed in a public museum, an alternative-to-incarceration program, and a criminal justice youth policy program. All of the institutions are located in three of the five boroughs of New York City.

Study participants chose to teach in alternative settings for professional and pedagogical freedom, and a perceived alignment between the organizational culture/mission and their natural selves. This choice was a direct reflection of how each

participant lived out her practice. Yet, with wide variation between types of institutional contexts, participants' environments fell along a broad spectrum of constraints and possibilities for transformative work. The character of the teaching environment truly mattered, and, ran the full gamut between hostile and welcoming to their work. No participant found a totally conflict-free environment devoid of any friction between individual agency and institutional will. Even with the knowledge that teaching in alternative settings held its own set of challenges, with such strong commitments to being transformative, no participant spoke of regretting the decision.

It turns out that many of the participants' concerns about the problems in K-12 schools are founded, according to research documenting the disproportionate disciplinary measures imposed on African American students, and students with disabilities, in U.S. schools (American Civil Liberties Union, 2018; Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Klein, 2018; Skiba et. al., 2016; The Council of State Governments Justice Center and Public Policy Research Institute, 2011). The numbers of police officers and armed guards being installed in schools has increased from 10 percent in 1997 to 42 percent by 2016. With that, incidences of police brutality are also increasing, including many high profile cases (American Civil Liberties Union, 2018). So, data support their fears that traditional school environments are not only harmful to students of color, low income youth and those with disabilities, but also potentially poisonous spaces in which to be employed, and restrictive for transformative work.

Mariana, a bridge program preparatory instructor at a community college, spoke of her fear of being a repressed teacher in a K-12 school: "I think teaching in general is like a calling...but K through 12 for me, that's almost like going into a monastery, like a

nun.” Aylisa, a museum educator of teens, linked her apprehensions about teaching in a traditional school to her own memories as a student who had suffered through them: “I probably would not be the person that survives [teaching in] a traditional educational model. I’d have to go start my own school. Yeah, just the way schools are set up...it’s the physical environment, but it’s also the emotional environment. Too oppressive.” And finally Shimitra, who regards traditional schools as similar to prisons, preferring instead to move about freely and do her work differently:

...considering the high school I went to, it was like prison.

Security, metal detectors; I mean I didn't get body-checked, but that was just the next step...I thought I would do something around advocacy, maybe do some counseling by way of teaching with groups and stuff like that... but K-12 just seemed like it would be this kind of other thing that just wasn't for me.

Tarsha explained her choice to teach in an alternative setting as a way of responsibly serving the families in her community:

I've chosen to be an educator outside of the traditional schools because schools have their own set of luggage. Families need something else to counter the experiences they have with [schools]. I feel like I wouldn't necessarily have the agency to do the kind of work that I've done thus far if I were embedded in schools. I'd be subjected to the politics of every major city.

Tarsha purposely chose to work in the kind of place that allowed her to serve students and families, but also avoid the next policy mandate imposed by the city or state.

Participants’ responses time and again suggested that the climate and culture of a

teaching environment was of primary significance to their job satisfaction. What they desired was a space in which they could feel free—both as individuals and professionals, to practice their craft in the ways they chose.

Amelia, as a transformative educator, believed in her students' inherent value and was motivated by a desire for connection with others across hierarchal lines. The structure under which she worked was a transfer high school, where she taught English Language Arts (ELA) to students who were under-credited and/or overage. While it was a public, urban school, it was nontraditional or “alternative” in its flexibility to broadly interpret state regulations governing curriculum and standards. With an intention to build and foster connections and relationships, coupled with the high regard she held for students and colleagues, Amelia was fortunate to have the permission she needed within the scope of her prescribed role to support students, share with colleagues, and affirm her belief in the students, whenever possible. She was not prohibited from attending to these relationships on her work time:

That is how I view my service, by spending time with people, students yes, but also colleagues. Understanding is a process and trying to be understood and trying to share experiences. With colleagues it is sharing experiences and with students it is providing experiences that they can take with them in other parts of their lives, right, even if they do not remember it consciously. It has to be because that is all I have got. It has to be in that. All I have is the ability to, so that is to love and encourage and to share ideas and experiences and it has to be enough. That is my service.

Amelia reported having the latitude in her school to be caring and encouraging, and to enjoy positive relationships with students and colleagues. From the outset, she had wanted to work in tandem with students who had struggled in traditional schools, well aware that those environments target and push these kinds of students out. She had learned to recognize this as a process of student profiling from her previous advocacy work on the school-to-prison pipeline. Her current school environment was one that instead encouraged and supported all students, particularly students of color and those with disabilities that were most likely to be targeted. This expressed desire to find a place that allowed her to do this is one aspect of her transformative practice:

[School of employment] used to be part of a network of [transfer] schools, but it split off a few years ago because it wanted to be its own thing and it had its own ideas. When I decided I wanted to be a teacher, I immediately made a list of schools that I knew I wanted to teach at. Especially after working on the school-to-prison pipeline, I was like, "I can't just work at any school," because if I wind up in a school that is toxic, then I'm not going to be helping anybody. I knew I wanted a transfer school because that's the population that I wanted to work with. I wanted to work with older students. I wanted to work with students who had struggled in the past in traditional schools because I know how traditional schools have a tendency to push students out that don't fit in, that don't fit the mold. I wanted students that didn't fit the mold because I felt like I could really survive and be something of good kindred spirit with them. So I wanted a transfer school.

Before Amelia's hiring, she was already working closely with the NYC Department of Education to investigate student abuses in the system, and had learned that this particular transfer high school's leadership had desired to free the school from adherence to certain status quo procedures that placed limitations on student learning. Amelia frequently referenced her deep knowledge and experience with schools, her observations of problematic interactions between teachers, students, families, and law enforcement, and had no tolerance left for hostile school environments. Her personal standards dictated that it was not enough just for a school to be non-abusive to young people; rather, the school needed to show intentional support of traditionally rejected and isolated youth. Naturally, this view extended to the physical environment of her school. She preferred to work in a place free of metal detectors, police guards, and even uniforms.

Just as Amelia's school placed fewer restrictions on student learning, the teachers were, in turn, pushed to focus their attention on instruction due to the principal's belief that teachers performed better when unencumbered by non-instructional tasks:

The principal and the vice principal, they are very hands-on, very hands-on. They know all the students. They know them very well. They're constantly in their offices talking with students. They handle most of the disciplinary issues. Our dean retired recently but is still on for two days a week. It's been difficult but they're handling it. We're doing the teacher stuff. They're always like, "How are you doing?" I felt very welcome there as a teacher, as a first year teacher. They're just like, "If you have any issues, then come to us." I was happy. I was fine. It was weird because they were like, "Are you sure you haven't broken down yet?" I'm

like, "No." I was like, "Is that unusual?" They were like, "Yeah." I think it's because I found the right place.

So again, students and staff enjoyed a non-punitive approach to discipline that was relational and respectful for all involved. Teachers were not left to their own devices to potentially harm students or themselves in the process of solving student problems. The leadership was still attentive to student problems. Further, Amelia's school culture was one that encouraged connections. The school principal made the goal of "community" explicit, but it was fostered as opposed to artificially enforced:

We host a lot of trips for students and faculty because the principal's goal is to create a community. He says one of the ways that we do that is by bonding with different exercises, so we go to this upstate retreat. Every year we do this thing where we do rope sports or something like that. We just went to Field Day last week. Just taking them to Great Adventures Park. We do all this school-wide stuff. We have Culture Day where we all learned to salsa...do talent shows. It's nice.

In Amelia's school, the entire school community participated in retreats together. And in addition to fostering connection, the school also put democracy into action: one powerful illustration of this is that students take a lead role in the interviewing and hiring of their own teachers:

What I really love is that the students were in charge of hiring me or not. They had a discussion about me afterwards and when I got hired, I would go into the class and students were like, "I was in the demo lesson with you. I got you hired."

Amelia loved that students felt empowered enough to express this sentiment so directly to her. Due to her past experiences defending students stripped of their rights by school

districts, she was unwilling to be a party to any unfair processes. Beyond just being a demonstration for students and teachers for how democracy works, the inclusive process described here positioned students as citizen decision makers in their school community, rather than sidelined observers. Further, teacher and student voices were highly valued (even if not staff voices, which Amelia does note), and largely liberated from prescribed hierarchal roles:

I feel like there's a lot of teacher voice in the decision making at the school. I think that administration is very, very intentional about that and that every decision that is made, there has to be a meeting with faculty on board to make that decision. Also there's checks and balances too because if a teacher isn't in a room, another teacher will say, "This teacher isn't the room, we got to wait." That's okay. That's accepted. We'll wait. I'm really happy about that. Faculty voice is heard and if it's not being heard, faculty will make a stand and then be heard.

Amelia's background in community organizing taught her the importance of working people making themselves heard to powerful institutions. It was no accident that she would fight for the opportunity to work inside of a teacher-led school, so totally aligned with her worldview of how communities—even a small school workforce—can work together intentionally to achieve representation for every member.

Tarsha similarly described having once had a supportive teaching environment prior to the recent change in her agency's leadership. Under the previous administration, her community-based after-school and weekend enrichment program rewarded its dedicated faculty with ample opportunities for professional growth and development.

Teacher experimentation with “out of the box” projects and collaboration were enthusiastically supported. The agency’s female leaders of color, who were also Tarsha’s mentors, cultivated a workplace culture driven by transformative values: open, direct communication, giving service through shared community responsibility, and fostering relationships with students and families. As described in Chapter 4, Tarsha had thrived amidst a community of black female mentors who freely discussed the politics of the day and of students’ lives right in the workplace. When current events of direct relevance to students occurred, they were openly discussed both by leadership and in the classrooms. No hard lines separated supposed “real life” from the work of teaching:

When I first started working with the organization, leadership was predominantly of color...the Executive Director was a black woman, the vice president was a black woman. The Director of Finance was a black woman. There was strong leadership at the top, the directors of which I was one, there were three of us, two black women and a black man. We had ... I could probably just go through the whole demographic of the whole organization, butWe had a strong staff of well-accomplished people of color who reflected the young people we were working with when I began there, and it was like that for the majority of the years that I was there. I think in that regard when I was in this space ... I was very much able to bring to the table who I was as a black woman, who I was as a black person, who I was as a woman, who I was as a city kid, who I was having southern roots.... There was always an opportunity to connect with either staff or other people in that regard, all of these things came to the

table. We were able to have conversations with the kids on issues of race and gender and class. Everyone was in agreement. We definitely had discussions where people didn't agree about certain things, like respectability politics is often like a point of contention. The fact was that these were things we could have conversations about, which was in itself a positive thing.

Once the leadership changed, however, the culture that allowed for these types of exchanges also changed. The black female, educator-led leadership was replaced by a nonprofit consulting management team, led by a white woman, and its impact on Tarsha's work and teaching was immediate. The sudden corporatization of the organization transformed its culture from mission-driven and collaborative, to a silencing, colonizing and outcomes-focused environment seemingly overnight. It was indicative of the high-stakes accountability movement formerly concentrated on public schools now moving over to nonprofit programs (Baldrige, 2014). Any critique of organizational processes in the agency was now ignored, cultural expertise was rejected, student experiences were no longer prioritized, and teacher voice was silenced. For an educator like Tarsha, whose preparation for teaching had been so centered in the values of community and collaboration, this new way felt completely alienating. As her beloved workplace became increasingly corporatized, the transformative features once embedded into the institutional structure gradually dissolved.

Yeah, the shift that the organization took in two years was just really drastic and so I believe myself to be mission driven and we were moving away from the mission that I had signed on for...the idea was that, we were taking students

underserved by schools to make sure that they had college completion as an opportunity, but a lot of the conversation after the change in executive leadership began to center around low income students of a certain income level, and then we started asking parents to verify their income and things like that, and I was like, this lacks an understanding of students of color and who they are and what “need” means. There are plenty of statistics that show that students of color from middle income are working poor, and that lack of understanding is problematic because you are not serving a whole host of kids just because they are making a certain amount of money, doesn't mean that you have access.

For Tarsha, the departure of the black female leadership signaled the end of an era where the needs of the local community were understood from direct experience. Gone was any institutional care about the depth of educational neglect in the Harlem neighborhood. It appeared as though children had become program numbers. Suddenly, long-time participating neighborhood families were barred from participating in programs due to strict new income-eligibility cut-offs. Now that output was the focus over quality, it did not matter that children were being deprived of the high quality education that their neighborhood schools failed to provide. Anything unrelated to improving state test scores or raising school performance percentiles became irrelevant, which meant that those aspects of transformative education the children needed most were no longer prioritized—the cultural validation, culturally responsive curriculum, high expectations, and the affirming engagement teachers of color are known for (Ladson-Billings, 2009). This was perhaps the greatest loss of all for the children of the surrounding community.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Lisette-Michelle's teaching practice with court-involved youth was borne out of her developmental perspective on students' lives and decision-making habits, in addition to her own lived experience in the criminal justice system. At the time of this study, she was employed as a program coordinator at a policy organization widely celebrated for its experimental youth prison diversion programs. Lisette-Michelle's job was teaching court-involved youth of color about how to change criminal justice policy through their local court system. She was part of a team of direct service professionals who were themselves from many of the same local neighborhoods as the students. Lisette-Michelle taught using her knowledge of youth development, always seeing kids from a strengths-based perspective.

But according to Lisette-Michelle, the agency was totally disingenuous in its purported interest in New York City youth. It was at its core a research and policy institution, not an activist institution—yet it used several poorly resourced add-on youth-focused direct service programs to maintain its “street credibility” with funders and big name donors. Subsequently, those same funding priorities guided the youth programming rather than the actual needs of local youth. All of the supervisors of these direct service staff of color were white, as were the organization's middle managers, executives, and external-facing staff. In fact, the hierarchy also became increasingly more male as one ascended the career ladder, fitting Jones' (2005) characterization of plantation-like organizational models. The result was that knowledgeable staff people were not consulted as new programs were rapidly being conceived based upon funders' interests. The dynamic was one where those who held decision-making power over programming were the ones that knew the least about constituents, with no obligation to listen to those

who knew the most. Lisette-Michelle felt that she and her colleagues of color had little freedom to use their cultural knowledge at work. Her own teaching practices were often disapproved of, and placed in her in a defensive position against the agency's desire to have participating youth be involved in multiple pilot initiatives certain to engender positive publicity and impress donors. As a transformative educator whose intention was to work on terms that benefited youth, the dynamic between Lisette-Michelle and her employer was constantly one of "push and pull." She believed her work was only valued when it suited the organization, and that her true expertise was underutilized. This again, was a function of a plantation workplace dynamic (Jones, 2005). The consequence was that Lisette-Michelle felt altogether castrated from doing her best work with youth out in the open, and reported that other staff of color felt the same way. She remained committed to doing what she knew how to do with students in her classroom, but the structure of the teaching environment impeded her ability to do the work efficiently.

With discerning insight onto how power and opportunities were unevenly distributed across her institution in these ways, Lisette-Michelle also observed the pattern that newer staff with white racial identity and Ivy League degrees tended to fast-track directly into senior level roles faster than veteran staff of color. White colleagues appeared to receive entrée into an informal network that ate lunch together, and met behind closed doors where important decisions were made. The agency continually selected external hires who lacked community-driven experience, instead of promoting from within. The resulting disconnect between what direct service staff of color knew about their constituents of color, and the directives they received from white men and women supervisors, was a constant source of workplace friction. Lisette-Michelle

described how this process would happen:

They're hiring people that don't understand the neighborhoods, don't understand the people, don't understand anything... who aren't connected to the demographics that you're actually serving. Someone can look awesome on paper and they have all these skills that make your eyes light up and you feel so great because you are like, "Oh my goodness, I can use them for this." Somewhere in the process of them getting hired and actually doing the work, the hiring committee forgets about the skills they have to bring.

Over time, Lisette-Michelle also observed how white supervisors' racial privilege sometimes insulated them from having to demonstrate some basic competencies on the job. For example, she was routinely called upon to compensate for various supervisors' inability to connect with the students, and was asked to interpret for them, broker arrangements, and mediate conflicts. Although aware that doing so cast her in the classic "overseer" plantation role, Lisette-Michelle flipped this around to work to her students' advantage. Rather than vocalize her displeasure and risk being removed from direct student contact, she turned it into an opportunity to enjoy more uninterrupted, non-micromanaged time with them. She allowed the institution to believe it had in her an on-call disciplinarian, when in fact she became the students' advisor and advocate—in addition to their teacher:

You have these people who never grew up in New York, have no idea how New York runs or flows or dynamics of neighborhoods. They go in for like a couple of hours and then they hop on the path or they hop on these other trains and end up

in all these areas where the kids aren't. Explain to me how do you understand [kids' lives]? But yet still, these are the ones who are making decisions. These are the ones who are setting the criteria of what the program is supposed to be and how quickly the turnaround needs to be. Honestly, if I'm running the program, I know what's enough time to address issues. I tell them, "no, this is not enough time. You need to allow me enough time in order to adjust this. When you go into agreement with a partner make sure that they understand, stop trying to fit into this timeline because you think, "oh this will make sure that I get the money." Stop fitting it to the time because I feel like it's discrediting the work because now you're just forcing students; it's not real.

Here, Lisette-Michelle simply capitalized on her own supervisor's apparent lack of interest in having direct proximity to the youth, as well as his fears of confronting them on disciplinary matters. She assumed access to programmatic resources to engage students in all the ways her supervisors were unwilling and unable to do. Although with each successive programmatic victory, her supervisors took credit for her successes, the program survived another year of budget cuts from high media accolades and praise from funders. Lisette-Michelle focused her attention on the work, mostly concerned with helping her students thrive and accomplish their personal goals. She was without much formal institutional power, and so wielded her considerable influence in the classroom using this strengths-based knowledge of youth development informed by her lived experience.

In Tarsha's case, her preservice journey had early on foreshadowed future encounters with institutional power she would later have as a teacher of record. Years

before acquiring the senior teacher position at the community agency she had at the time of this study, Tarsha started off as an undergraduate who had switched to education after having been dropped by the computer science department of her small liberal arts college (described in Chapter 4). That first brush with faculty gatekeeping had served as a harsh introduction to institutional power. She later faced her second major encounter with such power during student teaching, when a conflict arose between Tarsha and her cooperating teacher over a Black History Month assignment. But this time, having dealt with it previously with the computer science department chair, she was now consciously aware of the presence of racism and patriarchy in educational spaces, and was better prepared:

I had dealt with some of the tensions around what it means to be a quasi-conscious educator in a space where that is not necessarily even understood, much less valued. The cooperating teacher... when I was doing my student teaching, she said, "why don't you do the black history month bulletin board?" Then being told that I was dividing the community in her class because of some of the instruction I was providing. But you told me to do a unit on black history...now that I'm doing it, you have a problem with what I'm presenting? I think having this as an undergrad and really beginning to understand privilege on that level helped me understand a lot to start with. Those sorts of encounters...those certainly prepared me [for future teaching] to some degree.

The cooperating teacher had made a request of Tarsha to create an assignment infused with racial subject matter, but then completely revoked it when she became

personally uncomfortable. Tarsha did not see this incident as caused merely by “creative differences.” She believed instead that she was being held captive to the subjective comfort of her white supervisor, who represented the institutional power structure, and that her success in this classroom (and course grade) would be measured by the extent to which she could erase the student, herself, and the teacher into nonracial beings.

Distinguishing her racial identity by explicitly incorporating themes of racial difference into the curriculum, even when asked to do so, as in this case, could not be done if she wanted to keep the peace. The implicit message was to maintain the status quo. This was to be a “colorblind” classroom.

Tarsha’s experience illustrated the kinds of choices teachers of color often have to make while at work in predominately white institutions. In order to keep the peace (and her position), she felt she needed to prioritize keeping her mentor teacher comfortable and unthreatened, despite any loss of value to the curriculum or students’ experiences. Tarsha also referenced this when talking with her African American faculty advisor in Chapter 4, when she described having to “leave one’s identity at the door” as a teacher of color, or risk being cast as a troublemaker. Veracini (2011) calls this the “contradictory cacophony” of colonized settings, where institutions redefine moment-by-moment the preferred amount of erasure, displacement, or invisibility allowed to the colonized. For example, “you—work for me while we wait for you to disappear” (p.2). While it is not made clear to what extent the colonized need to disappear, it is clear they cannot *actually* disappear because their labor is still needed.

This persistent power dynamic was not unique to schools, however. Tarsha would continue to experience similar conflict while working for the community agency in which

she held employment at the time of this study. Once the new agency leadership began moving toward increased exclusivity in admissions for students through more outcomes-driven practices, she began to vocalize her criticism:

In an organization that served predominantly black and Latino children ... the kind of supports that they need were being eroded. There was now this emphasis only on results, outcomes, without any consideration for context and process. It began to really feel like... for me as someone who was one of those students...I'd very much identified with my own students having been a New York City public school student myself... it got to the point where certain things occurred that I felt like if I continued I would be complicit in racist dealings with my kids.

From Tarsha's perspective, students legitimately needed the supplemental academic supports that their local schools did not provide, making it an important responsibility to offer enough high quality enrichment experiences to serve as many students as possible. Her courage to contest the rollback of services came from having walked in her students' shoes, but her professional experience had also shown her that having a singular focus on quantitative outcomes could corrupt the very social good it intends to promote (Campbell, 1976; Joyce, Harrison, & Murphy, 2016; Royal & Gibson, 2017). Moreover, an uneven focus on standardization and accountability minimized class time left for sociopolitical topics in curriculum and watered down culturally relevant pedagogies to sound bites. But she found herself powerless to change the turning tide, and began to question whether staying on was giving tacit approval to the organization's practices.

Tarsha asked herself on many occasions: at what point does the advocate herself now become complicit? Ultimately, she decided to resign her position in order to find a job more congruent with her personal values, but also to get ahead of any action to push her out.

Perhaps more than for any other participant, Shimitra's teaching environment was a combustible dynamic between students, staff, and New York City police, the Department of Corrections, and criminal courts. A social worker by training, she taught at an alternative to incarceration program designed to decrease the incarceration rates of youthful offenders through a rigorous mediation process. Unlike some of her counterparts in this study, Shimitra never had to argue the existence of systemic racism in the New York City criminal justice to her immediate colleagues. However, like Tarsha, Shimitra still struggled with inner conflict over working in partnership with police, prosecutors, and prisons—all systems she believed were inherently corrupted:

...all underneath it is an inherently unjust and unfair corrupt system, which makes our choices very limited. Just trying to think about the next day, literally twenty-four hours, wondering, what's going to be the next struggle? I work in a fucked up place—I don't care how beautiful it is or what its intentions are. It's really fucked up. We're playing nice with people who are really corrupt and who don't even realize how corrupt they are because they're part of the institution that's just built to fail everyone: the whole criminal justice system. We're this like in this weird middle place, because we're tools for people who have these dreams of ending mass

incarceration, or dreams of victims having a voice, and power when otherwise they wouldn't— but then we also send people to jail. Law enforcement—me having to use it, then turn around and fight it, which is hard.

Shimitra cited pervasive corruption in the network of New York City criminal justice institutions, and described the people inside of them as “caught up” in perpetuating the machines—perhaps unwittingly, or at least, unconsciously. Familiar with being caught between a rock and a hard place as just another middle manager inside the massive prison industrial complex, she constantly straddled a fine line between being liberatory and oppressive. This is the classic dilemma of an “overseer,” or person in a buffer position between plantation leadership and front line workers to manage operations according to the preferences of the leadership.

Reading the oppression in her workplace was stressful, but Shimitra’s understanding of the institutional megapower in which she worked appeared to give her an unfiltered insight into the costs to the conscience and integrity of the people within it. In her years of experience working alongside youth enmeshed between courts and prisons, Shimitra had learned not to ignore her own culpability. She was always honest with herself about how embedded institutional oppressions are near impossible not to reproduce, even with all of her critical awareness. She certainly struggled to fairly wield what institutional power she did possess over the youth when seeking to get things done, or benefit her own position, appearing to genuinely desire to prevent perpetuating that very oppression she railed so hard against. In fact, she was acutely aware of the colonizing uses of social workers in particular as instruments of population control

historically under the guise of providing charity in the United States (Coates & Hetherington, 2016; Dominelli & Campling, 2002).

Some people have very different feelings about social workers...people know that a lot of [social work] came out of racist practices, going into poor people's homes and telling them what to do.... I can experience that, know that, and know that that's a facet of it or at least a part of its inception, but also that so many of us just give a damn about people having their voices heard, and having their own power even if it's still on a plantation, executing it however they see fit in order to bring about change.

Cognizant of those contradictions inherent in her profession, Shimitra insisted that she tried to teach subversively using a justice framework. Similar to Amelia's concerns about participating in the U.S. Peace Corps because of its ties to U.S. global imperialism, Shimitra remained conscious of the abuses of poor families by social workers who exploited the intimate access given to people's private lives. Despite knowing she was sometimes still perceived by students as a tool of the carceral state, Shimitra tried to be a change agent regardless of these associations.

The descriptions related here by Amelia, Tarsha, Lisette-Michelle, and Shimitra about working inside of large, complex institutional systems depict environments that cause them to feel fragmented. They described being caught between heightened awareness of the power dynamic in the institution, while also struggling with feelings of powerlessness in the face of the institution's sheer enormity. Certainly, understanding the inner workings of power particular to their organizations enabled them to better navigate

in support of students more effectively, and definitely informed their chosen strategies for responding. Still, in every example, there was a cost of safety and security, one commonly experienced by black women, as they faced gendered racism intertwined with institutional racism.

In the following sections, I share examples where some teachers chose to engage even from their tenuous locations to interrupt cycles of harm directed at themselves or students. This was when institutional power found itself challenged or tested by a lone individual—the “structure versus agency” binary which can play out in any real world of work—in these cases with an educational environment acting as the collision course.

Interrupting The Everyday Colonization Behind Institutional Norms

When the might of an entrenched institution meets the agency of an engaged transformative educator, there is inevitable friction. Despite some of the obvious professional risks, the educators in this study described many instances of interrupting plantation-like workplace behaviors that seemed particularly intended to assert institutional dominance.

Teachers did not always conform their activities to their job descriptions. For many African Americans, distrust of institutions is based on actual harm done historically in the domains of medicine, housing, banking and education (Hill-Collins, 2000). My participants likewise experienced silencing and isolation on the way to their inevitable push-out for behaviors that went contrary to institutional norms. Smith & Freyd’s (2014) work describes this phenomenon as institutional betrayal—first, the trauma of the institutional harm, and second, the invalidation or denial of that harm. Tarsha reported

that when her agency's efforts to push her into silence concerning institutional impropriety failed, for example, the leadership tried to contain her by policing her body language:

I was direct, I was straightforward, I was honest. ... if I brought up a particular issue in a staff meeting it became really apparent that I have become the villain or the naysayer...nobody really wanted my input and so they seemed to be quite content with me being quiet. Then if I'm just reasoning a point, people might appreciate it in the moment, but it never really seemed to be appreciated for what it was. I got the feeling that it was taken as me being the naysayer. Everyone's giving me the nod, "yeah, that's true, that's true, that's true...." But absolutely nothing was said after. Literal silence. If there was anything critical that I had to say— "critical" meaning, just critically analyzing a situation—it would often stop the room cold. Then I actually had the CEO of the company tell me some ridiculousness: 'you don't always look like you're happy, you need to smile' ... that I need to smile more in staff meetings specifically. She literally told me to fake it because [she] doesn't give a shit if I believe in what she's doing, [she] just wants me to look like I do, for everybody else. You don't care because you're going to continue to do what you want to do. I mean...that talked about who I am as a black woman, the intersection of the two. For a white woman demanding of a black woman that I smile in staff

meetings... framing it in the sense of the senior person doing that... it's really important because that set the tone.

Here were two tactics: an organizational inaction (ignoring Tarsha's complaint) and an organizational action (telling Tarsha to smile), each seeming to assert the dominance of institutional will over individual agency. Tarsha read both events as tacit commands from the institution to thwart any democratic process or dissent. From her perspective, the refusal to engage in any discussion of an organizational response to a serious issue, and then to be asked to "perform" cooperation, were two examples of the institution deciding what was of legitimate importance in its space. Although technically her job duties did not entail any of these activities, as a transformative educator, her focus was always on students and the well-being of the school community as a whole.

Like Tarsha, Mariana relied on her voice as one important mechanism for mediating the hegemony perpetuated by institutions, and did not limit her critical gaze to her own institution. For example, she knew that one important function of government is to rely on population sorting practices to organize large groups into categories as a means of maintaining political and economic control over access to information or resources. She had personally participated in census-taking during her prior career, and had helped sort urban residents into racial, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, linguistic, and citizenship categories. Once she became an educator at a New York City public community college, one of the ways she sought to thwart efforts to colonize in that space was to remind students of their rights to refuse to self-categorize. In an effort to be a living demonstration of how to embrace one's own intersectionality, Mariana would not allow anyone to categorize her either as black or Latina—she loudly proclaimed both: Afro

Latina. Her purpose in doing so was to reject the notion that complexity in one's identity is problematic and that assimilation has to be a goal. She desired that her multiethnic, largely immigrant student populations understood that it was legitimate to "unbox" oneself and place their intersectional lives upfront if they chose:

Okay. As a young [instructor] of color, Afro-Latina...my students are like, "what the fuck is that? What do you mean? You're black. What is Afro-Latina?" Because it's not addressed in their book but I talk about racial categories in the U.S. because a lot of my students are immigrant students and they have no idea what they're categorized as. I don't put people in boxes... I study the census and I also understand what that means in terms of policy. It's important to understand the racial and ethnic categories you're classified by. I'm also from the urban communities they're [students] from, I grew up in the [New York City] housing projects and I make sure to bring that into my classroom. The jewelry that I wear, my makeup, for the women... it's to show them like you don't have to give up a sense of who you are to make it in whatever field you want. Sometimes I'll use Ebonics or I'll throw in some Spanish. And I use a lot of my personal stories. Speaking to some of my older colleagues they're like, "I never talk about my personal life." I do go into my personal story. My struggles, my mother was undocumented when she arrived here, or being on social services, or when we talk about tenant's rights. Like, I'll ask, how many of

you have woken up with no heat and hot water? Hopefully they can see themselves in me... and they can see that they can get to where they want to go and not necessarily...sell themselves out.

Mariana's explicit vocalization of feminism, her strategic blending of Ebonics and Spanish, the choice to disclose her childhood memories of poverty, and her adult activism were done to model the choice to "belong" in ways of her choosing rather than be defined by institutional norms. She could be "both—and" rather than "either—or." Even as many of the students were undocumented, Mariana—who understood their vulnerable positions firsthand—hoped they could become as comfortable with self-definitions as they had with institutional-societal ones. In this public community college teaching environment, she was aware of close institutional tracking and collection of student data linked to census and city/state government funding. Instructors like Mariana were required to participate in attendance taking and other tracking activities, but otherwise enjoyed great curricular and pedagogical freedom in their classrooms. She used every bit of this autonomy to speak unrestrained to students about what she perceived as their shared realities to benefit them as they moved through navigating U.S society.

Mariana never experienced pushback from the college for her approaches. In her case, any resistance or conflict came from her young adult students themselves. Like Lisette-Michelle, Mariana did not see her students as apathetic, but rather as disengaged from having been cheated of the chance to become fully actualized during their schooling. Instead of responding to student behaviors punitively, she tried often to engage in practices intended to instead remind those students of their own power. Oftentimes, this meant attempting to decolonize the transactional spaces between herself and the

students by simply offering them a different reality to consider. In this example, Mariana described offering her students the opportunity to consider a structural power analysis:

The institutionalized racism is kind of double edged because in the U.S. it's so subtle. Obama's black, everything's fine. Racism is over. So I have to grapple with that and I think it makes it difficult because I talk about racial issues and my students look at me like I'm looking for trouble. The fact that there is so much invisibilization of these things is my biggest problem because they don't want to believe it. They almost don't believe you or they don't know what you're talking about in a sense with the institutions that are invisible....

Students expressed dissent at Mariana's views by telling her she was "looking for trouble." Mariana believed that her students were reluctant to accept the possibility that oppression exists in the United States, because some of the critical questions they had posed in class about the "whys?" of the conditions of their lives might suggest that they were on to something—and this was too provocative an intrusion upon their lifelong belief in the American Dream. Mariana believed that their fears about trusting their critical intuition about the world around them were a function of their schooling, which had pushed their questioning minds onto the margins. So instead, she affirmed that they were, in fact, on to something. She wanted to use her time with students to debunk the notion that they were deficient, and that their feelings of disconnection in school had been their fault. Or, the lie that they had failed school—rather than that school had failed them. Mariana sought to press the "reset" button on how her students saw themselves in

the U.S. educational system, and reverse the effects of the lies they had internalized about themselves. Part of interrupting the low expectations that had been sewn into her students over time meant deconstructing the notion that there is a role to which students “belonged” and should stay relegated:

I feel like I'm being of service by helping them find out who they are, identifying that and sticking to it. Let them know that it's okay to be who you are and don't let anybody tell you anything different because everybody else will always tell you like, "oh no, this isn't it." Or, "You should be more like this." "No, you make things ... You move things around to fit you so that you stay true to who you are, you do what you need what you do, and you still get the results that you want to get depending on what you want to do." That's how I'm being of service is by helping them identify who they are. It's sticking to it and not let anybody tell you that there's something wrong with that.

At the same time, Mariana decolonizing the teaching space was her challenge to students to consider their own participation in perpetuating structural oppression at a micro level. Where they've been criminalized and objectified, othered, and where that has led to them reproducing it onto others. Teachers know this is a function of oppression. In this example, she interrupted patriarchy, where she was being objectified as a woman, and diminished professionally as qualified instructor of color. She decolonized by setting up a “brand new normal” for the room:

Last semester in my urban sociology course, which is 40 students, I walked in- I'm always 10, 15 minutes early. The first day in particular, that day I was running a little late, so I got there two minutes before the class so the class was already full. It was a really long classroom where the door was at one end and I had to walk to the other end. So I walk in and I'm like, "good morning everyone, I'll be your instructor." Somebody in the back of the room was like, "damn" [appraising her physical appearance]. I was like, "hell no." I had to stop in the middle of the classroom and that was a great opportunity. That very first day I usually warm them up that it ain't that type of party. That first day I was like, "no— it ain't happening. I'm not an object. That is not going to happen."

Mariana refused to let students miss the teachable moment: that as a dilemma of moving from colonization to decolonization, young men of color, while marginalized themselves, can still choose to or not to reproduce patriarchy and heteronormativity. In another example, Mariana interrupted a student—not to humiliate her, but again, to decolonize their shared space:

I had one student email me. She wanted an extension. On the subject line she wrote "hey G U U U R R R R L", like that. When I saw her I'm like, "would you have addressed a white faculty member in that way?" When I say those things, I don't want them to feel like I'm attacking them. I don't really think they're doing it on purpose. Then I call their attention and it's like, "she's so

radical, she's so nit-picky, you're so passionate."

Again, what can be seen here is that Mariana saw straight to the root cause of both exchanges. A teacher without a deeper perception might see students' actions as exclusively a function of immaturity, or a lack of understanding about respectful professional boundaries. While these could always be the case with youthful students, Mariana contextualizes these encounters firmly in the gendered racism that she, as a young, female instructor of color, is not automatically accorded the same professional respect as her white counterparts (Berry, 2004; Burden, Harrison & Hodge, 2005; Hobson-Horton & Cleveland, 2004). Mariana was aware of being "othered" even in her own classroom. So she did not shy away from shining the light of that truth back onto students to make them fully aware of their complicity in lifting up white male supremacy, marginalizing her as less than a "real" professor than others who represented authority they could better recognize. This was Mariana's effort to decolonize a norm she felt was harmful to both women and men, particularly for marginalized communities of color where economic access and social mobility in the United States are already limited by discrimination (Leonardo, 2012).

Some participants also described the ways in which they attempted to push back against the limited "teacher" trope. Aylisa, for example, had always wanted to experience schooling that was more participatory and devoid of the explicitly vertical *teacher-equals-expert* power relationships that undermined her own learning as a child in school. So she personally sought out a college experience that would be totally different from the schooling of her youth, choosing a well-known interdisciplinary New York City based program with hybrid and campus-based learning formats, and mostly unstructured core

curriculum requirements. As Aylisa gradually self-purged of traditional notions of teaching and learning, she adopted a teacher identity to reflect her belief that teachers were just a means to student learning, like any other tool or vehicle. In contrast to the banking model where learning flows downward in one direction (Freire, 1970) Aylisa attempted to redistribute power back to students as much as possible:

I don't feel like a teacher because of my experiences with teachers being, "I am the all-knowledgeable person in the room. Whatever I say, goes." Even when their behinds are wrong, incorrect, etc. That probably is what put me off from being a teacher at first. I feel that I'm a facilitator. Our children have to understand that they are contributors to knowledge, not just absorbing knowledge. What they have to say is important. They are just as integral to teaching as I am. That's how I feel. I am not the standard bearer ... "let me tell you all what I know."

For Aylisa, ridding herself of any misconceptions about schooling programmed into her from a lifetime of damaging experiences with former teachers meant rebuilding her definition of what a teacher could be from the ground up. As described in Chapter 4, her family had provided her with counter-narratives to the psychological fragmentation that so many students of color contend with as racially minoritized persons in U.S. schools. At least partially, that upbringing saved her from totally internalizing messaging of inferiority and lack of belongingness. Aylisa also credited her higher education for helping to bring self-awareness and healing to whatever vestiges of internalized oppression still remained after high school:

[in my classes] *I would reflect, and in my informal engagement, I would reflect like maybe I'm saying something wrong or doing something wrong...and even as I grew, even in the work place...like, am I crazy? Am I a crazy black woman? Am I angry?" Applying all of their [mainstream white society's] lenses to myself, unknowingly. Once [I matured] literally I was like "Oh, okay", that's what happened.*

Today, Aylisa manages the library in the basement level of the same children's museum where she serves as a youth programs educator. "I'm the executive level down here [basement level]," she said. "So people come down here to talk to me like, 'we *all* here on the plantation.' We've had people saying that, because there's a lot of trauma here." When other staff members of color routinely trekked down to her basement office to speak honestly about the racism they experienced in the environment, they often referenced the emotional toll of shouldering that institutional oppression on a daily basis (Smith & Freyd, 2014).

Aylisa, for her part, chose to interrupt the use of language to assert power used among some of her white colleagues at the children's museum in which they worked. She, like many of the other participants in this study, was attuned to those behaviors that blocked opportunities for authentic collegial relationships to form across boundaries of authority—and would not stand for them. Weis & Fine (2012) call her sensitive filter on the environment "critical bifocality"—the ability to connect everyday interactions, and the larger societal constructs that influence them. In this case, Aylisa perceived the power structures hiding behind language used by some colleagues as racism, patriarchy, and

social privilege:

It's clear to me that I'm a black woman at those times when I have to interact with people because of how they speak to me. There's multiple languages here. There's that language of entitlement that certain people have. It's white people, specifically males...for example, part of my job is managing the library. I manage this space. That's my spot, the library's my spot. If you need something about that space, or have a question about that space, who should the first person you come to be? [Me] but instead you go to someone else.

Aylisa gave this example of what she described as a commonplace occurrence of either ignoring or looking through black women even within their institutionally-sanctioned spaces of authority—most particularly done by the white men in her place of work. As the single and highest authority figurehead in her department, it would have been in keeping with standard organizational protocol to address Aylisa on matters pertaining to the museum library. Yet, Aylisa found herself being addressed second to her non-black colleagues, including the white women. To Aylisa, it was of critical importance to address patterns of overlooking other human beings and ignoring their professional authority in their own spaces on the basis of discomfort with race and gender. She frequently made the choice to interrupt longstanding patterns of condescension and disrespect that had become normalized as part of the way some colleagues in powerful positions engaged others in less powerful positions. In this example, the organization's new Finance Officer, a white man Aylisa had never even formally met, approached her

desk to inform her about an unspent grant award in Alysia's departmental budget:

I was sitting at the library desk, just there working and this man comes over to me, without introducing himself, without announcing himself, not even greeting or anything basically cordial...stands right over me and says "we don't send money back here at the [museum]." And I'm sitting down, but I stood up, I said "I don't know who you are, and I don't know who you think I am, but you will never ever approach me like that again. It's in your best interest to introduce yourself and then come to me respectfully and tell me what you need." He didn't talk to me for like two months. He would see me in the hallway and be like this [looking the other way]. We haven't had a problem since, though.

In both examples, someone demonstrated privilege by attempting to assert dominance over another through the indirect and direct use of language. But by using her own language, Aylisa temporarily inverted the power differential and equalized the space between them, setting up a new standard for engagement from that which had been customary. One can see that creating a "new normal" engendered some discomfort for her colleague, but to Aylisa, discomfort was an unavoidable part of decolonizing a colonized institutional environment.

Tarsha, too, was challenged to push back against institutional norms numerous times when her community-based agency was taken over by a new management company. As previously mentioned, this transition moved the organization to a top-down leadership model more reminiscent of a plantation structure with very vertical hierarchies

and stricter rules of engagement. Resignations and layoffs would soon follow, but one of the most significant changes was the loss of open dialogue once freely enjoyed even between staff. This change proved devastating when on November 2014, the St. Louis County (Missouri) grand jury failed to indict the police officer who fatally shot unarmed 18-year old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, sparking a week of protests and clashes between Ferguson citizens, their supporters from outside the area, and local police with their own supporters. Area law enforcement was widely criticized for use of excessive force, and the events of the week received worldwide press coverage. Tarsha knew the youth in her Harlem, New York afterschool program were disturbed both by the incident and the painfully polarizing public responses to a problem they experienced locally in New York City as well. Tarsha had expected to be able to respond to students openly in a manner consistent with what had previously had been the organization's standard practice. To her, Brown's death signaled the need for agency operations to temporarily stop in order to allow everyone to process. It felt hypocritical to blithely continue a relentless focus on college readiness activities and ignore a potentially triggering event in light of the police violence the students faced every day. While Tarsha never diminished the importance of college readiness, she felt that to ignore this traumatic event, and force staff and students to maintain "business as usual," was akin to malpractice:

When the Michael Brown situation happened, here I am, a staff person who's used to being able to say, "okay, how are we addressing this with the kids, what are we going to do?" ... to realize that they're not doing anything, nobody's even speaking

about it. I'm the only one that's looking around to see what's going to be done. Then further, when the non-indictment occurred, we had a new vice president now, a different guy... but again no response, no sorts of chirps from senior management. I'm looking around again trying to figure out how this is being dealt with. So I took it upon myself to go to my other program-director colleagues and say "We've got to do something! This just happened this afternoon, kids are coming in, they've heard this news." I'm sitting on my laptop listening to the news. The kids are talking about it. We have to say something to them. So I pulled something together just to say something. Don't ignore it.

To Tarsha, the agency's silence normalized the violent death of Michael Brown and reinforced the lie that his life did not matter. Students whose lives and circumstances placed them in proximity with police violence likely were only too aware that they could easily meet the same end as Brown. Therefore, Tarsha feared her students could internalize the lie that their lives and safety did not matter, either, if some intervention was not undertaken by the agency. In this critical moment, an engaged pedagogy collided with an institutional practice of *disengagement* from the politics of students' lives. Tarsha explained her rationale:

We needed to talk about our students getting stopped and frisked. We had a staff person who got stopped and frisked and we didn't have an appropriate response to that. What does that mean for our kids? How can we not have those conversations with our kids? We

need to talk about the fact that this happens to our kids, this is the violence of everyday life, and let them know and help them sort through that.

Tarsha was on her own fighting to interrupt her agency's practice of ignoring the structural violence occurring in students' lives and using institutional power in ways that reproduced that oppression in the school. Initially under the new regime, Tarsha simply continued with the customary agency practice of openly discussing current politics that affected students, and presumably the work at hand. She soon discovered, however, that the new leadership was interested in drawing stark lines between in-school practices and events occurring in the students' lives. As a transformative educator, Tarsha regarded this as an attempt to conduct business as usual in the face of violence, and as such, that choice represented *more* violence. In keeping with her commitment to respect the realities of her students' lives, she attempted to interrupt the institution's attempt to assert power over communications. However, she as one lone individual was no match for an institution. She told the story here of a young black male coworker, who also happened to be a very recent alumni of the agency's program, and his traumatic street encounter, which was also met with silence from the organization's new leadership:

He was on his way to a conference...in a cardigan, a button-down [dress shirt] and a tie, and apparently he gets told to come off the train by a police officer. He basically is stopped and frisked. He's detained so he's late to this conference. He's like, "they asked for me to get off the train, I tell them I'm on my way to work, I'm off to a conference." They held him up because they wanted to search him or whatever the case may be, and they were like, "well, I've got to wait for my

sergeant to get here.” And they put him in a squad car until the sergeant got there. Meanwhile, this is a young black man in a shirt and tie on his way to work, sitting in the back of the squad car, set and appearing to look like some sort of criminal because they don't, for whatever reasons they don't want to run his ID or whatever the case may be.

The young man, devastated and demoralized, returned to the agency, his workplace, traumatized, having missed the conference. Tarsha described the reaction:

He comes back to work and he tells us about this story, and there are a number of us who are sitting around the table absolutely appalled. In the process of that, the same way that we would have had a conversation about what this meant for him and what it means for our kids and why the work we do is important and how we engage these kinds of issues into the work, under new leadership, the new executive director is a white woman, there was no language from her any way around how ... it's like that pitiful, “oh my God, I'm so sorry it happened to you.” I remember myself talking about how that's relevant to the work that we do. Being looked at ... while I talked about it. I talked about just being able to have him share that experience with our kids and getting kids to be able to write, because they've gone through it, and being able to have those conversations be still a part of the work we do. In that moment, with a room full of every staff person, there is absolute silence. While they may appear to be nods of affirmation, the conversation went absolutely nowhere when I made the statement. It was like “oh, you made really good points,” but it wasn't engaged. That goes back to what I was saying about the shift, starting with staff. We couldn't even talk about our

experiences where these things were concerned anymore, why would we be expected to have them with the kids? That's where that feeling was now translating into practice.

The executive director's response of "I'm so sorry that happened to you" was emblematic of larger society's treatment of police brutality as an aberrance among individual police, rather than an insidious manifestation of systemic racism. Tarsha felt that the young man's case was a model example in that he was dressed and behaving "professionally," but went unprotected by his clothing because he was still young, black, and male. The incident was both about the victimization of an individual black man and the racist violence that pervaded New York City streets at the hands of police.

Tarsha demonstrated how turning a blind eye was effectively that same violence, now reverberating back in her teaching environment. There was no acknowledgement that the stop-and-frisk was more than just some unfortunate incident. Under the new leadership, teachers were divested of decision-making power, so there was no response required nor given to Tarsha's suggestion that there be some kind of organized response for their students affected by police brutality in New York City every day. In this way, oppression was reproduced despite Tarsha's attempt to interrupt it. The illustration brings to mind the summation made by another participant, Aylisa, who said, "*People don't want to hear about black people's pain...that's the thing...when your pain is normalized, you think it's regular.*" Because of Tarsha's grasp of how racial formations can be made to seem normal and natural (Omi & Winant, 2015) when taken for granted in these ways, her responsibility as a transformative educator was to interrupt the normalization of that process, whether the incident had occurred in the workplace or not.

Despite feeling alone, Tarsha proved that she was not powerless. Bolstered by the confidence that her actions to garner attention to police violence and a staff member's harassment were both right *and* necessary, she was undeterred. After some time she had become a lead teacher and gained some authority to institutionalize decolonizing pedagogies in another way. She began using her power as gatekeeper to screen new teacher candidates. Sifting out prospective teachers who could potentially impart dangerous, colonizing beliefs onto children became part of Tarsha's own distinctively decolonizing practice. This began with the in-person interview:

One of the things that I did when I hired teachers was I asked them to bring with them an educational philosophy statement. Because I wanted to hear what their views on teaching and learning were about. I'm looking for catchphrases and buzzwords that potentially could mark points of harm for kids. Where you start using a lot of "underprivileged," "disadvantaged," where the language sounds like they're doing messianic work. When they tout that as the things that make them worthy of this job—"I've worked with students in disadvantaged, rough neighborhoods before" or "I've worked with underprivileged children...." When that is the focus of what they're talking about, as opposed to how they've done the work, and how they have related to young people, and the kinds of really critical thinking that they have promoted with their work, those tend to be flags. My decisions around choosing teachers who were not going to do damage, choosing curriculum that was going to engage them

intellectually and culturally and socially.... All of those things mattered to me. Suddenly I was impacting kids in a very different way. It wasn't just me in a classroom of 25, 30 kids anymore. It was me managing a program that was impacting over 150 kids a year.

Tarsha used the teaching philosophy as a screening tool to discern candidates' critical awareness even before they set foot in the classrooms she supervised. Her ability to detect the soft language of paternalism was fine-tuned. Because she was aware of the power adult teachers wielded over marginalized children and their futures, she used her own to select only those with the potential to be youth-affirming and empowering in their practices.

Finally, to Lisette-Michelle, dismantling institutional norms included the decolonizing action of nurturing work relationships with colleagues and external partners. Part of her practice was to circulate among the cubicles each morning to share treats, make random "just-called-to-say-hello" phone calls to agency partners, take frequent breaks to speak with old colleagues, and get to know her new ones over long lunches. These were the same practices she used with students. She simply regarded good relations as the fuel that kept the engines of the work running and insisted on taking her time to keep work relationships alive. Doing so also happened to help facilitate her work, which happened benefit the organization. Unfortunately for her, this went in direct opposition to the normed, hierarchal culture of her agency and totally undercut her institution's power to control her body at work. And inevitably, it caused friction between Lisette-Michelle and her supervisors.

Just like how they always say, "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar." I have the right to remove myself from my desk to go and talk to other people that work here. There's a level of integrity that I have that I'm not going to compromise even though [supervisors] try to control me. It goes back to even how you teach the kids. It's beginning, end point, whereas there's all these different things that's moving in the middle that you have to pay attention to because it can either make the end point come quicker, or make it longer. By bringing that into it, it helps a whole lot because it gives you a different result versus something else.

So regardless of the risks, she kept interrupting unwritten rules that sorted and separated colleagues, believing that people mattered, and so did the relationships between them. For Lisette-Michelle, being a genial colleague was part of her personal ethos, but it was also a part of her professional ethos. People were to be related *to* and *with*, rather than used as a means to an end whenever a need arose. This was a completely decolonizing concept. This work style is described as “polychronic” or “high-context,” one which is more inclined to prioritize communication and value connection, something research suggests is an important component of life satisfaction of U.S. employees (De Bruin & Barber, 2019; Gray, 2019; Hall, 1959, 1960, 1984) and, believed to be a cultural-relational style in many communities of color. But workplace professionalism norms in the United States are not necessarily known to be congruent with the cultural-relational ways of communities of color.

In this section, I described the range of ways participants chose to use their own

positionality with their institutions—however fragile—to navigate oppressive tactics and negative manifestations of institutional power. Here, participants exemplified the distinction between being an *activist* transformative educator and any other kind of educator. In the next section, I describe those teaching environments which actually created opportunities for transformative practices among the school community.

Cultivating a Diverse Community of Intellectuals and Scholars

Coloniality may show up in curriculum “by translating the world into a version without ambiguities or unpleasant truths, by keeping the focus on homogeneity of experiences. In this way, texts get emptied of all political content, and we are left with the “experiences” and “feelings” of individuals characters to find “universal truths,” “convenient abstractions which obscure the specific social basis of their own thought” (Mukherjee, 1986, p. 56). Part of interrupting colonizing institutional norms, then, can be to create safe, inclusive settings to counteract older, homogenizing norms of understanding texts. Instead, students could feel safe bringing their cultural knowledge and different forms of meaning making into their classrooms. As seen with Mariana’s students, some traditionally educated students might actually experience some dissonance the first time their knowledge and experiences are validated by a teacher in a classroom setting. By interpreting any reticence to engage as a natural part of decolonization rather than some inherent apathy on the students’ part, teachers can potentially interrupt decades of negative belief patterns created by colonizing school classrooms. Like Mariana, Amelia attempted to create such an environment by thinking expansively about what constituted deeper learning (Philip, 2011):

Right away, they need books that they can really identify with because they've been so let down by classroom before, by English classrooms before. They've been so let down by books that not only don't speak to them but actually actively hurt them. That do damage to their identity. I didn't want to do that. I was really, really intentional about the books that I chose. At the same time, I couldn't help but gravitate toward books that also spoke to my experience, too.

Because Amelia believed that her students' very existence was political, she used what power was imbued her by the institution as a gatekeeper to privilege student perspectives, helping acclimate them to speaking about the politics of their own lives. She tried to be totally responsive to students with her curricular choices, a rare privilege teachers enjoyed in her alternative transfer high school. In Amelia's classroom, she favored novels, essays, poetry, and political manifestos that were unabashedly political and responsive to student's interests:

I found this book...Molefi Kefi Asante... and my students and I talked about Afrocentricity. I saw something in their faces that I never saw when we were reading classical short stories like Ray Bradbury's 'All Summer and a Day.' I think of a successful student as someone who can think critically about the world around them and can look at a text...and by text I do not necessarily mean book or story. A text is like a painting or a film or a conversation, right? Any sort of interaction with the world,

can they think critically about that? Can they form their own opinions? Are they not just regurgitating information, and can they make connections to what they are seeing and their own experience in the world... or can they make connections to what they are seeing and something else that they have experienced? I think that a successful student is passionate about what they are experiencing...it's real learning.

Amelia's broadening of her own landscape in order to meet her students, rather than forcing them to shrink to meet hers— was institutional decolonization at work.

Similarly, Aylisa interrupted patterns of colonization by rejecting the continued sorting of students by ability or test scores. She believed in the value of multiple literacies and refused to privilege any one modality, especially if it categorized students unnecessarily. And, like Amelia, she enjoyed the freedom to do this specifically because she taught in an alternative setting:

In teaching them that language goes beyond words on a page, it's about multiple literacies. Not having ever been taught that way before, I'm like, "Okay, we're going to deconstruct these poems, but we're also going to watch this music video, and we're going to deconstruct that, too." Then I'm going to show you a picture of Jay-Z and we're going to deconstruct his hidden curriculum." They get so much more, so and their papers wind up being so much better. It's about broadening their critical and analytical thinking process and that you as someone [student] do have input.

In this example, Aylisa spoke directly to the larger historical problem of white, middle-class criterion and norm-referenced standardized assessments used as proxies for intelligence and aptitude in the U.S. (Aguirre, Mayfield-Ingram & Martin, 2013; Drew, 1973; Reilly, 1991). Diagnostic research and educational discourse have historically been steeped in deficit language to the detriment of nearly every category of child: youth of color, poor youth, children with disabilities, rural youth, military youth, immigrant children, LGBTQ youth, and English language learners. Aylisa utilized what institutional power she could wield to replace assessments with culturally relevant, student-centered curricula that gave students opportunities for project-based learning.

Both Amelia and Aylisa rejected the homogenization of students that schools and other educational institutions are notorious for trying to achieve. Inside of her classroom, Aylisa intentionally chose assessment tools that would accurately depict her students' strengths. This was made possible for them by the relative flexibility and autonomy allowed in their classrooms over curricular choices and pacing of material. Amelia and Aylisa's institutions arguably have the most freedom for educators and students in the sample.

In some of the settings, teachers were regarded as instructional experts and thought leaders who drove curriculum and instruction. As discussed earlier, Amelia's transfer high school structured its own internal governance. Leadership set a precedent for this, and how it treated the faculty was no exception:

We have professional development meetings in which we just sit in circles and say okay, 'what is the meaning of being a successful teacher?' Well, sometimes we have a designated person from each department, English, science, social studies

whatever. Go to the meetings with the principal and vice principal every other week and we say, 'this is what we want our PD sessions to be about, right.?' Sometimes certain issues take priority of course, right, for instance if there is a parents' meeting coming up, and they need to talk about that. Things take priority but essentially it is understood that it is everyone's job to decide what our PD session should be about. We go in there and we tell our department member representative that this is what we want to do and then we will craft the next few PDs based on that. Then our PDs, sometimes a lot of it has to do with pedagogy, and I think that it is so necessary. I do not understand how other professional developments do not touch on that, not touch on what are you teaching in the classroom and how do you teach it, and how do you think you could be better at teaching, right, because otherwise we are just going through the motions.

Amelia was complimentary of her school's professional development because topics were teacher-driven. But what was of greater significance here was the respect shown for teachers' intellectuality. What this scenario indicated was that teachers were trusted as legitimate intellectual leaders. That *whatever* the questions were, they could be asked. The professional learning made room for all kinds of philosophical and critical inquiry. Teachers could ask their questions on the school's time, rather than have to pursue their work-related inquiries outside of work.

On the matter of curriculum, as with most transfer high schools, Amelia's students were not subjected to the same state testing and curriculum requirements as required by traditional public high schools in New York State. Many transfer high schools in New York City currently use portfolio performance-based assessments, and

Amelia's school took the additional step of allowing teachers to write curricula in response to student interests. Even new teachers like Amelia were allowed to create within the structure of a state-tested subject (in her case ELA, English Language Arts).

I have a lot of freedom in the classroom. I came I and I said, "Is there a curriculum that you want me to work from?" He said, "well, yeah, but did you want to create your own curriculum?" I said, "could I?" Could I do that?" They said, "sure. Just let us know what you're interested in teaching." The first day of orientation, teacher orientation, I said, "I really love graphic novels. I love them. Graphic novel learning, and so if there's any possibility?" That semester, they put me on the rosters with graphic novels teacher. I'm teaching a class called Graphic Novels 101. It can be stressful because sometimes when a lesson doesn't go well, I think, am I a failure? Am I a good teacher? I come back the next day and I'm nurtured by my colleagues. I think that when I go in to school in the morning, people aren't expecting me to be perfect. People actually give me feedback. "You're doing a good job. Keep doing what you're doing."

Teachers at Amelia's school were able to select texts and course materials that they themselves were passionate about. What this meant for her as a new teacher was that she had to take responsibility for being an intellectual leader and make a contribution to the school learning community. Amelia did not have to leave all of the creativity and enthusiasm she had in graduate school at the door. The structure of her teaching environment was one that freed, rather than inhibited, teachers' and students' learning and development. Further, teachers were encouraged to study one another as in-house experts:

We have three days of professional development for teachers, which I hear is a lot [as compared to other schools]. But I need time with my colleagues to see how other people are teaching, to get an idea of practice. We encourage visiting other teacher's classrooms to see how they teach. We just had a week of that. Sometimes it's informal. This was formal. [Leadership] was just like, "okay, now, we're going to take this week and I want everybody to visit someone else's classroom. Take notes." So we did that.

It is important to note here Amelia's expectant attitude when proclaiming her need to learn from more experienced others, and more importantly, that this outlook is only encouraged by her environment.

Aylisa's teaching environment was a popular museum, where she served as the managing educator of after school and weekend enrichment programs for school-aged youth. Her teaching practice consisted of deconstructing the idea that knowledge is owned by anyone, and that only some reserved the right to teach. As a lifelong learner, she had constantly questioned who set those standards, based upon what, and who got to critique that? Education for Aylisa had never been bounded. For example, it felt important for her to acknowledge that her primary teachers were actually the elder members of her family, many of whom were never formally educated, and that in many respects she had acted as her own best teacher when faced with her school's limitations. As a result, she felt in no way beholden to being certified as a "real teacher" in order to teach. Likewise, she hired her teaching staff accordingly. Aylisa had long ago reframed the definition of what made someone an arbiter of knowledge, or what qualified them to teach.

Fortunately, there was no tug-of-war between Aylisa's teaching practices and the climate of her educational setting. At the museum, she enjoyed complete curricular and pedagogical autonomy as long as she and her teaching staff worked within programmatic goals. These aims tended to be guided by city and state funding priorities. Aylisa was therefore required to track students' progress, but with assessments of her choosing, and opted to use multiple measures, including tools usually used for talented and gifted programs. "There are multiple intelligences," she said, "and they are all valuable." So she did not rely only on those tools that privileged mathematics and English Language Arts. And, she had freedom to do this because she worked an alternative context.

Aylisa used multiple modalities to teach her writing and social studies courses and hired a diversity of educators. She made a distinction between those who purposely opted out of K-12 but still chose to teach, and those who chose K-12 teaching.

Everyone here isn't a formal educator because they wanted to be an informal educator. We've been having side conversations about that. There are people who applied to teaching programs, got into teaching programs and left. They're like, "I'm not doing this." I know a lot of our educators here, part-time and full-time, are informal educators elsewhere. One of our culture educators, she teaches theater at the program that my daughter's in on Saturdays. They do other things, and a lot of people here, even folks who are full-time, are artists and musicians.

The types of educators that were invited in brought diversity in skills and talents, and were still considered teachers regardless of possessing a state certification. Their various expertises were desired and celebrated. Here we have an example of the decolonization of the notion of what constitutes an "authentic" or qualified educator. This teaching

environment elevated multiple forms of knowledge and expertise, making room for all sorts of learning opportunities to take shape for the entire school community.

Amelia, a black woman and transformative educator concerned about the universality of oppression, was sensitive to all forms of tyranny and exclusion—even if not about black people specifically. Thus she cared if anyone excluded another, and was concerned about cultural and political misrepresentation. She spoke here with pride about the rich diversity of the people who made up her school community:

The principal's a white man. He's gay, and out. He's Israeli and he's open to talking about it rather than saying Palestinians are just terrorists. Anyway, it's clear, and they've all been working there a long time. The Assistant Principal's worked there for 18 years and he got his GED. Some teachers went to transfer high schools themselves. There are a lot of teachers of color who work there, black and Latino. I don't know. I got lucky.

Amelia intentionally sought out a teaching environment that was the right fit for her transformative practice. In order to feel welcomed there, she needed to see that a diversity of identities, backgrounds, and viewpoints could also be welcomed. Particularly in the case of the building leaders, she wanted to know that they could embrace varied viewpoints and not exclude differing perspectives. A particular advantage at this school was that there were faculty and staff who also shared the transfer high school experience with the students.

In sum, Amelia and Aylisa are both transformative educators who happened each to work in supportive teaching environments that fostered transformative practices. They represented two institutional systems that, while imperfect, managed to be porous and

malleable. Neither was a traditional public school, and from this sample of alternative environments, these two institutions were the least restrictive. Despite this, both Amelia and Aylisa still sometimes found themselves on the defensive against microaggressions when gendered racism reared its ugly head.

This chapter addressed the second research question: *How do black women educators in alternative educational settings understand and describe the conditions and constraints of their work lives?* Overall, for black women educators doing transformative work, this task plays out differently for each one in her own work context. Each educator was part of an active interplay between her own expression of identity and activism, and the particular structure of the institution in which she was engaged. The transformative educator's mission remained the same, but the institution was faced with a decision in her presence: to either bend or remain unchanged. All of the teachers' work settings displayed features that fell along a continuum between these two extremes. Each woman's efforts to subvert standard operating procedures that oppressed, however small, can be seen as her attempt to destabilize an organizational structure she perceived to be colonizing. Despite the career risks posed by engaging in activism on the job, each woman tried to challenge prescribed definitions of the teaching role and limiting beliefs about what teachers could do from their organization-insider positions.

But it is important to note that they were enabled by the ability to first, assess the actions of individual actors or processes, and second, to place the problems in their larger contexts of racism, patriarchy, privilege, class, and/or exclusion. Without a critical perspective from which to analyze their encounters with power on the ground and figure out potential interruption points, perhaps they might have felt too intimidated to act. But

each of the participants in this study came to this work with a baseline understanding of institutional power in general, which informed her view of how that power manifested in her specific workplace.

Participants demonstrated that it was less important whether schools were public, private, charter, independent, or alternative. Of greater significance was the extent to which the school either enabled or disabled teachers' ability to engage in transformative work in response to the symbolic or actual violence in the schools. Amelia's transfer high school, for example, represented the high end. While it was not perfect, it was a safe space for teachers and students alike to creatively collaborate, express dissent, and constructively criticize the school. Lisette-Michelle's criminal justice policy agency, where she worked with teenagers to become reform advocates, represented the low end. She encountered great opposition from colleagues at every turn both personally and professionally, had her expertise derided, and her very personhood denied.

The other four educators whose teaching contexts fell between these extremes still engaged in the dance every day between their personal agency and the institution's will. Tarsha pushed back against her organization's general silencing of open dialogue and failure to address issues of relevance, like reoccurring police brutality, because it felt like a blatant disregard for her students' lives. And when asked to feign happiness to maintain the status quo, she interpreted the request not only as personally demeaning, but also as representative of a much larger system of control over black emotional expression and black bodies. Mariana chose to use her teaching time to expose seemingly innocuous tools of state power like the census, which stratified U.S. residents along lines of race, socioeconomic status, and citizenship. Knowing that her largely immigrant,

undocumented students may not see danger in these projects as she did, from the vantage point of having walked in their shoes, Mariana believed it was her responsibility to help them understand the ways in which their lives and livelihoods were directly impacted by uncritically participating in U.S society. Even if some thought she was proselytizing, Mariana saw herself as pushing students to make the connection between their reticence to engage injustices they observed “out there,” and their hesitance to intellectually engage with thorny social issues “in here” (the classroom). Further, in the same way that Tarsha refused to let her executive leadership off the hook for reproducing oppressions in her workplace, Mariana felt compelled to call students out whenever they chose to reenact an oppressive behavior, or refused to recognize their own agency to participate (or not) in social change. Where others might have attributed youth disengagement to laziness, deficits, or lack of aptitude, she read it all as internalized oppression. Mariana knew that many had withdrawn from school having been taught *by* school to see themselves through the lenses of low expectations.

Aylisa, too, intentionally established strong boundaries with work colleagues of any rank who asserted white male privilege through the use of condescending language. Where others might have seen “bad manners,” she recognized in colleague’s actions the reverberation of an old plantation-era social order to which she refused to be complicit. Like Mariana, Lisette-Michelle capitalized on her classroom time to try reversing some of the more harmful psychological and intellectual effects of institutional harm and neglect. She taught from a strengths-based perspective, like Shimitra, who believed her students held more power to change the conditions of their lives than they knew, and that the government and corporations’ survival literally depended upon them *not* exercising

that power.

In fact, all of the teachers in this study had striking testimonies about how they perceived the operation of their institution's power, mostly through the lenses of colonization, hegemony, and neoliberalism reenacted through institutional practices. They articulated specific examples of these but also described instances of constant ongoing interplay/collision between those forces, their actions, and the positions of their students. Mariana and Lisette-Michelle sensed the deep-rooted sense of inadequacy and instability that societal oppression had engendered in their students, while also seeing those same students' incredible navigational strengths. They took advantage of their proximity to students to use their own lives as a demonstration of the power that a life lived consciously can have. Whenever Tarsha, Shimitra, or Aylisa detected a lack of institutional transparency, or anything that punished dissent, they responded with direct confrontation, even if it cast them as the "problem employee." Because they saw clearly the effects of educational oppression on students and larger communities in every day life, they used whatever means available to buffer students against those forces in their own teaching environment. Shimitra and Mariana attempted to expose youth to hard truths *while* providing them with tools to change their own circumstances, the love to know that they were also good, worthy, and capable, and the confidence that their poverty was not of their own doing.

These educators tended to grasp challenges like these as opportunities to refine their practices and become stronger as individuals at the same time, pushing themselves to grow as well. The women in this study attempted to change structure, not just individual hearts and minds. Like Eric Williams (1946), they regarded the anti-colonial

struggle as not only upending the colonial system, but also about recognizing and resisting the residual imprint of the *experience* of colonialism on the inner being of a people, a necessary process of inward decolonization. Everything discussed here suggests that beyond the common difficulties found in teaching in general, that transformative teaching in an oppressive teaching environment will most certainly result in external and internal struggle. Given that transformative educators must push for change, then what place can a transformative educator have in an institutional environment that is itself not malleable to transformation? Or rather, how long is it likely to expect that an individual can maintain her fortitude at odds with a powerful institution? This struggle will be explored further in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER SIX**TOWARDS AN ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY**

*And it isn't long – in fact it begins when he is in school...he discovers
the shape of his oppression.* -James Baldwin

In previous chapters, I have been describing how teachers' identities and the structures of their workplaces intersected to inform their transformative practices. In Chapter Four, participants recounted their life stories and significant experiences that led to the development of the critical consciousness that is now part of who they are today. In Chapter Five, we learned that the teachers in this study were distinguished by their awareness of, and ability to perceive, the power dynamics ordering relations between people in their respective teaching settings, and the ways that the structural characteristics of the setting pervaded teachers' work experiences.

Chapter Six will now address the third research question: *What are the strategies with which black women educators navigate these conditions and constraints in their work with marginalized youth in alternative settings?* I will describe the ways oppression manifested in participants' settings, its residual effects on the teachers, and the teachers' uses of transformative practices to resist and counteract it. To the extent possible, each teacher tried to disrupt what would continue unchecked as "business-as-usual" in their institutions by acting as gatekeepers and interrupters to prevent, expose, protect, or undo the harmful effects of oppression, wherever preservation of the status quo was the expectation. This chapter also further explores the broader meta-inquiry posed in the first

chapter: *what happens to teachers navigating systems they are trying to change, in which they are also participating?*

When I write about transformative practices in contexts of institutional oppression, I am really getting at teaching practices that attempt to address the despair, rage, rejection, displacement, isolation, fear, destruction of the human spirit, and powerlessness caused by that oppression. These women believed they were fighting to preserve students' lives from being overtaken by the same structures of oppression that threaten all of us. For the educators in this study, there was little to no compartmentalization between the Self, the bodily practice of teaching itself, and their awareness of the interplay of multiple systems on the educational process. The "armor" they put on to teach was the very same one they used to navigate their personal worlds. Indeed, teachers' practices with students seemed simultaneously political, relational, historical, and autobiographical. Authentically transformative education requires the deconstruction of all teaching and learning until it connects back to the politics of people's lives—ultimately leading to internal *and* external change (Giroux 1988; 2010). The conditions of real people's lives are always at the heart of transformative education. According to Friere (1970), all educational practice is political, connected to social change, and necessitates a radical reconstruction of the teaching and learning process. It should have the effect of engaging students with the world precisely so that they can then be moved to transform it. The teachers in this study were demonstrations of how transformative teaching is much more than a technical activity. They employed a body of transformative actions and activities in *and* outside of the classroom that may not necessarily have been integrated into curriculum content. The *integration of the Self* is an

important feature here, in that for each teacher, there was little separation between her personhood, her teaching practice, and her awareness of the interplay of systems on her work. The participants described pedagogies that fully fused the political, relational, historical and autobiographical aspects of theirs and their students' lives. Hence, they were hyper-aware—more so than most teachers I have interviewed—of the consequences of each pedagogical and interpersonal decision and action, as well as the costs of writing off any student for “failure.”

There are real consequences to enduring the corrosive effects of oppression. First, black women are the recipients of dehumanizing treatment as both blacks and women; second, as discussed in Chapter Five, we are frequently tokenized, used, or disempowered by the organizations in which we work; and third, black women often stand in the difficult position of buffer between institutions and the vulnerable youth systematically being pushed to the margins. Finally, black women who are educators advocating for students are trying to remain in good professional standing all at the same time. In this chapter, I will describe the ways structural and symbolic violence manifest in participants' alternative education settings, their residual effects on the teachers, and the teachers' use of transformative practices to resist and counteract.

Cultural Trauma

Dehumanization and oppressive practices pervade U.S. institutions, and the alternative educational settings in which the teachers in this study are employed are no exception. Franklin, et. al. (2006) describes how systemic racism persists in public, private, and commercial sectors, perpetuating huge racial disparities in quality-of-life

outcomes. Having to chronically endure and resist oppressive circumstances has consequences for those bearing the weight.

Cultural trauma is a phenomenon that describes the multigenerational, unresolved grief and trauma borne by groups that have experienced oppression in the form of massive losses of lives, land, culture, and language through colonization or warfare. It is long term, and transmitted through subjugation, violence, and protracted atrocities. Literature on the descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors has traced the multigenerational transmission of trauma, grief, and the survivor's child complex to the unresolved traumatic experiences the survivor parents endured during the Holocaust (Kellerman 2001). Indigenous populations in the Americas suffered near annihilation when European settler contact forced them from ancestral lands, committed cultural genocide, and began a legacy of untreated suffering to last for generations (Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

Historically, oppressed people have always resisted colonization and its damaging effects (Freire, 1970; Ogbu & Simons, 1998) and I regard the transformative practices of the teachers in this study as part of that same legacy of resistance. It is the impact of cultural trauma and ongoing oppression, and the wounds from resisting during these struggles, that are the primary focus of this chapter. As observed by Franz Fanon (1965), generations of atrocities untreated and unrecognized "leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well" (p.36). For example, Native Americans are plagued by high rates of suicide, homicide, accidental deaths, domestic violence, child abuse, diabetes, alcoholism, and persistent social problems (Bachman, 1992; Berlin, 1986; May, 1987).

For African Americans, the roots of generational trauma are found in the traffic and enslavement of Africans during the transatlantic slave trade. The scars of more than 350 years of bondage, rape, and terror are now borne by the ancestors of those who survived and comprise the global African diaspora. Leary & Robinson (2005) write about the depth of unrecognized trauma in African Americans, made worse by the persistent societal denial of racism in the U.S., despite continuing anti-black terrorism, political disenfranchisement, police brutality and gentrification. In other words, those crimes of history still reverberate to the present day to impede black lives and livelihoods. This chapter gives voice to participants' specific experiences with enduring and *resisting* oppression in their respective contexts.

Because transformative practice reintegrates the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of our human existence (Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, 2003) that have been fragmented by traumatic experiences, in many ways it can be considered an antidote to the cultural trauma created by historical oppression. In other words, where the colonizing institutional structures described in previous chapters only splinter, divide, categorize, dehumanize, erase, marginalize and disempower human beings, transformative practices have the potential to connect, restore, unify, and heal. This extends to all engaged in the transaction: teachers and students alike. The educators in this study believed it was their responsibility to know something about the complexity of students' lives, identities, and experiences. They also realized that *not* to do so was to contribute to the colonizing effort. The following section describes some of the ways the participants have used transformative practices to respond to the conditions of their students' lives.

Attending to Students' Lives

Participants believed that deeply perceiving and listening to their students was fundamental. Using an intersectional lens with attention to equity and access, teachers were able to be responsive to students' experiences—both to those aspects of their lives that were on display, as well as those features that were less visible.

Amelia, an English teacher at a transfer high school in Manhattan, truly adored her place of work. But she was under no illusion that it was a perfect place, nor that transfer high schools resolved the problem of educational inequity. Operating with great sensitivity to the universality in the human experience of oppression, Amelia regarded the existence of an entirely separate public school system designed to house “problem students” as an indication that the mainstream system was fundamentally flawed. Using an intersectional lens, she shared this example of how public education in New York City fails both students of color and students whose poverty and undocumented statuses place them at the margins as well. Her observation was that even her own progressive school environment needed to broaden its understanding of who was considered “vulnerable”:

I suppose that the fact that we are part of the public school system that we are part of institutional oppression. All of our students [in her school] are black, Latino or immigrants. So that means that traditional education is not working for black, Latino and immigrant students. We do not have any white students here who are born in this country, so what that says to me is that there is something wrong with traditional education and how it relates to black, Latino and immigrant students. I have a student right now who just got out of Rikers who is an Albanian immigrant, and he came over here with his mom when he was kid but

he got involved in gangs and just did not know how to navigate the world around him because they were so few opportunities for him to do that. His mother cleans homes so they are not privileged. He is a white kid technically by the standards of this country, but everyone else in his neighborhood is not a white kid. He's trying to really conform and assimilate himself into this society and what he finds is that as he's trying to assimilate into this black and Latino community he is susceptible to all the shit that black and Latino kids have to go through. He has been caught up in all that.

Amelia was observing here that students' failings are evidence of a broken system, not of broken students. This was her intersectional analysis of one struggling boy who might ordinarily have been able to assimilate into the mainstream and benefit somewhat from white privilege. Instead, his educational outcomes were complicated by poverty and his undocumented status—both tremendous structures of oppression. As a result, he had been exposed to the racial isolation, residential segregation, lack of economic opportunity, and street violence typically experienced by poor youth of color in New York City. From Amelia's perspective, it was critical that a teacher understand his layered circumstances in order to structure his educational experience in ways that would benefit him. For example, he may have unique issues with forming peer groups, or require extended time to produce requisite financial documentation.

Similarly, Amelia was able to contextualize her students' college preparedness through lenses of access and equity, rather than grade point averages or test score cutoffs. In this example, she compared her students to affluent private school students she had worked with previously, noting the unique advantages and disadvantages afforded to each

group in the college application process. Amelia once worked part-time for a for-profit company that helped high school students write strong college application essays. Her main clients had been wealthy, white parents who wanted their children to attend elite colleges and universities, but felt their children did not have compelling enough stories of their own to use in college essays.

You are talking about privileged young people who have gone to academically elite institutions, their whole schooling, who really just know how to give a teacher what they want. That is what they have been taught. Sometimes those private schools are not much more progressive academically than your regular public school that does state exams all year. It is just “this is what you will have to write about in the college. This is what an essay must look like.” It is really sad that those students have a hard time being creative. Progressive schools would pay us a lot of money to teach young people how to write an essay that was creative and compelling. They sometimes would be hired individually by parents and do workshops with small groups of students writing their college essays. We talked about hooks. We talked about grabbing your reader’s attention, describing in detail the chipped paint in the wall or the scratchy sound of someone’s voice. Just like, capture those really compelling moments...and they struggled. Then we would do pro bono work for reduced fees going to public schools where the majority of students were black and Latino, and there was no need to really pull stories out of students. They had stories, and they had stories where they would describe things in such rich beautiful detail, right. Their ability to tell stories orally was uncanny. They were poets. We said, “okay write that

down.” But they said, “I do not have the academic foundation to actually to put that down on paper to get me into a really competitive institution,” whereas the wealthier kids had the mechanics, but such a hard time being creative. It was incredibly fascinating...so when I talk about my population of students with such love and affection, it is because they are an amazing gift for being able to observe the world around them with such rich detail and meaning. We can have conversations... these are profound young people. I can have profound conversations with them that I have not had with any other population. That is why I love [teaching these students] so much.

On one level, Amelia’s observation is an interesting critique of the college essay for its ease of manipulability. The assignment could be a potential barrier for one group based upon content, for the other group based upon form. So one larger question raised here was, will the public school students ever reap the rewards for this apparent creativity in the ways that the private school students will be rewarded? Even after having proven mastery over the writing of a compelling entry essay, the poorer children may not win college acceptance and completion races over the affluent children. Many will not be able to even enter the competition. She regards them all as children having a structured experience in that both groups of students’ access to higher education had been prescribed well before the moment of the college essay, yet she laments the blatant inequity in the process. Despite knowing that fewer of her public school students were as likely to be rewarded tangibly for their storytelling abilities, Amelia here (and frequently throughout our conversations) took time to share her respect and admiration for the ways in which they expressed their rich inner lives.

And what of the impact of this college-essay guidance on both groups of students? What must it feel like for the private school students to know they were “prepared,” but implied to have no stories to share in an essay that could have been seen as compelling in its own right? And what is it for the public school students to declare they “lack foundations”—that they are forever the entertaining storytellers, but inadequate as college material—as “real” writers?

Mariana was accustomed to centering her own Afro-Latina, feminist experience as a counterpoint to the lack of representation of women of color in higher education studying economics, so it came naturally to center her underrepresented students by making the “American story” in her urban sociology course into *their* American story. She used course content to attend to the students’ political and historical marginalization in the United States. The young men and women in her classes were so racially, ethnically, and geographically diverse that Mariana knew getting at their experience in the urban U.S. was not just responsive pedagogy, but her responsibility as their teacher:

A lot of the students are either undocumented or they're in the process of citizenship. Many of them have no foundation in U.S. history. Because of that I had to learn. I watch documentaries and I read because I want my students to know that I care enough to know about their history. For example, I have two Chinese students that just arrived. I wanted to connect them, center them [in the course curriculum]... we talked about how Chinese immigrants built up the railroad systems in the U.S., were instrumental in this nation's industrial boom. It's making that connection historically. They have that struggle.

Mariana demonstrated how to connect her Chinese students to awareness of their ancestors' contributions in the hope that they might feel entitled to fuller participation in the social and political life of this country. Mariana knew firsthand, after all, how undocumented immigrants can feel obligated to hide within the margins.

The educators in this study worked hard to be responsive to students' complex lives and experiences by viewing them through the lenses of access, equity, and intersectionality. In the following section, I discuss the ways in which other participants, like Mariana, as part of their transformative practice also showed us how to appreciate the full humanity of students in ways many of their colleagues did not.

The Violence of Everyday Life

Few areas expose the dehumanization of youth of color more strongly than the well-documented excessive use of force in U.S. schools (American Civil Liberties Union, 2018; Griffin & Tackie, 2016; The Council of State Governments Justice Center and Public Policy Research Institute, 2011). Violence under the guise of school safety is on the rise, an extension of the brutality of law enforcement leveled toward African Americans more generally. Even in their alternative contexts, participants described witnessing students' expressions of rage and despair about their own repression being criminalized, pathologized, medicalized, or completely ignored. Time and again, participants showed an ability to recognize the full humanity of the young people in their charge—their right to live and thrive with dignity. They also knew their students' freedoms were tenuous, and found themselves sometimes having to shield students from further injury at the hand of the institution. Teachers were also aware because they, too,

were enmeshed in many of the same battles in their own lives. While each of the participants had stories like this, experiences of direct violence were far more pronounced for those whose work directly intersected with the criminal justice system. In settings like Shimitra's and Lisette-Michelle's, the stakes were much higher.

Shimitra's stance as an activist was central to her work with court-involved 16-24 year olds. From childhood she was trained to confront political repression and aggressive corporate intimidation tactics. In her role as an educator and advocate for a court mandated youth prison diversion program, she was often constrained by the authority of police, criminal courts, and the District Attorney when advocating for students. Since students were compromised as juveniles with open criminal cases, her main concern was their vulnerability at the hands of sadistic corrections officers. Shimitra shared an example of what a young black man's victimization looks like when his fate laid in the hands of a formidable, unforgiving system:

With this one young man, he was held at Rikers [correctional facility] for 10 months with no open cases! Then he comes to court with us and suddenly gets arrested at court! Even the judge wasn't aware of it. We find out that's because they charged him in a different jurisdiction, saying that he had assaulted corrections officers. I don't know what the fuck the statute of limitations is for these officers to have pressed charges... but they should have done it in the month or two months it took us to get him into our program. So the distrust [of the criminal justice system] is real. It's very much warranted. So he got locked up. We were able to get him released within 24 hours but in the transport from Brooklyn

to the Bronx he was assaulted by the corrections officers. He may have provoked at least through language, but their job is to not beat him up, and that happened.

After sitting in a jail infamous for corruption and violence with no open case against him, but unable to afford bail, Shimitra's organization had been able to advocate for the young man's release to their "second chance" program on those grounds. Then, out of nowhere, he was suddenly seized by the jail's corrections officers on what seemed to be false charges and likely some personal vendetta. Even though Shimitra knew that trying to use the mechanisms of the system to try to liberate him was risky, she was also equally clear that she *had to act* somehow. However, in the limited time he was in custody, he was assaulted a second time. So that by the time she had orchestrated his release once more, traumatized, he completely lost momentum and went missing from the program, returning eventually only to test positive for drug use. This placed him in violation of the protections offered to him by the program and forced Shimitra to remand him back to custody. But as a last ditch effort to protect him from facing more abuse, she had him sent to an inpatient behavioral health facility, where he would ostensibly be heavily guarded. While he was in custody, he was assaulted a third time by other inmates.

Shimitra questions:

How are you heavily guarded and other inmates are able to attack you? We knew that could be something related to corrections officers being corrupt. They actually take him to the hospital...so we put him on suicide watch and he understood it without us needing to communicate it because we had officers all around us when he was being remanded, that it was really for his safety, not because we think he's insane. Then within hours of coming back from the hospital

he's attacked again, and this time by corrections officers. No report, so we don't have any proof. I'm sure it was in a place where there are no cameras, but he described it. They didn't take him back to the hospital this time because that would prove that he had a need and that there had been some incident. But the boy could hardly stand up.

In the end, the corrections officers had purposely rerouted the young man to a different facility to create an opportunity to abuse him again, undetected. Shimitra painted a terrifying picture of a youth's vulnerability inside a matrix of adult corruption. This young man was no longer seen as a child or even a human being, once in this system. She was hyper aware of her lack of options to help as long as she had to rely upon the same system which continued to violate him, but this was a dilemma all the teachers faced with students who face disciplinary actions that, whether proportionate or disproportionate to the crime, are still tinged with racism and bias. Shimitra knew that being a young man of color was something that would never work in his favor:

All underneath an inherently unjust and unfair corrupt system, which makes our choices very limited. Just trying to think about what the next day, literally twenty-four hours, wondering what is going to be the next struggle? This young man, like many of the people in our program, can fare much better outside of a system like prison, but because of the setup, because of what he's done and because of the systems that have played out in his life it may be, the very place we send him, which will be a success? Ethically, it feels all kinds of fucked up.

This scenario was a tragic example of how part of the teacher's role was placing herself between the youth and the institution, knowing that she may be that child's last hope of being seen as a child and treated as such. Shimitra knew that making immature decisions and poorly planning one's actions are normal features in the developmental life cycle of any child, not necessarily the mark of a criminal animal. But she found herself asking what could she do to give him the best possible outcome, given the myriad factors working to disadvantage him? Shimitra bore witness to this kind of violence in students' lives far too often.

And what is the impact of such violence on the psychological condition of the children who have to endure dehumanization? In the following section, teachers described their use of transformative practices to push back some of the dehumanizing effects of oppression on students.

Internalized Oppression

You know, it's not the world that was my oppressor, because what the world does to you, if the world does it to you long enough and effectively enough, you begin to do to yourself.

-James Baldwin in conversation with Nikki Giovanni, 1973

The need to police oneself in order to avoid being excessively policed by institutions is a familiar theme for many people of color. In school settings, white adults' fears of black youth warp black children's views of themselves, as children begin to internalize those adult perspectives that they are not as smart, not as good, not as

innocent, or not as worthy as other children different from themselves. As a result, black students learn to suppress natural abilities to be bold or gregarious in order to quell the fears of teachers. The study participants similarly observed the negative effects of internalized racism on their students, and how it impeded teaching and learning.

In Lisette-Michelle's program within a larger criminal justice agency, students were selected for their potential to be junior policymakers and future leaders in criminal justice reform. They undertook reviews of current policing and sentencing policies and collaboratively developed reform recommendations. Lisette-Michelle's job was to guide them through the research and writing process all the way to publishing. She completely believed in her students' ability to accomplish the task, as all were selected by competitive application process and arrived rather eager to engage in criminal justice reform as people who had been directly impacted by the system. Yet when her supervisor, a white male, was face-to-face with the students of color, rather than feel admiration, she sensed his fear:

I feel like when it comes to the black kids, he's [the supervisor] more afraid of them. I feel like when it comes to talking to the white kids, he's okay. He's fine, he connects with them, even maybe like one or two Hispanic kids who are very quiet. But for the other ones who have like stronger personalities or they're willing to question you... which I think is great because if they're going to question you, then that proves that you're really teaching them something. Who else would you want to do this program except kids who are inquisitive, who are like "wait, why is this like this?" But he didn't like anybody that challenges him.

Here, Lisette-Michelle reminded us why research suggests that the presence of at least one teacher of color is so important for students of color. Teachers of color appear to have more commitment to, and positive beliefs about, students of color than their white counterparts (Lee, 2012; Oates, 2003; Parker & Hood 1995; Rios & Montecinos, 1999; Sheets & Chew, 2002; Shen, 1998; Su, 1997; Villegas, 2005; Villegas & Clewell, 1998; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Consistently, the literature reiterates that teachers of color bring affirming beliefs that both contribute to their successful teaching and clash with discriminatory policies and practices in their workplaces. Lisette-Michelle knew that attributes normally valued in advocacy work were suddenly seen as threatening when exhibited by youth of color. Students were given few options but to conform and suppress their own gifts and talents, or face other consequences. Yet, what consequences did their teachers face for allowing their bias to constrain young people's chances to fully experience this rare and important learning opportunity? Lisette-Michelle witnessed this kind of subtle violence against students far too often and through no fault of their own. As a transformative educator, she was able to discern the subtle racism toward her students. But this also meant she was in a position of responsibility to push back against it, choosing to forcefully affirm the students when the supervisor was not around in order to counterbalance the damage he had done.

Amelia too, knew how students of color experienced white adults' fears of them. Per the hiring process at her transfer high school, students participated in the teacher candidate interviews and observed candidates do a teaching demonstration. Part of what students liked about Amelia as a prospective teacher was her lack of fear of them:

They commented about that...in my demo lesson and afterwards when I started teaching they would come to me...one of the students he said, 'I wanted you because you did not have any problems with us.' What he implied was you weren't scared by us, right? You were not frightened by us, and I thought that was really interesting because it made me think, who is frightened by you? Are your teachers frightened by you? When I think about our sociopolitical surroundings and when I think about the systemic oppression that we experience of course there are people who are scared of students who I teach, right, who are scared of my students, but my experience with them is just like how can anybody be afraid of you guys?

Amelia could neither understand nor relate to this fear of her students. But as a transformative educator, she could make the connection between these individual teachers' fears and the influence of a broader systemic racism on their perceptions. She had the ability to read between the lines of what the students were telling her, knowing full well that they were aware of how they were perceived even as teenagers in an audience watching a teaching demonstration.

Like Amelia, Tarsha used her pedagogical freedom to validate students' interests in learning more about the injustices they experienced in their own lives. In her supplemental school instruction, she allowed them to pursue related subjects of their choosing in their curriculum:

There were microaggressions that the kids suffered. They were doing work on recognizing microaggressions for themselves or looking at youth violence, and they were kind of being told subtly, "you know it's much more important for you to

learn how to divide than it is for you to talk about these social issues.” It's applied learning. It's the things that we do with learning once we have it. You don't see that value. It's relevant to them, which is what they need. They need to be affirmed but because there's nothing affirming to you as in this case a white man [an executive supervisor in the program], you don't see the value.

To Tarsha, there was no binary: learning could be student-driven as well as academically rigorous. The problem was that what students found valuable to study was not always seen as valuable by schools. Yet these are opportunities to connect schooling to something real and relevant. More than this, these educators also knew that helping reverse the damage that schooling wrought upon these young people was a step toward helping reconnect them *with* school. In turn, reengaging students only increased their chances of surviving—and even thriving—in school. Similarly, low expectations from teachers of students' aptitude negatively impacted their self-efficacy. Aylisa attested to how she had to sometimes watch students attempt to shrink in the classroom:

They second-guess themselves. When I showed them like, “No, you know what you're talking about. You know this.” There's been so many times we're sitting there and we're like we'll ask questions about things that they've learned already and they're like, “Umm.” They'd hesitate and they're not so sure. Or they dance around it.” They're accustomed to being thought low of, in their experiences in school.

The youths in their charge had talents and abilities and yet had also to be concerned with surviving racism in their schools. Time and again, the participants had to interrupt the cycles of psychological harm to flood their students with restorative affirmations that they were still beautiful, worthy, and good.

Invisibility

While trying to buffer students from harm, teachers themselves continued to be subjected to other forms of structural and symbolic violence. On the condition of black women specifically, Aylisa felt black women were kept at the bottom of the social hierarchy because our pain is ignored and normalized.

Because we are the bearers of everything. You know, people love to say like "but there are more black women enrolled in college," but what about retention? You look at these numbers, there are all these initiatives for black boys. One dollar out of one hundred goes to black girls because they have this idea that we're doing so well. If we look at the disease rates, if we look at the mortality rates..... If we look at the education rates, if we look at all these things, yeah we hold up every institution in our communities whether it's through our blood, sweat, tears or our money. We are the foundation of everything but we are treated like shit. We are so mired in being treated that way that it's normalized.

In her intersectional understanding of black people's oppression, Aylisa called out the low socioeconomic status of black women who were acknowledged in terms of social policies, but also most harmed by harsh economic policies. She blamed the much-touted statistic of higher postsecondary degree attainment of black women over black men for helping perpetuate the myth of the "strong black woman" presumed to be less in need of social supports. We are the "bearers of everything," she said, so that in being sandwiched between racism and patriarchy, black women are the ones bleeding out.

Amelia echoed Tarsha's sentiment, having internalized the role of black-woman-as-caregiver when she was just a young child. Her older sister had observed Amelia in a state of overwhelm from being overextended at her previous job, and tried to help her

break free of this learned role. In the following example, Amelia's sister referenced a famous Audre Lorde quote: "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (1988, p.131).

My sister is a huge influence in my life as you probably could have guessed. She sent me an article by a woman who talked about self-care for black women specifically... because the societal expectation is that black women must offer themselves to the world. That is how they are expected to exist... doing for others and not themselves. That to take care of yourself as a black woman, to care for you, and just you, is a form of resistance to that idea. It is revolutionary. To put in a context the way we have thought of our purpose of being here...the reason being to make other lives better. I think that growing up--and it is not my mom's fault--but we were conditioned to be of use, to be of service to others. Right, and you know how black folks talk. They say, I was working when I was 11 years old, right. I started working when I was eight. Everybody is like, why wait? We brag about it. Are we okay? I do not think we are. We are not okay.

The phenomenon Amelia described here has its origins in the antebellum "mammy" archetype that can still be seen threaded throughout the behaviors and characteristics of black women characters in popular culture, film, and television (Bogle, 2001). Mammies were "happy slave" caricatures modeled after real life black women who cared for the children of white slaveowning families often at the expense of their own families. Like Tarsha, Amelia regarded black women's self-care as more than just respite from tiring work; rather, it is more akin to a soldier who refuses to fight wars in others' best interest that destroy him in the process. Most poignant was her insight into how she, her family,

and her larger community internalized self-sacrifice to the extent that it became a source of pride. This myth was the very one prematurely aging and killing black women.

Shimitra powerfully illustrated how youth are caught between a “rock and a hard place,” set up for failure by the conditions of their lives, and deprived of resources to adequately surmount many of those obstacles:

*We're like in this really jacked up situation with kids who are not regarded. They're young, so they're especially not regarded. But little black and brown kids, any non-white kids, they especially don't get regarded. We just want them to hurry up and grow up to disregard them some more. They're seen as like, garbage... even if they never fuck up. Young people of color are at risk everywhere, and young people themselves have to know that they matter. That's a hard thing to do with just the nature of insecurities and self-doubt and all this other stuff. Then you add crime to that, you add poverty and all kinds of shit. Learning disabilities, all kinds of things. In some ways, my job is just like that, picking up trash. The kids aren't the trash, the shit that they bring with them is trash. But they weren't born with that. Developmental problems are normal. Trauma is normal, those types of things. The things that happen to make that worse for some people than for others, that's the shit that I'm talking about that's garbage. That's the heart of what their biggest problem is in life is that, they're seen as garbage but then they're given garbage status, the stuff that comes with garbage stink and taking up space. People see that and they forget that **they did it to them**. So then, they get the double punishment, they get a double punishment and they walk right into it, thinking, having the audacity to think that they can steal something and it's the*

same as if somebody else stole something when in fact, it's not at all and it's already done. It's already done. You had no choice. There was nothing that was ever going to spare you. There was no better option.

In this moving explanation, Shimitra mapped the systematic traps set for black youth inside the matrix of how racism functions. Black children were first born less valued and othered. Then, as in the case of her students, they were accorded “garbage status” as she put it, well before being propelled by any circumstances into criminal activity. Having other normal difficulties—such as disabilities or trauma—only created more layers of challenge for the disregarded child to now add to the trauma created by being caught in a chokehold of racism. But somehow, these impediments are forgotten when that young person commits a crime—be it a legal or symbolic one—but she will most certainly be blamed for them. She will even pay double penance. The game was never possible to win; the child lost her life before it even got started. Without even being aware of it, the black child was laden by the weight of garbage—i.e., racism—poured over her by our society, the moment she was born. Naturally, she internalizes the falsehood that this is a condition of her own making, and that she is as her society says she is. This cycle is essentially the way systemic oppression works to perpetuate itself.

Amidst all of this, teachers struggled to preserve themselves and prevent the death of the Self. As a consequence of witnessing students’ oppression and experiencing their own, they were constantly being fragmented, experiencing a disconnect between who they were, and who they were allowed to be. In the following section, participants detail their experiences with fragmentation.

Fragmentation

Lisette-Michelle had little freedom or ownership at work. Her fragmentation stemmed from the feeling that her efforts to change her work environment and the attitudes of her colleagues toward students were fruitless. Instead, she focused her energies on her productive work with students. But trying to be transformative inside an openly hostile workplace took its toll:

Usually when I walk in ... before I walk in I feel okay. I feel like I am who I am and I feel strong in the fact that I am a female, I'm African American, I'm educated, I have my own stuff, I'm determined, like all of the things that make me who I am like all my strengths I feel it. As I walk in I'm still okay, but the more I interact I tend to lose that. Mondays, I may feel like great, I'm very aware of who I am and comfortable. I don't see myself separate from everyone. As the day goes on whether it's in conversations like there's maybe a joke that's said, that doesn't sit well...and granted it may not directly be connected to me but it's not comfortable.

Lisette-Michelle began her work week imbued with self-confidence. With each successive day it waned as she started getting pummeled by the microaggressions and passive-aggressive attacks on her competence. Her usual confidence began to falter. Tarsha too, had the same energy for her actual work on each Monday, but became so deflated by the energy of the environment that she was soon praying to make it to Friday:

I saw just how my disposition was completely changing. I was going to work and I was miserable where that had not been the case before. I used to be able to get up in the morning and be like, I'm tired but I'm going to work. It's cool. It became

this point where I'm waking up on Monday talking about, "Lord, one more day closer to Friday." That's a big difference in the way that I saw the work. That's my motivation. If I can just get through today, that's one day closer to Friday. That's not what I went into education to do, to count my days down.

Eventually, Tarsha became unable to bear the weight of working for an organization that cared so little about the youth it publicly claimed to serve. She felt the crushing burden of its disingenuousness every day, and the toxicity was more than she could handle. Tarsha chose to leave rather than be emotionally destroyed, but also sensed she would have eventually been fired anyway for her efforts to make changes to the organization. Decisions like these for transformative educators are not made lightly because, as mentioned, they typically put their entire selves into the work. But exercising self-preservation has also become a part of some of the participants' transformative practice as well. It is a radical activity, especially for black women (Lorde, 1988). Far from mere relaxation, self-care in the lives of these participants was the medicine for burnout from such intensive engagement, and for facing real problems for which there were no immediate solutions. In Tarsha's case, it took years for her to accept her inability to stop the world from crashing down on her students.

Shimitra reconciled the struggle by recognizing her own limitations, telling herself with each loss that she had done her best with what she had:

Like since as much as I want to save people, I'm glad that I can't. I'm glad that I don't have to be the one to decide and that people still have the ability to make their own decisions and fuck up and that they're aware of that. They're not going to be upset and hurt like if somebody that I work with turns up dead, I'm going to

have all kinds of feelings about it. But there's something inside me that's like, "Well, did you do your best?" Even with this young man or the young woman I described and all that, but that's was done. What comes in their life is theirs even though I know there are so many factors that press on it.

Shimitra said she has faith that she is part of a larger cosmic machine that will ultimately have its own way, which comforted her to know that if she does her best, she was reconciled, even if the outcome was a terrible one. However, as previously discussed, she was one of the teachers who was the most angered by the “garbage” of racism and brutality heaped upon students’ lives, through no fault of their own. One had to wonder if she was truly reconciled, or if she had decided to suppress what she saw each day in order to keep her own sanity in tact. Here she spoke about how she has matured in the profession, pulling back and choosing her battles:

Young people are at risk everywhere. If that's the kind of work that I choose to get into, which is to make sure that those people [youth] fucking matter, it will eat away at you. You're just like, "Why am I doing this?" I really do think that some people in my profession become alcoholics or addicts of some kind. Or, mutilate themselves in some way or enter into really unhealthy situations. Early in my career, I'd do any and everything to feel better because work was so fucking hard. I did everything to try and like, celebrate life. Sometimes I went to the excess side, just like partying a lot, spending every last dime, like anything that was about pleasure. I'm not there now. I get very winded. I can see a lot of trouble coming. Sometimes, I'm sure I could handle some things if I wanted to personally, but I just choose not to because I'm like worn out from work. I'm trying not to be worn

out so...if I have to choose I'm going to choose where the paycheck is helping me at least take care of some things, so I can do it at work and not do it in my life every damn day.

Shimitra appeared to indicate that she had come to understand her limitations. She knew the battle to protect black children's lives was not going away anytime soon, and still believed it was her responsibility to help defend them. But somehow over the years, she had come to a place where she could regulate how fully she would integrate herself. This was partially a result of maturity, but was also attributable to fatigue. Nevertheless, she has learned from *all* of it. This was self-preservation in action—and in Shimitra's case, it was a strategic choice to keep herself strong for the battles ahead. We know this because she never mentioned even *a consideration* to stop doing the work. Instead, she was figuring out ways to make herself last longer and work smarter. As I will discuss in the next section, there were underlying motivations that kept Shimitra and the other participants engaged in this work.

Transformative Practice as Service

Transformative practice reflects the way these educators lived and breathed in the world. Yet, their practices are also restorative: in many ways they healed the effects of structural violence and oppression. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the participants were motivated by their own experiences with oppression, and by their personal politics which compelled them to fight for the survival of their own and other historically oppressed communities. Where the colonizing institutional structures described in previous chapters

dehumanize, marginalize and disempower human beings, transformative practices have the potential to humanize, restore, and empower.

Shimitra conceived of her work as service, and seemed to be both exhausted and energized by it at the same time, yet overall sustained by the belief that she was on the “right side” of the fight. During our conversations, when asked what work she would she do if not for *this* work, she responded:

Somebody has to fucking do this! That's what my response is, and not because I'm so black, and so noble. I'm just like, this would be easy if all of us were doing this. People who go corporate, they're like, "I'm making money and I do my community service over here because I don't want to be immersed in that kind of shit...." But they're still getting stomped out left and right by corporations and people with power trips. All of us are in a power struggle, so which one we're going to be in and with whom? My students frustrate the hell out of me, sure. Yeah, there are moments when you'll want safety in the emotional, physical, mental ways. Is it really secure? No. You think about all the ways that you're compromising not just your integrity but your life. Challenging somebody to be better than what the fuck they've been prescribed to be. But, somebody did that shit for me.

If not her, who? She stated that if everyone would invest in doing some of this work then the world's problems would be significantly reduced. But there was just too much to be done, and the work too important, for her to spend her time and talent doing something different. Shimitra also made a very interesting case for those who may think they avoid trauma by staying away from careers in education or social services, but in the meantime

are losing their lives—or souls—in other ways in corporate America. Finally, she referenced working with young people who have been discarded as her way of fighting against the machine, refusing to allow those youth to be swallowed alive. The same was done for Shimitra while still a young person herself, so in that sense, she's simply paying it forward.

Where Shimitra advocated for youth to help restore all that was being systematically stolen from them, Aylisa was motivated by an investment in seeing her students realize their full potential.

I am invested in them being successful people in the world, whatever that means to them. I'm definitely invested in them being whole healthy happy people. I think they get that immediately and they buy into that. The complete and total acceptance of who you are and meeting people where they are. Our teens are all over the place but I'm not going to treat one differently than the other. They see that too, they see that even-handedness I think. And really this idea that you, whoever you wherever you're coming from, whatever you're dealing with, you are a worthy person based on the fact that you're here. I have faith enough in them that they can do what they are here to do. I'm nurturing in many ways but I don't treat them as children and I respect their intelligences. No one is a deficit, even students who are gang members. They're still people.

Aylisa repeated several times that her students were already whole people; her job was to authentically and lovingly support them in their development by providing a safe, disciplined, and structured space in keeping with Lisa Delpit's (2012) "warm demander" philosophy. She felt no fear of her students despite them being "all over the place." The

youth had no need to prove themselves worthy of her unconditional positive regard because she accorded them their due respect upfront. She rejected deficit thinking in favor of total acceptance of each student as they were.

Amelia also practiced unconditional loving regard, but placed even more emphasis on nurturing as a pedagogical tool. Important also is the thread of joy and excitement that seemed to run through Amelia's responses. She obviously derived happiness just from being in her students' presence, finding it very easy to be interested in their ideas and enjoy their company. In fact, she became most incensed when she encountered instances of blatant adult disdain for the talents and abilities that young people brought to the table, seeming to be in disbelief and disappointment that others did not see in them what she did:

As you're teaching content, you also nurture the emotion because that's how students become more open to knowledge, if they feel nurtured emotionally as well. Part of the way I teach is by asking the students' questions and make it clear that any question they ask is a good question so they don't feel afraid. They never feel afraid to say anything in my classroom as long as they're saying it sincerely. I can give them as much knowledge as I want to, but if I'm hostile towards them, they're not going to absorb it. I didn't want to learn from the teachers that I didn't like. I didn't want to learn from teachers that I thought didn't like me. I think it means listening to your students and letting them guide you and try and understand what their worlds are like. Where they are coming from? How they see the world. That is exciting to me as an educator. It is this solely trying to see the world in my student's eyes. I think that that's the foundation. That is where

you are build from, right, and eventually your job is to craft learning experiences for your students that speak for that

Amelia shared her excitement about learning all about who these young people were. Treating them as esteemed colleagues, she was enthusiastic about discovering what students were thinking about in the course of a day. She looked forward to uncovering their perspectives on various topics through creative classroom assignments, and genuinely wanted to understand their worldviews. How distinct Amelia's approach was, compared to teachers with a "savior complex."

Further, Amelia gave us a rare glimpse into a teacher doing what she loved—in this case, sharing a subject she was passionate about (English) with a group she was equally as passionate about (transfer high school students). In Amelia, we witnessed someone for whom teaching was not just a job, but a calling. She truly considered it her privilege and honor to work at this school, and with this particular group of students. There can be little doubt that each student must have benefitted from near proximity to a teacher who gave off such unadulterated joy. "They are just fun," she said. "I like talking about things, about the world, with them. It's fun for me. It is with these young people." Amelia's delight to be with her students was evident, in ways it was not as obvious with the other participants. In Amelia's case, I could readily see the ingredients of delight, humility, and wonder in her reasons for choosing to teach.

Ultimately, all of the transformative educators in this study did their work with the hope that their efforts would interrupt conditions of oppression and offer some restoration and healing for what had been taken from students. Nothing was more rewarding than when the indomitable spirit and resilience of the students prevailed. In

this final section, teachers related some examples of students' overcoming and transcending the conditions of their schooling.

Liberation

At the same time as students are being hurt or victimized, there are many instances where students defy odds and successfully resist oppression. Teachers had in common this persistent *hope* that liberation is possible. So when the students themselves become agents of transformative change—showing signs of self-love rather than internalizing their oppression, speaking truth to power rather than accepting the status quo, demanding to be treated as full human beings instead of accepting disempowerment—the educators felt supremely rewarded.

Tarsha's hope came from students' successes she saw in her own classroom. In this example, Tarsha engaged her students in a mathematical skill-building exercise using survey design methods. Soon the students felt challenged to pursue answers to some hard questions about their neighborhood and community. Despite some criticism from her executive leadership about the political nature of their questions, the students persisted:

Students are doing surveys with their peers on their experiences with micro aggressions and their ability to negotiate whether or not they even recognize them as such. These were with middle school students from us just talking about do we even know what micro aggressions are enough to call it out when we deal with it? The first year we did it, the kids were very much doing it themselves. They wanted to know since mom and dad are making me go to after-school programs and college prep programs, do they even work? And so they did research on that.

Then the next cohort that took the class, they became a little bit more socially oriented and they began to focus on bullying in their experiences with bullying and the effects. Again, I was able to see lines come out of these things that were not suggested by myself. The third cohort that came around at this class, I think this was at the time that that NYPD had screwed up with some young people. Trayvon Martin was right on the edge of all those killings and the kids shifted. They began to move their work towards just looking at violence.

Despite the fact that her agency's leadership did not understand the multilevel learning that was occurring in these units, Tarsha saw children becoming engaged and politically activated from asking hard questions about issues in their own lives. They were putting real social problems to the test.

There is perhaps no greater reward than seeing a youth be able to self-advocate or articulate their point of view. Amelia was serving as a non-subject area panelist on a social studies panel (New York City transfer high schools like Amelia's use portfolio assessments instead of the state exam). A young black woman with an individualized education plan (IEP) was passionately delivering an oral argument about the origins of the partition between India and Pakistan. Afterwards, the student's social studies teacher facilitated questions from the panel:

So when [the student] struggled the teacher was there, and so and so forth... and asked her questions that would lead her to deeper meaning, but then at the end of it the teacher said 'okay can you tell us a little bit about some of the benefits of colonization by the British,' right? The student was confused... that was not part of her understanding in this movement. Her [the student's] understanding of

colonization was that the English needed to get out of it and so she said, 'I do not think...I do not know that there were any benefits' ...and the teacher said, "well you know the transportation system that they built and all of these other advances in technology that India did not have before." The student said, "maybe they would have had that without the English or the British." And I wanted to think that this was a question a teacher would ask to hopefully get that answer from the student, but I do not think it was. It might even be a question that I would ask to get that answer from a student, to get the answer that actually India could have developed those technologies on their own in fact even a lot sooner if they had not been subjugated and oppressed.

The student offered a critical answer to a contested New York State Regents test question that had received some attention in years past. Amelia praised the student for having the courage to voice her critical stance:

I talked to [the student] afterwards and I said, 'it is actually something that I would have been asked when I was in school and probably it would have traumatized me.' She is an amazing student, but I think that all of our students are amazing and what makes students amazing is that they are okay about challenging their teachers. They do not necessarily give you the answer that you want.

The important story here is not that the student passed her assessment, but that she articulated and defended an unpopular political viewpoint to a panel full of her teachers—and triumphed. In her triumph, she grew beyond the curriculum and the text

material to become a transformative educator herself. What made this moment transformative is that the student became self-actualized.

In previous chapters, I discussed how teachers' identities and knowledge intersected to help them recognize oppression, and informed their transformative practices to resist it. This chapter addressed the third research question: *what are the strategies with which they navigate these conditions and constraints in their work with marginalized youth in alternative settings?* We learned how participants were forced regularly to witness the trauma, violence, and internalized oppression suffered by their students, while also enduring their own feelings of fragmentation and invisibility at the hands of the institution. Teachers shared ways they deployed transformative practices to resist and counteract that oppression, and also to attend to their students' humanity, both inside and outside of their classrooms. Fortunately, they found their practices also to be restorative—a liberating force, an expression of service, and a labor of love.

In the conclusion chapter, I will provide an overview of chapters with a summary of findings, discuss the implications of this study, its limitations, and directions for future research.

CONCLUSION

I have a commitment to recording and documenting the testimonies of everyday black women managing the everyday racism common in U.S. institutions. As someone concerned with social and historical context, I sought to document different narratives of racism across multiple professional settings. I was motivated to convey what it means to be black, and women, as we go about the business of living and working inside contexts of racism.

What is not always explicit in many narratives is the creative navigation and resistance strategies of the ordinary black women trying to survive these contexts, much like the six participants in this study. This study suggests that many black women take these attributes for granted, as they are part of a necessary survival strategy for ordinary life. The everyday black woman would likely not even name her activities as “resistance.” Many would probably hesitate to even to call themselves “activists” because more often than not, their activities are merely part of the effort necessary just to move forward within institutional contexts. Yet they are transformative activists precisely because of their choice to respond to these concerns about students’ lives time and again. They intentionally interrupted policies and practices that harmed youth, and made every attempt to then alleviate the suffering created from those policies and practices. Despite being responsible only for the teaching of academic and/or life skills, they acted as gatekeepers, systems navigators, and interrupters to reduce or eliminate the effects of structural violence against their students inside and outside of their classrooms.

For this dissertation, I purposely interviewed black women who *do* explicitly name the racism, who outright *call* their own activities resistance, and who speak

candidly about trying to dismantle structures. By making public the narratives of transformative educators for whom racism and activism are central to life and work, we learn about what seemed collective and universal about their experiences. To reiterate, I sought to understand how a teaching practice can address structural violence and oppression, as well what it looks like to try to navigate and change oppressive systems of which one is also a part. In order to explore these larger inquiries, my qualitative research methodology was designed around the following three research questions:

- 1) What are the specific ways black women educators in alternative education settings make connections between their identities (biography), larger structural forces (structure), and work (practice)? (Addressed in Chapter Four).
- 2) How do black women educators in alternative educational settings understand and describe the conditions and constraints of their work lives? (Addressed in Chapter Five).
- 3) What are the strategies with which black women educators navigate these conditions and constraints in their work with marginalized youth in these settings? (Addressed in Chapter Six).

Systematic data collection and analysis were undertaken to investigate four categories of analysis for participants' work in alternative settings: biography, structure, transformative education, and practice. Out of participants' narratives emerged six case studies of very different life journeys, yet all six biographies centered racism and activism, and all six lives converged in the choice to channel that activism into a teaching career in a nontraditional setting.

Critical Biography as Preparation for Teaching

In Chapter Four, I addressed the first of the meta questions: *how does a teaching practice meet the structural violence and oppression in a racist institutional system?* Participants' narratives illustrated how one's own life is preparation for learning to understand, navigate, and defend against structural violence and oppression. They reported having developed a framework for recognizing and countering these forces that was largely borne out of formative life experiences they had acquired in largely nontraditional spaces. I framed each activist teacher identity as a kind of master narrative for each woman's life. Amelia filtered her practice through a lens of global universality in the experience of oppression learned from a childhood of transnational activism; where Tarsha engaged youth by using strategies of "other-mothering" and "warm demander" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Delpit, 1995; Dixson, 2003; Griffin, 2013; Guiffrida, 2003; Ware, 2006) derived from her own black female mentor-models. Mariana engaged her students from an intersectional feminist standpoint that emerged from her bicultural, bilingual identity; but Aylisa's framework for encouraging intellectual independence came out of a lifetime of redefining her own schooling. Shimitra's childhood lessons about a community's right to collective self-determination had taught her to use the teaching platform in defense of justice; while Lisette-Michelle discovered as a formerly court-involved youth that an educator's first task is to learn to humanize all others.

Although the participants all had come from different places, they arrived at the same conclusion: the purpose of teaching transcends prescribed content or technical skills. Rather, to teach was to interrupt and counter the effects of the racism they themselves had experienced, and knew to also be a reality for their students. Because this

reality is so intertwined in their personal beings as they navigated the world, there was little separation between the embodied practice of teaching and the educator herself. Teachers' practices with their students were simultaneously political, relational, historical, autobiographical, and institutional. The participants carried a strong sense of responsibility for their work and greatly personalized the events of students' lives.

Critical Consciousness and Power

In Chapter Five, I again addressed the first of the meta questions: *how does a teaching practice meet the structural violence and oppression in a racist institutional system?* Participants first deployed critical consciousness in their choice of a teaching career in a nontraditional setting, which they knew would be conducive to their transformative work. Once inside their alternative settings, they all relied fully upon their critical sensibilities to give them an unfiltered view of which forms of power—racism, colonization, or neoliberalism—were at play in the environment. Participants clearly articulated that their critical lenses enabled them to recognize the operation of power in their settings. They had placed themselves in these positions intentionally and used subject matter knowledge and proximity to students to counter hegemony in students' lives, as well as their own. Again, the purpose of teaching was not just to transmit knowledge.

This chapter also detailed the ways educators still managed to be transformative in spite of limitations imposed by their teaching environments. Although their settings and subject matter expertise differed significantly from one another, all participants were clear about the political functions of teaching when transacting knowledge, even amidst

opposition. No participant ever seemed to blame students or their communities for challenges caused by institutional neglect. But they did believe in students' power to alter the conditions of their lives if provided with specific tools and knowledge to deconstruct oppressive structures. Again, they had arrived at the same conclusion: the purpose of their position was to use that influence to dismantle institutional power, and return some of that power to students whenever possible.

Critical Transformative Practice

Chapter Six addressed the second meta question: *how do teachers navigate through systems they wish to change, in which they are also participating?* Here participants demonstrated that for educators to make meaningful changes to systems in which they are participating, their practices would need to be transformative. To instigate change, teachers' actions had to disrupt status quo processes that harmed, or else undid the harmful effects of that oppression whenever possible. To a large extent their practices would also need to be activist, but that activism may be expressed in a variety of ways. Participants beautifully articulated the corrosive psychological and emotional impact of racism on students and themselves, along with the material costs and consequences of their resistance. For a majority of the participants, their work ultimately resulted in a loss of employment.

Educators also expressed that their work had healing and nourishing effects on them. Teaching in the ways they did gave them as much satisfaction as it did frustration. While some participants described a limit to how long their stamina for this type of challenging work could last, no one expressed a desire to abandon the work. Teachers

shared that their work was an expression of service and a demonstration of love. This suggests that transformative practices have important healing properties that can address the despair, powerlessness, and destruction of the human spirit created by racism and other forms of oppression. Further, their actions and activities did frequently result in some level of change or positive impact for their institutions.

Black Women's Experience as Theory

All people on this planet are colonized and suffering in one form or another from the effects of domination and subjugation by institutions. Few of us can avoid some complicity in reproducing oppression ourselves. What distinguishes the educators in this study is that they consciously try to figure out how to lessen the impact of their own and various systems' colonizing harm to students. That is a principal reason why I selected these six engaged educators as interview subjects. But as Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) has suggested, the lens of black women's experiences need not be relegated only to understanding black oppression or empowerment. Although black feminist epistemology is grounded in black women's experiences, by grounding ideas like teacher knowledge, preparation, or practice in the particularities of black women educators' experiences, it is possible to approach universality. Through the rigorous examination of black women's narratives (Amoah, 1997), all people concerned about justice could come to reflect much more seriously upon the shape of their own oppression by institutions, their participation in it, and its poisonous effects on us all.

Implications for Teacher Education

Teacher education research gives sparse attention to nontraditional education settings, or to the often uncertified educators working successfully with students outside of traditional K-12 schools. These students are off the K-12 radar and on the spectrum of multiple other systems: juvenile justice, child welfare, mental health, etc. Their teachers are missing from teacher education research, yet they are very valuable sources of knowledge and severely understudied. A stronger research focus on these teachers would also bring attention to nontraditional education settings as important sites of teacher learning and development. Perhaps the field can look more closely at preparation for effective teaching according to the needs of *every* environment, including public, private, charter, independent, and alternative, in order to strengthen teacher efficacy in general.

Implications for Policy and Practice

A more layered historical picture ought to be painted to support structural improvements in the U.S. education system, and philanthropic efforts must attend to structural racism embedded in existing processes of schooling rather than only funding more additive solutions. Desegregating schools has not improved educational outcomes for all children, and teacher preparation in general should include more about the historical roots of contemporary conditions.

Relevant teaching preparation matters for effective teaching, but perhaps not as much in terms of whether it is university-based or alternate route. Participants described having acquired their most relevant and useful preparation for teaching from academic and extracurricular programs that were not specifically designed to prepare them for

classroom teaching at all. It was in contexts outside of formal teacher education that they had the richest learning experiences, ones that really developed them for future work as critical classroom educators with the stamina to remain in the profession despite significant opposition.

This study has implications for an expansion of some of the limited theoretical constructs used in teacher preparation. First, K-12 schools are not the only sites where successful teaching and learning take place. Successful education occurs in spaces and places both within and outside of formal schools, and there are educators other than K-12 teachers that aid in important educative processes for school-aged youth. This ought to pose more of a challenge to policies that currently limit public school teaching only to those in possession of a state license in teacher education.

Further, this study reinforces the notion that teachers' prior experiences have value, and this is especially pertinent to the recruitment of mature professionals and career changers into teaching. Perhaps their years of work experience and diverse knowledges should be given more attention. Teacher preparation programs would do well to attract these multifaceted individuals by offering nontraditional learning and practice opportunities for those seeking employment outside of K-12 schools.

Limitations of the Study

The data collected from each participant is context-dependent and the context of each case limits the generalizability of the findings. Further, the small sample size will also limit the generalizability of the findings as well.

Further, I interviewed women mostly without certifications in teaching. I do not

know what kinds of teachers they may have been had they become traditionally certified and still taught in nontraditional settings. It would have been interesting to see the outcomes had all of these participants had been prepared in strong, comprehensive teacher education programs.

Final Thoughts

Hearing more black women teachers' narratives might encourage more joint teacher-student organizing, organizing of more teachers across seemingly disparate education settings, or simply get teachers to attend more to self-care, celebrate successes, or study the consequences of living in survival mode so much of the time. Whether or not black women's narratives are validated by dominant society, the narratives should keep proliferating and be made public.

Where institutional racism in education is concerned, I fear most for young people's jeopardized futures. Because racism does not cease, our advocacy for our lives and our children's lives will likely never be able to cease, either. The structural violence against black children in schools has lifelong consequences, and the urgency is for all persons in the school building to become willing to step up and interrupt the machine. After all, schools, like any systems, are made up of individual actors. If individual actors can help to create inequitable conditions, then there are others who may also work to undo them. And, while all students need adults in their lives who possess an awareness of the interrelated systems of domination and their reverberating effects in U.S. schools, low income and students of color are the ones most at risk for being violated in U.S. school settings. Children are in need of gatekeepers like the women in this study, who are

willing to stand right at the potential points of disruption where disparities take root— and interrupt when signs of exclusion or harm first appear. I am hopeful that as people listen more to the narratives of black women in education, they will recognize the profound imprint of these teachers' courage on all of our lives, historically and still today.

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APPENDIX A

Email Call for Participants

Dear Educators:

My name is Gail Perry-Ryder, and I am a doctoral student in education at Montclair State University seeking participants for my qualitative study of black women educators working with marginalized youth in alternative settings in New York City.

The participants I seek must be:

- 1). Self-identified black women educators (need not be certified teachers, but must teach as part of their employment marginalized youth between the ages of 13-24).
- 2). Employed in the New York City area, outside of mainstream public school classrooms in alternative settings or programs (but may include alternative public schools, programs/agencies within public schools, post-secondary settings, or private or government agencies); must be engaged in academic, career, or skills-based instruction with marginalized youth (i.e., youth identified either as low-income, court-involved, currently out-of school or otherwise "at-risk," and/or youth of color, etc.).
- 3). Willing to participate in two individual interviews and one focus group so that their thinking and decision-making can be documented.

Why is this study being done? I seek to document the ways black women educators read, navigate, and make meaning of their work with marginalized students in their respective institutional contexts.

What will happen while you are in the study? After an initial telephone pre-screening to verify eligibility, educators will be interviewed two times individually for 60-90 minutes each. Last, all participants will be brought together for a one-time 60-90 minute focus group in Winter/Spring 2015.

Compensation:

\$20 gift card for first one-on-one interview of 60-90 mins

\$20 gift card for second one-on-one interview of 60-90 mins

\$20 gift card for participating in the culminating 60-90 min. focus group (food provided)

If you are eligible and interested please reach out to me with your contact information at **perryryderg1@montclair.edu**. Please feel free to forward this message to anyone else you think may be interested in participating as well.

Warmly,

Gail Perry-Ryder

Teacher Education & Teacher Development Program

Montclair State University

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Phone Screen Script

- 1) Are you a Black woman educator?
- 2) Are you currently teaching youth outside of a public school context in an alternative setting in New York City (including alternative public schools, or private or government agencies)? Please describe your institution/setting.
- 3) Are you currently engaged in academic and/or skills-based instruction of marginalized youth (i.e., youth identified either as low-income, court-involved, currently out-of school or otherwise academically at-risk, and/or youth of color)? Please describe the youth including ages. Describe courses/subjects you teach.
- 4) What is your understanding of this study's aims/goals?
- 5) Why did you respond to this call for participation?
- 6) Are you available for two 60-90 minute interviews over the next two months in person? Do you agree with being recorded and signing a consent form?

APPENDIX C

Proposed Subset of Questions—Institutional Ethnography

- 1). Can you sketch a drawing or picture of your *various selves* within the context of your institution/work?
- 2). Please visually depict your best representation of how you experience institutional power in your particular institution. In other words, how would what you feel or notice actually appear in pictures or images, instead of through narrative? (Assign these structures a material, like steel, concrete, glass, fabric, paper, steam, etc. How is it moving if it is “embodied”—hammering, dancing, ducking in and out, etc.)?
- 3). How does structural power “look” to you (i.e., is it top down, porous, hard lines, arrows, invisible, two-way, three way, etc.)?
- 4). Where are the lines of flight? Fault lines? Where do you see them? What do you do with them? What do they do with you? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

First Round Interview Questions

PARTICIPANT NAME _____ DATE _____

1. Please describe yourself:

- a. Age
- b. Ethnicity
- c. Sexual orientation
- d. Gender identification/representation
- e. Any other markers of identity I've left out you wish to share?
- f. Brief work history
- g. How she came to the work she does- her pathway to getting here?
- h. Educational background
- i. Why didn't you choose to work as a K-12 school teacher?

2. Please describe present work institution/agency:

- a. Name
- b. Location
- c. Mission
- d. Population served/makeup of population/community served
- e. Size/Budget
- f. Number of staff/makeup of staff

3. Please describe job description in detail:

- a. Exact job title
- b. Specific responsibilities (what does your typical day look like?)

- c. Any defining words that help describe the role: for example, “liaison”, “head facilitator” “manager”, “head of team.”
- d. Her position in agency/institutional hierarchy
- e. Agency’s position among institutional hierarchy/system/network.

4. Describing your workplace identities

- a. When you walk in the workplace door, you bring multiple identities - your gender, race, social class, age, sexual orientation, etc. As you go about your workday, are there times when you are more aware of some identities being in the forefront (or more prominent)? (Class, race, social relationships, etc.)
- b. How do you see any of your identities figuring directly into the work you do?
- c. Which identities feel less comfortable or more difficult to incorporate into your life at work? Why?
- d. Could you give an example of when you might have screened or diluted yourself, reshaping or altering the person you presented yourself to be at work?

5. Relationship to teacher preparation

- 1. To what extent do you feel your formal educational preparation prepared you for the kinds of complexities you would encounter in your future work—specifically the kinds we have been discussing?
- 2. What about your background/life experience most prepared you to be successful in the work that you currently do?

APPENDIX E

Second Round Interview Questions

1. First of all, is there anything you'd like to share that you've been thinking about since the last interview?
2. What does being a successful educator mean to you? Do your colleagues hold this same perspective as you about being a successful educator?
3. What does a successful student look like? How does this perspective of success student sit with the perspectives of your administrators? Within the larger system?
4. Generally, How do your students respond to you? What is it about you or your practice that they are responding to? Do you see students responding to you differently at different times? How so? What is distinctive about your practice with the youth?
5. What do your colleagues think about you and your work with students? How do you know this? What do you think about your colleagues' perspectives of your work? What are your colleagues varying perspectives of successful students in their own work?
6. Are there particular strategies you use as you work with other adults in your context? Are there specific strategies you rely upon or use to navigate your institution, in order to do your work?
7. What about your context seems to limit what you can do, and what about your context seems to enable what you can do? Can you give me particular examples? Can you and/or how do you overcome these restrictions?

8. Many people have said that there is residual impact (i.e., trauma, internalization, integration, etc.) from having to work daily under and within such systems/structures. Does this resonate with you? How might this/these manifest in your professional or personal life?
9. How are you of service in your practice?
10. How do you heal yourself? (nourish, sustain, restore?)

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