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Witnessing the Pedagogical Impact of Ethnic Studies Through an Intergenerational Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

Ethnic studies emerged as a discipline that centered the axiology, ontology, and epistemology of BIPOC communities across space and time (Kelley, 2020). At its inception and over the course of the last 50 years, this discipline examined sites of resistance from racially and ethnically minoritized perspectives while offering transformative dreams for an educationally and socially just world. Through the lens of endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000), this collaborative autoethnographic essay offers the intergenerational testimonies of a Black mother and daughter documenting our experiences with ethnic studies pedagogies as students at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and later as pre-k-12 educators in the Deep South. Our life notes serve as our communal witnessing of the impact of ethnic studies on our pedagogical development over four decades in pre-k to 12 educational settings.

Keywords: Collaborative autoethnography, intergenerational, culturally affirming pedagogy

Witnessing the Pedagogical Impact of Ethnic Studies Through an Intergenerational Collaborative Autoethnography

Ethnic studies emerged as an academic discipline on college campuses in the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a response to Eurocentric post-secondary models of education and served as a direct antagonist to positivist philosophical theories (Banales, 2019; Kelley, 2020). These hegemonic models of academia reproduced social, educational, and economic inequities in historically divested communities. The aims of pioneering ethnic studies activists were not to simply re-create racially and ethnically diverse intellectual silos steeped in the capitalistic structure of American society; students demanded the creation of community-based ontological and epistemological centers committed to decolonizing inequitable structures (Kelley, 2020).

Grounded in endarkened feminist epistemology, the following essay explores the intergenerational experiences of two Black women educators, Priscilla (mother) and Meghan (daughter), who graduated, respectively, from HBCUs in the 1970s and early 2000s. Endarkened feminist

epistemology (EFE) centers the racialized and gendered lived experiences of Black women as experts in our ways of being and knowing (see Dillard, 2000). We begin with a brief discussion of the creation and development of ethnic studies programs at both predominately white[32] institutions (PWIs) and HBCUs in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then examine our (re)imagination of ethnic studies pedagogy and praxis rooted in our endarkened freedom dreams through our personal narratives, or life notes. Throughout this collaborative autoethnography, we reflect on the similarities and differences between our experiences with ethnic studies as students and the impact of the lessons we learned on our pedagogy as pre-k-12 educators. Each life note testifies to the promise of ethnic studies pedagogies as the spark that ignites the imaginations of all educators (Dillard, 2000; Lapadat, 2017).

History of Ethnic Studies at HBCUs

Andrews (2020) argued that ethnic studies departments were not largely founded on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) because of the history of these spaces as elitist "institutions funded by well-meaning white philanthropists" who sought to uphold the ideals of separate but equal through paternalistic means (p. 17). Despite this contradiction in HBCUs' stated values and their more nefarious beginnings, research conducted in the last decade highlights the positive impact of HBCU faculty members' focus on cultural validation has had on Black students' racial identity development (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022). Through exposure to culturally informed learning experiences during our tenure at HBCUs, we developed pedagogies as educators that centered our students' funds of knowledge. Our culturally affirming encounters during our undergraduate years demonstrate an example of Williams et al.'s (2021) findings of:

> …two approaches used to promote Black students' college success— advancing culturally relevant knowledge and culturally-informed pedagogy by embedding the experiences of Black people into research and curriculum; and embracing Black cultural validation by connecting with Black communities and students' racial backgrounds (p. 752).

From speech and debate to Africana diasporic films, our ethnic studies coursework at Grambling State University and Howard University chartered the course for our ontological and epistemological journeys as pre-k-12 educators. Banales (2019) noted the counterhegemonic impact of the creation of ethnic studies departments at PWIs and explained how "ethnic studies as a field transformed the traditional understanding of what the academy counts as knowledge…" (p. 232). However, the history of ethnic studies departments, particularly Black studies departments, at HBCUs was more contentious (Zulu, 2018). Why would a historically Black college and/or university need a Black studies department if the entire institution were dedicated to the academic well-being of Black students? Ethnic studies represented safe spaces for racially minoritized students to discuss their unique histories and lived experiences while imagining futures that eradicated systems of oppression. Interdisciplinary undergraduate and graduate ethnic studies programs at PWIs have thrived for 50 years. On HBCU campuses, however, Charles P. Henry

[32] We do not capitalize the "w" in white as it relates racial and/or ethnic identity due to our intentional efforts to decenter whiteness and disrupt the focused attention from the perspective of a white gaze (Davis, 2019; Jackson, 2020).

argued that ethnic studies departments were not prioritized with the same zeal or "level of urgency" (Zulu, 2018, p. 92).

Beginning Our Process of Communal Witnessing

Our process began when Meghan contacted Priscilla to inquire about the possibility of collaborating on a writing project based on their experiences as alumni of HBCUs and pre-k to 12 educators. Priscilla had published her personal poetry in various anthologies over the years, but she had never explicitly written about her experiences as a secondary educator. We decided to use life notes as our method for presenting our narratives because of our focus on rendering research texts that honored our lived experiences as Black women. Within the tenets of endarkened feminist epistemology, our narrative reflections and musings embodied the mosaic of our co-constructed knowledge (Dillard, 2000).

As we considered the ways that we enacted ethnic studies pedagogies in the Deep South, we reflected on our black sense of place (McKittrick, 2011) and the ways that our racial and cultural histories were transmitted from generation to generation. Our bodies have been physically, emotionally, and spiritually tied to the land in southwest Louisiana where we were both raised and later taught pre-k to 12th grade. It was important for us to write honestly and to ruminate on how our praxis revealed larger truths about how we as Black women educators engaged with our students. Through our process of communal witnessing, we connected our experiences as mother and daughter to our shared understanding of the importance of documenting the lessons we learned about teaching ethnic studies to pre-k to 12th-grade students in a geographical location steeped in historic and contemporary anti-black racial violence.

In the first life note presented, Priscilla reflects on how her lack of experiences with ethnic studies at Grambling and a chance encounter with a supplemental textbook of Black literature became the spark that led to her journey into teaching African American studies. She also discusses how that spark ignited her passion for public speaking instruction. The second life note focuses on Meghan's exposure to Black studies at different points in her life and the impact that exposure had on her trajectory as an early childhood educator. She connects her ethnic studies pedagogy to her enactment of Black fugitivity as a means of intellectual survival and resistance.

Priscilla's Life Note: (Re)Imagining Ethnic Studies as Being Seen and Heard

I graduated from Grambling on December 19, 1975. I started in the summer of 1972; I graduated in three years because I went for three summers. I feel especially blessed to have attended Grambling State University because it prepared me from the inside out to be an educator who not only teaches but inspires students to be their very best, regardless of career choice. Although I was exposed to professors of diverse backgrounds and cultures, such as England, South Africa, and India, it was my interaction with proud, caring, brilliant professors who looked like me, that solidified my path as a lifelong educator (Williams et al., 2022). Children of all ages prosper when they can identify with role models who resemble them in physical likeness, speech, mode of dress, cultural practices, and family dynamics. My professors' racial and ethnic identities greatly affected my development as an undergraduate student at an HBCU and my understanding of what it meant to be an educator. I did not take any courses on African American literature at Grambling, however.

In 1978, I started teaching senior English at Plaisance High School, which was 99% African American. There was a supplemental text with compiled entries of African American prose and poetry provided by the school board. It was divided into two volumes. That was my first experience with literature that was strictly African American. I do not know if the textbook had been used previously, but the children seemed aware of African American literature and were extremely receptive. From what I understand, the children had access to African American literature at church before they even came to school. They had annual Black history programs at their schools and churches. They regularly participated in rallies sponsored by both the school and community organizations, such as Black sororities and fraternities.

In my first few years as a teacher in Plaisance, I brought an additional focus on public speaking to the school that was a result of my public speaking course at Grambling. It was part of the regular curriculum. I taught my students the same types of speeches that I had learned in college. Their assignments were not about memorizing other people's words; they were developing their own speeches for different purposes that they would need throughout life. There is no greater builder of self-esteem than acceptance; my students' fiction and nonfiction essays and poetry were submitted to annual national contests; many were published poets. Anthologies displaying their work were donated to the school's library. Through observing the practices of first-year teachers who are successful with teaching African American students, Ladson-Billings (2002) determined that the source of the successful teaching was due to the teachers' insistence on success and their understanding of their students' backgrounds and interests. I cultivated my students' rich funds of knowledge (see Love, 2019) by building upon the strong public speaking traditions of the community.

Meghan's Life Note: (Re)Imagining Ethnic Studies as a Fugitive Space

I first became interested in Black Studies when I was around 10 or 11 years old. I can remember reading books by Carter G. Woodson, Frances Cress Welsing, and Ivan Van Sertima when I entered middle school. As a child of the 1980s and 1990s, my love of Black culture was inspired by the resurgence of Pan-Africanism in the late 20th century. Throughout high school, I listened to music by liberation-focused hip-hop artists such as Mos Def, Talib Kweli, The Roots, and Dead Prez. My demonstration of Black fugitivity was rooted in practices of refusal or disengagement with academic spaces that had been offered to me as traditional routes of escape (Sojoyner, 2017). I decided to study disciplines that offered the most promising opportunities to break away from the systems that had such a stronghold on my life as a Black girl in south Louisiana. I decided to study anthropology and African American studies at Howard because I wanted to grow academically and socially in a space dedicated to Black people.

I soon discovered the tense relationship between the more militant faculty in Black studies departments on my campus and the conservative Black administrative leaders. This tension served as the beginning of my understanding of the "radical conceptions of Blackness" upon which Black studies was founded (see Andrews, 2020, p. 19). The elite ranks of Howard University often clashed with the abolitionist aims of students like me who were direct products of an inequitable American educational system. My passion for Black studies was rooted in my desire to dismantle systems of oppression, not to replicate them. This requires a necessary epistemological shift in ethnic studies departments at HBCUs. These spaces should not seek to replace a white gaze with a Black one. They must push the boundaries of what is to (re)envision what could be in higher learning

environments meant to challenge dominant discourses. Black studies in the U.S. became a way to comfortably imitate dominant discourses in academia instead of a subversive discipline. Andrews (2020) noted Black scholars' historical disillusionment with academia's prevalent epistemic violence:

> Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist epistemology for instance offers a pathway for an overhaul the position of the academic. By embracing the standpoint of Black women this creates an organic link to struggles outside the ivory tower. This is essential for flipping the dynamics of how we understand knowledge is produced, not from the elite but from the grassroots. Collins' concept of the "ethic of personal accountability" also captures the way that our role as scholars has to be different. (p. 23-24)

Although ethnic studies initially emerged as an interdisciplinary program of study in the 1960s and 1970s at higher education institutions (Bañales, 2019; de Novais & Spencer, 2019), the discipline's impact on the pedagogy of pre-k to 12 educators is undeniable. Our life notes support the need for more research about how exposure to ethnic studies content influences pre-k-12 educators' development of a socially just teaching praxis. Culturally relevant pedagogy is inextricably tied to Black educators' post-secondary engagement in ethnic studies (Bowman et al., 2011; Sleeter, 2011).

Conclusion

Discussing our intergenerational experiences as educators reminded us of our shared love for the written and spoken word of Black communities as well as our desire to convey that knowledge to our students through ethnic studies. Although Meghan's undergraduate education was greatly influenced by courses offered at that level and Priscilla had no such experience, even at an HBCU, the vital importance of imparting those cultural memories was eminent for each of us though. In Priscilla's experience, it was necessary to compile excerpts in the form of supplementary material to positively enhance the experience of Black youth in the Deep South because early textbooks made very obscure mentions of the works of Black folks. Meghan's commitment to ethnic studies was driven by her familial connections. Her relationships with elders in her small community fostered her critical consciousness and provided the basis for the development of her ethnic studies pedagogy when she became an educator (Tintiangco-Cubales & Duncan-Andrade, 2021). The importance of ethnic studies pedagogies in the Deep South, where the legacy of anti-blackness is as visual as the large magnolia flowers on mossy trees, cannot be underestimated.

Consistent with current research findings, ethnic studies pedagogies had a positive effect on my mother's and my understanding of structural racism, our epistemological stances, and our personal and political ideologies as pre-k-12 educators (de Novais & Spencer, 2019). As highlighted throughout our narratives, direct and indirect engagement with ethnic studies at HBCUs imparted "a critical understanding and appreciation of the racial and cultural diversity in our society" and grounded our teaching philosophies in Black cultural traditions and histories (de Novais & Spencer, 2019, p. 880). The activists and academics who dared to dream of a decolonized world where those bearing the weight of white supremacy would be free to "work towards the liberation of all people and society" (Bañales, 2019, p. 233) grounded ethnic studies pedagogies in their hopes and aspirations for the youngest members of society. Green et al. (2020) noted an increase in calls for the inclusion of ethnic studies in pre-k-12 educational spaces. In the wake of the anti-critical race

theory movement, conservative political groups have led targeted efforts to dismantle the progress of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) activists and educators who seek to abolish hegemonic spirit-killing pre-k-12 curricula (Love, 2019). As our intergenerational testimonies demonstrate, (re)imagining the role of ethnic studies pedagogies will require all of us to radically dream of a future where our liberation is intrinsically tied to the lessons of our past.

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