(Re)membering Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogy in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article explores the liberatory pedagogies of Black Women in higher education through a spiritually grounded, culturally responsive, and critically reflective lens. Drawing on Black feminist theory, memoir, and qualitative inquiry, the author uses her narrative and scholarly lineage to highlight how Black Women Educators (BWEs) cultivate transformative spaces that challenge systemic oppression while centering healing, spirituality, and wholeness. At the heart of this work is the concept of (re)membering—a process of reassembling fragmented histories, identities, and practices to reclaim epistemic and pedagogical power. The author also introduces The Life Cycle of Liberation, an emergent theoretical framework grounded in Black Women's holistic healing traditions. Rooted in holistic education, the framework honors the integration of mind, body, spirit, and community in the learning process, offering a pathway for educators to move from internal healing to systemic change. This article invites scholars and institutions to recognize and uplift Black Women's ways of knowing and teaching as essential to reimagining holistic education as a space for collective liberation.

Keywords: *Black Women, holistic healing, liberation, soulfulness, well-being, pedagogy, Teacher Education, higher education*

We can center the conversation about education on the spirit of Black women teachers who have thrived and loved in spite of our unmentionable and multiple oppressions.

> -Cynthia B. Dillard, *The Spirit of Our Work: Black Women Teachers (Re)member*

The conversation on holistic healing in higher education must consider the ways Black Women scholars have cultivated spirituality (Dillard, 2006, 2012, 2021), soulfulness (Harrell, 2018), healing (Perlow et al., 2018), liberation (hooks, 1994), wellness and well-being practices (Evans, 2021) to thrive "in spite of our unmentionable and multiple oppressions" (Dillard, 2021, p. 2) inside and outside of the academy for centuries.My deliberate capitalization of "Black Women" reflects how I intentionally operationalize the theory of intersectionality throughout my work. For me, this choice symbolizes wholeness, affirming the whole humanity, complexity, and dignity of a "Black

Woman" or a collective of "Black Women". While this stylistic decision may not be widely documented in existing scholarship, to my knowledge, it stands as a personal and political declaration. By reconstructing "Black Women" as a proper noun, I aim to signal value, respect, and honor, an act of linguistic restoration that resists marginalization and affirms presence. In the last fifty years, Black Women Educators (BWEs) and scholars have contributed a wealth of knowledge to society through holistic healing (Holmes, 2017; King, 2018; Magee, 2019; Cannon, 2021; Hemphill, 2024) and critical contemplative practices (Bryant-Davis, 2022; Cairo, 2021; Duff & Tinker Sachs, 2024), like soulfulness (Harrell, 2018), from classrooms to social justice movements (Haynes et al., 2020; National Museum of African American Culture, n.d.).

Dr. Cynthia B. Dillard is an exemplar in her decades of devotion to demonstrating the spirit of Black Women's ways of knowing and being in the world (Dillard, 2006, 2012, 2021). She developed holistic educational theories, calling us into the process of (re)membering Black Women's spiritual work in teacher education (Dillard, 2000, 2021) and qualitative methodologies (Dillard & Neal, 2021). Her call to action, to (re)member, is symbolic of holism and healing, bringing together the pieces of a whole again. She offers insight from an intersectional and marginalized lens, as she identifies as a Black Woman who dares to center spirituality in her research. However, educational spaces perceive the topic of spirituality in education as taboo (Dillard & Neal, 2021). Mayes's (2001) article, "Cultivating Spiritual Reflectivity in Teachers," addresses the "widespread neglect of spiritual commitment in teacher education programs (Nord, 1990)" (p. 5). Lingley (2016) refers to it as "practitioner silence" when discussing the topic of spirituality in education (p. 1). In this article, the terms "spirit" and "soul" are conceptualized metaphorically as two sides of the same coin.

The paradox and power of Black Women Teachers and professors are foundational for embedding holistic healing practices in teacher preparation and embodying them in pedagogy. As a Black Woman Educator, the depth of Dillard's (2000, 2021) work inspired my exploratory text study into liberatory pedagogy in higher education.

Black Women's Issues in Higher Education

Black Women in positions of the professorate experience high levels of emotional, social, and spiritual stress and strive to be well, liberated, and culturally authentic in the academy (Njoku & Marshall, 2024). They are less likely to be recognized for their contribution to the academy or field of teacher education (Muhammad et al., 2020).

Truehill's (2021) article, "Black Women Leaders' Professional and Social Experiences in Higher Education," is a literature review that sheds light on Black Women's social and professional experiences in the academy. The themes highlighted in the literature review are experiences of discrimination, social conditions, and lack of advancement in academic institutions. "Black women described their social experiences as stressful, isolating, and at a severe disadvantage for tenure and promotion practices in post-secondary institutions employment positions" (Truehill, 2021, p. 1; see also Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beard & Julion, 2016; Croom & Patton, 2011; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Howard, 2017). Porcher and Austin's (2021) study, "Black Women are Mules of the World: Black Women Professors of Practice in Teacher Education Programs," examines the intersection of labor and racial equity, revealing the hidden labor thrust upon Black Women professors without adequate compensation or career advancement.

The literature on the issues of oppression, discrimination, and disadvantages that Black

Women encounter in higher education impacts our professional performance, as well as our mental, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Ramdeo (2023) documents from a global perspective the "intersectional invisibility" Black Women endure that hinders our careers and causes psychological harm in school environments (p. 3). More studies and dissertations reveal the detrimental effects of oppressive environments on Black Women's well-being (Butler, 2023; Owens et al., 2018; Truehill, 2021). Still, there is scant research on how Black Women use well-being practices to thrive in higher education through centering spirituality and cultivating holistic healing (Buchanan et al., 2019; Okafor, 2018).

Dillard's (2021) framework is necessary because, historically and globally, Black Women endure marginalization. More specifically, in the context of higher education, "The impacts of racism and racial inequities on Black women continue to be an invisible part of this legacy of oppression, especially in the literature on Black teachers' lives and experiences" (Dillard, 2021, p. 2). Black Women Educators (BWEs) are known for culturally relevant pedagogy, yet are rarely the subject of studies or research. We experience high levels of stress in the profession for many reasons, the most pressing being the erasure of our work (Muhammad et al., 2020, p. 425). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005) said it this way, "Historically, Black women have been largely ignored by much of the academic theorizing and research in education, as they were never the center around which the conservative projects of dominant femininity and teaching were developed" (p. 435). We, therefore, are healing through (re)membering (Dillard, 2021), resisting through rest (Hersey, 2022), and (re)covering (hooks, 1994) (centering) our cultural and spiritual ontological epistemologies in (re)search, theories in education, praxis, and pedagogy.

Black Women Educators' Wellness and Well-being

To conceptualize and discuss the state of Black Women Educators' wellness and well-being, I draw upon Black Women's memoirs and literature. With this in mind, I consider these words of Dillard (2021):

> Despite all that we have been through, Black women have continued to sing our songs and tell our tales as loudly as we can. However, the hunter has always told the story in ways that glorify his conquests, labor, and accomplishments. It is now time for Black women to (re)member and tell our stories in ways that lift up the politics, spiritual consciousness, and creativity that we hold dear and that fuels us. (p. 4)

Reflecting on this powerful statement, I am encouraged to share my story within the context of a legacy of Black Women's theories, memoirs (life writings), and spirituality that spans time and space across generations and the globe. At the same time, echoing Dr. Dillard, as a Black Woman scholar, I am obligated to "...make our teaching and living about (re)membering the full circle of all of our stories" (Dillard, 2021, p. 4).

My Story of Oppression and Liberation

I became curious about Black Women's approach to holistic healing as a student studying to become a teacher in graduate school. While completing my teaching program, I endured challenges as the only Black Woman in my cohort.

Personally, the process of becoming a teacher was excruciatingly painful, a process that planted a seed of inferiority, made me want to quit school, and deterred my growth and future aspirations as a teacher and professor. My dream to teach (and teach teachers) was born through the turmoil I faced while completing my teacher preparation program. I was determined to make a difference, to

alleviate the suffering of other Black Women so no one else would have to go through what I went through or learn critical strategies on how to navigate systems of internalized and institutionalized oppression that's fueled by the ideology of racism and white supremacy.

Through my desire to be liberated from oppression, I began to explore the complexities of Black Women's liberatory pedagogy and embodiment practices by reflecting on how I could heal the situation and move toward my goal of teaching teachers. Looking back, I was rooted in a spiritual practice of soulfulness (Harrell, 2018; hooks, 2003) because I was connected to a community that encouraged healing, liberation, and transformation through education.

Emerging from this exploratory study of Black Women's liberatory practices (holistic healing) is a conceptualization of how Black Women Educators can mitigate oppressive systems by embodying liberatory practices in our pedagogy. An explanation of an emergent framework of Black Women's liberatory pedagogy follows.

HER-storically Speaking: Thriving through Soulfulness

Black Women thrive in the academy despite historical oppression (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2019), some by staying grounded in the cultural, pedagogical, and contemplative practices of soulfulness developed by psychologist Shelly Harrell (2018). Black Women have a way of knowing and being in the world that centers humanity, healing, holism, spirituality, and well-being (Cade, 1970; Bell-Scott & Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Bryant-Davis, 2022; Dillard, 2000; Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Evans, 2021; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 2003). Black Women have demonstrated holistic healing practices in higher education in many ways. Therefore, I conceptualize spirituality in education through a lens of well-being supported from the perspective of Black Women professors.

In a larger study, I explored the paradox and power of Black Women's healing theories and practices as foundational to providing the next generation of professors, specifically teacher educators, with a budding system of liberatory pedagogy. Later in this article, I present an emergent system derived from the larger study: *The Life Cycle of Liberation*. It serves as a pathway toward centering Black Women's holistic healing theories and practices in teacher education and the holistic healing conversation. It began with a deeper understanding of our ways of knowing, doing, and being through Black Women's memoirs. What follows is a brief account of my findings.

Black Women's Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing in Academic Literature

Fifty years ago, a paradigm shift in academic literature occurred through Black Women's literature (memoirs), demonstrating a different way of knowing, being, and doing (Evans, 2013). Author and editor Toni Cade (Bambara) galvanized the voices of poets, essayists, and activists, such as Sonia Sanchez and Audre Lorde, in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (Cade, 1970), sparking a movement called "The Black Women's Literature Renaissance" (National Museum of African American Culture, n.d.). Three literary giants released a book the same year: Toni Morrison's (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's (1970) *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Maya Angelou's (1970) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.* Morrison, Walker, and Angelou's writings reflected Black Women's ways of knowing and being at the intersection of marginalized identities while striving toward liberation and freedom, which essentially involves embodiment practices in the spirit and soul of our literature.

Inspired by the historical and intellectual work of

Black Women, Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans compiled over 1,400 publications to create an online resource, The Black Women Studies Booklist (BWST), organized into five overarching themes: theories, identities, disciplines, activism, and locations (Evans, 2018). She offers two downloadable resources on the website: an alphabetized list of all the publications and a document organized by themes, "Emergent Themes in Critical Race and Gender Research: A Thousand Points of Praxis and Transformation" (Evans, 2018). In this document, she shares a timeline demonstrating a legacy of academic contributions of Black Women's "intellectual history" beyond the last fifty years (Evans, 2007, 2019, pp. 9–10).

Before Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) coined the term *intersectionality*, scholars such as Angela Davis (1983) and bell hooks (1994) also theorized through a lens of race, gender, and class. Since its inception, intersectionality has come to encompass a variety of identities and also extends to the idea that multiple ideas can be true at once. For example, the current conversation around the interconnectedness of spirituality and social justice has been broadened through the use of intersectionality as a method (Hayes et al., 2020). Over the last fifty years, Black Women's ways of knowing and being in the world have been expressed creatively through literature (fiction and memoir-fiction), organizations, and theories that influence how Black Women write and theorize.

Black Women's Memoir Theorization

I conducted an extensive literature review of Black Women's memoirs and the works of Black Women theorists. As I contemplated Black Women's holistic healing practices in higher education through memoirs and life writings, I observed a phenomenon among Black Women Theorists (Muhammad et al., 2020). It more or less crystallized through the work of author, educator, and cultural critic bell hooks (1994), who demonstrates memoir theorization, a combination of theorizing through the genre of memoir writing, in her groundbreaking book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. In this novel, her educational theories range from feminist thinking to spirituality in education. Her perspective on spirituality in education is built upon the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, who "offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit" (hooks, 1994, p. 14). Her thoughts on education as a practice of freedom are also discussed in terms of liberation or a liberatory practice. Her teaching trilogy (hooks, 1994, 2003, & 2009) exemplifies Black Women's ART (activism, research, and teaching), a liberatory practice in higher education. As the conversation on holistic healing evolves, it is essential to acknowledge Black Women's ways of knowing and being, as well as our liberatory practices, and explore how we creatively champion holistic healing in higher education and educational research.

Black Women Professors' Liberatory Practices and Pedagogy

An Emergent System: *The Life Cycle of Liberation*

Inspired by Daniel Goleman and Peter Senge's (2015) book, *The Triple Focus: A New Approach to Education*, and a professional learning framework referred to as The 4 I's of Oppression found in Jamilia Lyiscott's (2019) book *Black Appetite, White Food* I offer a systematic theory on how Black Women have practiced an embodied liberatory pedagogy through liberatory practices that shift paradigms in and beyond the academy. It is imperative to note that the emergent system is a theory presented linearly. However, the process

transpires cyclically and aspects of the system happen simultaneously. I therefore refer to this theory as *The Life Cycle of Liberation.*

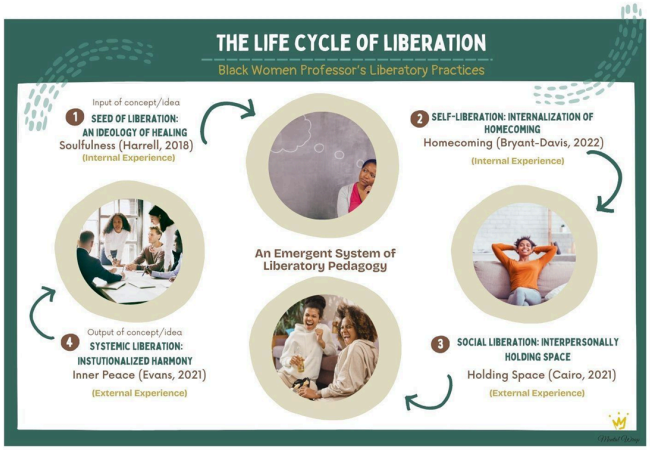

Figure 1: *The Life Cycle of Liberation*

The Life Cycle of Liberation's Theoretical Framework

Step 1: The Seed of Liberation

Black Women's liberatory practices begin with inputting the ideology of healing (See Figure 1 and Table 1). Concepts can positively or negatively impact Black Women's health and well-being. For example, if the input is racist or demeans the Black Woman, then she can be at risk for internalizing the negative concept. However, Black Women have historically cultivated liberation (spirituality and soulfulness) in an oppressive system, as evidenced by the exploratory text studies I have conducted. Suppose I illustrate it metaphorically; it is like planting a seed of liberation, the input idea of freedom, spirituality, and soulfulness into education. This seed can be planted through family, friends, personal, or professional research studies.

Step 2: Self-Liberation

The next step in the process is internalizing a liberatory practice. For example, in this framework I use the practice of homecoming (Bryant-Davis, 2022). Homecoming is not a physical space, but rather a return to an inner space of self-acceptance. She refers to it as "an emotional and spiritual space of belonging, appreciation, and love" (Bryant-Davis, 2022, p. 4).After watering the seeds of liberation, Black Women internalized their freedom by visualizing and meditating on holistic wellness and well-being. This internalization is similar to Bryant-Davis' (2022) liberatory practice of homecoming.

Step 3: Social of Liberation

Once self-liberation has taken root, Black Women can offer liberatory practice through interpersonal interactions. For example, in this framework, I use Cairo's approach of holding space. The healing practice of holding space is a new term I encountered in professional learning and contemplative educational spaces. There needs to be more clarity around what it means to hold space. The closest definition I could find was a quote about the importance of acknowledging our humanity (Cairo, 2021, p. 302). Once the practice of holding space takes root, Black Women can see how our ideas, informed by educational theories, practices, and frameworks, influence systems and lead to system-level liberation.

Step 4: Systemic Liberation

The next step in the process is achieveing institutional harmony. For the purpose of illustrating the theory, I offer an inner peace practice (Evans, 2021) which promotes *Inner peace practice* (Evans, 2021) promotes holistic healing for Black Women and others, as well as for systems of education, including higher education and teacher preparation. In my life, storytelling and sharing my life aid in cultivating inner peace (Evans, 2021) as I traverse the oppressive systems I encounter in the academy. Dillard's (2021) words inspire BWEs to be mindful of telling our stories in ways counter-narrative to what American sociologist Joe Feagin (2013) calls a "white racial frame" or a settler-colonial frame of reference (p. 1). The liberatory practice of inner peace is an

external output that leads to systems transformation. Evans (2021) particularly advocates for Black Women's memoir writing and yoga as inner peace practices. She is clear that yoga is an umbrella term that includes meditation, music, and movement (dancing) (Evans, 2021, p. 6). Her writing aligns with the literature on wellness and well-being because the research argues that yoga can "create mental, spiritual, and physical balance, counteract the stress impact of racism and sexism, and improve quality of life by relieving a range of illnesses and health conditions" (Evans, 2021, p. 8).

The emergent Life Cycle of Li beration framework is an example of how to uplift the work of Black Women Educators (BWEs) using a political, spiritually conscious, and creative lens. It weaves together the healing practices of weaving the healing practices of homecoming (Bryant-Davis, 2022), holding space (Cairo, 2021), and inner peace (Evans, 2022) with Dillard's (2021) (re)membering framework of (re)searching, (re)visioning, (re)cognizing, (re)presenting, and (re) claiming (pp. 21–22) set a foundation, a blueprint for educational research in BWEs' wellness and- well-being, to emerge.

Seed of Liberation:	**Ideology of Healing** (hooks, 1994; Harrell, 2018; Lyiscott, 2019)
Self-Liberation:	**Internalization of Homecoming** (Bryant-Davis, 2022; Goleman & Senge, 2015; Lyiscott, 2019)
Social Liberation:	**Interpersonally Holding Space** (Cario, 2021; Goleman & Senge, 2015; Lyiscott, 2019)
Systems Liberation:	**Institutional Harmony** (Evans, 2021; Goleman & Senge, 2015; Lyiscott, 2019)

Table 1: *The Life Cycle of Liberation's Theoretical Framework*

From a holistic education perspective, *The Life Cycle of Liberation* model offers educators a robust, integrated framework for fostering meaningful learning, personal growth, and collective transformation. It honors both the internal and external dimensions of the educational experience, recognizing that authentic learning engages not just the intellect, but the heart, body, and spirit. For educators, this model offers a roadmap for cultivating liberatory pedagogy: one that begins with inner healing and self-awareness, expands into relational practices such as holding space, and ultimately contributes to institutional environments grounded in justice and harmony. This cycle aligns with the core values of holistic education by centering on the development of the whole person and guiding educators in creating emotionally nurturing, socially equitable, and spiritually grounded classrooms.

Conclusion

(Re)membering Black Women's liberatory pedagogy in higher education is a healing and radical educational intervention. It draws on a lineage of wisdom, creativity, and resistance passed down through generations–wisdom found in the soulfulness of Harrell (2018), the homecoming of Bryant-Davis (2022), and the inner peace of Evans (2021). These liberatory practices are not abstract ideals but embodied strategies for survival and transformation in systems that often seek to erase Black Women's presence and contributions. Through memoir theorization, spiritual reflectivity, and holistic healing, Black Women Educators (BWEs) cultivate liberatory pedagogies that integrate mind, body, and spirit.

As presented in this work, *The Life Cycle of Liberation* offers a systemic framework for educators to move from internal awareness to institutional harmony. It reflects an emergent pedagogy grounded in self-liberation, social connection, and systemic healing—an approach necessary for confronting the persistent intersectional oppression that Black Women in the academy endure. As Dillard (2021) reminds us, to (re)member is to bring wholeness back to fractured

narratives. It is an invitation to look back with reverence, be present with courage, and build a better future through Black Women's authentic epistemologies, ontologies, axiologies, and methodologies. This conclusion is not an end, but a beginning—a call to educators, scholars, and institutions to hold space for liberation, to teach from the soul, and to lead with love.

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Author Bio

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Dr. Duff holds certification in Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (CBCT) from Emory University's Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics and is a national fellow of the Transformative Educational Leadership (TEL) program. Her research lies at the intersection of cultural, critical, and contemplative pedagogy, integrating social-emotional learning, educational equity, and academic excellence. Her recent article, "Centering Our Liberatory Voice: Black Women's Contemplative Criticality," appears in Thresholds in Education.