(Re)membering the Ecology of the Self

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I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self.
— Audre Lorde (1984)

There are systems in this world that have everything to gain from your disembodiment. Because emptied bodies are easier to use.
Stay whole.
— Cole Arthur Riley (2024)

CHAPTER 1: ACTS OF FAITH

I spent five years in elementary and middle school classrooms as a teacher of reading, language arts, and social studies. Because my school was located in a refugee resettlement area, I taught and engaged with students from across the globe – from Tanzania, Iran, and Mexico, among many other places. In this space, my students also served as my teacher, instructing me in the ways of their worlds.

Beyond the teaching of standardized content, I had a chance to teach my public school students about God, not through explicit instruction, but through my embodiment of my Christian faith. This shaped my approach, values, and interactions with students and families, so much so that students often asked why I did not curse at them. They frequently mentioned that there was something "different" about me, although they did not have the language for exactly what it was. Yet, they knew that they were welcomed and embraced in our homeplace of the classroom, knowing that their minds, bodies, and spirits were free to be.

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For me, being an educator was much deeper than the mere transmission of knowledge or taking up a noble vocation. It was deeply inspired by my faith. It was this deep sense of purpose and calling that actually relocated me away from my family, friends,

and familiarity in Georgia to Texas, where I knew only a few people. On June 9th, 2013, I wrote the following in my journal:

> I moved to Houston, Texas yesterday, as a result of me being accepted into the Teach for America program here. I was initially accepted into this program in January of 2013, and was initially very excited. I had prayed and asked for God's will to be done in my life and with my application. I told God that if I got accepted into the program, wherever He decides to send me, I would go. My first choice was Atlanta, Houston was second, and Dallas was third. So, Houston it was...

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> Yet, I wrestled with this decision for MONTHS, knowing that I didn't necessarily want to leave Georgia, but the circumstances at home weren't getting any better… I remember going to a church conference in January 2013, and hearing the spirit of the Lord so clearly during prayer saying, "I'm sending you to Houston for a reason, trust me." So, now I'm here, and I'm trying to trust.

My move to Texas to take up teaching as a career was an act of faith. It was my faith that kept me in the classroom when I wanted to leave. It was my faith that influenced my pedagogical decision making and educational advocacy when administrators often reduced students to test scores and grades. It was my understanding of communion, fellowship, and the inherent worth of each student that inspired me to cultivate a nurturing classroom climate where all students were treated with dignity, humanity, and respect. It was my personal experience with the unmerited grace of God that enabled me to engage with students in a way that was restorative, understanding, and forgiving, helping students to not only thrive academically, but emotionally, interpersonally, and spiritually.

CHAPTER 2: EXPECTATION OF FRAGMENTATION

During the first year of my doctoral program, I took a women's studies course. In conversation about Black feminist pedagogies, I mentioned my Christian faith. I perked up in my chair, eager to share this experiential and embodied knowledge. I spoke about how my ways of knowing, being, and believing showed up in my teaching practice and how I hoped to delve deeper into this understanding. Instead, I heard the instructor's voice get stern and watched her face grow grim as she firmly dismissed my claim. She made it explicitly clear to me, and to the audience of my classmates who bore witness, that discussions of faith, religion and/or spirituality were inappropriate in the classroom, and across academic spaces. According to her, teaching was objective and neutral, and had nothing to do with spiritual matters. In response, I sat back quietly in my chair, and refused to speak for the remainder of the class period. While my pride and ego were bruised, it felt deeper than public humiliation.

I had noticed the silence of my classmates when I brought up spirituality in other spaces. I took notes from seasoned scholars

who warned me against proselytizing in my research and teaching endeavors. I noted the caveats of well-meaning folks who enthusiastically supported my research but warned me that Christianity was a touchy subject in education. Yet I wondered why topics of race, gender, class, nationality, and other criteria of meaning and identity were safe to discuss in the classroom, while faith was essentially expelled. I didn't realize it at the time, but these moments were slowly indoctrinating me into the academy's *expectation of fragmentation*.

The positivist and post-positivist paradigms that root academic institutions suggest that in order to achieve objectivity, neutrality, and the "objective" singular truth, spiritual fragmentation is necessary. The expectation of fragmentation, then, refers to the violent tendency of Western academic institutions to demand that the whole self be disconnected or dismembered, in order to fit into often oppressive, harmful, hegemonic structures. Staples defined the fragmented self as "iterations of one's *collective* identity".[1] The expectation of fragmentation and the culture of academia permitted only select parts of my intersectional identities to project, while my spiritual ways of knowing and being were suppressed and compartmentalized. My experience of the expectation of fragmentation inside and outside the classroom would take me on a journey to make sense of the intertwined histories of religion and education in the United States.

CHAPTER 3: ACADEMIC APOLOGETICS

I was a young, emerging scholar with seemingly little to gain, and much more to give up if I didn't acquiesce to the seductions of the academy. So I found myself watering down and defending my theologies and onto-epistemologies from academic critiques about rational thought, logic, reason, and empirical evidence. Academic apologetics refers to my process of trying to defend my faith by making it more legible, palatable, secular, and academic for broader audiences. I heeded the suggestions of folks who reminded me that the discourse of new age spirituality was more accepted in educational research literature. However, that language did not capture, or explicitly name, who I was or what I was referring to. Importantly, in my research about the inner worlds and spiritual lives of historical Black women teachers, the language of spirituality was not what they marshaled. Instead, they called forth a radical Christianity and liberatory theology that held their experiences as Black women. And for me, that specificity was critical.

Yet, in writing and presentations, I would use the terms "spiritual" or "spirituality" when I actually meant "Black Christianity," or even use "Black faith" when I explicitly meant "the Black Church." I would spend hours at my laptop typing, erasing, backspacing, redacting, trying to bring all of myself onto the page. Until I was completely erased. And that's what the expectation of fragmentation did to me. It effectively seduced me into erasure. As Gordon and Meroe argue,

> We often wonder if the socially adapted human being, who happens to be a scholar, is truly capable of discarding her or his individual frame of reference when it comes to the study of a subject to which she or he has chosen to commit her or his life's work. This is a precarious and dangerous situation because too many times "objectivity" has served as a mask for the political agenda of the status quo, thus marginalizing and labeling the concerns of less empowered groups as "special interests."[2]

The harm of my apologetic, as a seductive tactic of the expectation of fragmentation, was that it effectively secularized my ways of knowing, being, and believing into something that did not reflect who I was, at all.

I began to understand that while the academy only cared for my mind and intellectual prowess, my embodied Black womanhood and Christianity could not be separated from the processes of teaching and learning. The expectation of fragmentation seduced me into protecting and advancing the status quo in academia, specifically, by advancing the idea of the racial-religious-gendered other. It reinforced that I did not belong and that my fragmentation

was necessary. The danger of the expectation of fragmentation is that when we are split into pieces, cut off from one another and from our source of strength and power, it makes the temptation to forget the spiritual nature of the work, and our world, inevitable.[3]

Yet, there is something more insidious and dangerous here as well. Beyond preventing someone from being their fully integrated self and from being a person of spiritual integrity, fragmentation can also lead to a loss of meaning and purpose in life, making it difficult for individuals to find fulfillment and satisfaction. It can also lead to a person having a crisis of faith or of spiritual identity, and to feelings of being disconnected from their beliefs. Fragmentation cuts people off from all of the possibilities that are around them to support their flourishing. In this way, it's not just forgetting spiritual power and centeredness – it's the inability to access this power and being unable to invite others to access this power as well.

CHAPTER 4: CONTOURS

That moment in class haunted me. When I went back the next week, I could feel the heaviness in the air so thick. I kept thinking, what would make this professor so vehemently refuse to even engage in the conversation? I recognized there might be a number of reasons for the lack of engagement in topics around religion and faith in the secular education classroom. These might include the instructor's lack of interest in the topic, a nonreligious world sense, or fear of the consequences. Another reason for such hesitancy may be found in McKittrick's articulation of the unknowable, which suggests that certain aspects of Black life, history, and experience cannot be fully understood or represented within traditional academic frameworks.[4] Yet, I needed to understand, beyond that moment and beyond the professor of the course, why religion, faith, and spirituality were such taboo subjects in the classroom space.

Over the course of my doctoral program, I wracked my mind, and the literature, trying to make sense of these questions. And I grew to understand the deep and complex history of education and religion in the U.S. It is more than debates over prayer in schools; it is the ways in which Christianity remains entangled in U.S. education. Burke and Segall suggest,

> Unless we acknowledge that all of education is theological in character (if only by dint of its own organization, language, and practices and in how it organizes student bodies) then talk of religion in (or out of) school is limited to surface and perhaps by comparison, unimportant discussions about prayer in school. Which in turn severely hamstrings the possibility of fruitful discussions of what role religion ought to (or does already) play in the schooling of and for children.[5]

It was the "possibility of fruitful discussions" that I was after.

In my continued search for the ways that religion and education intersect, I also kept bumping up against white Christian nationalism. I began to see the ways in which white supremacist values mixed with nationalism and distorted readings of the Bible shaped and continue to shape the educational experiences of

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students from preschool through graduate school. From mission schools and Native American boarding schools, to criminalizing literacy for enslaved Black people, to private white segregation academies in slavery's afterlives, each of these moments in the history of American education were rooted in white Christian nationalist values. In coming to this understanding, I could see how the intertwined histories of education and religion were even more present than I thought.

Recently the state superintendent announced that all schools in Oklahoma must incorporate the Bible and the Ten Commandments in their curriculums, effectively requiring public school teachers to teach the Bible in the classroom. I wanted to consider matters of faith and spirituality in the classroom, not support a theocracy. I believe, even as a Christian, that God gives free will and wants all to come to know Him of their own volition. Thus, forcing and subjecting all students to Bible lessons was not what I was advocating for. At the same time, states across the nation began proposing bills prohibiting instruction or training around "divisive subjects" such as race, white supremacy, chattel slavery, and genocide. I wondered how this curriculum silencing was similar to, or different from, my experience in the classroom when spiritual matters were prohibited. I needed to untangle what exactly I was advocating for, and how it was different from these problematic integrations of Christianity and pedagogy.

Considering these questions, I began to see the contours of my classroom experiences, as both a teacher and a student, and began to realize that it was more nuanced than a professor's refusal to permit matters of spirituality in the classroom. I recognized the long and insidious history of Christianity being connected to projects of anti-intellectualism and to other forms of oppression and white supremacy in the U.S. Overall, this necessitated that I confront normative constructs perpetuated by white Christian nationalism in U.S. schools across history and the present while also exploring more humanizing possibilities.

CHAPTER 5: PEDAGOGIES OF POSSIBILITY

Deeper than religion, I wondered if there was a more expansive and humanizing way to invite the "spirit of our work"[6] into our pedagogical practice that was wholly untethered from white Christian nationalism. A way to bring the fullness of the human being – mind, body, and spirit – to the classroom. Black feminist writer Toni Morrison explained that Black people have always had a depth of understanding of the supernatural and the material reality. She explains,

> [In *Song of Solomon*] I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I supposed could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. And some of those things were "discredited knowledge" that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was "discredited." And also because the press toward upward social mobility would mean to get as far away from that kind of knowledge as possible. That kind of knowledge has a very strong place in my work.[7]

What Morrison describes here is not only a particular worldview, but a distinctive way of knowing that disrupts the Western canon and its socially constructed dichotomies between the sacred and the secular, personal and political, and in my case, the spiritual and educational. As Morrison explains, rather than distancing herself from the distinctive yet discredited knowledge that is often derided by Eurocentric paradigms, she validates and embraces it.

Black feminist scholar and activist bell hooks framed spirituality as both the rationale for her political activities, as well as a

resource for surviving, and thriving, in the midst of oppression. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, she identifies her spiritual practices as essential to her work as a liberationist educator, stating,

> I began to use the vision of spiritual self-recovery in relationship to the political self-recovery of colonized and oppressed peoples. I did this to see the points of convergence between the effort to *live in the spirit* and the effort of oppressed peoples to *renew their spirits* – to find themselves again in suffering and in resistance.[8]

Teaching, hooks envisioned, is a moral, communal, ethical, and spiritual endeavor, incorporating humanistic pedagogical approaches. Engaged pedagogy, she proposed, is transgressive and alternative in that it refuses fragmentation and conformity to the status quo, and instead emphasizes wholeness through the communion of mind, body, and spirit.[9] She upholds education as a holistic experience and necessitates spirituality in the art and practice of teaching, with the belief that our practice is inherently sacred and life-giving, and central to the work of critical social justice education.

Hyperaware of the expectation of fragmentation in academic classrooms, hooks found that "honestly naming spirituality as a force strengthen[ed] my capacity to resist and enabled me to stand within centers of dominator culture and courageously offer alternatives."[10] Essential to hooks' spiritually engaged pedagogy – and central to Black feminist theories – is the power of naming.[11]

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, was most renowned for championing critical pedagogy. Yet, few education scholars have seriously considered the influence of his faith on his practice and philosophy.[13] In *Letters to Christina* (1996), published a year before his death, he commented on the importance of his faith, stating, "Something else explains my political beliefs,… something that cannot be underestimated, much less rejected… my Christian upbringing."[14] In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, published posthumously, he reiterates this worldview,

> I do want to mention, however, the fundamental importance of my faith in my struggle for overcoming an oppressive reality and for building a less ugly society, one that is less evil and more humane. All arguments in favour of the legitimacy of my struggle for a more people-oriented society have their deepest roots in my faith.[15]

Freire's background as a Christian undoubtedly influenced his spiritual development, as well as his lifelong commitment to a vision of humanization through dialogue and praxis.[16] This is evidenced in educational philosophies centered on community service, teaching as a higher calling, and justice for the oppressed. Freire utilized his faith as a resource to sustain, give hope, and energize his critical, liberationist pedagogy, as well as his political activities.

Yet, Freire expressed hesitancy in explicitly naming the spirituality laden in his work. In a posthumous publication he professed, "I do not feel very comfortable speaking about my faith. At least, I do not feel as comfortable as I do when speaking about my political choice, my utopia, and my pedagogical dreams."[17] Despite the spiritual worldviews engrained in his words and works, it seems that even renowned educator Paulo Freire experienced cognitive dissonance and the pressure of fragmentation.

In his work on education and spirituality, Parker Palmer theorizes about what he calls the pain of disconnection.[18] This refers to the emotional, psychological, and spiritual suffering that arises when individuals or communities experience a lack of meaningful connection with themselves, others, or their surroundings. In the context of schools, this can occur when teachers and students are disconnected from the subjects they teach and learn, from each other, from their inner lives, and from their spiritual selves. This can deeply affect one's sense of identity and purpose, as well as lead to a fragmented and dehumanizing educational experience.

In various ways, each of these theorists, scholars, and pedagogues have offered "pedagogies of possibility" for understanding and seeing people through more holistic and expansive lenses.[19] Pedagogies of possibility revolve around teaching and learning methods that empower individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities, to envision and realize new possibilities for their lives and societies. This pedagogical approach emphasizes liberation, critical thinking, and the potential for social transformation. It is critical to note, however, that these scholars were each talking about spirituality and faith in varied ways, not necessarily confined to a religious orientation. What unifies their stances, however, is the enactment and embodiment of a spiritually centered paradigm[20] that has the power and possibility to impact the teacher, students, and broader society.

CHAPTER 6: ECOLOGY OF THE SELF

Schools, from K-12 settings to post-secondary institutions, and the culture embedded therein, have created the conditions where fragmentation is expected and required. Miller went as far as saying that "modern schooling is a *spiritually* devastating form of engineering that is hostile to human values and democratic ideals."[21] As bell hooks argues,

> [It] teaches us that disconnection is organic to being.... In actuality, it is the failure to achieve harmony of mind, body, and spirit that has furthered anti-intellectualism in our culture and made our schools mere factories.[22]

In essence, to refuse to see human beings in their fullness of being, mind, body, and spirit, is to reduce them to mere flesh.[23] Denying the existence of someone's spirit and their spiritual world sense moves beyond religious affiliation, doctrines, or denomination. It is a form of spiritual violence. Yet, there are other possibilities for integrating the mind, body, and spirit in the classroom and beyond.

Black feminist writer, Audre Lorde described the expectation of fragmentation, or what she named the encouragement to compartmentalize the different parts of her identity, particularly in her efforts toward racial justice and freedom from all forms of oppression.[24] Yet, she offers a way forward stating,

> I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition. Only then can I bring myself and my energies as a whole to the service of those struggles which I embrace as part of my living.[25]

It is the integration of all the parts of oneself, operating in tandem with each other, that enables Audre Lorde to holistically embrace herself, and invites others to do the same.

Cover of The Cancer Journals by Audre Lorde

What Lorde is gesturing to here is what I consider an integrated *ecology of the self*. While ecology typically refers to the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings, the ecology of the self refers to the dynamic relationship and interaction between the mind, body, and spirit. It emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual contexts in shaping

an individual's experiences and identity. The ecology of the self is a holistic perspective that helps lead to self-integration and wholeness and is rooted in culturally and spiritually situated ways of knowing and being, as highlighted briefly below.

ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, the ecological systems theory is a framework for understanding human development by considering the multiple layers of environment that influence an individual's growth. It outlines how multiple systems interact and impact a person's development from childhood through adulthood. These systems include:

1. Microsystem, which refers to the immediate environment in which a person lives.
2. Mesosystem, or the interactions between a person's various microsystems.
3. Exosystem, which is the largest social system that influences a person, but on an indirect level.
4. Macrosystem, the broader cultural context that shapes and influences an individual.
5. Chronosystem, which refers to the dimensions of time, and reflects how life transitions and environmental events can impact a person's life.[26]

The ecological systems theory is important for understanding how these different systems interact and influence an individual's development by highlighting the complex interplay between the individual and their environment. However, this theory does have limitations, particularly as it relates to the experiences of marginalized and historically oppressed people. Ecological systems theory applies as a universal framework, and does not adequately capture the unique, nuanced, and cultural experiences and values of Black communities. It also underestimates the role of systemic racism and structural inequality, and how it permeates all levels of the ecological systems; overlooks intersectionality; offers one-size-fits-all solutions and interventions. Importantly, it does not examine how individuals embody systems *within* themselves, systems consisting of the mind, body, and spirit. The "ecology" of the self, on the other hand, emphasizes the integration, interconnectedness, and interdependence of the mind-body-spirit. In this way, the connection or fragmentation of the mind, body, and spirit also influences how an individual interacts with and responds to the various systems, as highlighted by Bronfenbrenner.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Though there exists a wide range of doctrines and denominations under the umbrella of Christianity, on a very surface level, my Christian cosmology stands on certain things:

1. I believe in a transcendent, sovereign, omnipresent, omniscient God who created the heavens, earth, and everything else in between. As a result, every single person has value and purpose in God's eyes.
2. I believe in a triune God, also known as the Trinity, consisting of God the Father, God the Son, and God as Holy Spirit. Each of these three distinct entities are co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial, yet united in divinity.
3. I believe in the *imago dei*: that all people, regardless of their race, ethnicity, age, ability, and so forth, were created in the image and likeness of God and are called to be in perfect and intimate communion with Him.
4. Another part of the *imago dei* is that as Christians, we demonstrate God's likeness on earth so that others may see Him personified and glorified in and through our lives.
5. God cares deeply about the human condition, and doesn't desire that anyone should perish, but enjoy eternal life with Him. This means that no person is disposable, no sin above His grace, and no mistakes unworthy of redemption.

6. I believe that in a world that is often filled with tragedy, heartbreak, disappointment, oppression, and hatred, God is good. This is not in the cliché sense that God simply provides stuff and things, but that His very nature is goodness. This idea makes plain that societal ills like slavery, anti-Blackness, poverty, hunger, and so forth are not in accordance with God's very nature, but are the product of inhumanity.

In my current understanding of Christian theology, I believe that as the nature and being of God is tripartite, we were also created as such. The mind, body, and spirit are distinct but interconnected aspects of a human being and created by God to function in harmony. This perspective emphasizes the unity of the whole person, reflecting the image of God. By contrast, the objectification of another, the denial of their subjectivity and spirituality, is an act of violence against that image of God's self.

In this way, the mind is associated with thoughts, intellect, understandings, decision-making, will, and emotions. Romans 12:2 encourages believers to renew their minds through the word of God, aligning their thoughts with God's. The body is considered the physical temple of the Holy Spirit and also houses the mind. It is the vessel through which we serve God and others. In this way, the physical body of a person is integral to God's redemptive plan. Finally, the spirit. The spirit of a person connects with God. It is through the spirit that individuals experience communion with the Holy Spirit, nurturing spiritual growth and maturity. The spirit is the means through which believers are empowered, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit leads, guides, comforts, directs, and enables us to become more like Jesus Christ. In summary, the concept of the ecology of the self aligns with Christian theology as it emphasizes that harmony of the mind, body, and spirit are essential for holistic well-being.

AFRICAN COSMOLOGY

The expectation of fragmentation operates in polarities and "either-or" thinking. It elevates rational thought processes over cultural, spiritual, embodied, and other ways of knowing. It chooses individualism over collectivism and community. It marks the Black body invisible (while simultaneously hyper visible), and promotes facts over feelings, and mind over matter.[27] In contrast, African cosmology affirms and legitimates Indigenous knowledges as important sources of cultural and embodied knowledge. As Mbiti suggests, traditional African religions

> permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and the non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Where the African is, there is his religion: He carries it to the fields, where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party to attend the funeral ceremony; if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.[28]

The expectation of fragmentation works in direct contrast to African cosmology which emphasizes a holistic view of the mind, body, and spirit connection. African cosmology suggests that the differing dimensions of a person are ultimately indistinguishable, indivisible from each other. Further, while Western thought attempts to neatly demarcate and separate, it sees the dimensions of the ecology of the self as inseparable, and essential for maintaining harmony with the individual and their community.

As a ten-year-old girl, I began to deepen my knowledge and understanding of Black history. But I experienced cognitive dissonance in my identities of being both Black and Christian. In my innocence, I attempted to tease out the perceived contradictions of being both an enslaved people and "a chosen people" (1 Peter 2:9). However, my subsequent learning of Black history and later visit to Ghana, West Africa, revealed the notion of syncretism: combining elements of African spirituality and Christianity. According to Raboteau, syncretism was a natural occurrence among enslaved Africans who converted to Western religions while also embodying

an African cosmology.[29] Still, syncretism is a highly contested idea because it presumes that there is some "pure" Christianity or "pure" African traditional religion – instead of all religions reflecting cultural influences and inflections. However, my study of syncretism through African cosmology facilitated my self-actualization and understanding of the inseparability of my Black Christian womanhood. They are not in contradiction, competition, or opposition. It also facilitated a deeper understanding of the indivisibility of the three dimensions of the ecology of the self, as well as the violence of the expectation of fragmentation.

CHAPTER 7: WHOLENESS

Bettina Love argued that spirit murder occurs when educational environments fail to recognize and nurture the *full humanity* of their students.[30] Spirit murder happens when schools subject students to harsh punishment, low expectations, and a curriculum that disregards their cultural identities and histories. To combat spirit murder, Love advocates for abolitionist teaching, a reimagining of education that dismantles oppressive structures while radically building something new. If we are to take spirit murder in the context of schools seriously, it necessitates an awareness of what comprises full humanity, and that is an understanding of the ecology of the self.

Cynthia Dillard's work on (re)*membering*[31] is a critical framework for understanding and theorizing an ecology of the self, and importantly, how we might remedy fragmentation. She suggests that African ascendants have been seduced into forgetting our cultural memories and histories, which directly impacts our identity and work in the world. She emphasizes the importance of reclaiming, or (re)membering, ancestral knowledge, traditions, and histories that have been marginalized, delegitimated, or silenced by dominant structures, both inside and outside of schools. In her work, she advances (re)membering as more than just a recalling of events, but as an intentional process of bringing together fragmented parts of history, culture, and identity. It likewise involves a commitment to (re)membering the spiritual nature of the work of teaching, learning, and research.

Drawing on Dillard's work, Jamila Lyiscott developed racial-spiritual re-membering as a way of reconciling her racial and spiritual identities, within the context of schools and the academy.[32] She suggests that racial-spiritual re-membering involves acknowledging the historical and contemporary ways in which Christianity has operated as an instrument of colonization, enslavement, and dehumanization. Yet, this re-membering can also serve as a powerful tool for resistance. In the context of schools, racial-spiritual re-membering can support schools in becoming more inclusive by supporting the holistic need of their students, families, and communities. Taken together, these radical understandings of re-membering serve as the basis for disrupting, dismantling, and resisting the expectation of fragmentation within the academy, and beyond.

An awareness of the ecology of the self facilitates (re)membering and embracing one's whole self. To (re)member the ecology of the self is to immediately recognize that God made human beings as an integrated whole of mind, body, and spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23), and that denying this radical subjectivity and spirituality is an act of violence. (Re)membering the ecology of the self also means embracing culturally- and spiritually-situated bodies of knowledge. African cosmology, for example, puts forth the idea of the inseparability of the mind, body, and spirit. Operating with this understanding of these interconnections impacts the ways in which one shows up in the world. Refusal is another mechanism for (re)membering the ecology of the self. This involves righteous indignation and the refusal to being fragmented, dismembered, or disconnected in order to fit into oppressive systems of white supremacy and antiblackness. (Re)membering the ecology of the self, then, must become a way of being, a mechanism for self-integration of the mind-body-spirit. Importantly, operating from a place of wholeness is one of our best ways of not only disrupting structural oppression, but living the full and abundant lives that God intends for us.

AFTERWORD

In the end, I welcomed the effect of standing fully in my faith. I felt it would be a disservice to myself, as well as a distortion of my wholeness, if I surrendered to the expectation of fragmentation and did not acknowledge my faith. Yet, it is the very expectancy that adversely affects the experiences of many marginalized folks in the academy, and beyond. The phenomenon of fragmentation, I learned, was not exclusive to academia or education more broadly, but is part and parcel of living and existing in an imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. This system of operation reinforces the idea that there is an inherent contradiction between what we feel, what we know, what we do, and who we are in the world. Alexander suggests that fragmentation is a societal issue, stating,

> To this process of fragmentation we gave the name colonization, usually understood as a set of exploitative practices in political, ideological, and aesthetic terms, but also linked in minute ways to dualistic and hierarchical thinking: divisions among mind, body, spirit; between sacred and secular, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual; in class divisions; and in divisions between the erotic and the Divine. We saw its operation, as well, in creating singular thinking: the mistaken notion that only one kind of justice work could lead to freedom... Such thinking always premised in negation, often translated into singular explanations for oppression. Breaking down these divisions and hierarchies, indeed making ourselves whole again, became the work that occupied us throughout our entire journey. Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment.[33]

If fragmentation was part and parcel of the project of colonization, then radically embracing wholeness through understanding, belonging, embodiment, and (re)membering the ecology of the self is an act of decolonization, empowerment, and healing. It also connects with how one acts and navigates in the world. While self-integration is a goal, in and of itself, there is an underlying ethical component that necessitates right action in the world as well.

Still, there are moments in which I am seduced into forgetting the spiritual nature of the work or expected to fragment my mind-body-spirit. As long as systems of oppression exist and continue to deny one's full humanity, (re)membering will always exist as a radical way of being and knowing. This also means that (re)membering will always be consequential and risky. The persuasiveness of the academy in convincing one to dismember and fragment the mind, body, and spirit is incessant, and is part of the colonial project. In this way, we must resolve that our efforts toward wholeness do not

Photo Illustration by Mike Meulstee

automatically guarantee understanding, safety, or that the mind-body-spirit will always function in perfect balance. And we may still succumb to the seductions.

At the same time, one must be very strategic about the battles one picks and consider the nuances in the process. Indeed, there is something seductive even about the neatness of wholeness. The very act of (re)membering, though, is ongoing, messy, and iterative, so that even when integrated, it's still not perfect. White supremacist logic suggests that when we are integrated and operating in our full ecology, this absolves the invitation to fragment. The reality is that sometimes we may *need* to fragment for our survival. Further, because some spaces are so harmful and hostile to humanity that to bring one's full self is to risk injury or harm.

It is my hope that this paper serves as an invitation for people to stand fully in the integration and wholeness of mind, body, and spirit. (Re)membering the ecology of the self provides a means through which to operate and navigate in systems and structures that would fragment us into devourable pieces. The work I suggest, then, is to (re)*member*, or bring oneself back to a place of wholeness by centering humanizing, holistic, and wholeness-centered life praxis that prioritizes the ecology of the self: mind-body-spirit.

I am...
Alive
Sitting in a chair smelling perfume
Gaidenia and vanilla
I am hearing
Listening
Voices
Speech
Silences
I feel heat
Sweaty palms
Heartbeat
I taste
Gum at the roof of my mouth
Hunger
Thirst
I see
Through gold glasses
technology
keys
Papers
Wood
Desks
Lights

I am...
Human
Breath
body
Water
Skin
Blood
Bone
Organs
I am a system madeup of systems
Respiratory system
Circulatory system
Nervious system
Skeletal system
Immune system
Reproductive system
I am a system within a system
I am spirit
Soul
body
I am...
Black
Woman
Christian

WIfe
Mother
Daughter
Sister
Friend
I am student
Teacher
professor
I am a system within systems
that demand my fragmentation
yet
I am
An ecosystem
Of one
Independant
Dependant
Interdependant
Wholly
holy
interconnected
I am ...
whole
ecology

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[5] Burke and Segall. "Christianity and its Legacy," 652.

[6] Dillard, *Spirit of Our Work*.

[7] Morrison, "Rootedness," 342.

[8] hooks, *Teaching Community,* 161–162.

[9] hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

[10] hooks, *Teaching Community*, 181.

[11] Collins, "What's in a Name?"

[12] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*.

[13] Boyd, "Critical Spirituality" ; Kristjánsson, "Word in the World."

[14] Freire, *Letters to Cristina*, 86.

[15] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, 104.

[16] Lingley, *Interrogating (Hi)Stories*.

[17] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, 104

[18] Palmer, To Know.

[19] Allen et al., "Teaching to Transform"; Cannon, *Katie's Cannon*; Floyd-Thomas, "Teaching the Canon,"; Floyd-Thomas, "Cultivating a Pedagogy"; Lee, "From a Place"; Oredein, "Christian Womanist Religious Scholarship"; Simon, *Teaching Against the Grain.*

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[22] hooks, *Teaching Community*, 180-181.

[23] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

[24] Lorde, *Sister Outsider.*

[25] Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* 120.

[26] Bronfenbrenner, *Ecology of Human Development.*

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[28] Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* 2.

[29] Raboteau, *Slave Religion.*

[30] Love, "Anti-Black State Violence"; "I See Trayvon Martin"; *Do More Than Survive.*

[31] Dillard, *Learning to (Re)member; Spirit of Our Work*.

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