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Wilson Kwamogi Okello

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# “Loving Flesh”: Self-Love, Student Development Theory, and the Coloniality of Being

Wilson Kwamogi Okello

*Baby Suggs’s sermon in the clearing to formerly enslaved Black folk offers readers an important anecdote about living in the afterlife of white supremacy (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016). Baby Suggs seemed to understand that the priority for survival and emancipation was loving one’s flesh in a world where “yonder they do not love your flesh.” Morrison’s (1987) careful and deliberate use of “flesh” denotes what Spillers (1987) wrote about as a self before captivity. Morrison’s reminder suggests that even if the body is free, those formerly enslaved must wrestle with the unconscious, internalized seeds of captivity supplanted as psychic trauma (Oliver, 2004). Higher education contexts, as extensions of white supremacy, are rooted in colonization (Wilder, 2013). On this premise, daily, Black students are contending with the afterlife of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) externally and internally. Building on Baby Suggs’s plea, I was particularly interested in how Black students “love [their] flesh.” I explored the potentialities of Black literary works to provoke onto-epistemological development and intervene on colonizing scripts in the student development theoretical canon and in the lives of Black folk. I took up this work by conducting a Black feminist analysis (Christian, 1988; Smith, 1979) of one student’s exposure to Black literary works (Christian, 1988; Gordon, 1997) and the meaning made from that experience toward a praxis of self-love (Baszile, 2018).*

In *Beloved*, one of Toni Morrison’s (1987) seminal texts, Baby Suggs, an elder, preached to a group of formerly enslaved Black folk

about the necessity of self-love. In what follows, Morrison is quoted at length to honor the breadth of her message and to provide an exemplar of the theoretical possibilities located in Black literary works. With rising cadence, grave urgency, and convicted tone, Baby Suggs commanded:

Here . . . in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder, they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They do not love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder, they flay it. And O my people, they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off, and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either. *You* got to love it, *you!* And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than the eyes or feet. More than the lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (p. 88)

Baby Suggs’s sermon in the clearing to formerly enslaved Black folk offers readers an essential anecdote about living in the afterlife of white supremacy (Hartman, 2007; Sharpe, 2016). Baby Suggs seemed to understand that the priority for survival and emancipation was

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*Wilson Kwamogi Okello is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.*

loving one's flesh in a world where "yonder they do not love your flesh." Morrison's careful and deliberate use of "flesh" denotes what Spillers (1987) wrote about as a self before captivity, a notion that Mobley (2017) suggested transcends place and time. Morrison's reminder suggests that even if the body is *free*, those formerly enslaved must wrestle with the unconscious, internalized seeds of captivity supplanted as psychic trauma (Oliver, 2004).

As extensions of white supremacy, higher education contexts are rooted in colonization (Wilder, 2013). On this premise, Black students daily contend with the afterlife of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) externally and internally. Recalling the ancient strength (Mobley, 2017) that informed Baby Suggs's plea, I am particularly interested in how Black folx "love [their] flesh." I explored the potentialities of Black literary works to provoke onto-epistemological development and intervene on colonizing scripts in the student development theoretical canon and the lives of Black folx by asking the following research question: How might Black letters and literature contribute to meaning making broadly and to self-definition in particular? I take up this work by conducting a Black feminist analysis (Christian, 1988; Smith, 1979) of one student's exposure to Black literary works (Christian, 1988; Gordon, 1997) and the meaning made from that experience toward a praxis of self-love (Baszile, 2018). In order to address this question, the following prompts guided the participant's writing:

- What new representations, if any, does exposure to this curriculum produce?
- How does one exist in the body that they hold in this historical moment?

While the use of literary and rhetorical traditions has been acknowledged in student development theory (see Coles, 1989), they are yet undertheorized in favor of qualitative experiential methods (Creswell, 2013). Thus,

this manuscript bears witness to the use of literature as a generative meaning-making tool, locating its promise in the counterstorytelling tradition (Baszile, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Williams, 1991). Moreover, I grapple with what it means to "love flesh" in the afterlife of white supremacy, given the psychic trauma (Collins, 1990; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Oliver, 2004; Woodson, 1933) that lingers on the spirits of Black folx in and beyond higher educational contexts.

I insert my positionality upfront as a way to unpack my relationship with the notion of *loving flesh*. Following my positionality, I review the literature on coloniality and its relationship to student development theory. From there, I borrow from the Black feminist canon to construct my theoretical framework and methodological approach. I conclude with recommendations for strengthening educators' relationships with Black students.

## CALL AND RESPONSE

I have grown accustomed to the ways K–12 schooling fails Black children. The damage has a particular cadence. The tone fluctuates from student to student. Its expressions vary. It goes by different names—imposter syndrome, internalized racism, uncritical assimilation, and self-doubt—but its root is always the same. Woodson (1933) called it "miseducation" and said:

If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it. . . . If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (p. 84)

I am convinced that the need for students to love themselves "here in this place" (Morrison, 1987, p. 88) of higher education, against structures of anti-Blackness that cannot

love them back, is as pressing now as it has ever been. With this notion in mind, I turn to Jasmine, the student whose essay guided this analysis.

Jasmine sat in the front row during every class meeting of our Black World Studies course, present in body and curiosity. She poured over the readings and spoke candidly about her experience as a Black woman on campus. Finding value in the readings and course discussions, Jasmine exclaimed, “I never learned this,” on more than one occasion. Beyond placing blame, increasingly, I wonder how educators might support the self-definition of Black folx (Okello, 2018) in ways that treat their minds, bodies, and spirits. Jasmine’s experience in the class culminated with a final reflection. Of the 10 Students of Color in her class section, I focused on Jasmine’s essay because of how she keys into themes of self-love as her primary takeaway from the course. In sharing her work, I recognize that cisgender Men of Color have a storied tendency to misinterpret Black women’s narratives (Christian, 1988). For this reason, it was vital to share my interpretations with Jasmine and to accept whatever feedback she had about those interpretations.

Given this approach, Jasmine could maintain possession of her narrative and, to some degree, have a say in its dissemination. Additionally, recognizing the inherent power differentials at play in my relationship with Jasmine, I sought feedback on my analysis from Black women who have attended, graduated, taught, and currently work at predominantly white institutions. Nevertheless, the potential for misappropriation exists; I hope to honor Jasmine by providing a rich analysis of the things she taught me with her essay as connected to the long tradition of Black theorists and writers who taught us both (Jasmine and myself) about loving Blackness. This exchange embodies what it means to call and respond, *vis-à-vis*, to engage in constructive relationships with Black students.

## NO ONE ESCAPES WITHOUT SCARS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Black folx are contending with a white gaze engineered as a mechanistic terror, imposed suffering, and unyielding anxiety pressed upon them (Sithole, 2016). As such, student development theorizing must answer questions that address Black folx’ perpetual need to justify their existence in the afterlife of colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Importantly, *colonialism* is different from *coloniality*. Colonialism “denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Coloniality “refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Thus, coloniality survives colonialism and is kept alive in literature, cultural patterns and ideals, ways of knowing, and, in this article, student development theorizing. Beyond simple aftermath, coloniality emerges and reemerges across time, place, and groups of people.

Scholars have addressed the effects of coloniality on oppressed people in research (e.g., hooks, 1990, 1992; Fanon, 1952, 1965; Freire, 1970), and yet few have theorized on the conundrum of self-hatred. Echoing this sentiment, bell hooks (1992) wrote: “The paucity of scholarly work looking at the issue of black self-hatred, examining the ways in which the colonization and exploitation of black people are reinforced by internalized racial hatred via white supremacist thinking, is awesome” (p. 11). As it relates to higher education, student development theory has broached a conversation on affirming the self (Kegan, 1982, 1994) and developing a

positive self-concept. With their notion of establishing identity Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested:

To establish one's identity is to develop a healthy self-concept and outlook towards oneself that is considerate of comfort with body and appearance; comfort with gender and sexual orientation; [a] sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context; clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyle; [a] sense of self in response to feedback from valued others; self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration. (p. 49)

While establishing identity accounts for the multiple considerations that pertain to self-concept, it does not deal with the historical and present structural patterns of anti-Blackness that make the project of lovingly gazing upon the self an arduous task for Black folx (Callier & Hill, 2019; Sithole, 2016).

Moreover, the surveillance of Black folx, materialized by anti-Blackness and systems of terror, means that Black folx must wrestle with external and internal disciplining that reads their bodies as unlovable things (Young, 2010) in and beyond higher education. Kegan's (1982, 1994) thesis on self-authorship heightened this tension.

### Coloniality and the Subject–Object Principle

Meaning-making complexity in self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Kegan, 1982, 1994) is held up by the subject–object principle, in which consciousness is regarded as the achievement of an object position. Hinging on the idea of cognitive complexity, the object position as an organizing principle erases the body as a site of knowing (Okello, 2018) and reinforces coloniality. Furthermore, the subject–object principle that undergirds self-authorship can trace its underpinnings to colonial thinking in Descartes' (1637/1909)

work. Formulating what is contemporarily known as *Cartesian dualism*—the separation of the mind and body—epistemology is a cognitive endeavor that leans on the first part of the statement: “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes, 1637/1909).

Ontology, or the question of being, I argue, is taken up in the second portion of this statement *I am*. Beneath *I am* one can locate “justification for the idea that ‘others are not’ or do not have being” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 253). A close reading of “I think, therefore I am” animates the more complex and historically acute rendering: “I think (others do not think, or do not think properly); therefore I am (others are-not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable)” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 253). Accordingly, Cartesian dualism (read: the subject–object principle) as noted above, privileges epistemology/cognition and simultaneously “hides both what could be regarded as the coloniality of knowledge (others do not think) and the coloniality of Being (others are not)” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 253). As coloniality marks Black folx as a *thing* (Gordon, 1997), the body carries no life or humanity worth honoring. Thus, coloniality takes root in the body as trauma, reinscribing messages that function to despise it. Consequently, the despised individual body acquiesces to coloniality and, in doing so, shoulders the ongoing weights of embodied trauma.

### Embodied Trauma

The body is central to the manifestation of trauma. Notably, the holistic body—as a mental, emotional, physiological, spiritual, and spatial entity—is absent in theorizations of holistic development and identity development such as the model of multiple dimensions of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), and the reconceptualized model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Torres and Hernández (2007) do take up the notion of racism as

a structural pattern that may instantiate an additional developmental task, yet this does not account for the ways history is bound up in constructions of anti-Blackness nor the centrality of the body in its always already antagonistic relationship with society (Dumas, 2014). If, as Dumas (2014) puts forth, Black suffering is not only expected, it is necessary for the production of schooling sites, a central question becomes: How do Black folx exist in their bodies in this historical moment (Okello, 2018)? Accounting for the body and history, Okello and White (2019) call for a melding of subject–object poles into an embodied position.

Extending hooks's (1992) meditation, there is unmet attention to the effects of coloniality, or what I call here *embodied trauma*, on Black folx in higher education contexts (DeGruy, 2005). Herein, embodied trauma represents the unconscious yet pernicious effects of oppression that stem from coloniality. While there is research that addresses the relationship between trauma and identity development (see Shalka, 2019), embodied trauma is undertheorized. Fanon (1965) suggested that the adverse "effects of the oppressors are 'deposited into the bones' of the oppressed. . . . Colonization and oppression operate through depositing the unwanted effects of the dominant group onto those othered by that group in order to sustain its privileged position" (p. xiv), necessitating an examination of psychic space. For Oliver (2004), understanding and responding to colonization in the psychic space, demands a close analysis of the effects of oppression and the production of those effects in particular social situations.

### Spirit Murder

Baszile (2016), recounting an experience that deemed her Blackness as deficit and a detriment to her ability to do well in higher education, wrote: "[I] talked too Black. [I] acted too Black. [I] talked too much about Black things.

[I] had too many questions about being Black" (p. 6). Remembering this attempted spirit murder, she went on to say that although she survived, "she had not escaped completely unscathed. No one ever does" (p. 6), as she suffered wounds in places she could not see or touch. The wounds were buried deep in her subconscious self. Discussing her cohort's admission to higher education, Chatelain (2019) echoed this sentiment: "We were offered scholarships and retention counselors in exchange for scorn and contempt. We were told to be grateful and quiet" (para. 1). In unison, Bradley (2019) suggested that "even though [we] Black scholars and students, in most cases, have worked hard and overcome significant impediments to get here, maintaining a modicum of dignity means realizing that we may never be fully included at our colleges. . . . I have also witnessed other Black professionals lose parts of their souls to fulfill the compromise" (para. 1). According to Cridland-Hughes and King (2015), the traditional curriculum softly kills Black students' spirit and humanity. In a similar vein, Johnson and Bryan (2016) explained that Black professors are spirit murdered in educational sites.

Returning to Baszile (2016), coloniality, buried deep in the subconscious, involves a "process and the condition whereby the main fabric of one's being is de-ontologized, and worse yet it is done not in spite of you, but really through you" (p. 7). Without this examination, "without continually interpreting and reinterpreting the meaning of our actions and values" (Oliver, 2004, p. xxiii), one risks normalizing the unproductive acceptance of coloniality and, subsequently, trauma.

### Prioritizing Self-Love

As hooks (1992) posited, the only way to intervene on embodied trauma—the result of coloniality and the ongoing project of anti-

Blackness (Dumas, 2016) that marks Black folk as perpetually problematic (Baszile, 2018)—is to prioritize of self-love (Okello, 2018). For Nash (2013), self-love emerges from “an active working on the self, preparing it for the labor of social engagement, and for the task of advocating for the survival and wholeness of entire people” (p. 10). Self-love understands that challenging self-hatred, marked by “the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints. It is not a discourse on the universal, but the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different” (Fanon, 1965, p. 6). Self-love, according to Baszile (2016), is an act of struggle against spirit murder that pulls on the resilience legacies of Black folk “to keep on keeping on despite the exploitation, misrepresentation, and invisibility that often defined their lives” (p. 6). Baby Suggs’s rhetorical attention to naming the flesh (Spillers, 1987) and its various parts inevitably rub against the colonizing scripts that position the body as illegible, without form, and something to be controlled (Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 1987).

Naming the flesh, self-love, is in fact a return to the self before coloniality. More specifically, it intervenes on the subject–object relationship that both calls for a mind–body split and denounces the body as a site of meaning. Furthermore, naming flesh acknowledges and understands the sustained nature of trauma and the ways educative sites function to murder the spirits of Black folk. Reconciling these truths may hinge on what Dillard (2012) called *learning to (re)member*, or reconnection to one’s core self.

## BLACK FEMINIST LITERARY THEORY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Against this backdrop, responding to the words of Alice Walker, Dillard (2012) called on Black

women to write the things that they want to read and “all the things [we] should have been able to read” (p. x), effectively locating the power of Black [women] people in collective remembrance and relationality. In *Beloved*, readers can experience that relationality in the rhetorical creativity that Baby Suggs deployed. Baby Suggs introduced readers to the aesthetic and theoretical possibilities of what hooks (1989) called talking back.

The project of talking back for Black folk in and beyond higher education contexts remembers (Dillard, 2012) that “even in the face of power structures”—in this sense embodied trauma—“it remains possible for each of us, especially those of us who are members of oppressed and exploited groups, . . . to define and determine alternative standards, to decide on the nature and extent of compromise” (p. 8). Talking back is a decolonizing gesture, because it forces one to endure the trauma that accompanies freedom. (Re)membering knows that coloniality has been a long shadow over the experiences of Black folk, disembodied them, and encouraging the adoption and internalization of whiteness (Freire, 1970). This participation in whiteness (Baszile, 2015; Feagin, 2010) submits to the legitimacy of “privileged theoretical perspective or ‘good research’ that supports patriarchal, racist, xenophobic” regimes (Dillard, 2012, p. 19). This natural order controls what counts as truth and how truth is written and interpreted in academia.

For Dillard (2012), remembering, which is to say, talking back to the coloniality of being that produces embodied trauma, must face two particular realities: seduction and forgetfulness (Edwards, 2016). These twin conspirators surface when we “have been enticed away from ourselves” (p. 15), accepting white rational ways of being as one’s own. Issuing the reminder that “yonder, they do not love your flesh,” Dillard posited that Black

folx should interrogate both structural powers and patterns of behavior that facilitate their sense of self and being in the world. Resisting the seductions attached to the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) can be found in communion. Effectively defining and determining alternative standards (hooks, 1989) is to challenge and play with rhetoric (Williams, 1991) outside the bounds of conventional canonical thought. Black feminist, Barbara Christian (1988) wrote it this way:

People of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? (p. 68)

Black folx, and Black women in particular, have long wielded the pen to write the self and collective into being (Christian, 1988). Through womanist testimony and textual pedagogy, they have understood that assigning readings and writings in the classroom are all the more critical because of their capacity to create the onto-epistemic space to “teach what is often silenced” (Edwards & Baszile, 2016, p. 87). In this tradition, Baszile (2015) noted Black abolitionists “countered proslavery propaganda that insisted that slaves were uncivilized beasts of burden who were happy with their lot in life . . . by writing, publishing, and circulating detailed arguments against slavery and the wretched treatment of free Blacks” (p. 242). Operationalizing early iterations of counterstorytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Williams, 1991), Black abolitionists challenged rationality by exposing

contradictions between slavery and Western, United States conceptions of equality (Baszile, 2015). Counterstorytelling is a method that minoritized scholars have deployed to invoke voices and experiences left out of the academy.

According to Baszile (2018): “Perhaps better suited than theory for getting at oppression as an affective phenomenon, . . . literature [stories] can show . . . the contradictions and complications in the relationship between subject positions and subjectivity, between the social and the psyche, oppression, and desire” (p. 5). Furthermore, as Cheng (2001) explained: “Literature allows us to tease out the complex social etiology of racial grief” (p. 15), which is to say, literature taps into the core of interlocking emotions such as “desire and doubt, affirmation and rejection, projection and identification, management and dysfunction” (p. 15). In the next section, I discuss the methodological approach that enabled me to work with and read Jasmine’s curricular experience.

### **Black Feminist Literary Criticism**

The material consequences of anti-Blackness have functioned to unrecognize Black onto-epistemologies as high theory (Smith, 1979) in the student development theoretical canon. Nevertheless, Black folx have always left record (Smith, 1979). As the findings communicate, essays and literary works were a method by which Black folx constructed alternative pathways of livability for their communities. For these reasons, I deployed a Black feminist literary criticism (Durham, 2014; Henderson, 1989; Smith, 1979; Wall, 1989) to analyze the impact of a Black existential curriculum on the onto-epistemological development of one Black woman student. This methodology enabled me to clarify what Lisa Anderson (2008) calls *aesthetics*, or “the elements of the text/performance that invoke a particular history, politics, or philosophy of a



‘community’ (broadly construed)” (p. 115). Moreover, this methodology instructed my analysis to key into themes and strategies theorized through Joy James’s (1999) concept of limbos, which considers the various ways Black folk progressively move forward despite the vulnerability of their positions. Limbos are known to entail “vulnerable backbreaking postures as well as isolated states” (James, 1999, p. 41). According to James, limbo, in its primary usage, references liminal spaces, “oblivion and neglect, or suspension between states” (p. 42). As choreographers of agency, Black feminisms’ conservative or liberal ideologies conduct varying limbos as they negotiate the plurality of its meanings.

For this study I used as data a final reflection paper submitted by Jasmine, who was enrolled in my Black World Studies course between January 2019 and May 2019. Jasmine, a Black woman, was a first-year student in her second semester at a predominantly white institution. I was drawn to her contributions because I interpreted her time in class as a search for something more. Furthermore, her approach to the class throughout the semester went beyond merely receiving a grade: Jasmine approached the class eager for a way to make sense of her worlds. Heeding Callier and Hill’s (2019) call to look without turning away, to see Blackness, this analysis is partially a way to say, “I see you, Jasmine.” Among the several assignments in the course, I hone in on the final reflection paper because of the expansive (entirety of the course) nature of the questions that prompted student writings. The data stem from three separate sections of the course. Each course met 2–3 times each week (depending on the section) for 15 weeks. The class period that met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes. The other two sections met on Monday and Wednesday for 1 hour and 55 minutes. This assignment required students to reflect on, revise, and articulate

their conceptualization of dignity and self-definition as they witnessed and made sense of the concepts throughout the course. I examined Jasmine’s essay to dive deep into the nuances of her experience. For the final, Jasmine offered her thoughts on the following questions:

- What new representations, if any, does exposure to this curriculum produce?
- How does one exist in the body that they hold in this historical moment?

Black feminist scholars look for precedence and insights in the interpretation of other Black feminist works of art and literature (Smith, 1979), and as such, patterned coding and analytical memo writing (Saldaña, 2009) were used to draw out themes. During my close read of Jasmine’s essay, I marked and starred passages that responded directly to the stated questions. I wrote additional notes/phrases in the margins that reflected “loving flesh,” as denoted by Morrison (1987). I also wrote comments in the margins about how my positionality might be influencing my read of the essay. Using these annotations as guiding tools, I looked for themes in and across Black feminist understandings of self-love to ensure that my reading of Jasmine’s words were relevant and consistent.

## LOVING FLESH: FINDINGS

A Black feminist literary analysis of Jasmine’s final reflection essay yielded three essential ideas to contend with Black self-hatred (hooks, 1992; Oliver, 2004; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Woodson, 1933) toward the cultivation of self-love. Consistent with the work of what hooks (1992) called *loving Blackness*, unsettling the coloniality of being (Wynter, 2003) reinforced by higher education involves (a) naming Black self-hatred and its origins as a production of white supremacist logic, (b) locating self-love as the resistance of white supremacist logic, and (c) understanding Black self-love as

impossible without engaging in decoloniality (Fanon, 1965; Oliver, 2004; Maldonado-Torres, 2007), a process dependent on critical consciousness (Baszile, 2018).

### Naming Black Self-Hatred

How “black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). In her essay, Jasmine began naming the deposits of self-hatred attached to her being: “I am now aware of the importance of self-defining—something the world told me was not possible. The world labeled me as angry, the girl who would be lucky to attend college. The world labels me as just another Black girl.” The deposits of self-hatred, according to Jasmine, are indictments that society has projected on to her. Readers should assume that these stereotypes are increasingly challenging to wrestle with despite how far one has progressed in the Western, United States K–16 pipeline, as Jasmine appeared to shoulder these sentiments well into her first year as an undergraduate student. One must wonder if Jasmine had opportunities throughout her educational tenure where she could look at and address these labels for a sustained period.

These labels, as expressions of self-hatred, it seems, take on different names in the lives of Black students and yet revolve around the deficiency of Blackness—attempts at the spirit murder of Black people. If one is unalterably *too*—too loud, too angry, too Black, too much, too passionate—they are always weighing the consequences of being and forever in a state of dissonance (Oliver, 2004; Taylor & Reynolds, 2019). Self-doubt, an unconscious effect of oppression that governs our actions and values, is perhaps the “sharpest tool in the arsenal of domination, precisely because it cuts from the inside out” (Baszile, 2016, p. 7). As Jasmine lifted,

self-hatred is a wound that hides underneath in places not seen and rarely touched, living at the root of one’s epistemology. In naming self-hatred, Jasmine attends to the colonial condition: “My experiences as a Black woman are real.” The subtext of Jasmine’s proclamation suggested that Black women are inherently unknowable, and their nuanced experiences are unworthy of analysis and acknowledgment. Her comments, fleshed in historicity, hearken to reminders of transatlantic captivities that reduced Black folx to bodies of cargo. In essence, Jasmine professed a way of thinking that can envision the self as deserving of humanity, a maneuver that is emblematic of what Collins (1990) calls a Black feminist epistemology.

This naming of an alternative brings to bear the fact that Black folx are matriculating to and through various educational contexts managing the persistent threats of exploitation, misrepresentation, erasure, and invisibility altogether. In doing so, they are absorbing (Okello & White, 2019) these murderous attempts on their spirit and simultaneously making meaning of these messages as self-defining practice (Okello, 2018). Working on the unconscious level, the messages trap students in mazes and images, seemingly without the adequate tools to free themselves. Jasmine’s statement lets readers know that Black folx, though agile and able to survive these murderous attempts at their spirit, long for something otherwise:

I’ve learned that there will always be individuals that attack your identity/ identities. I believe that this course has taught us to respond to anti-Blackness by standing firm in your identity. There is anti-Blackness in our classrooms. There is anti-Blackness in our dorms. There is anti-Blackness on any quad you decide to take on. That is the reality of being a Black student here.

Armed with a new language, Jasmine can name

the logics and sites of self-hatred in her life and on campus. This new language opened up new possibilities of being. Hence, Jasmine is learning to reassemble pieces of herself torn apart by the ongoing legacies of coloniality.

### Self-Love as Resistance to White Supremacist Logic

Jasmine, commented on the course's broader impact:

I'm now awake. One of my favorite textual readings from this semester stated: "As we go about wake work, we must think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of Blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human condemned to death . . . that is Black being in the wake."

Reflecting on the legacy of colonialism, hooks (1992) noted that Black folx must create models consistently, as "colonialism means that we must always rethink everything" (p. 2); said differently, the decision to love oneself is an untenable position in a colonial society that depends on dominance for its subsistence. As a challenge to the coloniality of being, Jasmine discussed the importance of "loving myself above anything and everything others may say about my hair, skin color, or abilities." This turn to loving the self in the throes of anti-Black logics that would have one to question and rethink their living, in itself, is a form of resistance as it makes a statement about what and how one may matter in society. Resolutely, Jasmine provided some insight into how structures of domination function to determine perceptions of goodness and acceptability. She noted, as June Jordan (2005) astutely named, that her body was wrong and as a result restricted by the gaze and expectations of whiteness. One should conclude, as Callier and Hill (2019) conferred, that processes of anti-Blackness in the United States

have come to view the subjectivities of Black folx as "unintelligible, aberrant, excessive" (p. 12) and beyond normal—nonmale, nonwhite, or otherwise understood as nondominant.

Additionally, anti-Blackness, as an extension of coloniality, is not merely a phenomenon that one inherits, but "a tortuous, melancholic path of alienation, resistance, aggression, and then finally, the domestication of that aggression as 'love'" (Cheng, 2001, p. 17). Jasmine's exposure to Black literary works, allowed her to see, touch, and imagine herself anew:

"As they become known to us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring ideas" (Audre Lorde). This past semester created a shift. The opportunity to study my own identity was presented, and I never imagined it bringing so much clarity and freedom.

Appearing to find value in Lorde's (1984) words, Jasmine can return to and explore former ways of knowing with "curiosity and openness" (Fleetwood, 2011, p. 7) such that new ways of being may begin to emerge.

Honing in on *seeing* as a political project, Jasmine implored readers to examine how their peculiar angles of vision have constructed her presence in educational contexts:

I can now say, being Black and seeking higher education at a predominantly white institution, was something that I was not fully equipped for. There have been times that I've cried because this identity can be overwhelming. No one quite understands unless they hold a place within a Black body themselves. There have already been instances where I have been sold short of this highly valued education. There have been times where assumptions have been made. There have been times where all of my identities have had a hard day, and it results in burnout.

But in writing this paper, I cannot help but think, how many Black students have felt that? The sad reality is probably every single one of them.

Here, readers learn that Jasmine has had to vigorously challenge distorted representations, inviting researchers and educators to consider the many slights and nonrecognitions that pervade her experience. As noted by Jasmine, seeing as resistance was a “power-move” or what allowed her to assert the self through deliberate actions. She built on this definition: “I have been taught that I have the power to define who I am. [The] possibilities are endless because of what Black folx have experienced, [are] experiencing, and will experience.” The language of “possibilities” here refers to onto-epistemological knowing outside of Jasmine’s formal schooling. A product of coloniality, loving herself is “something the world [said] was not possible.” Jasmine can unseat this fallacy because of the inherent counter-narratives of Black letters and literature.

Jasmine’s engagement and dialogue with the textual embodiment of Black folx compelled her to question the taken-for-granted, understudied, and scarcely taught experiences of Black folx in this Western, United States context. Until this point in her education tenure, the usual schooling circumstance convinced Jasmine that her lived experience was not real. She observed and appeared to be cultivating a language to talk back (hooks, 1989) to the deficit-minded theorizing that had wrapped her learning.

### Engaging in Decoloniality Toward Self-Love

For Black folx, “long before white supremacists ever reached the shores of what we now call the United States, they constructed images of blackness and black people to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their

political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave” (hooks, 1992, p. 2). Against this backdrop, Jasmine asserted: “With knowing more, I’m able to be more. In return, being more drives me to imagine possibilities that I may have.” Building and sustaining a pedagogy of self-love, as Jasmine displayed, is committing to decoloniality. Maldonado-Torres (2007) described this phenomenon:

With decolonization, I do not have in mind simply the end of formal colonial relations, as it happened throughout the Americas in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. I am instead referring to a confrontation with the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies that were put in place or strengthened by European modernity as it colonized and enslaved populations through the planet. In short, with decolonization, I am thinking of oppositions to the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being—it may be more consistent to refer to it as “decoloniality.” (p. 261)

Jasmine echoed this sentiment: “It is through self-definition that minoritized bodies quicken the energies of their souls, negotiating the dehumanizing advances of Western designations of citizenship.” In this way, self-definition is staking claims to a dignity not often afforded. Furthermore, part of the process of decoloniality for Jasmine involved “allowing [the self] to dream and imagine more—getting rid of the tendency to think that possibilities are out of reach . . . to find possibility in holding a place within my inconvenient labeled body.” This sense of replacing former tendencies is an effort to break with colonial logic.

Alternatively, Jasmine is forwarding decolonial ways of knowing and being that endeavor to create a new reality (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Emphasizing the tools of decoloniality as situating oppressed knowledge as a primary analytic for meaning-making, Jasmine wrote:

We were able to focus on the Black body, Black figures, and creative approaches. Learning from this perspective has encouraged me to no longer think that [reimagining myself in the world] is something that cannot be done or is “too hard” to achieve. It has shifted my being to think of it as a norm.

Jasmine’s testimony demonstrates the power of culturally grounded theories and works to refashion one’s sense of place in the world. Jasmine also illustrated the importance of relationship and community to the process of decoloniality. In an essay that inquired about one’s unique experience, she invoked the pronoun *we* throughout her essay. For Jasmine, loving herself anew meant seeing and being seen, both in text and with the community of learners inside the classroom setting:

It is a vision of a free Black future that keeps *us* on our feet. Bodies in motion, *we* strut despite the persistent riddle of history, hard at *our* heels. *We* strut toward a future that is neither clear nor promised. *We* strut with consummate style. *We* strut with surpassing grace. *We* strut, therefore. (emphasis added; see Asim, 2018)

Insistence on the collective *we*, marks a call to consider incorporating diverse epistemologies as a form of community building that extends across generations. Importantly, the collective *we* can find root in the ways Women of Color (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), Black women in particular, have long understood healing (Bambara, 1980) and survival in the afterlife of colonization and white supremacy (Dillard, 2012; Lorde, 1984). As Cleage (2005) noted, Black feminism itself is a reminder “that we are part of something better, truer, deeper” (p. 15). This parable suggests that Black students are forming relationships with Black writers and theorists beyond simply reading texts. Black writers and theorists like Toni Morrison wrote for

*us*. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Black students are affectively, emotionally, and psychologically encountering a self-defining and intentionally curated love in and through Black writers and theorists.

In short, Jasmine can love her flesh, because those before her loved her flesh. Relatedly, Jasmine takes up the responsibility of intergenerational loving when she stated:

I have been granted the opportunity to learn from this perspective, so now I hold a responsibility to grant others the opportunity. I aspire to carry this responsibility that will affect my Black family from generation to generation. This is one of the greatest possibilities that I believe we must take hold of throughout our lifetimes. I’m thankful to know that ending generational patterns is possible.

Decisions to love one’s flesh, as a project of decoloniality, thus, becomes a process of radical relationality (Nash, 2018) and witnessing. The act of witnessing describes “Black feminist theory’s investment in a rich and political counter-history, one that draws on memory—personal, collective, or embodied—to demand an ethical reckoning with past and present” (Nash, 2018, p. 116). Building this capacity, Jasmine embraced the responsibility to bear witness to what she has seen and experienced.

## UNDISCIPLINED: A DISCUSSION

Ontology, which is to say, being in a Western, United States context are narrative constructions (Baszile, 2018; Callier & Hill, 2019; Kendi, 2016). Identity, or how one sees and understands the self in the world, is a blend of stories told, shared, and received. On this premise, identities can be “narratively damaged and narratively repaired” (Baszile, 2018, p. 268); stated differently, master narratives, constructed by those in dominant

positions in society, reproduce oppressed positions in educational contexts. Framed largely by master narratives, Black being has been misrepresented, misrecognized, and erased in higher education curricula and the cocurricular. As a result, Black folx “are often disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe [their] own annihilation” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 15). This disciplined thinking reinforces and reproduces what Sylvia Wynter (1994) has called their “narratively condemned status” (p. 70). As such, this manuscript pondered what it means to become *undisciplined* by adding dimension to the cause of loving Blackness.

By examining letters and literature as theory, a conceptual break from Western social science, I investigated how one student experienced this theorizing and what it taught her about learning to love Blackness anew. The findings shared elevate the importance of counter-narratives for Black individuals as central to their colonial-made present bout with self-hatred. As illustrated, counter-narratives perform three crucial tasks for Black folx in naming Black self-hatred and its origins as a production of white supremacist logic, locating self-love as the resistance of white supremacist logic, and recognizing that Black self-love is impossible without engaging in decoloniality.

## LOOK WITHOUT TURNING AWAY: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Three critical recommendations surface from these findings as guides for educators and practitioners as they think about their work and relationships with Black folx in and beyond educational sites. First, educators and practitioners must openly and consistently trouble the waters, which is to challenge the seductions (Dillard, 2012) that have had detrimental effects on the minds, bodies, and

spirits of Black folx in and beyond higher education. Second, educators and practitioners should consider incorporating counter-narratives related to Black folx’ survival praxis across time. Finally, educators and practitioners should provide Black students opportunities to talk back (hooks, 1989) to seductions by attending to their affective lives.

## Troubling the Waters

Loving flesh, as loving Blackness, we must be willing to look at the prevailing undercurrents that necessitate the need to center love. To account for the unconscious effects of oppression, we must look sharply and plainly at the ordinariness of coloniality in institutional life and what it requires of Black students daily. Looking without turning away opens up a space for educators and practitioners to interrogate their motives and the reasoning that undergirds the development of their programs and policies. For example, what are the guiding metrics, named and hidden, that stir up beliefs in Black people that they might not be good enough, smart enough, or rational enough for the higher education classroom and context? In other words, educators and practitioners might ask, What is one’s contribution to the spirit murder of Black students (Williams, 1991), where spirit murder describes “the wounds left on the flesh, psyche, and even [the] soul of those who experience violence and the wounds, often invisible” (Nash, 2018, pp. 123–124). Acknowledging the potential for spirit murder is a question of complicity and responsibility that endeavors to organize education contexts that promote and ensure the vitality of spirit. To counter this complicity, educators and researchers might do more to name, for instance, the prevailing, designed nature of imposter syndrome in and on the lives of Black folx. In doing so, they would help to normalize anti-Black aggression and cultivate strategies for working against its perpetual assault.

## Incorporating Counter-Narratives

The notion of counter-narratives may move along a set of terms that align them with concepts like diversity and inclusion. The language of diversity and inclusion has become institutionalized in United States colleges and universities (Ahmed, 2012), often absorbed in mission and vision statements. Nash (2018), argued: “Differences articulated as critiques of the presumed benevolence of political-economic institutions become absorbed within an administrative ethos that recast those differences as testaments to the progress of the university and the resuscitation of a common national culture” (p. 23). The language of “differences” refers to the inclusion of diverse and critical perspectives into institutional life.

In this way, counter-narratives should not be institutionalized such that they become nonperformatives (Ahmed, 2012). Instead, educators and practitioners should organize curricula and cocurricular events through the lens of counter-narratives. Meaningful theorizing with oppressed knowledge may provoke a trickling up (Spade, 2015) that begins to think about the standpoint experiences of Black folx as more than oppositional, but a generative movement toward creative and expansive self-actualization. Building on Walker’s (1983) call to create the things we should have been able to read, educators should be mindful of their roles as embodiments of the norm or breathing counter-narratives. With attention to the latter, the ways dark educators (Love, 2019) normalize wellness, care, creativity, and mindfulness of spirit, model for others what is possible in research and educative sites.

### Attending to Affect

In theorizing with Morrison’s “loving flesh” and bearing witness to Jasmine’s responses, educators and practitioners should note the

Black feminist dialectic of felt and intellectual practice. That is, to feel is intellectual, as intellectualizing is to feel. “Loving flesh” becomes a “power move” because of its versatility as an intellectual, creative, and political project that is lived and felt. Attending to the affective lives of students is an invitation to consider how systems of oppression feel and to suggest that “simply naming structures fails to do justice to how they move against (and inside of) our bodies” (Nash, 2018, p. 30). Reframing Du Bois’s (1903) question “What does it feel like to be a problem?” attending to affect in the lives of Black folx asks this question with specificity related to their experiences in the higher education context.

Along with the findings outlined above, educators and researchers might ask about students’ affective experiences in the classroom, the campus, the dining hall, and residence hall, as learning to love themselves might be different across various sites. Additionally, in and through Black feminist theorizing, attending to affect allows educators and researchers to center increasingly relevant terms like *survival*, *loss*, *pain*, and *desire*, equipping Black folx with the tools to protect their spirits.

## PROTECT YOUR SPIRIT: CONCLUSION

Black folx need space to articulate injuries of the flesh—embodied wounds, particularly those of the spirit and psyche. Baby Suggs’s sermon is an exemplar for naming the harm done and imagining a healing provision that understands self-love, not as self-indulgence, but rather self-preservation (Lorde, 1984). If coloniality has been about the theoretical and experiential erasure of Black folx from onto-epistemological canons, then Black feminist theorizing and Black literary works may facilitate decolonial ways of being. This approach can urge Black folx to “create new

systems of value that attempt to rescue the self from internalizing a capitalist logic” that allows one only to see the self in terms of wealth, use, value, or object (Nash, 2018, p. 79). Self-love, as loving flesh, is personal, discursive, and collective, engendering a willingness to look, see, and account for the embodied lives of

Black folx in higher education and beyond.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Wilson Kwamogi Okello, Department of Educational Leadership, University of North Carolina Wilmington, Watson College of Education, Wilmington, NC 28403; okellow@uncw.edu

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