

Chapter 6

“It’s Like Boiling a Frog”

Deintellectualization and Devaluation through the Eyes of a Black Woman Academician in the Deep South

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CAUGHT

I’ve been caught. Trapped. Chosen. Selected to leave the waters that have provided me comfort, shelter, and safety. I’ve been selected to leave the waters that have nourished my soul. I’ve been selected to nourish the souls of others. To provide what’s needed in the way they wish to have what’s needed. To give parts of my nourishment for their sustenance. Possibly to endure abuse, isolation, and trauma along the way with no care for where my sustenance originated. I am the frog. The prized frog caught after the sun no longer beams on the water.

I am placed inside a cool, dry vessel, *shielded* from harm until I make it to the destination of someone else’s choosing. This vessel is confining, limiting, dank, and doesn’t provide a glimpse of hope toward the possibility of freedom. But, within this vessel I am accompanied by other frogs who have also been selected to be carted off to a new destination that is not our home or place of nourishment. I notice the looks of fear and anguish. I notice the looks of wonder and pleasant confusion. But what I feel is emptiness, because these frogs and I are going to be separated or maybe even kept separate from each other where we rarely, if ever, see each other or one of *us* again. This is unnerving and unsettling—the feeling heightens, as I’m unloaded into a kitchen, prepped, and placed in a pool of water.

As I sit in this pool of water, I see the people who have captured and unloaded me are laughing and enjoying the pleasantries of each other. I can only wish and mentally savor at the idea of being with other frogs. But, I’m

here now. Afraid to move. Afraid to make a sound. Afraid because I don't know what's to come of me. I'm afraid because the rumors I've heard of being considered a delicacy and valuable to the existence of someone else is eerily beginning to sink in as truth and not a rumor. So, here I am, not moving, watching the joy around me and hearing chatter that could only be about my presence in the space. I begin to wonder why me? I begin to question my purpose. I wonder what has happened to the others who have made this journey with me. Are they safe? Are they taken care of? I begin to wonder how we were chosen for this journey and what the outcome will be for the collective. I wonder what became of those who made this journey before me—where are they now? Are they happy?

I am filled with questions, many of which are concerns about others and not necessarily about myself. I'm plagued with an unsettling feeling that I'm not here to enjoy the party or survive the party, but rather to be consumed by those who take great merriment in this space I now share with them. It begins to settle in that the merriment about my existence in this space is solely about my ability to fill up and nourish the bodies of those in the room. I'm not here to enjoy the space like the others, I'm here to be eaten. But, as the terror begins to fully make its way in, the terror that I will die without concern for my value begins to become unbearable. It's time to make an escape, to jump out of this pool of water, and just as I begin to make my leap it's too late, the heat has already gotten to me, and I will not be able to escape.

My experiences as a Black woman in the academy are closely related to that of the frog, captured for consumption as a delicacy and left to die in a pot of boiling water before realizing it's hot, before having a chance to make an escape. As a Black teacher educator in the Deep South, I am seen as a delicacy for consumption and nourishment of bodies unlike my own, stripped of my essence, devalued, and displaced. When a live frog is placed in boiling hot water it will die right away. But, a frog, placed in room temperature water that is slowly being heated will adjust its body temperature to the water as it gets hot—continuously adjusting, not realizing it's being cooked alive. Once the water becomes unbearably hot, just shy of boiling, the frog tries to leap, but it's too late. The frog dies. Similarly, my experiences as a Black woman academician in the Deep South are like that of a frog in a pot of water, continuously adjusting to meet the heat where it is, afraid, confused, and uncertain as to when to make a leap—slowly having my essence, humanness, and value melted away. The leap, or rather the escape, would be to leave the homogenized, White space of academia that continues to isolate, demoralize, deintellectualize, and devalue Black women academicians. But, until that leap can be made safely, I turn to the use of curriculum theory to write myself out of my suffering and allow my escape to exist within the words present on these pages and beyond.

THE RISING HEAT

"How does it feel to be a problem?" (Du Bois, 1903/2002, p. 7). This question posed by Du Bois over a century ago gave way to the theory of double consciousness, a theory that requires an examination of the Black curricular self. The Black curricular self or the self that has been constructed within the gaze of Eurocentric understandings is to be unpacked, rearticulated, and established through close examination by answering the question: "Who am I?" For the purposes of this chapter, the question is: "What is my curriculum theory project of the self, where the racialized exploration is not only relevant, but necessary?" Articulations of "I" are necessary for this work, as the public display of "I" makes evident the need for understanding the racialized self within an educational context to undo the harm and deleterious nature of Blackness. Curriculum theorists articulate the need for autobiographical inquiry as a means for making education not only a personal project but also a cultural, historical, political, and social project (Pinar, 1975; Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Miller, 1998; Taliaferro, 2010). Autobiographical inquiry provides the theorist the terrain for engaging in an imaginative, performative, and deconstructive project of the self that creates opportunity for liberation, healing, and decolonizing understandings of particular bodies.

The engagement of autobiographical inquiry, particularly as it is used within this chapter, is a form of counterstorytelling. Counterstorytelling, as positioned by critical race theory (CRT), publicizes the marginalized voice for the purposes of understanding racism and Whiteness on the experiences of people of color, particularly Black people. This work takes up the call by curriculum theorists that all curriculum work is autobiographical and the engagement with "I" is self-transformative and impactful to the field of curriculum studies.

Curriculum in this sense is understood as lived experience rather than just the bound material prescribed and distributed by a district. Currere is a form of curriculum theorizing that is autobiographical in nature and that requires the author to be informed by the past in the present moment to articulate future nuances. The method of currere, as first positioned by William Pinar (1975), centers the nature of the autobiographical "I" or the biographic description of one's educational experiences with the understanding that educational experiences extend beyond formal years of schooling or experiences in a schoolhouse. Theorizing with currere calls for a reconceptualization of curriculum, Pinar (1975) articulates a move away "from course objectives to complicated conversations with one's self (as private intellectual), an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action as private and public intellectual—with others in the

social reconstruction public sphere” (as cited in Taliaferro-Baszile, p. 491). In this reconceptualization of curriculum, we are positioned to be intimately involved with ourselves—with our histories, in order to subvert traditionalist forms of education that do not invite or make space for subject knowledge, “Currere is a method of autobiographical/biographical inquiry that allows one to sketch the relations among school knowledge, life-history, and intellectual development in ways that might function self-transformatively” (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2017, p. vii).

The method requires moving across four moments: regressive, progressive, analytical, and syncretical. The regressive moment requires a look back at the past as a source of evidence or data. It is the remembering that supports present and future understandings. The progressive moment focuses on what is desired or hoped for in the present and future. The analytical moment requires meaning-making of the future and the past in the present. Finally, the syncretical moment requires me to reflect on my thoughts, experiences, and writing across time to consider possibilities for a more just future. Currere is a deeply contemplative, meditative, self-inquiry technique. It is not a method that utilizes traditional methodology description, nor is the articulated self, described within the four moments in traditional methodology form. Currere invites creative and performative writings of the self that inform and impact how we view education.

This particular work utilizes currere through counterstorytelling and a framework of Black feminist thought. Taliaferro-Baszile (2010) refers to currere of this kind as a “particular kind of currere . . . this critical race currere—I am looking specifically to understand and to signify the production of the racialized extended-self and the meanings it makes of education for liberation” (p. 492). The form of critical race currere utilized here creates a space to negotiate the tensions within myself in relation to others. This autobiographical work centers my subject knowledge as having meaning for informing the realities of experiences related to deintellectualization, dehumanization, and devaluation.

Within this chapter I utilize Black feminist thought through a critical race currere. Currere situates the autobiographical “I” as a subject of truth by engaging processes of mindfulness, introspection, imagination, and self-analysis for means of possibility, which fully supports the power of Black feminist thought. Ellis (2002), while not speaking to uses of currere as method, articulates that uses of “I” allow for narratives to exist as a political, socially just, and socially conscious act. The very use of “I” positions the holder of knowledge as subject rather than object. The uses of “I” throughout this chapter provides me the opportunity to utilize introspection and self-analysis to complicate notions of existing in the Deep South as an *outsider*.

Black Feminist Thought

"I was encouraged to write myself, my struggle, my meaning into existence" (Taliaferro-Baszi, 2006, p. 89). The uniqueness of Black feminist thought is that it positions Black women at the center of understanding reality from a raced, gendered, and other category of different points of view; it empowers individuals to rearticulate reality created and accepted by the dominant group (Brock, 2011; Collins, 1986, 1989; Huckaby, 2013). Black feminist thought supports the development of stories and shared experiences in order to challenge dominant ideologies (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Black feminist thought was developed in response to feminist theory because Black female scholars felt marginalized and voiceless through a theory that was created by women who owned a privileged voice (Collins, 1986). Traditional works of feminism often reinforce the inferiority and alienation felt by people of color (Crenshaw, 1991). "White feminists often define themselves against male-centered perspective"; feminist theory did not provide the substance needed to express the Black woman experience and, in its failure, did not address the oppression felt and experienced by racialized and gendered beings (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 107). Collins (1991) writes, "Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it" (p. 22). The theory supports the development of a counterstory that critical race theorists have acknowledged is the way people of color are able to insert their voice to undermine and challenge dominant ideologies (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Accordingly, Black feminist thought affords me a theoretical terrain to interrogate the epistemic claims and performances of whiteness that are always already present in higher education (Yancy, 2000). Further, it provides the substantive theory necessary for engaging in "emancipatory and reflective" work for constructing an autobiographical narrative (Yancy, 2000, p. 32). This work is emancipatory and healing in that I utilize the theoretical space to write myself into existence and to make this a process in which I feel a sense of freedom to construct my narrative as a Black woman academician and teacher educator (Cole, 2009; Taliaferro-Bazille, 2006). Through Black feminist thought, I can move myself away from the margins to add my voice to constructing knowledge about how I understand race and racism and use a language of theory to talk back to and resist dominant ideologies (Guillory, 2010; hooks, 1989).

Collins (1986) posits that Black women hold a unique space as the *outsider-within*; regardless of the location where I teach, I will always hold outsider status as a Black woman in society. But I have insider status or can exist *within* higher education in this case, because of the knowledge, tools, and resources I have ascertained through schooling and social experiences

that allow me to traverse spaces where my existence as a Black woman is not plentiful, that is, *the Ivory Towers*.

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1989) uses the term *intersectionality* to describe the varying discourses of Black women. Davis (2008) defines intersectionality as “the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power” (as cited in Cole, 2009, p. 565). Intersectionality explains how gender, race, and other categories of difference “mutually construct one another” (Collins, 1998, p. 63). The concept of intersectionality fuses together how race, gender, and other categories of difference are used to understand, explain, and transform notions of power or dominant ideology (Cole, 2009). Crenshaw (1991) articulates that gender and race for Black women go hand in hand—I cannot be a Black woman without recognizing that I am a woman who is Black. I am neatly situated in an arena that allows me to push against a dominating space of thought—White patriarchy.

As a theme of CRT, intersectionality provides the framing for how we consider the impact of multiple layers of one’s identity. CRT has its roots in critical legal studies (Bell, 1980, 1995) and provides a theoretical landscape for understanding the endemic nature of racism and White supremacy. CRT scholarship does not simply dichotomize Black and White; rather, CRT is used to understand the White supremacist ideology that has functioned to create our understanding of race (Taylor, 2009). Scholars of CRT posit that the use of counterstories helps to inform the changes and shifts publicly sought by centering the voices of those who are typically excluded. The use of counterstories as its own method, accompanied by *currence*, provides the writer an opportunity to complicate their experiences to create unique conversation with the self and a path forward for how respond to notions of race and racism within the academy.

The Experience of a Black Woman Academician and Teacher Educator

As a woman academician who is not Southern, conservative, Catholic, or White, my navigation of the Deep South, particularly the *Cajun* area of Louisiana, is rife with all of the things I am not. It is fraught with feelings of displacement, deintellectualization, devaluation, and dehumanization as the unintended outcomes of racial and gender trauma. The term trauma is broad and encompasses the experiences that produce suffering for individuals. I

define trauma as anything that disrupts or distorts the functioning of someone's spirit and that can induce a state or feeling of hopelessness. That said, trauma is not always felt or recognized on a cerebral level and can be understood through the unconscious terrain oftentimes stored in the body (Van Der Kolk, 2014). This definition of trauma moves beyond the premise of this chapter but establishes the landscape for that which I call attention to deintellectualization, dehumanization, and devaluation.

There is certainly no monolith of Black experience; the experience of Black men and that of Black women is not to be conflated. As hooks (2015b) describes, the experience of Blackness is commonly felt but Black men are still men—"his maleness may serve to mediate the extent to which he will be attacked, dominated, etc." (p. 60). This places Black women academics in crisis. Crisis because we are at the bottom of the hierarchy, we don't neatly fit alongside our Black male counterpart in being affirmed by the institution, we are often missing from the canon as reputable sources, and we don't experience enough of our presence to create solidarity to give rise to the many Black women who enter into higher education. Further, as a Black woman in the field of education, my presence is minimal. We are in crisis (hooks, 2015b). Jordan, Wilson, and Alsobrook (2019) write:

We have reached a moment, as Black women in the Deep South, that we must surface the issues amongst us both within the institution and socially. We must surface the experiences we had that brought us to this moment. We must surface the issues as often as possible if we are going to provide support to the women who come behind us. hooks (2015b) tells us "it is important that Black women in higher education write and talk about our experiences, about survival strategies." (p. 61)

I am a Black woman. I intentionally list this descriptor as a way to make obvious that my experiences in this life and in my chosen profession are two-fold and cannot be understood with the exclusion of one. I cannot experience the dynamics or issues of gender solely as a woman; they are experienced as a woman who is Black. And I cannot experience dynamics or issues of race solely as a Black person; they must be experienced as a Black person who is a woman. Coming to terms with how my experiences must be understood, I made a choice to enter into a profession, rather a way of life that is not kind to me and probably never will be kind to me. As a Black woman, I am an enigma in academia generally (Collins, 1986). And I must be prepared to be devalued and deintellectualized, especially in my courses.

As the chapter progresses, concepts of racialized and gendered trauma will be explored with a conclusion focused on healing in response to deintellectualization, dehumanization, and devaluation. I utilize my experience as a

diversity and social justice educator of preservice and in-service teachers to unearth the politics and tensions that exist and to bring color to my experiences of deintellectualization, dehumanization, and devaluation.

SURVIVAL

This process of deintellectualization, as I refer to it, is a subtle, strategic process of negating the intellect of individuals who stand counter to what someone else has deemed to be intelligent. Intelligence or being a holder of knowledge/information is as good as it's perceived to be. If that intelligence is perceived to be unfit for what the listener has determined to be meaningful, then the individual with a *nuanced* intelligence must be lacking in something and avenues must be taken to deintellectualize that individual. Similarly, the acts of dehumanization or devaluation are layered within being deintellectualized and occur in equally subtle ways. It can be considered that the acts of deintellectualization, dehumanization, and devaluation are violent and intended to create dynamics of power.

My experience of being deintellectualized followed me from my doctoral program as the only Black person in my cohort right on down to Cajun Country, United States, where I am a teacher educator in the field of anti-oppressive and social justice education. As a teacher educator in the Deep South, I am reminded on and off of my university campus how much the content of my teaching and my area of study isn't valued and is deintellectualized. There is a clear divide in the acceptance of the meaningfulness of social justice, anti-racist, social conscious education, or anything of the like (Journell, 2013; Kumashiro, 2000; LaDuke, 2009; Ohito, 2016; Wang, Castro, & Cunningham, 2014). The challenge comes with attempting to present information and content in a way that doesn't create resistance within the preservice teachers, especially White preservice teachers. But, I recognize, there is no good way to do that without eliminating certain content altogether or providing code words such as *diversity*, which might prevent them from shutting down. The great risk of these preservice teachers shutting down is my credibility as a professor is then questioned.

I am met with savvy reminders that what I am teaching doesn't matter much where my students come from, for example being told, "Well you're from New York City, clearly those are issues there, not here." My character and my intellect are demeaned by their level of attention in my course, by making decisions to complete other coursework during class time, or choosing not to participate, or referring to me as a colored person even after repeated correction to "person of color." Not only is the phrasing *colored*

person historically inaccurate and violent, a student's repeated use of the phrase after being corrected is a *conscious* choice, which highlights their careless and dismissive attitude toward understandings of racialized trauma. Moments of racialized trauma have continued to be experienced through statements such as, "slavery and in-school bullying are the same thing." Not only is it factually inaccurate but also violent and locks away an unconscious trauma for me as the professor who is constantly having to endure and press through situations that are devaluing and dehumanizing. Finally, they attempt to deintellectualize me by stating, "She's not suited for a faculty position in education." In past student evaluations, I've read:

- Dr. Jordan is really great, and obviously really smart. But she is not well suited for teaching education. She would be better in a social justice or sociology class.
- Dr. Jordan clearly didn't know what this course was about. She changed all of the objectives and I learned nothing about diversity. All I learned about were social constructions, race, gender, sexuality, and so on. She didn't know this was an education course where we have to learn how to teach for diversity. Also, she should not be up there talking about Whiteness and White supremacy.

The students' responses highlighted above show a clear sensitivity to my presence and the content of the course, so much so they deemed it unsuitable for education majors and as having nothing to do with diversity education. Their open-ended statements about me were intended to silence me and make sure I knew to *have a seat*—I don't belong in education and further I clearly know nothing about *teaching* diversity because I decided to teach about social constructions, race, gender, sexuality, and other things that, in their minds, have nothing to do with the classroom. These students allowed their fragility to manifest in their evaluations, a fragility they denied existed all semester with dismissive comments such as, "I'm comfortable talking about everything particularly with people I know think like me," or "Robin DiAngelo has never been to Lafayette, so she doesn't know how diverse and accepting we are here," or "I grew up in the 70s and 80s in a time where racial tensions were calm, [DiAngelo] is clearly only talking about one period in time and is clearly from the North." Students have frequently repeated, "Race has never been an issue for me because I went to good schools." The simple phrasing of *good schools* is an articulation of who was racially present in those "good schools" and who wasn't. The blinders to the function of race in their lives merely exist because they have attached race to people who are not White. As White people, they *don't have race*, so how could something they don't have be an issue?

The instances I've detailed bring into view the trauma I've experienced as a Black woman academician in the Deep South. My work becomes a response to my trauma in a way that allows for healing within my mind, body, and spirit. The use of theory gives me a terrain to engage my healing. The students I have engaged with have consciously enacted their power to attempt to strip me of mine. A power that may not be consciously recognized on the surface, but is a power of dominant ideologies and supremacy functioning to silence those who exist at the margins.

The students allowed their fragility to create a dynamic that reminded them, and me, of their power (DiAngelo, 2011). The power for them can never be lost and operates as a threat to my psyche; this threat to my psyche is what hooks (2015a) calls psychological colonization. Psychological colonization is necessary to keep Black women in check. The act of psychological colonization is to place upon the *other* the thoughts and ideas intended to control their behaviors. Black women are to be seen the way the colonizer intended; any appearance or manifestation of being liberated, strong, valued, respected, or powerful must be quelled at the onset (hooks, 2013, 2015a). The colonized mind of a Black woman is to know that she isn't intelligent and is not to be valued—those evaluations and the statements made by students serve as evidence of the ways in which devaluation and psychological colonization is enacted and, in turn, create a racialized and gendered trauma.

ESCAPE

I use this space to write myself out of my pain and the experiences of being deintellectualized and devalued. It's a survival strategy that allows me to feel affirmed and to take care of myself so that I may arrive whole. This is my healing! I come to curriculum theory so that I might have a landscape for centering myself as a Black woman. My progression into Black womanhood by no means occurred easily and not until I entered the academy and discovered how to write myself out of my pain and anger did I feel like I truly had a voice to argue. Berry (2018), Guillory (2010), and Taliaferro-Baszile (2006, 2010), as curriculum theorists, posit that the healing and survival of Black women rests upon our use of theory as a space to move ourselves away from the margins and allow our counterstories to exist in a way that breathes life back into our bodies. The use of theory has provided me a modality for my healing in academia and has provided me a language for which I can articulate clearly the trauma that is stored within my body. This chapter is not an expression of my teaching practice; my teaching practice cannot be what I wish it to be as long as I'm fending off assaults. Rather, this chapter serves as a direct beam of light that shines on the ways my existence as a Black

woman in academia in the Deep South is complicated by deintellectualization and devaluation.

I've brought my identity and sense of place as a Black woman from Queens, New York, into the academy, which has spaces that "speak[s], leak[s], and [have] possibility" (Helfenbein, 2010, p. 310). The academy often does not speak to the subjectivity of racialized beings. Yet, my subjectivity and lived experiences are able to leak into the academy to inform how one comes to make sense of this place and have a space of possibility "to understand the racial self as a curricular construction" (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2010, p. 485). Collins (1989) argues that Black women academicians need to be ready for potentially being rejected for not having a valid knowledge base. So here I am—a Black woman in the academy. I have retreated to this place, the academy because it exists to assist me with writing myself into existence and allowing my existence, my subjectivities, to leak into particular spaces to add to the dialogical nature of curriculum theory.

As long as I commit to a position of silence, I will forever be the frog adjusting her body temperature to meet the rising heat of the water, unable to leap forward. My healing and my ability to escape must begin with an attention to my marginalization, unpacking that marginalization, and making it publicly known. The work then becomes for those who sit in high seats of power in *the Ivory Tower* to see the truth in the collected stories of Black women academicians and move to surface significant change that allows for existence to be without the complicated nature of feeling like a boiling frog.

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