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## Meridians 15:1

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# Rethinking Meridians: as a Critical Knowledge Project, a Pedagogical Offering, and a Black Feminist Quilted Narrative<sup>1</sup>

## Education as a Form of Liberation

With the increasingly high stakes nature of teaching and the ongoing push to teach within the adopted Common Core, there appears to be very little room for teachers to incorporate the voices and experiences of anyone whose life is not already embedded within the curriculum. Given that there is an implied dominant circle of historical privilege—where the voices of those who are white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gendered, middle class, educated, and Christian are assumed to be and taught as if they were the norm—teachers must be provided with resources that are designed to decenter this “norm” and then center the voices of “the other.” This is an ongoing challenge but, as scholars, we are committed to developing research agendas and writing and teaching resources that advance liberatory educational possibilities for non-dominant and marginalized communities. We center this work firmly within the Black feminist tradition, drawing heavily upon the historic and foundational work

of Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective and the current work of bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Paula Giddings, Barbara Ransby, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Cheryl Wall, and Angela Davis (to name just a few). We do not have the option to resign in the face of difficulty or the luxury to hold our work hostage as we spend years pondering possible directions and solutions—because we create scholarship not simply for ourselves but for the unseen faces of people who depend on the unwavering commitment of scholars who take up justice work. We know that the ongoing work to rescue and reclaim the history and lives of Black women is important and that it is our duty—in the same vein as Alice Walker’s early work to rescue Zora Neale Hurston—to collect and share their life and experiences “for the future of our children...if necessary, bone by bone.” (Walker 1983, 92) This critical restoration work completed in the archives and then shared at the dinner tables, in book clubs, and more importantly, in classrooms, seeks to advance Paulo Freire’s idea of “conscientization,” opening it up and then expanding upon it. (hooks 1994, 14)

At the same time, we understand (and respect) that there is a necessary gulf that exists between the researcher and the teacher to ensure that every “good” research idea is not then tested on children, particularly those who exist precariously on the edge where the challenge of getting a good education is a daily struggle. So with these multiple streams of knowing in mind, we wrestled with how this new critical knowledge project of rethinking and re-centering *Meridians* as a text for teachers and students should be presented and positioned. Given that *Meridians* is available as both a print and an electronic source, we decided to challenge the contributors to think of this work in a two-dimensional way so that their text would be laden with hyperlinks where teachers could find additional resource materials to expand the lesson plan. This then became the focus of the effort to transform *Meridians* (even if just for a moment) into a pedagogical tool. It was quickly supported by teacher scholars across the country who were searching for materials that could be used to transform their classrooms into liberatory Black feminist think tanks where ideas are fostered, creativity is nurtured, all voices are welcomed, and all experiences are validated.

After some discussion about the #SayHerName project and the work that is being done to center and include the voices and stories of Black women and girls, Black feminist theory and #BlackGirlActivism were selected as the conceptual starting points for all of the lesson plans. Due to the variety of content area foci, and big ideas grounding the lesson plans, each lesson plan takes students on different learning paths but collectively the lessons represent multidimensional instructional opportunities for teaching about Black feminist theory. The tie that binds them together is that they each focus on the ways in which we understand and teach about Black feminist theory and the ways in which we conceptualize freedom, struggle, protest, and liberation. As a whole, the lessons demonstrate that rigorous and scholarly knowledge produced about and by Black women matters. The “absence” of Black women from mainstream U.S. history texts is not only disturbing, but also problematic in the twenty-first century classroom.<sup>2</sup> The erasure and omission of diverse views and perspectives in academic texts is a distortion that communicates an unspoken message to students that only certain groups of people (again, those within that pesky circle of privilege) matter in history. Organizing the development of lesson plan ideas for teaching *Meridians* challenges this deceptive practice and supplements this critical knowledge project, and we hope, empowers teachers to identify diverse and fruitful entry points to learning.

We recognize that the work collected here about Black feminist theory, about why we must #SayHerName, about nineteenth-century Black female activism, and about writing as a liberatory practice—unlike the multiple streams of research that currently exists about each of these areas—is just a small foray into the interdisciplinary work that needs to be done. It is organic and will continue to shift and grow and be corrected and disputed as new information is added and new conclusions are made. This is the work that comes with being a researcher, a scholar, and a teacher, the ongoing feelings of concern that the work is never finished and the research is never really complete. This is also some of the challenges that come with working to decenter the circle of privilege—it is excavation work (dirty and hard, sometimes with very little validation and reward). Even with this trepidation in mind, we decided to invite teachers and students into this conversation, fully aware that by having them participate in and add to

this growing body of knowledge, they are starting the work of becoming an active agent in their own knowledge process.<sup>3</sup>

As we worked to complete this project, we struggled with how best to situate it: was it an interdisciplinary text or a multidisciplinary one? Was it a historical offering or did it fit within the parameters of women's and gender studies? Who were we ultimately trying to reach: teachers or scholars or students? Or could we organize a project that reached them all? Simple questions to be sure but ones we wrestled with in an effort to create a liberatory project that answered all of the questions that we had been grappling with within our own classrooms. With that in mind, we submit that this Black feminist theory critical knowledge project is best viewed through a transdisciplinary lens (one that we once used to rethink the pocket diaries of Emilie Frances Davis) and that teachers can work both across disciplines and beyond their own discipline to help students understand this work, to make sense of the work, and to ultimately find ways to embrace and own the work. Furthermore, this concept of Black feminist theory viewed through a lens of transdisciplinarity can thus be interpreted in two ways: 1) as a thread that runs through each of the lesson plans and essays, providing an opportunity for different disciplinary perspectives to be integrated to depict a meta-narrative of knowledge and teaching; and, 2) as a tool for pedagogical practice that challenges both the teacher and the students to transcend the notion of the classroom as a static place constrained by tests and assessments where what they learn and how they learn is in the hands of nameless and faceless bureaucrats; and, to instead recognize that they have agency over their own learning. The classroom is simply an extension of them and it is shaped everyday by what they bring into the space, what they choose to discuss, and how they choose to engage with the material.

Finally, as the project began to take shape, we took seriously this idea of #BlackGirlMagic—as created and conceptualized by CaShawn Thompson—and we decided to simply reimagine the classroom as a liberated nonsexist nonmisogynistic anti-racist anti-classist space without any boundaries or borders. At the same time, we acknowledged that though we are magical, we are not magicians, and that the real work to transform the classroom is done by teachers who somehow find the strength to show up every day and work through the roadblocks of budget cuts, Common

Core, and school administrators. It is with this information in mind that we offer this work to them as a critical knowledge project—tools to help them along the way; a pedagogical offering—lesson plans that can immediately be taught in the classroom; and, as a Black feminist quilted narrative—fully aware that all of our lives and experiences are tied and knitted together and that none of us could ever really be free, until all of us are free.

## Section 1: #BlackGirlActivism: Reading the Personal as Political & Public

The essays and accompanying lessons plans are organized into three sections. The first section, #BlackGirlMagic, begins with an essay by Stephanie Troutman and Ileana Jiménez, “Lessons in Transgressions: #BlackGirlsMatter and the Feminist Classroom” which examines the ways in which teaching Black feminism in both high school and undergraduate contexts can inspire Black feminist activism in young Black women and girls. Drawing upon the work of bell hooks and the notion that “Feminism is for Everybody,” the authors developed a pedagogical toolbox designed to teach hooks’s texts for contemporary students. In “Black Feminism and Critical Media Literacy: Moving from Margin to Center,” co-authors Ashley N. Patterson, Arianna Howard, and Valerie Kinloch examine and explore the interactions they had and the stories that were shared by an intergenerational group of Black women who termed their regular meetings “The Black Women’s Gathering Place” (BWGP)—which eventually became a place where they engaged in practices of everyday activism (Collins 1990). Based upon this experience and upon their need to add their voices to the ongoing struggle to transform collaboratively spaces, they designed a lesson plan that represents the expansion of BWGP into a liberatory learning space.

In their essay, “Challenging Neoliberal Dreams of Girls of Color in a Digital Age,” Kimberly A. Scott and Patricia Garcia use critical feminist theory to offer a critique of neoliberal approaches to technology education for girls of color while also providing a broad overview of the conceptual catalysts that shape the approach of COMPUGIRLS, a National Science Foundation-funded technology program. In the accompanying lesson

plan, students are challenged to think deeply about identity and self and then design and create avatars that reflect how their identity is (and should be) constructed in virtual worlds. In the final essay in this section, “A Transnational Black Feminist (TBF) Framework: Rooting in Feminist Scholarship, Framing Contemporary Black Activism,” Kia M.Q. Hall explores the role of feminist scholar-activists in contemporary Black freedom movements such as Black Lives Matter. The lesson plan offers a closer look at TBF and how it can combine contemporary notions of activism with historic ideas of freedom to teach movement art.

## Section 2: #BlackGirlFeminism: Existing, Teaching, and Learning on the Edges and Beyond

Building upon the work outlined in the first section, the lesson plans in #BlackGirlFeminism expand the lens of Black feminist thought to discuss issues as varied as the prison industrial complex and reproductive justice. In “From Slavery to Jane Crow to Say Her Name: An Intersectional Examination of Black Women and Punishment,” Nishaun Battle explores the ongoing movement that has been happening around the country since 2012 exploring the question of whether anyone cares for the lives and experiences of Black women. The essay includes a collection of ideas and speeches from nineteenth-century Black women intellectual activists (Anna Julia Cooper, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Victoria Earle Matthews) that are used to bridge the gap between contemporary Black feminism and historic Black feminism. The lesson plan provides students with an opportunity to examine and explore the experiences of Black women in the criminal justice system. In similar fashion, Lena Palacios’s essay, “Challenging Convictions: Indigenous and Black Race-Radical Feminists Theorizing the Carceral State and Abolitionist Praxis in the United States and Canada,” examines what it means to be a race-radical woman of color feminist and how this understanding has helped the author to act strategically and tactically. This analysis is then critically applied as students (or participants) explore how Indigenous and Black race-radical feminists are currently at the forefront of antiviolence movement building in Canada and

the United States. The lesson plan is designed for both the classroom and for community activists, and encourages participants (“students”) to think about what it means—for themselves, their family, and their community—to be simultaneously privileged by, oppressed by, and complicit with carceral systems of domination, control, and violence.

In the essay “On Forbidden Wombs and Transnational Reproductive Justice,” Jallicia Jolly takes a similar approach (of asking the participants to center themselves in the story) and proposes transnational reproductive justice as a useful approach to the liberation of multiple marginalized women. The accompanying lesson plan explores reproductive politics by unpacking the history; and, by investigating the praxis and possibilities of the creation and application of a transnational reproductive justice system. In “The Slow Poisoning of Black Bodies: A Lesson in Environmental Racism and Hidden Violence,” Rita Turner explores environmental racism through the lens of the lead poisoning of Freddie Gray providing background and examples of how environmental degradation and exposure to toxins disproportionately affect people of color and the poor. In the lesson plan, students research current cases of environmental injustice and use creative and analytical writing to reflect on what they have learned.<sup>4</sup>

In the essay “#WhenIFellInLoveWithMyself: Disrupting the Gaze and Loving Our Black Womanist Self As An Act of Political Warfare,” Jameta N. Barlow discusses the work of the Saving Our Sisters’ (SOS) digital archive project to create and maintain a space where Black women can find healing, self-love, self-care and mental health, and well-being. In the lesson plan, Barlow provides teachers with an opportunity to engage deeply with the essay and to then decide and develop the best strategies for helping their students enter into and fully engage with the topic. In the final essay in this section, “Signifying, Narrativizing, & Repetition: Radical Approaches to Theorizing African-American Language,” Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier explores how teaching language/dialect differences in majority white school settings may have highly negative effects on African-American Language speakers. Building upon this idea, the lesson plan invites students to think about how the English Language, as a field, is constantly evolving and changing in our diverse, ever-widening international community.



## Section 3: #BlackGirlAgency: Saying Their Names Over & Over Again

In the final section of this journal, #BlackGirlAgency, we take a historic look at the roots of Black feminist activism starting with the work of Emilie Frances Davis, a freeborn nineteenth-century Black woman, whose daily practice of writing and recording her life was a conscious act of identity assertion. In “A Black Feminist Interpretation: Reading Life, Pedagogy, and Emilie,” Conra D. Gist examines the ways in which Black feminism—as a concept, an applied theory, and a safety net—functions as a critical social theory designed to assist students in understanding the multiple ways that Black and brown women are marginalized through institutionalized structures and practices.<sup>5</sup> By exploring the ways in which Black feminism is a thread that runs through the Black woman’s experiences, Gist effectively applies a Black feminist lens over Davis’s work and the work that was done by Karsonya Wise Whitehead to interpret Davis’s life and add her to the canon of Black women. In the lesson plan, students use Gist’s essay and Davis’s pocket diary entries to examine the ideas of Black feminism and actively apply it as a lens to interpret essays, articles, video clips, and music lyrics. Additionally, this article includes a second lesson plan designed by Whitehead that uses the writings of Emilie, Charlotte Forten, Ida B. Wells, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson to teach students how to become forensic herstorical investigators. Finally, this section includes a first-person essay from Regina N. Bradley, “Afterword: How I Use #BlackLivesMatter as an Entry Point & a Disruption Tool.” In this unique offering (our final thoughts on teaching #BlackLivesMatter), the author uses their childhood (growing up in Albany, Georgia where whiteness was used a pedagogical tool) as a starting point and a tool to help craft and teach a #BlackLivesMatter course at a predominantly white institution in an effort to facilitate and curate impactful teaching moments.

### #BlackGirlActivism: Exploring the Ways We Come Through the Storm

The same concepts—Black feminist theory, #SayHerName, and #BlackGirlActivism—and multiple ways that it can be explored, applied, and examined. This is what transdisciplinarity looks like when it is being

liberally applied and used as an active tool and a lens to expand our knowledge base. Taken separately, teachers and researchers have essays, lesson plans, discussion questions, primary sources, cover art, poetry, and media links that can be used throughout the year to actively insert the life and experiences of Black women into every classroom and every discussion. Taken together, it is a powerful tool of disruption for the standard classroom and compels teachers and students to engage more fully with the material and with each other. In a broad sense, we envision that the included essays and lesson plans will be applied in the spirit of culturally responsive pedagogy, which Geneva Gay describes as validating, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. (Gay 2010) Our commitment to this critical knowledge project compels us to rethink our work in the classroom and challenge teachers (from K-12 to the academy) to closely read the work with an eye attentive to the places where transformative and emancipatory learning possibilities are ripe.

We also encourage teachers and scholars to join us in the critical knowledge process by writing their own lesson plans and sharing them within the public spaces of engagement, where scholars co-create and co-design syllabi (we think in particular of the dynamic work that was done in the #SayHerName Syllabus, the #Charleston Syllabus, and the #TrumpSyllabus 2.0 to name just a few). The essays and lesson plan offered here are only initial offerings and are in no representative of all that the field has to offer. We are excited to see how the work will continue to grow and be (re)interpreted across the spectrum. Finally, although we understand that this project is finished, the work to explore the impact of Black feminist theory and to think about the foundational work upon which the field is built upon is still just beginning. Our hope is that our work to interstitially knit stories together adds to the field and provides it with yet another space to grow and expand. We know that we stand taller because we stand on their shoulders and we benefit from their sacrifices and from their work to write us a new reality and to forge us a new gate through which we could enter into and find ways to contribute to the field.

## Postscript

In October (2016), the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) announced that the 2017 Black History Month theme will be “The Crises

in *Black Education*,” focusing on and highlighting the ongoing challenges faced by African American children attending inner city public schools. As a mother and a scholar, I was not surprised that the ASALH lens had shifted from celebrating our Hallowed Grounds (the 2016 theme) and our achievements At the Crossroads of Freedom & Equality (the 2015 theme) to raising the alarm about the places and spaces where we are losing ground. Beginning (most recently) with the release of Michele Alexander’s groundbreaking book, *The New Jim Crow*, this country has been steeped in conversations about the prison industrial complex. I believe (with the latest facts and figures about the disparate state of Black education, in mind) that the Nation is finally starting to recognize and turn its attention to investigating the long-term detrimental effects of the inner city educational industrial complex. It is within this vein of crises and concern that I offer up this critical knowledge project to teachers and scholars as a tool of disruption to jumpstart the incredible energetic process of teaching and learning. Although this project was begun before ASALH’s announcement, I believe that their 2017 BHM theme is only further proof that the work that we do to liberate the classroom is both revolutionary and necessary. —KWW

#### NOTES

1. This essay draws heavily upon work that Conra Gist and I did to complete the *Rethinking Emilie* critical knowledge project. In that project, we actively applied the lens of transdisciplinarity and challenged our contributors to think deeply about writing as an act of identity politics, liberation, and assertion. The ideas from that introduction formed the basis of my work to think through this project and my desire to write this Introduction in the same vein in which I helped to write that one. I appreciate her generosity in allowing me to use that essay to form the basis of this Introduction. It is republished here with permission from the editor. (Whitehead and Gist 2014, 1-8); as the associate editor, Rita Turner worked with me to conceptualize the project, select and edit the essays and lesson plans. I appreciate the work that she did to complete the copyediting of the first drafts.
2. For more on the ways in which this absence impacts the classroom, see Schocker 2013, 23-31; and Collins 2010, 1-8.
3. For more on how knowledge streams change over time, see and compare the early research on the life of Malcolm X to Manning Marable (2011) or the mainstream work on Abraham Lincoln to Lerone Bennett, Jr. (2000).
4. Portions of “The Slow Poisoning of Black Bodies: A Lesson in Environmental Racism and Hidden Consequences” were originally published on *The Conversation* in 2015. They are republished here with the permission of the author.

5. Both “A Black Feminist Interpretation: Reading Life, Pedagogy, and Emilie” and the lesson plan were originally published in Whitehead and Gist 2014, 115-45. It is republished here with permission from the editor.

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