Resisting the "COVID-19 Scramble" by Writing Towards Black Transnational Futures

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Abstract

This case study demonstrates how a community-based literacy program, HELP, took up Black literate traditions, endarkened transnational feminism, and anticolonial practices to construct emancipatory literacy experiences for Haitian and Haitian American middle schoolers in Miami, Florida. Overall, the institutional practices of HELP worked to destigmatize the discourses of Haiti, center Black Haitian women's stories, and develop spiritual consciousness. Furthermore, this article discusses the "COVID-19 scramble" and its ability to detract from building socially just futures for Black transnational students. Lastly, the article ends with questions for consideration when confronting the cyclical violence of white supremacy in literacy programs.

Keywords

literacies, Black transnational youth, emancipatory curriculum, COVID-19, Haiti, middle school

Introduction

The murder of Trayvon Martin on February 26, 2012, and the subsequent birth of Black Lives Matter defined my first year as a literacy educator in Miami, Florida. As a Black female teacher in my early 20s, I felt a particular form of anguish—he was from the neighborhood in which I taught. Upon learning of his death, I remember surveying my classroom of predominantly Black and Brown fourth and fifth grade children. To me, they were just as extraordinary, and somehow, as easily disposable as Trayvon. I made the decision to wear a black hoodie to school. It was my first political undertaking as a brand-new teacher. I wanted to show solidarity and bring attention to Travyon's death to our school of predominantly Black and Brown students, teachers, and administrators…and nothing really happened. My hoodie, Trayvon's death, and the perilous conditions of Black life did little to interrupt our daily schooling routines steeped in deficit orientations of testing, interventions, and the remediation of Black and Brown children. My good intentions as an aggrieved Black teacher were ineffectual and nowhere near enough. My school's silence around Travyon's death, despite our geographical connection to his killing, perpetuated the legacy of anti-Black violence and harm.

In June of 2013, I began my first year as a literacy instructor at the culturally based, spiritually grounded, out-of-school literacy program called the Haitian Empowerment Literacy Project (HELP). By this point, heated protests denouncing racist policing in the United States engrossed Florida and much of the nation. Intergenerational racial traumas all came to a head during the criminal and public trial of ~~George Zimmerman~~ Trayvon Martin. I, like many, closely followed the media frenzy of the trial. As a Haitian American woman, I also felt the sting of the wildly racist linguistic dismissal of Haitian American teenager, Rachel Jeantel's Miami-bred Black Vernacular English. I remained glued to the news channels, desperately awaiting the jury's verdict. And late Saturday evening, on July 13, 2013, a jury acquitted the man charged with Trayvon's murder, and I was absolutely stunned. Suspended in a state of disbelief, I did not sleep that night or the following night. On Monday, July 15, 2013, week six of HELP's summer institute, I returned to my classroom of twenty-five Haitian and Haitian American rising sixth graders. That morning, I was not preoccupied with staying on target with the district's curriculum pacing guide. I was not scrambling to print off performance reports from benchmark exams. I did not teach a single test taking skill. On that morning, I asked my students to respond to the following questions in their daily journals: "What is your understanding of the events that happened between Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman? What is your reaction to the not guilty verdict of the Zimmerman trial? How does the verdict affect your thinking as a Black student?" One young boy wrote, "I felt like George Zimmerman supposed to be locked up in jail. He killed some 17-year-old boy. So, if I had a gun, do I have the power to kill a white man? I'm Black so of course I'm going to jail automatically." To the last question, "how does the verdict affect your thinking as a Black student?," Manoucheca, a sixth grade girl, shared, "It effects me because, I feel like they think we are nothing." From there, I had one of the most powerful classroom discussions as a novice teacher. To be clear, Trayvon Martin was not our first curricular encounter with global anti-Black racism. In the five weeks leading up to this moment, students in the entire program wrote and read tirelessly about the Middle Passage, Haiti's colonial past, and its historical significance in the movement for Black liberation across the African Diaspora. By then, the rising sixth graders were skilled in naming the racist entanglements projected onto Blackness and Haitianness because of diverse literacy experiences defining their intersectionality as Black transnational young people. Each week brought opportunities to develop rich counternarratives of their ancestors and of themselves. Hence, our process of writing, speaking, listening, and embodying the life and death of Trayvon Martin ran congruent with the curricular philosophies of HELP to dignify and celebrate Black life. The learning space was especially designed to support both my students and myself during a wrought experience of racialed violence.

I open this article with my first-year teaching narrative to emphasize a few points. First, the murder of Trayvon Martin, a young Black boy from Miami, Florida, taking a walk to the corner store, was a transformative moment. It spurred the clarion call of Black Lives Matter, and activated a whole new generation of advocates, organizers, and civil servants. Those calls are even louder today at the intersection

of COVID-19 and murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. Second, juxtaposing these two schooling experiences within the context of Trayvon's death and his murderer's acquittal presents an opportunity to reemphasize how schooling spaces actively neutralize humanizing literacy instruction that advocates for Black children. My school, with its explicitly fixed notions of literacy for Black and Brown children, was never designed to nurture their dynamic diasporic literacies. Third, by illustrating the stark differences in my early work as a Reading/Language Arts educator, I want to assert the power of establishing literacy experiences for Black transnational youth that are deeply committed to emancipatory projects.

Black transnational youth, such as Haitians and Haitian Americans in the US, are coming of age in an era wrought with open hostility and state-sanctioned violence against Black people, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and immigrants. The discourses of anti-Blackness and white supremacy have been especially potent in the rhetoric and policies of the forty-fifth President of the United States describing Haiti as a "shithole" country while simultaneously seeking to gut the Temporary Protected Status of Haitian immigrants. For transnational Haitian youth, these messages are caustic and embedded in their everyday lives as children.

In its destruction of human life, the global pandemic of COVID-19 has hyper-magnified thinly veiled colonial logics and structures of white supremacy. It comes as no surprise to critical scholars that the most vulnerable communities prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus are paying the highest price in terms of loss of life, barriers to care, debilitating unemployment, housing and food insecurity, and widening gaps in equitable schooling experiences for children. It should also be no surprise that the global pandemic of 2020 has exacerbated centuries-long tensions regarding state-sanctioned violence and extrajudicial killings of Black people. The onslaught murders of Taylor, Arbery, and Floyd drew thousands of Americans onto the streets to demand justice and the abolishment of police as we know it.

Since Trayvon's death, my adulthood and teaching career have been punctuated, in rapid succession, by the footages, hashtags, protests, and headlines documenting the brutal violence lobbied against Black people. COVID-19 and the current demands for Black liberation represents our greatest challenge yet. Let us not forget, however, white supremacy is able to sustain generational cycles of anti-Black violence because of its remarkable adaptability to social progress. In his posthumous farewell, John Lewis aptly remarks, "Emmett Till was my George Floyd. He was my Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor." To be frank, none of this is new. What I hope to accomplish in sharing this case study of HELP is to imbue readers with the urgency of establishing emancipatory curriculum in out-of-school literacy institutions that intentionally name the cyclical nature of global anti-Blackness and reconnect Black children to their literate traditions of liberation.

This paper intends to demonstrate how a community-based literacy program took up emancipatory approaches rooted in Black literacy traditions, Black transnational feminism, and anticolonial practices to generate liberatory experiences for Black Haitian and Haitian American middle schoolers. In doing so, this case study will provide opportunities for you to observe Black transnational youth wrestling

with modern categories of Blackness and gender. It will also be an opportunity to glimpse how students take up spiritual tools to redefine their intersectional identities outside the confines of colonialist conceptualizations of Truth, science, and race (Ferreira da Silva 82).

In sharing the work of HELP and its emancipatory curriculum, I also want to urge against what I call *"the COVID-19 scramble*" where, in our rush to address the weight of this moment, we generate a patchwork of solutions aimed at "consciousness raising" (Grundy) that circumvent the work of redressing or outright dismantling institutions that disappear Indigenous people and extinguish Black and Brown life (Grande and Anderson 140). Breaking the generational cycles of white supremacy requires deliberate and intentional literacy practices dedicated to its eradication.

As a case study, this paper specifically focuses on the curricular practices of HELP, a middle school-level, out-of-school literacy program in Miami, Florida, where I served as a literacy instructor and researcher for three years. My primary question is "How can Black literate traditions, transnational feminist praxis, and anticolonial frameworks inform curriculum?" To engage this question, I methodologically triangulate Winn's (née Fisher) ethno-historiographical conceptualization of independent Black institutions (IBI), transnational feminist scholars, and anticoloniality to interpret HELP's curricular design and implementation.

The data for this case study was collected during my dissertation research during the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015. For this piece, I pored over curriculum guides, lesson plans, weekly schedules, journal responses, and recorded classroom discussions. The goal was to examine how the curricular philosophies of the program supported my pedagogies as a literacy educator. I am specifically interested in how broad concepts such as race, gender, culture, place, and spirituality manifested in HELP's curriculum and facilitated Black transnational youth literacies. Overall, I determined HELP functioned as a transnational IBI by 1) disrupting neocolonial discourses of Haiti, Blackness, and Black womanhood, 2) strengthening students' cultural bridge to Haiti, and 3) encouraging spiritual consciousness that encompassed Haitian Vodou principles. By doing so, this community-based literacy center exercised transnational anticolonial pedagogy congruent with the African Diaspora's long traditions of literacy as resistance and liberation (Richardson, *African American Literacies* 16). In the sections that follow, I briefly overview HELP's inception, followed by theoretical perspectives of Black literacies and cultural institutions, Black transnational feminism, and anticolonialism. Next, I recount my teaching and learning experiences within the program while applying the triangulated methodological framework for analysis. Lastly, this piece maps twenty-first century implications for literacy programs committed to serving diverse Black transnational youth especially during moments of heightened racial violence.

Tools to Center Black Ways of Knowing and Liberation

Black literate traditions, Black transnational feminism, and anticolonial perspectives provide the necessary tools to decipher how HELP generated emancipatory curricu-

lum for its Black transnational students. Collectively, these histories and perspectives center Black ways of knowing for the express purpose of global Black liberation. Black literate traditions credit the literacy practices of Black people across space and time. Black transnational feminism recognizes the work Black women do across the world to disrupt and resist racist and sexist colonial logics. Lastly, anticolonial projects interrogate coloniality's dehumanizing categories for Black people and its anti-Black knowledge productions. Thus, I turn to these histories and perspectives to inform my analysis of HELP's curricular practices and how they support the literacies and identities of Haitian and Haitian American middle schoolers.

The work of IBIs is best understood through an expansive conceptualization of literacy. In her exploration of the historical foundations of literacy in nineteenth-century Black communities, Gholdy Muhammad emphasizes, "literacy among Black people was not just tied to skills and proficiencies…but it was also defined as liberation and power. In this way, literacy was connected to acts of self-empowerment, self-determination, and self-liberation" (22). Similarly, Winn's ethno-historiographical research of the literacy practices of Black institutions in the mid to late twentieth century highlights the ways "people of African descent have employed literate practices to create and sustain independent institutions in the United States and abroad that focus on the production and preservation of written and spoken words while generating a discourse of self-reliance among Black people" (Fisher 3). I synthesized Winn's evaluation of the print news publication *Black News* and the after-school spoken word club at Benjamin Banneker Academy for Community Development in Brooklyn, New York, facilitated by veteran public-school teacher and literacy coach, Cathie Wright-Lewis, "Mama C," to deduce the most salient characteristics of IBIs. The core principles of IBIs illustrated in Winn's inquiry included building safe spaces for Black people to engage their concerns throughout the African Diaspora, connecting the local to the global by including issues that impact Black people all over the world; challenging community members, both elders and youth, to name and define their purposes for learning; and sustaining the literate lives of community members.

To better contextualize Black language use, I turn to Geneva Smitherman's observation of both Black religious and secular cultural institutions. Her work demonstrates how these Black cultural institutions employ literacy as liberation. As Smitherman explains, African American language "functioned as both a resistance language and a linguistic bond of cultural and racial solidarity for those born under the lash" (""The Chain"' 8), and can be traced to seventeenth-century pidgin English which was the *lingua franca* of linguistically diverse enslaved African communities in Britain's North American colonies. Smitherman highlights communicative features that are prominent in African American language, especially in Hip Hop, such as narrativizing, the aspectual be, sampling, and semantic inversion as Black communication patterns of syntactic resistance, which "covertly reinforces Black America's 400-year rejection of Euro-American cultural, racial—and linguistic—domination" (11). Within the Black traditional church, Daniel and Smitherman's work note how Black communication dynamics are diasporic in nature and can be better defined through the cosmological lens of Traditional African World Views (27). Traditional African World

View is the "African formulation about the workings of the universe . . . that is of a dynamic, hierarchical unity…between God, man, and nature, with God serving as the head of the hierarchy" (29). They argue that this world view sustains a strong current in the African Diaspora and shapes the communication dynamics of Black people in the United States. By connecting Black literacies to Traditional African World View, it can also be argued that Black literacies are deeply spiritual and maintain connections to God, spirit, people, ancestors, and the material world. For Haitian communities especially, spirituality configures all aspects of life, which is aligned with Vodou's African-rooted principles (Bellegarde-Smith 103). Overall, historical and contemporary Black institutions center Black communicative dynamics of solidarity, spirituality, resistance, and invention. Thus, it is paramount to consider ways to incorporate the traditions of Black institutions when creating generative literacy experiences designed for Black transnational students.

It is vital for emancipatory literacy curriculum to name and dismantle the numerous ways race and gender are naturalized according to modern colonial categories (Ferreira da Silva 81). Coloniality can be understood as "centuries-long projects of delineating statuses of humanity, and from those categories of human and not, the ability to own land and others" (Wynter qtd. in Patel 359). These categories are normed by whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity and justified what C.L.R. James calls the "calculated total violence" of enslavement produced by colonial juridic, economic, and symbolic architectures (qtd. in Ferreira da Silva, 83). Ferreira da Silva further argues, "the total value produced by slave labor continues to sustain global capital" (83). Thus, transnationality can, in part, be understood as "a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than as a set of traits embodied in all non-U.S. citizens (particularly because U.S. citizenship continues to be premised within a white, Eurocentric, masculinist, heterosexist regime)" (Alexander and Mohanty 24). Nagar and Swarr propose several undertakings of transnational feminist praxis; however, for the scope of this case study, I focus on transnational feminism's ability to "attend to racialized, classed, masculinized, and heteronormative logics and practices of globalization and capitalist patriarchies, and the multiple ways in which they (re)structure colonial and neocolonial relations of domination and subordination" (5). Ferreira da Silva describes this process as "hacking," or the means to "disrupt the elements of sexual-gender signification that support the patriarch-form, even if she always comes into signification with/in the patriarch-form" ("Hacking" 26). In doing so, we emancipate Blackness from scientific and historical ways of knowing and allow an emancipated Blackness to open to other ways of knowing imagination (Ferreira da Silva, "Toward" 82).

Another key component in centering the racialized and gendered realities of Black women in global contexts is the spiritual discourses necessary to sustain diasporic ties to African-centered knowledge productions (Dillard and Okpalaoka 149). As Dillard highlights, academic spaces are often sites of universal generalizations which foreground White male knowledges to describe everyone's realities, including those Black and female (17). This leaves little room to ground research in the experiences and outside knowledges of Black women and dismisses spiritual conscious-

ness. Endarkened feminist epistemologies advocate for self-defined Black female consciousness, which embraces both "a culturally centered worldview and a feminist sensibility" (Dillard 19), but also grounds spiritual consciousness as a "legitimate frame from and through which to participate in the social and political struggles of the world" (41). In sum, Black transnational feminist praxis and endarkened feminist epistemologies encourage the processes of naming colonial structures that create racialized and gendered social categories across the world, while honoring the Black women's ways of knowing and imagination that are grounded in diasporic experiential and spiritual knowledges. For that reason, I incorporate these perspectives in my work of contextualizing emancipatory curriculum for Black transnational students.

Postcolonial theory in education is largely committed to "decolonizing knowledge and the production of transformative knowledge" (Subedi and Daza 2). However, Tuck and Yang (2012) admonish the notion of decolonization as a metaphor for other civil rights and human rights social justice projects. Their argument is that decolonization projects cannot be detached from remitting Indigenous land and sovereignty. In thinking about the literacy practices engaged at HELP, I find it difficult to position our learning community as decolonial in nature because it does not intentionally center the return of land to Indigenous communities. However, the African Diaspora's complicated relationship to land, space, and time, alongside Haiti's own entrenched history with French coloniality, necessitates tools to deconstruct colonial power structures, center the lived experiences of historically silenced communities, and create motives for reimagination and transformation. Thus, I lean into Patel's conceptualization of anticolonial projects as it more accurately describes the intent and practices of HELP's curriculum.

As a concept, anticoloniality locates "the genealogies in contemporary colonial relationships to learning, knowledge, and knowledge production" while avoiding "the unmet promises of stripping away colonization, as the term *decolonization* gestures to do" (Patel 360). Characteristics for anticolonial projects include, being "vigilant about the deeply colonial structures of institution, thought," and interrupting relationality deeply tied to land ownership" (Patel 360). As Patel explains, settler colonialism actively "seeks to place land ownership in the hands of a few" and, therefore, "our relationships to the land, to each other, and to knowledge and learning, are shaped by this settler colonial structure (361). Equally important in anticolonial efforts is the denaturalization of English as the primary language and performance of knowledge production and meaning making (Cushman 236). The language use of Haitian and Haitian American students creates an intersection of linguistic resources and marginalization. As Richardson highlights, historically, language education in the US consisted of a continuous push towards monolingualism and monodialecticalism, a process which teaches Black children to "devalue the Black cultural aspects of [their] identity, including [their] language use" ("Race" 63). When navigating traditional institutions of education, which are constituted by institutional racism, some Black students learn to cope by "adopting or adapting dominant cultural values" (Richardson, "Race" 41). As Black transnational youth situated within the United States, the students at HELP spoke both African American Vernacular English and Haitian Creole.

To unseat white monolingual culture, an anticolonial project must also recognize students' right to their own language and culture (Smitherman, "'Students'" 25).

In summary, anticolonial teaching and learning in a literacy context resembles centering lived experiences of the marginalized, disrupting text enmeshed in white settler colonialism imaginations of the Caribbean, and modeling epistemic disobedience—questioning categories, acknowledging the existence of racist institutions, and connecting the local and global to colonial projects (Krueger-Henney 90-92). With this stance, I can more accurately locate teaching and learning practices rooted in tearing down colonial categories and knowledge production within the context of a middle school literacy program. In the grand scheme of community-based writing and literacy programs, why do Black literacy traditions, Black transnational feminist praxis, and anticolonial projects matter? As Grande and Anderson point out, when the world continues to unravel due to climate change, immense debt, and unprecedented inequality and violence, these perspectives provide students a context and framework to make sense of their lives and imagine different possibilities (141-42). As COVID-19 continues to ravage our most vulnerable communities and expose deep fissures of injustice in all of our social institutions, we should further challenge the fundamental philosophies of literacy education by looking to the scholarship and lived experiences of people of color to drive literacy experiences with young people.

The Haitian Empowerment Literacy Project (HELP)

The literacy program, HELP, was founded by Drs. Charlene Désir and Pamela Hall. Dr. Charlene Désir is a Haitian American scholar, co-founder of The Empowerment Network Global (T.E.N. Global), and an associate professor at Nova Southeastern University's Fischler College of Education. Dr. Pamela Hall is the associate dean of Graduate Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences and associate professor of psychology at Barry University. As community-oriented psychologists and researchers, the two created HELP's high school-serving predecessor, the Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) Program, with a grant from The Children's Trust in 2009. HELP was formed to provide socioemotional support to the influx of Haitian children to South Florida after Haiti's devastating earthquake in 2010. The program began serving the middle grades to maintain grant requirements. HELP completed its seventh and final institute in the summer of 2015.

The purpose of the program was to mentor Haitian adolescents by empowering them to make positive life choices, develop sociocultural awareness, and build literacy skills in order for them to maximize their potential ("Pamela"). As a culturally based literacy program, HELP employed a holistic approach that provided students with "practical" literacy skills, explicit spiritual education, and cultural education. The program focused on cultivating the minds, bodies, and spirits of students. Each summer institute was shaped by a large overarching slogan which grounded the foundations for the cognitive, physical, and spiritual work to be accomplished during the summer institute. The slogans during my three years at the program were as follows: The School is the Church, the Church is the School: "Spiritual Consciousness Connects

us with the Divine Mind" (2013); Mystical Imagination: "Zero Curriculum: From Nothing Comes Everything" (2014); and "Beyond Liberation" (2015). Each week was led by a smaller guiding principle related to different aspects of the broader summer slogan. The program convened Monday-Friday from 8:00am-4:00pm. Each summer, HELP enrolled approximately one hundred students between the grades six through eight. I began as one of two sixth grade literacy instructors and rose with the same cohort of students until my final year as an eighth grade literacy instructor. By then, my classroom consisted of twenty-seven seventh and eighth grade students: twenty-two girls and five boys. Based on the theoretical perspectives framing this case study inquiry, I asked three analytical questions of HELP's curricular data. First, how does Black liberation inform the literacy practices of the program? Second, in what ways are the experiences of Black women and African-centered spiritual ways of knowing centered in the curriculum? And third, how does the program name and disrupt colonial discourses of Haiti?

Teaching and Learning at HELP

Creating New Narratives for Haiti and Blackness

As a curricular practice, HELP disrupted neocolonial discourses of Haiti and Blackness by offering students multiple literacy experiences to explore Haiti and Blackness within Black epistemologies. Students generated multiple reflective journal entries to articulate who they were; the relationships between Blackness, Haitianness, and Americanness; and how they situate themselves within these frames. Each summer, every student crafted "Who am I?" poems. Some students revised these poems into performance pieces for the end-of-summer celebration. The activities prepare students to take on new narratives of Haiti and are particularly important at the sixth grade level because, often times, it is their first introduction to Haiti in a schooling space that does not engage the tired trope "Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere." In the first week of the program, our sixth graders reflect on their imaginations of Haiti. In one journal prompt, "Haiti on my Mind," I asked my students to complete the following phrase: "When I think of the island Haiti, in my mind I see/think/feel…." I like to use the example of Manoucheca, the sixth grade girl referenced in my teaching narrative at the beginning of this article. I presented students with this prompt in the first week of the program, and on June 13, Manoucheca wrote, "When I see Haiti on TV, I feel sad for them. Sometimes, I think of doing a fundraiser to help Haiti." Her entry reveals even as a young Haitian girl who grew up in Miami, surrounded by a thriving Haitian community, she too, was unable to conceptualize the location of her ethnic heritage outside racist globalized pathologies that blame Haitian people for their current devastating realities (Krueger-Henney 91).

However, through close readings of the sixth grade text, and enrichment activities with local spoken word artist and musician, Mecca "Grimo" Marcelin, students gained entry into Haiti's remarkable histories and migration narratives through performative historical retellings of Haitian Revolution, poetry writing, and defining terms such as the Middle Passage and the African Diaspora. Four weeks later, I asked

my sixth graders to describe what they had learned so far in the program. By then, Manoucheca demonstrated the breadth and depth of learning in her short time in HELP. She shared the following:

> I'm Black. We won our independence. We were the first nation to win the independence from the French's. We got our country back. Haiti have beautiful beaches. Jean-Baptiste Point du Sable was the founder of Chicago. In Haiti, we have a bus called, Tap Tap. The reason why it's called that because they tap to tell the driver to let me off. Dessalines was the king of Haiti. Toussaint was a man that was smart. When we won our independence, he rip the white out the flag that represent slavery. He ripped it out and put the red and blue and that's how we got our flag.

Manoucheca's page-long entry represents her expanded imagination of Haiti that is not solely constructed by images of poverty and need. She cites Haitian revolutionary lore, speaks of Haiti's founders, and connects this knowledge to everyday cultural references such as the Haitian city transportation. Most importantly, Manoucheca doesn't distance herself from Haiti in the same ways she did in her previous entry. Haiti is no longer a distant "them" to be pitied. Four weeks later, she actively uses the collective "we" to discuss Haitian Independence, its historical significance, and her connection to a new-found sense of Blackness.

The process of creating new narratives of Blackness is ongoing in the program. Nadège, Haitian-born rising ninth grader in her second and final summer in the program, articulated how the program functioned as a space for reinvigorating affirming Black identities. On June 22, 2015, Nadège responded to the perennial question of "Who am I?" with a wrenching description of her eighth grade year. She wrote, "Last year, I stood on stage and spoke to an audience about who I thought I was. I was filled to the brim with confidence about my identity. However, as I went through my eighth grade year, that solid image shattered. I came back to HELP to pick up the pieces and glue them back together." Nadège went on to describe herself as a Black scholar, a writer who "gets pulled into a reality that [she] created," and a Christian with a strong faith in God. Her narrative exemplifies why articulating who you are within a Black gendered body must be a continuous exercise performed in a supportive space.

As an IBI, HELP reconfigured learning spaces by creating multiple interactions for students to engage in intergenerational literacy practices with elders, academics, and artists from their communities. These actors, in turn, imparted to students literacies that disrupted harmful discourses and challenged engrained "mis-education" (Fisher 69) of Haitian and Haitian American students in Miami. Approximately once a week, a guest lecturer would facilitate a morning discussion with the students on a topic related to the weekly theme or their own work in the Haitian community. On June 19, 2015, Sokari Ekine facilitated the morning meeting during the week themed "Self (Duality)." After describing her ties to Africa as Nigerian-British woman, Ekine opened her talk with the question, "What is Vodou?" The students' responses announced the controlling discourses of Vodou in their communities. One boy responded, "dark magic," while one girl chimed in that Vodou is medicine, but peo-

ple use it in the wrong way for other purposes. Another girl added, "originally used for healing, now something else, dark magic, bad stuff to kill people." One more girl added, "Ceremony that ancestors used to do to connect with magic." Ekine took the opportunity to unpack the word "magic" in the students' responses and queries by asking, "What is magic? What if I turn water into wine? Isn't that magic? They both require the power of a person. How do we use that power? Celebrating our ancestors, and drawing the spirit of ancestors, healing, communicating."

At this juncture of conversation, co-founder Charlene Désir put Vodou in conversation with Catholicism and Protestantism and asserted, "Vodou was a religion. It was the first religion, coming from Africa. Native Americans and [Africans] were not allowed to practice their religion. People vilified Vodou." She then connected the practices and products of Vodou to the everyday materials in their lives as Haitian youth. "Lwil mascriti," Haitian castor oil, and té, herbal tea remedies, came from Divine energy [and] connection to nature." Désir concluded by calling students to research and find out more about Vodou for themselves.

Ekine looped the conversation back to Vodou's connection to the African continent. She explained, "Look at Vodou as a historical and cultural tradition which draws connections to Ibo and Yoruba." She discussed how the names of the different Haitian Vodou traditions were the same names used in Yoruba and Ibo traditions, and that the ancestors "brought those together in Haiti. The history of Haiti is the bringing together of people." This portion of Ekine's presentation accomplished a range of things. With the assistance of Dr. Désir, she disrupted the vilification of Vodou and provided counternarratives to its epistemologies as a medium to connect to ancestors and nature and to bring people together. The conversation intertwined multiple discourses of Blackness, spirituality, and non-western epistemologies that drew explicit bonds between Haitian culture and the students' everyday cultural practices.

Centering Black Feminist Storytelling

HELP's curriculum supported Black feminist approaches to literacy instruction. The short stories of *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat center Black female protagonists as mothers, daughters, elders, sex workers, and domestics. These short stories normalized Haitian women's voices driving the narrative perspectives. In summer of 2015, tensions around gender were most apparent in my eighth grade class' reading of "Night Women," a seven-page short story narrated by a sex worker. The reading of "Night Women" required pre-reading strategies to air out the discourses of women in the sex industry, as well as using supporting texts to contextualize the lived experiences of the girls and women who get pushed into the industry. I facilitated a pre-reading activity, an open word-association activity in which I asked students to generate words that came to mind with the phrase, "women of the night." Unsurprisingly, students tapped into the dehumanizing gendered discourses of women in sex work. Their responses included whore, demoralized, slut, desperate, nasty, prostitute, deviant, and THOT (that ho over there). From there, students unraveled the meanings behind these labels and why they get ascribed to women.

In reading "Night Women," I asked students to make note of all the things we learned of the nameless woman in the story. The majority of students highlighted that the woman is a loving mother and the notable absence of her child's father. They also wrote about her beliefs in God and her desire to want more for herself, feeling older than her twenty-five years. One girl asked poignant questions, such as "Will she teach her son to not be like the men that come to her? Was his father her pimp? Was she raped? Did he sell her?" While students did make critiques of the woman in the story, I observed that, for the most part, they tried to dig deeper with the text and extract as many meanings as they could from the seven pages detailing an evening in the character's life.

I further challenged students to think of other ways to frame women in sex work and brought in two media texts: a news report from the *The Washington Post*, "Report: U.N. Peacekeepers in Haiti Had 'Transactional Sex' with Hundreds of Poor Women," and a publication from Black online media organization, *The Root*, titled "The Sex-Abuse-Prison Pipeline: How Girls of Color Are Unjustly Arrested and Incarcerated." These texts were used to shift perceptions and allow students to think of women in humanizing frameworks that explored patriarchal social structures that pushed some Black women and girls into vulnerable situations. As part of the reading, students were tasked with annotating the texts with questions and responses. A handful of students took to the inquiry process and annotated a series of thought-provoking comments to the text. In *The Washington Post* report, one girl gravitated to the following passage: "For rural women, hunger, lack of shelter, baby care items, medication and household items were frequently cited as the 'triggering need,' the report said. In exchange for sex, women got 'church shoes, cell phones, laptops, and perfume as well as money' from peacekeepers" (Moyer). She wrote in response, "If woman [*sic*] were in need why would they exchange sex? Wouldn't they go to the government are [*sic*] family members?" Two other girls made note of the report's finding that "most [Haitian women] were unaware the United Nations prohibited sexual exploitation and has a hotline to report it" and "only seven interviewees knew about the United Nations policy prohibiting sexual exploitation and abuse" (Moyer). Some girls speculated whether the women were too scared to report, and why so many to did not know how. One eighth grade girl, Venus, lodged a critique of the UN, and stated, "they're being very quiet and slow about what is happening… if the UN was more together maybe this might not happen." Malika Saada Saar's piece on the sex-abuse-prison pipeline elicited the most poignant responses in student annotations. Saar made the case that girls who run away from abusive environments or are forced into sex traffic are often criminalized for running away or jailed for prostitution. One girl angrily wrote, "why does no one arrest the men that buy and sell them? It's not their fault that they're being trafficked." Venus added, "that seems stupid to me. They're being locked up while the real bad people get to live their lives :/."

Our eighth grade class' reading of "Night Women" and the two accompanying media texts facilitated an exercise in humanizing Black women's experiences. We accomplished this by revealing the patriarchal structures that hypersexualize Black Caribbean women and perpetuate the colonial legacies of exploitation which continue to

ravage Haiti's most vulnerable communities. All three texts assisted students in recognizing the humanity in sex work and thus breaking down the binary of us/them, especially considering the US contexts in which Black girls are sexually abused into the prison pipeline. Centering Black transnational women's experiences gave students an entry point into understanding the precarity of Black girls in the United States.

Developing Spiritual Consciousness

HELP's curriculum encouraged students to develop spiritual consciousness that encompassed both Haitian Vodou principles and Judeo-Christian traditions. While trying to develop spiritual consciousness, the program did not explicitly promote any particular religion or its specific practices. Instead, the curriculum engaged in developing spiritual epistemologies, meaning, "how individuals know the transcendent and how they use and disseminate this knowledge in their lives and communities" (Désir et al. 336). The most commonly practiced religions in Haiti are Catholicism, Protestantism, and Vodou. Scholars have paid little attention to the spiritual development of Haitian and Haitian American young people, despite "religion being a complex phenomenon in the Haitian tradition" (344). As a program geared towards providing students the opportunity to explore their identities, HELP deliberately includes spiritual activities in the curriculum. Instead of instilling students with "traditional beliefs, behaviors, and rituals to participate in and perpetuate the institution and religious community" (Désir et al. 341), spirituality manifested "as both the search for meaning and life's purpose and the practices that deepen one's experience of transcendence" (342).

Haitian Vodou is an African cosmology that functions as a comprehensive religious system that "ties together the visible and invisible, material and spiritual, secular and scared" (Michel 282). Vodou grew in response to Haiti's brutally violent colonial history. Newly enslaved Africans from various regions created new collective communities anchored in shared spiritual ancestry and a quest for freedom. European colonial logics, 'til this day, demonized African spiritual ways of knowing and embedded Catholicism within the institution of slavery on the island. Haitian Vodou scholar Claudine Michel notes this repression of Vodou "forced the Africans to hide allegiance to their ancestral religions and stimulated them to develop innovative forms of worshiping African deities….Thus, Vodou became not only the means for revitalization through ancestral traditions but also the channel par excellence to organization and to resistance" (281).

Haitian Vodou principles manifested in HELP's curriculum as the weekly themes. These themes are represented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Lwas/Haitian Principle	Meaning of Principle	Weekly Themes
Gede	Life/Death	Self
Marasa	Duality	Self
Simbi	Healing	Interpersonal
Legba	Crossroads	Interpersonal
Jeni	Psychosocial Spiritual Intelligence/Awareness	Community (Internal)
Ezili	Love	Community (External)
Azaka	New Beginnings	Integration

Within each week, students participated in a series of reflective writing in their journals, meditations during morning meetings, and various activities with guest lecturers from the community. For the scope of this case study, I will focus specifically on the activities generated in week three of the program. The writing genre for this week consisted of prayer writing. Students participated in scaffolded reflective writing activities that culminated in constructing individual and co-constructed classroom prayers centered around the Haitian *lwa,* or spirit, Simbi. Within the Vodou tradition, Simbi represents a water spirit. The element of water occupies a central space in Afro-Haitian cosmology and represents "life-giving and purifying energy… A body of water is said to divide the ordinary world of humans and the invisible world of the spirits and the ancestors" (McAlister 261). Spirits that dwell within the waters, such as Simbi, contain energies that "can be 'worked' by humans for healing treatments" (261). As a *lwa,* Simbi represents "a type of reconfigured ancestor spirit" and is believed to be derived from the basimbi spirits from the Kongo region (261). As a water spirit, Simbi possess the power to offer healing and "purify what is soiled" (260).

Given the nature of Simbi, the reflections and eventual construction of prayers were anchored in ameliorating our collective relationships with each other and requesting healing and peace for others. Early in the week, I prompted students to define prayer, its purpose, and the multiple contexts in which someone may turn to prayer. Although students were well-versed in participating in prayer, the Simbi *lwa* principle facilitated conversations around trauma, healing, and the necessary actions to mend broken relationships and societal ills. In the final reflective activity, students created heart maps to articulate their desires and guide their prayers. Students were instructed to trace a large outline of a heart in their composition journals. From there, they were advised to chart out all the things they wanted for themselves in order to practice voicing what was in their hearts. From there, the students used the heart maps as a framework for their individual prayers. This guiding principle was also tightly aligned with the reading activities for the week. The sixth graders in the program were assigned to read Edwidge Danticat's *Behind the Mountains*, a Scholastic "First Person Fiction" that tells the story of a young Haitian girl's migration narrative

from Haiti to New York. Because the story grounds Haitian cultural references and practices, the main character, Celiane, takes up prayer during especially tense moments in the story. To connect the prayer writing genre to the text, students wrote prayers from the perspective of the main character and decided which of her experiences warranted prayer. In this activity, sixth grader Lucy in summer 2013 makes the choice to pray about the political tensions described in the story. She writes, "Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for keeping my family safe from the pipe bombs that were thrown at the camion. Help those who throw bombs realize they are hurting us and killing the souls of young children." Here, Lucy applies our classroom discussions of the Simbi principal of communal healing. Voiced as Celiane, Lucy recognizes an important part of ending the political violence occurring in the story involves appealing to the humanity of the instigators rather than condemning them as monsters.

Lucy's prayer at the end of the week incorporated a host of cultural and linguistic resources. Her prayer was written in both English and Haitian Creole, and she seamlessly oscillates between both languages to articulate her prayer. Lucy's prayer asks God to "let us build a foundation in our country" and for "people not to see us as boat people [but as] people of change." In Haitian Creole, Lucy thanks God for "all the children that survived the earthquake" and in English she expresses being "thankful for this country, a strong country." In this example, Lucy participates in writing as a spiritual reflective practice (Dillard 38) to make meaning of a Haitian canonical text centering a Black girl her age, while also engaging in the extensive anticolonial practice of translanguaging. Her prayer privileges her multilingual resources to process the text (Cushman 235) and spiritual consciousness.

Exploring Multimodalities of Haitian Visual and Performance Arts

Students' learning contexts at HELP took on multiple modalities throughout the duration of the program, which reflects the holistic approach to empowering Black transnational students with rich cultural backgrounds. HELP's curriculum created a cultural bridge for students to participate in literary experiences directly connected to Haitian visual and performance arts. The enrichment learning blocks were facilitated by community members from a range of creative disciplines. The objectives of the enrichment learning activities were for students to engage in multiple forms of expression to develop affirming identities. Incorporating the body, movement, and music were major parts of the enrichment experience. Students also participated in week-long Haitian folk dance and capoeira workshops with local dancers and capoeira masters.

The highlight of the enrichment experience was the filmmaking workshop conducted by Rachelle Salnave, an Emmy-nominated filmmaker, creator of Ayiti Images Film Series, and adjunct Film Professor at Miami Dade College. Students had the opportunity to write and direct their own film produced by Salnave. In the film, Salnave inquired, "What do you see in the mirror?" The film is a compilation of footage shot by students responding to Salvnave's question and capturing candid moments in the program. Students had a chance to use filming equipment and learned the ropes of capturing video, recording audio, and staging participants in the interviews. They

were also responsible for writing the script to go along with the film. Students who volunteered to be interviewed also took the liberty to speak in two languages, both English and Creole, to detail their aspirations. The film premiered at the end-of-summer celebration during the last week of the summer institute, which is attended by parents, community stakeholders, and supporters of the program. The showcase was the high-point of the summer. Students highlighted what they had learned in their chosen medium of spoken word poetry, dance, singing, instrumentation, or art. Students played a significant role in developing the programming and crafting the narrative of the summer.

Concluding Thoughts and Implications for the Year 2020

The HELP program functioned as an independent Black institution exercising transnational feminist and anticolonial pedagogy congruent with the African Diaspora's long traditions of literacy as liberation. Using Black literacy traditions, transnational feminist praxis, and anticolonial perspectives, I was able to interpret the ways its curriculum facilitated emancipatory approaches towards literacy instruction for Black transnational children. HELP's curriculum strived to disrupt the colonial discourses of Haiti and provided students with an epistemological framework of the home island rooted in agency and liberation. Community activists and artists heartened students to connect Haiti's legacy to solidarity movements across the African Diaspora. The HELP curriculum, rooted in Haitian feminist canonical texts of Edwidge Danticat, gave students access to themselves in a literacy classroom that is often missing in their traditional schooling experiences. In addition, the program emphasized developing spiritual consciousness to support students' meaning-making processes and expand their conceptualization of spirituality to include Haiti's Afro-cosmology of Vodou. Overall, for curriculum to be emancipatory and serve culturally and linguistically diverse students, it must recognize and center the literacies embedded in their communities. Those literacies supply crucial frameworks in which to engage the lived experiences and intersectionality of student groups. Also, emancipatory curriculum is decidedly Black and gender inclusive. Transnational feminist praxis encapsulates the experiential knowledges of women of color and queer communities across the world. The most consequential critique of the program is that more work could have and should have been done around queering Black transnational epistemologies and experiences. Though we briefly discussed Caitlyn Jenner's transition in the summer of 2015, it was clear students did not have access to the same sorts of tools to discuss queer experiences as they had with Blackness, Haitianness, and gender. Lastly, people of color around the world are still deeply entrenched in colonial and imperial legacies. Therefore, emancipatory curriculum must speak directly to those legacies and generate literacy experiences where students disrupt categories and learn histories rooted in anticolonial projects.

So, how does a literacy program that ended five years ago help us navigate our current realities of COVID-19 and white supremacy's hyper visible violence? To borrow from a ubiquitous Black adage, "if you stay ready, you ain't gotta get ready,"

meaning programs that are fundamentally designed to confront white supremacy and intentionally center epistemologies of communities of color are best prepared to take on the cyclical violence. COVID-19 has elevated public awareness around structural racism in ways that are both encouraging and frustrating. In our collective rush to honor the moment, and bring back some semblance of normalcy, we naively—or intentionally—overlook that "normal" for many communities has meant erasure, violence, and exploitation. As institutions dedicated to safeguarding the well-being and development of young people, especially young people of color, our work must be grounded in making sure that "normal" never comes back again.

A transformative community-based writing center recognizes our new realities and addresses them head on. This is done by connecting local experiences to communities around the world, centering the voices of women, and honoring diasporic sacred knowledges. When considering your context, in what ways can you practice deep listening and create spaces based on articulated needs of families? How can their cultural and spiritual epistemologies guide experiences within your centers? HELP's curriculum team consisted of Black female researchers; our academic expertise offered but one avenue for student engagement. Working closely with community organizers and artists, students had a wide selection of generational expertise to create rounded ideas themselves. Thus, are people at the decision-making level of your institution intimately connected to the experiences, scholarship, and communities of Black, Brown, or Indigenous people? If the answer is no, ask why; then do the work to find them. The pressure to "get it right" is a real one, and my intention is not to make light of this effort. However, interrupting generations of global anti-Black violence requires informed thoughtfulness, humility, and incredible visions for the future.

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