

**Care-sickness:
Black Women Educators,
Care Theory,
and a Hermeneutic
of Suspicion**

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Introduction

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As Black¹ women educators, we situate ourselves at the intersection of race, gender, and pedagogy. For us, to be Black women educators demands that we attune ourselves to the critical ways institutional structures create, shape, and manipulate our lives. We find ourselves consistently questioning what it means to be Black women educators at predominantly White institutions. In many ways, our pedagogy was inherited, consciously and unconsciously, as we watched our mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers, educate in unfathomable circumstances. In being with these maternal caretakers, we learned the importance of presence, being in relationship, being with ourselves, and being engaged with the past. From them we learned that to be a Black woman was to teach, to embody the

political in word and deed. They taught us how and when to “read the world” and to “read the word,” to gaze in ways that would interpret, erase, and transcend Jim Crow segregation as well as its residual affects (Freire, 1998b; hooks, 2003).

In framing this article, we discovered that we could not divorce the social and familial from the academic. From our perspective, writing as critical educators begins with the personal, connects with the political, and extends to the spiritual. We center our critical perspectives on the spiritual because we believe that, to fight against injustice, we must engage in a pedagogy of the soul (O’Malley, 2003, 2007) or emancipatory spirituality (Lerner, 2005)—a way of teaching and learning that allows us to teach and learn as integrated beings (hooks, 1994; Krishnamurti, 1953; Purpel, 2005). A pedagogy of the soul allows educators to engage in teaching and learning as connoisseurs (Eisner, 1985) able to perceive subtleties and contradictions. Such a pedagogy makes possible an attunement to affliction (interior suffering) and quest for human goodness. In modeling for us what it meant to be present, our maternal ancestors embodied a womanist ideology (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Walker, 1983; Williams, 2002) which mirrors O’Malley’s (2003, 2007) pedagogy of the soul in that they lived in the nexus between pedagogy, politics, and spirituality.

A pedagogy of the soul disturbs us, however, because we have witnessed its destructive affects on our Black women ancestors. In a sense, they have cared too much, worked too hard, and come to understand exhaustion as the norm rather than the exception. In defying and refuting multiple oppressions (e.g., racism, sexism, classism), they constructed a persona of strength which has, in its interpretation and application become a primary paradigm for Black women’s lives. While the lived experiences of Black women and their transcendent survival may speak truth to the metaphor “strong Black woman,” such comparisons trap Black women into cyclical modes of being which demand that they “live” the metaphor. In attempting to do so, they dismiss weakness and privilege strength; with such privileging, they embody normative notions of womanhood which differ from those assigned to White women (e.g., humble, frail, dependent, etc.) (Piper, 2003; Wittig, 1993). To embody (or to perform—see Butler, 1993, 2003) a womanhood which differs from the norm situates Black women in perpetual conflict and predisposes them to alienation, isolation, and insecurity—all of which, if navigated while living the metaphor of “strong Black woman,” can lead Black women to disproportionately suffer from depression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007).

Embracing Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s (2002) exposition of black womanist pedagogy, we contend that Black women teachers historically have operated with an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk. With such a pedagogy, they perceive teaching to be a political act, one grounded in “other mothering” (Collins, 2000), and contextualized by a race-based positionality which marks them as oppressed. This “marking” assigns Black women educators to a culturally inferior border position.² When Black women speak from this position, they must transgress—to speak in ways that alter their realities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; hooks, 1994). And they must do so in ways which complicate traditional percep-

tions of teaching and care; for Black women, “other mothering” and transgressive teaching demand an ethic of care that is both defensive and proactive, embodied and performed, private and public.

When Carol Gilligan (1982) put forth a systematic explanation of ethic of care she highlighted relational and moral concerns of women in contrast to then prevalent male-centered theories of justice. She concludes that, “an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same” and “an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt” (p. 174). Since then, other academics (Engster, 2005; Hurd & Brabeck, 1997; Noddings, 1992a, 2005b) have further theorized the applicability of an ethic of care to educational settings and they have examined the relationship between an ethic of care and education.

While this work has served an important educational role by investigating the relevance of nurture and care to student learning, care theory has also been criticized for its colorblindness relevant to the unique oppressive circumstances of Black women educators (Thompson, 1998). This article builds upon earlier work exploring the implications of care theory for Black women educators by exploring the issue of colorblindness more broadly, as it relates to libratory education. Using the work of Freire (1970, 1998a, 1998b) and Noddings (1992a, 1995, 2001, 2005b), we revisit the relationship between libratory education and ethic of care paying particular attention to its relevance to the unique circumstances of Black women educators.

We argue that Black women educators embody a qualitatively different ethic of care—one that is nuanced by our historical, social, spiritual, and political situatedness. We contend that as Black women educators, we cannot divorce our historicized disposition toward libratory education from our lived experiences of multiple and competing forms of oppression. Normative notions of trust, home, and power relevant to care theory are complicated by the lived experiences of Black women educators. We use the narratives of exemplary Black women educators to develop a preliminary framework for libratory ethic of care that is sensitive to Black women educators’ contradictory status as “oppressed liberators.” Lastly, we introduce the concept of care-sickness through a brief exploration of the implications for Black women who practice their ethic of care within multiple contexts of oppression.

Methodology

This historical study utilizes comparative analysis to explore the narratives of Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Anna Julia Cooper—Black women educators who, in their embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and ethic of risk, practiced a womanist pedagogy. In our analysis, we use biographies and personal writings and complement this historical analysis with our understanding of qualitative research using specifically the work of Casey (1995), Riessman (1993, 2007), Kleinmann & Copp (1993), Denzin & Lincoln (2000, 2003), and Peshkin

(1998). Taken together, these researchers suggest that narrative analysis requires particular attention to the intertextuality of narratives and the intersecting of various subjectivities during the engagement with the narrative text. We identified conceptual patterns within the narratives (work and care, freedom and choice, authority and power) and we analyzed those emergent concepts in parallel to Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) theoretical framework which identifies womanist pedagogy as comprising an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk.

Theoretical Framework

We begin by juxtaposing the theories of Freire (1970, 1998a, 1998b) and Noddings (2002, 2005a, 2005b) here with the understanding that their theoretical work was grounded in very different lived experiences and, as such, has distinctly different implications. Freire, in his work with literacy and poor farmers, instituted a theory which was, by its expressed purpose, political. His writing and suppositions have been critiqued for creating a particularly patriarchal conversation about liberatory education (see hooks, 2003) and for creating a dichotomy between the oppressed and oppressor (as if there is no fluid space in between or around) (Smith, 1997/2002). Noddings, with her focus on children and her feminine framework, does not articulate a theory of liberatory education. In referencing these theories in this paper, we use them to bring together seemingly divergent philosophical orientations—that of care theory and political literacy—both of which are embedded in the practices of Black women educators who perceive their mission to be driven by care, conviction, and civic courage.

For Freire, education that is liberating and transformative occurs through dialogue, specifically transformative dialogue which speaks through and within an ethic of care, compassion, and love. Educators who are committed to liberatory education must care. When liberatory educators live as oppressed, however, the dehumanization created by that oppression disrupts the practice of caring. Because Freire claims that the oppressed, though dehumanized, exploited, and manipulated by their oppressors, are the only ones capable of liberating themselves and their oppressors, only the oppressed can transform the world. If their oppression somehow subsumes or erases their ability to care, then their liberatory work loses its transformative potential. Using Freire's exposition, we argue that Black women, whether they claim a subjective oppressed position or not, are assigned such a position by White capitalist patriarchy (see hooks, 2003) and are asked, therefore, to transcend hate, espouse care, compassion, and love while also uplifting humanity. Such a request, whether explicit or implicit, demands that Black women (or any oppressed group), name their oppression, navigate the structures which perpetuate it, and develop a discourse to refute that oppression.

If Black women educators adopt care as a necessary characteristic of good teaching, then they may uncritically embrace Noddings' ethic of care presuming (without thought to the structural oppression they face as women of color) that her

theory of care is applicable to their teaching contexts and pedagogies. If they adopt the ethic of care proposed by Noddings (2005b), they are asked to become teachers who are characterized by receptiveness, relatedness, and engrossment. They are asked to build trust, give students and teachers the time to “learn” each other, and create a feeling of “home” in the school and classroom. For Noddings, trust between teacher and student is necessary, possible, and workable. We contend that the positionality of Black women educators makes such relationships of trust improbable when considering the systemic and structural processes in place which de-voice Black women and which disrupt their exercise of power in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

Theoretical Complications: Liberatory Ethic of Care for Black Women Educators

To begin to define a liberatory ethic of care for Black women educators, we started first with the nagging sense that traditional expositions of ethic of care somehow did not adequately capture the unique survival strategies of Blacks in the U.S. Noddings (2005b) says, “Young people should understand that it is sometimes necessary to break off a relation in which they are exploited, abused, or pushed to do things they regard as harmful or wrong” (p. 99). But, implicitly, her argument is rooted in an individualist characterization of loyalty and friendship. We suggest that, for Black students and teachers, navigating the educational system requires a *hermeneutic of suspicion*—an attitude grounded in learned distrust that leads us to critically question schools and the political structures that sustain them.³ To ignore this suspicion is to ignore the experiences of Black people in the United States and the existence of institutionalized racism. In many ways, Black teachers and students are grappling with an inherited interpretive framework⁴ that teaches distrust as a survival technique. To not learn this distrust would leave Black teachers and students vulnerable, incapable of recognizing racism, and unable to interpret the world.

This distrust remains so poignant for many people of color because they have inherited a legacy of loss and resistance from their ancestors (Tatum, 1997). To inherit a legacy of loss and resistance is to translate the world from a position of distrust (although this translation may occur in conjunction with other subject positions). From this position, loss and resistance operate simultaneously, constructing together a particular oppositional identity, an identity predicated upon searching for truth in multiple contexts of oppression. Biegert (1998) describes more specifically the transmission of legends of resistance among Black people which emanated from slavery and which are constructed today. These legends led to the development of a collective consciousness⁵ among African Americans which, through oral and written form, memorialized the history of racism in the United States *and* African American response to such racism. We believe that these responses, though varied in form and complexity, are rooted in a legacy of learned distrust, one that requires acute attention to identifying the intent of the dominant society’s words and actions.

This distrust operates in lived reality in varied and debatable ways but it has

specific implications for Black women educators who embrace the political and perceive education to be about liberation. Using a political lens demands that Black women educators identify oppression and to do so requires the development or adoption of pedagogy which seeks to identify the ways in which oppressions is structurally sanctioned. Such identification requires a certain amount of distrust. To distrust means to doubt or to not believe. With doubt, Black women libratory educators question. They deconstruct the words and actions of others looking, in particular, for intent and/or motive. Second, this Socratic pedagogy laced with doubt, prompts an interrogation—a line of questioning in which those with allegiance to the dominant society are treated with suspicion and, by extension, become suspects. Third, when Black women libratory educators treat stakeholders in the dominant society as suspects, all curricula, policy decisions, and processes are critiqued. The entire educational structure, therefore, becomes the platform on which to establish an “alternative curriculum.” And so it becomes possible for Black women educators to say, with conviction within this alternative curriculum, that their purpose is to “uplift the race” because the “content” of the traditional curriculum and the deliverers of that curriculum are all in question. It is, ultimately, a quest for “truth(s)” and in the quest, a pedagogy of suspicion is thus born.

Also problematic for Black women educators is Noddings’ (1992b, 2001) assertion that the care tradition has typically centered on homemaking, a place which has largely been defined as “women’s space” and as the locus of identity formation for children. Though she suggests that home is political, “loaded with the possibilities for radical social action,” and problematic for those who are homeless, we maintain that home, for Black women, exists as a profoundly convoluted space. Whatever it is or has been, it has never been an entirely safe space because, for Black women, safe spaces are illusive.⁶ It is a space characterized by its distinctiveness, its possibility for solidarity building. It is a space in which Black women can teach their children to be vigilant, wary, and cognizant of the world but it is also a space where the world intrudes. It is a place where Black women teach their children to trust *and* distrust, to be oppositional and obedient; in other words, to obey the commands of their mothers/parental figures while simultaneously denouncing institutional structures that oppress.

Home then is a place of contention, contestation, and change (Mohanty, 2003). It is a place where continuity, safety, and trust take on different meanings, all of which depend on teaching and learning at the interstices between different lived experiences. To understand Black women educators, others must recognize that, in our navigation of multiplicative identities (Wing, 1997), we understand, operate, and bridge competing interpretive frameworks in our pedagogy; we embrace, embody, and teach in contradiction.

Finally, we argue that, for Black women educators, uncritically blending Freire’s notion of libratory education with Noddings’ ethic of care could yield a pedagogy that undermines Black women’s already precarious authority in classrooms with privileged White students. Because we interpret power as a historicized reality

and exercised differently in changing contextual relationships (Foucault, 1997), we emphasize the tendency for Black women educators to operate with different pedagogical intent (Casey, 1993), performance traditions (Jeffries, 1997), or curriculum orientations (Watkins, 1993). Black women educators embody a complex working of power and caring, which favors guided direct instruction, treats children as children and not miniature adults, and attunes itself to the colorblindness of liberal progressive education (Noblit, 1993 & Delpit, 2003).

Libratory education requires an understanding of power as shared, a belief that students should have the space and opportunity to affect decision making in the classroom. This concept assumes that educators are respected as “authority figures” and that they somehow need to “relinquish” power to create more democratic classroom spaces. Because public schools in the United States perpetuate patriarchal, sexist, racist, and classist policies (see, for example, Carlson, & Gause, 2007; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; & McLaren, 2003) that undermine Black educators’ authority in the classroom—they are not able to exercise power in the same way as White educators and, therefore, not able to “relinquish” it similarly. Taken together, libratory education and ethic of care can support a policy of benign neglect for and towards Black women educators; they are concepts that simplify the different ways black educators exercise and experience power and, combined, both ideas dismiss the importance of contradiction.

To better frame this discussion, we rely upon Beauboef-Lafontant’s (2002) exposition of Black women’s pedagogy as rooted in womanist caring. Black women who espouse this particular type of caring teach with an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk. They teach in ways that presume a connection between caring, power, and politics—their teaching reflects persistent efforts to uncover, explain, create, and actualize curriculum reflective of this connection. For Black womanist educators, Noddings (2001) emphasizes Casey’s (1993) suggestion that understanding “how identity is shaped by places (including homes) and how homes become extensions of our own bodies” allows us to “see clearly how privileged some of us are and how deeply some of us are deprived” would seem self evident (p. 32). Statistically, Black people are disproportionately poor, economically disadvantaged, and racially excluded.⁷ We question then to whom Noddings is referring to when she argues that re-conceptualizing home as a necessary part of the curriculum would allow “us” to see privilege. Black women in particular and, people of color in general, have seen and bear witness to the existence of privilege for centuries (DuBois, 1903; Anzaldúa, 1987) and this “sight” generates for them a distinct pedagogy that attempts to expose and dismantle privilege in its various forms.

Re-conceptualizing Ethic of Care Using the Narratives of Black Women Educators

Based on the narratives we studied and our own life stories as Black women and teachers, we offer a rethinking of libratory ethic of care from a Black woman-

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ist perspective. We expound on Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) position that Black women educators embrace the maternal, political clarity, and an ethic of risk by suggesting that Black women operate with different definitions of the relationship between (1) work and care, (2) freedom and choice, and (3) authority and power. We also incorporate a historically specific educational philosophy into this re-examination of Black women educators' libratory ethic of care. Perry (2003) captures the essence of this philosophy by saying,

For African Americans, from slavery to the modern Civil Rights movement, the answers were these: You pursued learning because this is how you asserted yourself as a free person, how you claimed your humanity. You pursued learning so you could work for racial uplift, for the liberation of your people. You pursued education so you could prepare yourself to lead your people. (p. 11)

Using narratives of enslaved Black Americans and race leaders, Perry lays forth a philosophy of education based in Black American literary traditions, one which "was powerfully implicated in motivating African Americans across generations to pursue education" (p. 12). If our ancestors used education to claim their humanity, work for racial uplift, and lead their communities, they would understand the relationship between power, caring, and education in different ways—different because, for their White counterparts, humanity was assumed, racial uplift was unnecessary, and community leadership (across color lines) was established.

When we examined the biographies and writings of Anna Julia Copper, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, we discovered in their life work an ethic of care defined by authoritarian leadership that demanded deference to their teachings, exhaustive servant leadership that separated them from family for extended periods of time, and extended kinship networks created through their educative work. These were women who were not to be ignored or silenced. They were women for whom care demanded a certain rigidity, an inflexibility in pedagogy. These Black women taught in definitive ways. Though that teaching may have seemed too rigid, too structured, too authoritarian, they laced it with an ethic of care that would give rise to a new generation of Black women educators similarly dedicated to uplifting the race.

To frame the thinking (as evidenced in their writing and interpreted in their biographies) of these three women, we first situate them temporally, socially, and politically. Anna Julia Cooper was born in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina, the daughter of an enslaved woman and a White slave holder. She began her political life by protesting against the sexist practices of St. Augustine's, a college which trained male candidates for the ministry. While serving as principal at M Street school (later known as Dunbar High School) in Washington, D.C., she rejected Booker T. Washington's vocational education program and encouraged her students to pursue a more philosophical collegiate curriculum; she would eventually send students to Harvard, Oberlin, Yale, Amherst, Dartmouth, and Radcliffe. Cooper's work as a Black woman educator inevitably tied her to the political because she educated young Black

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people to be great in an era when such greatness was unexpected, unwanted, and rejected by those in power. As one of her former students, Annette Eaton, wrote:

If you could smell or feel in any way sense the aura of D.C. in those days, you would know that it only took her daring in having her students accepted and given scholarship at Ivy League schools to know that the White power structure would be out to get her for any reason or for no reason. It was pure heresy to think that a colored child could do what a White child could.... So I must fix Dr. Cooper's removal on the ill-feeling created among the power structure in education because of the way her students stood up. And then, you must remember that she was out front, highly visible, and therefore caught the brunt of the hatred that really belonged to her faculty. (Washington, 1988, p. xxxv)

The fourth black woman to receive a Ph.D. in the United States,⁸ Cooper defied the racial and gender expectations of her era. According to Washington (1988), her work was publicly ignored by the Black male intelligentsia of the time (W.E.B. DuBois and Frederick Douglass included). She criticized Whites for acting as the sole arbiters of "authentic" Black writing and critiqued many of the "giants" of Black literature of the time including Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. When she died in 1964 at the age of 105, Anna Julia Cooper had lived in slavery and tasted freedom; she had exhibited a pedagogy centered on combating sexism and racism through education (Washington, 1988).

Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of Bethune-Cookman College, was born on July 10, 1875, in Sumter County, South Carolina. She was one of 17 children in an overwhelmingly illiterate⁹ Black community. Bethune was born after slavery but learned from her grandmother stories of Black exploitation at the hands of White masters. For Bethune, those stories formed the contours of a gendered understanding of race relations, in which Black women were strong, independent caretakers and Black men were "shadow figures" (Hanson, 2003, p. 27). Bethune first attended school as an adolescent at Trinity Presbyterian Mission School and later attended Scotia Seminary in North Carolina, a school with White and Black faculty. After completing her degree at Moody Bible College, she worked as a laundress and cook and eventually moved to Florida where she taught school and sold life insurance. Bethune opened Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls on October 3, 1904. The school would later become Bethune-Cookman College, the first fully accredited black college in the nation. At the time of her death on May 18, 1955, she had witnessed the infancy of school desegregation and inspired thousands through her politically conscious pedagogy.

Charlotte Hawkins Brown,¹⁰ founder of Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina, was born June 11, 1883 in Henderson, North Carolina. In 1888 her family relocated to Boston where Brown received her education. In 1901 she returned to North Carolina and began teaching in Guilford County as part of the American Missionary Society's Bethany Institute. When the school she was teaching at closed in 1902, Brown began soliciting donations to open her own school. Brown obtained funding from a benefactor to start her school and over the next several

decades, raised hundreds of thousands of dollars, purchased land, and constructed several buildings to expand school facilities. Even after her death on January 11, 1961, Palmer Institute, the school she founded, continued to educate Black students until 1971. The hundreds of Palmer graduates who went on to pursue graduate degrees and enter the realm of the black middle class are indicative of Brown's legacy (Wadelington & Knapp, 1999).

Work and Care:

The Maternal for Black Women Libratory Educators

Historians, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists have noted for decades that Black people have a tendency to create elaborate kinship networks which act as meaningful extended family units (Clark, 1974; Collins, 2000; Fordham, 1988; Spillers, 1988; Stack, 1996). Black women acted/act as "othermothers" in the community by caring for children that are not their own; Black women educators, in particular, understood this othermothering as a vital part of educating. For these women the maintenance of kinship networks was part of their educational role; othermothering exemplified the ethic of care for Black women educators, yet this was an ethic of care much different than that expressed by Noddings because a network of care centered on othermothering privileges collectivity above individuality.

When Anna Julia Cooper made the statement, "A race is but a total of families," she spoke for scores of Black women educators who held the same philosophy (1892/1988, p. 29). By establishing kinship connections, Black women educators could prepare Black children for the brutal reality of racism by teaching in ways that were direct, honest, and strict. Because they combined rigid structure with genuine compassion, they could, if interpreted through the lens of Freire (1998b), be perceived as too authoritarian and anti-democratic. For teachers at Palmer Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina, the expectation to serve as parental figure was clear. As Wadelington (1999) says, "Brown expected teachers to work around the clock as instructors, chaperons, and campus residents. They taught Sunday school, led trips to Greensboro, and ate meals with students. Like other staff at Black schools and at boarding schools in general, Palmer teachers often played the role of surrogate parents" (p. 98). Brown adhered to the expectations she set for her teachers. She lived on campus with the students, taught classes, managed the daily operations of the school, and coordinated fundraising efforts.

Bethune, like Brown, acted as a surrogate parent for students but managed to combine nurture and authority in ways that encouraged student participation. In embracing the maternal, establishing kinship networks, and revering ancestral traditions, Bethune demonstrated an ethic of care connected to history and bound in social temporality. According to Hanson (2003),

During Daytona Institute's first year of operation, Bethune was principal, guardian, nurse, cook, maid, and educational mentor, passing along the principles of social responsibility mastered from family, religious, and educational experiences. The

school became her workshop for forging intergenerational networks. She once commented that each generation should be free to move in its own direction, but if it “does this without roots or without hooking onto something, pretty soon it becomes disillusioned, it becomes deradicalized, it becomes much more conservative.” (p. 75)

For Bethune, kinship crossed temporal boundaries, connected Black women educators to their foremothers, and, in this connection, created space for radical, transformative teaching. Kinship created the space for sustainable Black communities despite social and political efforts to dehumanize, separate, and miseducate Black people. Thus, through her work Bethune constructed and maintained kinship networks rooted in political service to and for Black communities.

Noddings’ ethic of care conflates notions of “better parenting” with the ability to stay at home and rear children (Thompson, 1998). We contend that this exposition of “better parenting” privileges middle class values and ignores the economic realities of many Black Americans. For Bethune and Brown, working was not an option. Rather, it was the surest way to achieve political and social equity for Black Americans. Thus, for these women, *working demonstrated care*. By teaching, Black women educators practiced an ethic of care. Their pedagogy—embodied through the creation and maintenance of extended kinship networks—allowed them to be responsible parents and ‘other mothers,’ contribute to racial uplift, and create better conditions and possibilities for all Black children. Thus through their ethic of care, these Black women educators, in very real ways, participated in social transformation.

In working, they built social and political networks, established extended frameworks of care through those networks, and intertwined the personal with the political. Their work would not have been possible in isolation—they worked on multiple levels to build solidarity and community. For Bethune and Brown, to work meant to create connections, possibilities, and hope—to not work would have disconnected their private lives from their political lives and, as women pledged to improving race relations, they could not suffer that disconnection.

Political Clarity: Freedom and Choice

When Frederick Douglass wrote in 1852, “What to the slave is the fourth of July?” he brought into public political space the contradictory definition of freedom which shaped and continues to mark the lives of Black Americans. For Black Americans, freedom continues to be an illusory concept, rooted in White middle class definitions of what it means to be free yet complicated by the lived experiences of Black Americans as not free. Freedom historically has both physical and intellectual implications, both of which are intricately tied to the legal and political systems of today. We suggest that freedom, for Black Americans, is defined in a perceptually unsafe world, a world that limits the choices of some while simultaneously offering others unearned privilege (McIntosh, 2003). Cooper, Bethune, and Brown taught

with this understanding and clearly articulated this concept to their students. Cooper (1892/1988) aptly captures the distinctive difference in White and Black Americans' definitions of freedom when she says, "We are the heirs of a past which was not our fathers' moulding. 'Every man the arbiter of his own destiny' was not true for the American Negro of the past: and it is no fault of his that he finds himself to-day the inheritor of a manhood and womanhood impoverished and debased by two centuries and more of compression and degradation" (p. 28). For Black Americans, the idea that they could "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" was literally and figuratively impossible—institutional racism, supported by legal and political processes, prevented them from doing so. Freedom, then, was always conditional, contingent upon the purview of White Americans who had the power and inclination to change segregationist/unjust/discriminatory laws or practices.

More specifically, Cooper, Bethune, and Brown realized in their daily struggles with navigating racial and gender constructs that they could not exercise choice in the unlimited and idealistic sense of the word; they came to understand that choice never comes without restrictions, limitations, or stipulations. In an excerpt that alludes to the multiple oppressions she faced, Cooper (1892/1988) remarked,

And when farther on in the same section our train stops at a dilapidated station, rendered yet more unsightly by dozens of loafers with their hands in their pockets while a productive soil and inviting climate beckon in vain to industry; and when, looking more closely, I see two dingy little rooms with 'FOR LADIES' swinging over one and 'FOR COLORED PEOPLE' over the other; while wondering under which head I come. (p. 96)

Cooper's comment speaks directly to the difficulty Black women educators faced when working to combat oppressions on multiple levels; they understood clearly that they had to selectively privilege racial and gender identities at different times and in different contexts. Equally important, they believed that making appropriate choices hinged on one's access to information. For them, education was about gaining access and to do so required acknowledgment that Jim Crow America protected White politicians and educators who purposefully withheld information from Blacks. Over the course of her career, Bethune engaged in what would be perceived by some as skillful political maneuvering and what others would claim was just "too much bowing and scraping" (McCluskey & Smith, 1999). Despite these critiques, she managed, over the course of her career to become engrossed in education and politics, marrying the two in an uneasy alliance. By 1944, she had written an essay entitled "Certain Unalienable Rights" in which she critiqued American democracy. In it she says,

In order to maintain slavery, it was necessary to isolate Black men from every possible manifestation of our culture. It was necessary to teach that they were inferior beings who could not profit from that culture. After the slave was freed, every effort has persisted to maintain 'White supremacy' and wall the Negro in from every opportunity to challenge this concocted 'supremacy.' Many Americans said the Negro could not learn and they 'proved' it by restricting his educational opportunities. When he surmounted these obstacles and achieved a measure

of training, they said he did know how to use it and proved it by restricting his employment opportunities. When it was necessary to employ him, they saw to it that he was confined to laborious and poorly-paid jobs. After they had made every effort to guarantee that his economic, social, and cultural levels were low, they attributed his status to his race. (pp. 22-23)

From Bethune's perspective, Black Americans had been trying to engage in American democracy through traditional processes (e.g., military service), but had discovered an immutable paradox—such processes would not “make” them more American yet they could serve because they were Americans, at least according to the law. Their lives were marked by circumstance, not choice. In this respect, choice came to represent, for Bethune, the ability to speak one's own truth, to communicate without fear that someone would re-author one's words. Choice was not an individual experience, but, rather, a merging of structural prescriptions influenced by one's access to information. Though choice may be made individually, it always implied a communal connection and, by extension, a socio-political affect.

Bethune's charge to Black women is particularly demanding. In her charge, we begin to see how Black women educators came to inherit a curriculum centered on uplifting the race and we can begin to understand how one's presence—e.g., being a Black woman—marks one's position historically. In this marking, Black women, whether by “choice” or by force, consciously or unconsciously, struggle with the following:

Our women know too well the disintegrating effect upon our family life of our low economic status. Discrimination and restriction have too often meant broken homes and the delinquency of our children. We have seen our dreams frustrated and our hopes broken. We have risen, however, out of our despair to help our men climb up the next rung of the ladder. We see now more than a glimmer of light on the horizon of a new hope. We feel behind us the surge of all women of China and India and of Africa who see the same light and look to us to march with them. We will reach out our hands to all women who struggle forward—White, Black, Brown, Yellow—all. If we have the courage and tenacity of our forebears, who stood firmly like a rock against the lashings of slavery and the disruption of Reconstruction, we shall find a way to do for our day what they did for theirs. (p. 27)

Bethune's interpretation of success and possibility is tempered, therefore, by her historicized consciousness. This consciousness leads her to weigh a deeply personal charge on Black women—to situate Black women in constant comparative analysis of one's own life and the lives of one's foremothers. Such a comparison, in simple terms, means that we must find/identify/adopt the same fortitude they held in resisting enslavement (psychologically and physically). Such a strength thus becomes the “essence” of Black womanhood and, in Bethune's work as an educator, morphs into a teaching philosophy for Black women educators. Bethune's earlier commentaries on this philosophy actually come forth in a single statement made in 1926 as she writes, “Negro women have always known struggle. This heritage is just as much to be desired as any other. Our girls should be taught to appreciate it

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and welcome it” (McCluskey & Smith, p. 85). For the Black women studied here and from our personal experiences, to be a Black woman in the U.S. is to know struggle, to be on intimate terms with it, and to use it to facilitate learning (of oneself and the society in which one lives).

Finally, for Cooper, Bethune, and Brown, choice was also closely tied to the gendered moral expectations of their times. Realizing that white Americans needed “convincing” of Black Americans’ readiness for freedom and equity, Cooper, Bethune, and Brown all expressed specific moral sensibilities centered on Christian values. In doing so, they hoped to teach young Black students that they had to present themselves as prepared, both intellectually and morally, for participation in democratic life. Though White teachers and students did not face the same expectations, Cooper, Bethune, and Brown operated with the understanding that they had to “prove” their worthiness to White America. Wadelington and Knapp (1999) capture this perspective by describe Brown’s blending of the moral and the political,

Wealthy student Leslie Lacy later recalled Brown’s characteristic presence at key chapel occasions: ‘From head to shoes she was dressed in perfect taste; even the carnation on her well-tailored white dress was still slightly dripping with dew.’ She generally addressed three main topics: culture, education, and race relations. Brown firmly believed that once African Americans had been educated in the best of middle-class American culture, the result—as shown by the example of her own life—would be greater acceptance by Whites. (p. 137)

Brown’s equal emphasis on knowledge, community work, and manners indicate her recognition of choice, for Black Americans, as contingent upon Black people’s ability to assimilate White middle class dress, mannerisms, and moral ideology.¹¹ For Brown, Cooper, and Bethune, racial uplift implied and mandated the teaching of White middle class values because “success” hinged upon Black students’ cultural competence—their ability to understand multiple contexts and communities, to speak multiple languages,¹² and to use that knowledge to transcend oppression.

Brown, Cooper, and Bethune created an ethic of care inclusive of this fundamental belief that freedom and choice, for Black Americans, were precariously tied to the inclination of White Americans. To prepare Black students for survival and success in “America” demanded a particular honesty from Black women educators, a pedagogy which made clear the problematic nature of freedom and choice for people of color. In addition, Cooper, Bethune, and Brown operated with the assumption that this limited choice for Black Americans, this asynchronous yet co-dependent relationship, made the world an extremely unsafe place for Black children. As a result, their particular ethic of care could not express for students unlimited possibilities; it could not perpetuate the myth of meritocracy—that success was achieved in direct proportion to effort—because, for Black Americans, many choices were pre-determined.

An Ethic of Risk: Authority and Power

To understand Black women educators is to refute the belief that caring is an apolitical act, devoid of power (Noblit, 1993). Teaching encompasses numerous power relations which shift based on the contextual assumptions of the encounter (Foucault, 1997). Since Bethune, Brown, and Cooper witnessed the “White culture of power” ignore, erase, and reject the importance of educating Black children, these Black women educators infused in their curriculum specific lessons designed to teach Black students how to recognize and subvert this system (Casey, 1993; Delpit, 2003). Theirs was and is a curriculum based on the experiences of Black people in America as *Other* and *Oppressed* (Watkins, 1993). Their insistence on high standards and superior work reflected a much larger political point. Their standards were high because they expected students to go back to their respective communities, share their knowledge, and uplift the race—this was no small task. Through their teaching, they hoped to reconstitute power structures in the United States. Cooper (1892/1988) captures this point brilliantly when she states:

A nation or an individual may be at peace because all opponents have been killed or crushed; or, nation as well as individual may have found the secret of true harmony in the determination to live and let live (p. 149). Progressive peace in a nation is the result of conflict; and, conflict, such as is healthy, stimulating, and progressive, is produced through the co-existence of radically opposing or racially different elements.... The child can never gain strength save by resistance, and there can be no resistance if all movement is in one direction and all opposition made forever an impossibility. (p. 151)

For Cooper, power is intricately tied to conflict and, only with conflict, can we paradoxically realize peace. Conflict is unavoidable, necessary, and healthy; learning occurs when children resist, when they engage in conflict and/or reject the status quo. In this respect, Cooper’s pedagogy centered on learning in counter hegemonic space—the creative space of resistance for organic intellectuals in training (Gramsci, 1971).

In similar fashion, Brown embraced conflict, the unexpected, and the unwarranted. In the decades that she operated Palmer Institute, the school weathered several fires, near bankruptcy, and political attack. For Brown, conflict became the norm; it was the one variable that remained constant during her tenure as an educator and political activist. In this spirit, she taught her students “how to meet disaster with their head unbowed except to God” (Wadelington & Knapp, 1999, p. 150). Though she was more willing to compromise than Bethune, Brown modeled, as an educator, the art of being prepared. This art of being prepared was inevitably shaped by the inconsistency and unpredictability of life for Black Americans who lived a different sense of normalcy—segregationist practices and institutionalized racism forced Black Americans to create counter narratives, to re-write their lives in meaningful ways. In this sense, issues that White women would claim as points

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of attack for a feminist agenda were reinterpreted and rewritten by women of color as points of entry into White America (hooks, 2000; Robnett, 1997; Naples & Desai, 2002). When White women rejected stereotypical notions of womanhood which confined women to rigid sexual and gender roles, Black women educators like Brown were stressing to their young Black women the importance of being “feminine” and “virtuous.” Brown, Bethune, and Cooper realized that to gain access to certain political and social systems, Black women would have to model the very qualities being attacked by some White feminists because Black women lived with a different, externally imposed, narrative. As Hanson (2003) says,

During the 1890s, African American women were subject to increasingly negative stereotypes as liars, prostitutes, and thieves. A large part of the educated Black woman’s agenda for racial uplift rested on disproving and overturning these images, particularly through sexual respectability and stable marriage. Bethune reconciled this tension by working to make her personal life *appear* traditional. She presented a model of decorum, femininity, and studies propriety.... She consistently introduced herself as ‘Mrs. Bethune’ and insisted that all refer to her as such. Although this was a charade, Bethune’s actions constituted an act of cultural resistance. At a time when Whites routinely addressed Black women by their first names or used the term ‘Auntie,’ Bethune’s insistence on the formal title ‘Mrs. Bethune’ forced Whites to address a Black woman with respect and her behavior seemed to undermine the popular image of Black women as wanton and immoral. (p. 54)

Bethune proved the importance of claiming power for Black women educators. To do so, they had to identify the social expectations of White society and emulate those to counter the assumption that Black women were heathens and not worthy of respect or acknowledgment. Although her emulation of White standards for womanhood might be interpreted as too conciliatory, it represented, in large measure, an attempt to challenge the hegemony of Whiteness in America. The life histories of Bethune, Brown, and Cooper demonstrate that, contrary to notions espoused by ethic of care and libratory education advocates, Black women’s multiple positionality (as educators and oppressed individuals) necessitates that they retain power and use authority in strategic ways that counter structures of oppression.

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The Collapse and Resurrection of Black Women Educators

Thus far, we have argued that Black women educators historically framed a pedagogy rooted in an ethic of care which differs somewhat from Noddings (1992a; 2005b) conceptualization. We have suggested that Black women educators historically have understood the relationship between work and care, freedom and choice, and authority and power based on their multiple oppressions and their desire to better humanity. While we do not suggest that all Black women educators operate with the same pedagogy, we do argue that there exists a historicized understanding of Black teachers, particularly women, as multiply oppressed that provides a

specific interpretive framework for teaching Black children (Beauboef-Lafontant, 2002, 2007; Casey, 1993; Foster, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Watkins, 1993). We conclude that many Black women teachers equate work with care believing that work connects them to the larger community and provides the social and political avenues to affect change. We maintain that Black women educators teach children (especially children of color) that freedom is, in many instances, pre-determined and choice curtailed by societal structures that disseminate privilege in different ways. Finally, we suggest that Black women educators express authority in strategic ways that counter historically stereotypical perceptions of Black women.

In studying the writings and biographies of these three women, we were struck by their tireless work as political educators. We began to question the physical and psychological implications of their persistent commitment to social justice through teaching despite the overwhelming obstacles. While Cooper lived to be 105 years old and remained an educator, mother, and othermother her entire life, Brown and Bethune both experienced significant health decline over the years. Brown suffered a near nervous collapse in the winter of 1924-25 after a fire destroyed part of her school in December and, as her biographers note, she “had again worked herself to the point of exhaustion” (p. 121). She eventually died from complications associated with diabetes, but had also been judged mentally incompetent prior to her death. Bethune’s asthma grew worse as she aged and was continuously exacerbated by her constant work; at the age of 80 she died of a heart attack.

The lives of these Black women educators intersect with our own experiences to highlight several key questions. Is it possible that Black women educators, committed to social justice, may care too much? What are the psychological and physical consequences for Black women educators who faithfully practice engaged pedagogy in a world which consistently questions one’s actions, motives, and competence? Impacted by racial and gender oppression, are Black women educators, as Freire (1970) would argue, responsible for liberating the oppressor? If so, when (if ever) do we get a time-out—a chance to disengage from this critical social work? If respite is granted, how do we rest and not experience the guilt of not being in “the struggle?” When, if ever, can we remove the mantle of race and gender, and just be still, if only for a moment?

We ground our preliminary response to the aforementioned questions in the ethic of care we inherited from our foremothers. We are bound to a pedagogy of contradiction, a life of teaching and learning for which conflict is the norm and the path to peace. In our teaching and lives, we find ourselves constantly embattled—in psychological and ideological resistance and in compromise. Daily, we decide “when and where we enter”¹³ understanding that this decision is never made in isolation and always has broad social and political implications. For us, teaching to transgress (hooks, 1994) has become the norm; we live in a permanent state of resistance. And this is how we care, this is how we teach our children to care. We teach them to carefully balance distrust and trust—distrust will keep them alive and trust will help them flourish. We teach them that meritocracy is a myth, that choices

are possibilities but not endless, and we teach them that our people are still claiming the authority that has been denied to us for generations; that this is the authority to author our own lives, to speak our truth(s), and to collect our dignity. This is a liberatory ethic of care based on collective work and responsibility, not individual effort, worth, or merit. It is an ethic of care infused with love, humility, passion, and power. But, most of all, it is an ethic of care that must be political, that is rooted in an understanding of the home and the spiritual as politically creative spaces.

And, finally, we conclude that care-sickness may stem from an imposed navigation of systemic oppression, inherited interpretive Black tradition(s), and an ideology of liberatory education that creates for Black women educators the responsibility of racial uplift. We hypothesize that the current shortage of students of color entering the teaching profession (Montecinos, 2004) is related, whether directly or indirectly, to the dissolution of current Black educators who are, quite honestly, tired from caring, tired from trying to prove themselves intellectually capable, and tired from trying to prove to White people that racism exists, permeates our political systems, and is reinforced by current curriculum practices. In her last will and testament, Bethune reminds us of the difficulty we face in teaching with a hermeneutic of suspicion; this type of pedagogy contradicts our sense of hope—the faith that we must maintain in ourselves, our race, and public education. To remain committed to public education, such faith is critical. Bethune captures its importance by saying, “I leave you faith. Faith is the first factor in a life dedicated to service. Without faith, nothing is possible” (McCluskey & Smith, 1999, p. 60). For Black women whose pedagogy reflects a womanist tradition, faith confounds care-sickness and gives us the will to continue.

Notes

¹ We use the term “Black” here instead of African American to refer more specifically to the ways in which we are “raced” as such in the United States and also to embrace a broader conceptualization of Black diasporic culture.

² We ground our understanding and use of the term “border” in the work of Navarro (2002) who moves beyond the physical definition of border and discusses borders as psychological spaces with very real lived consequences.

³ The phrase, hermeneutic of suspicion is grounded in the work of deconstructionism. For a more specific discussion of how it relates to African American interpretive tradition (s), see Stephen Breck Reid’s article, “Endangered species: The African-American scholar between text and people,” located at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/africanamertext.htm> (retrieved on March 21, 2006).

⁴ For more information on interpretive communities, see Casey (1993) and Gramsci’s (1971) collective subjective.

⁵ We do not argue that there is an indisputable collective consciousness among all Black Americans. From a postmodern perspective, we understand the viability of multiple consciousness and subject positions. All Black people do not share the same beliefs or attitudes. We use the term collective consciousness here to evoke a political orientation. For a more extensive discussion of black consciousness, see Dubois (1903) and Fanon (1952).

⁶ For a better discussion of safe spaces, see Collins (2000). Here, she elaborates on the ways Black women use semi-safe spaces as locations of solidarity building, organizing, and support.

⁷ For more specific data, see a U.S. census press release located at http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/income_wealth/005647.jhtml and see the relationship between race, poverty, and education described in Kozol (1991).

⁸ Cooper received her Ph.D. from the University of Paris in 1925 at the age of 67. The other women to receive doctoral degrees before Cooper were Georgiana Rose Simpson, Eva B. Dykes, and Sadie Tanner Alexander.

⁹ Nationally, in 1880, the illiteracy rate for Black Americans was 78.5 percent (Hanson, 2003).

¹⁰ Her birth name was Lottie Hawkins.

¹¹ We recognize the distinctiveness of White middle class society of the time (and of the present) and understand the dangers of essentializing any particular group; we realize that not everyone adopted the same moral or religious beliefs. In this instance, we are speaking to White, middle class, Protestant ideology which implicitly encouraged the perpetuation of Victorian gender standards (women were to be homemakers and men breadwinners). We also recognize the danger in presuming that “good” manners are White manners.

¹² When we refer to the speaking of multiple languages, we are speaking to code-switching. When Black people code switch, they demonstrate an understanding of the rules of ‘standard English’ and the cultural codes which are implied by such language and they demonstrate an ability to speak Black English vernacular or dialects in more familial settings.

¹³ This quote is one of Anna Julia Cooper’s (1892; 1988) most famous, “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*” (p. 31).

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