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## “I Do This for All of the Reasons America Doesn’t Want Me To”: The Organic Pedagogies of Black Male Instructors

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the teaching philosophies of Black male teachers of Black male students in manhood development classes in a district-wide program in Oakland, California. Drawing on observations and instructor interview data, we explore the teachers’ histories, teaching philosophies, and the trajectory of their racial-educational understandings. We utilize Gramsci’s (1971) theory of the organic intellectual, Mills’ (1997) and Leonardo’s (2013) theories of the sub-person and substudent, and Dumas’ (2014) notion of Black suffering to theorize the ways that race comes into play in the teaching of African American male students. We find that racialization and re-humanization are key to instructors’ teaching, and we identify two key aspects of their teaching philosophies: (1) Humanization/Love and (2) Reciprocity.

Black people’s persistent fight for equal educational opportunities culminated in the historic *Brown v Board of Education* decision. It was a critical victory for the Black community and represented a step toward dismantling white supremacy and racial inequity (Ladson-Billings, 2007). One troubling aspect of the *Brown* legacy, however, was the widespread loss of Black teachers. Although segregated Black schools historically suffered from racialized economic policies that rendered them materially inferior, the human relationships between teachers and students (Foster, 1997; Morris, 2001; Siddle-Walker, 1996) and the mutual project of racial struggle (hooks, 1994) created an educational environment that supported the personal and academic growth of Black students. Research has documented the histories, philosophies, and pedagogies of Black teachers who understood themselves as participants in racial uplift (Foster, 1997; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1991a, 1991b; Lynn, 2002; Morris, 2004).

While these accounts add to our understanding of Black teachers’ philosophies, these studies either retrospectively explore teacher perspectives pre-desegregation, or examine teachers who followed a traditional teacher education trajectory. Less is known about the teaching philosophies of community-based, critical Black educators on non-traditional paths. This is a critical omission, given the tradition of community-based teaching and informal learning settings in the Black community (Anderson, 1988; Perry, 1975; Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, & Mayfield, 2013). Furthermore, the bulk of scholarship on Black teachers focuses on women, leaving absent the experiences of Black male teachers.

The current study is an examination of the teaching philosophies and work of Black male teachers with all-Black, all male students in manhood development classes in a district-wide program in Oakland, California. We explore who these teachers are, their histories, and the trajectory of their current racial-educational understandings (for discussion of their teaching practices, see Nasir, ross, McKinney de Royston, Givens, & Bryant, 2013; Givens, Nasir, ross, & McKinney de Royston, 2016). In doing so, we

highlight critical aspects of the ways these teachers frame their Black male students, the job of teaching them, and the ways they describe and conceptualize their teaching practices. By describing the commitments, values, and philosophies of these teachers, we move toward a robust theorizing around the ways that race comes into play while teaching Black male students in a purported post-racial society, and the ways that racialization (and re-humanization) are part and parcel of their approach to teaching their students.

As men from the local community involved in grassroots educational projects, we refer to the instructors in this study as “organic instructors” based on Gramsci’s (1971) critical distinction between traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. The traditional intellectual is understood as a professional intellectual (priest, philosopher, etc.). Falsely regarded as disconnected from any group or class, the traditional intellectual reinforces dominant, hegemonic<sup>1</sup> ideas and is deeply connected to the hegemonic order. The organic intellectual, conversely, is connected to a specific social group and may explicitly embody its interests. Gramsci (1971) believed that the working class could produce organic intellectuals that would support counter-hegemonic ideology and win the consent of the masses. The instructors in this study were non-traditional, Black male teachers from the local community who possessed distinct relationships with their Black male students and shared understandings of the challenges they faced.

## Literature review

Researchers have documented the characteristics of successful Black educators of Black students. Effective Black teachers rely on the cultural and social underpinnings of the Black community and have cultural solidarity beyond shared race (Foster, 1994). They also have strong attachments to the Black community and deep understandings of their own racial, political, and cultural identities (Foster, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1991a, 1991b; Milner, 2006; Murrell, 1999). Academically, Black teachers hold high expectations for Black students (Beady & Hansell, 1981; Irvine, 2003) and link their students’ lived racial and cultural experiences to classroom content (Foster, 1994; Henry, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1991a, 1991b; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990; Milner, 2006). The classrooms of Black educators featured as an important political space in the Black struggle for freedom (Anderson, 1988). For instance, during the Jim Crow era, Black educators worked to empower their students to imagine possibilities for their future that challenged the status quo of segregation (Siddle-Walker, 1996). Although their actions were not always public displays of protest, their politicization of Black students and the liberatory praxis they employed reflect what Kelley (1996, p. 8) has called “infrapolitics”—the hidden and discrete resistance of oppressed groups, which may take place off stage, at times even couched in a façade of conformity.

Black teachers also engage in racial socialization work. This includes teaching strategies to navigate racial discrimination (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as well as reframing Black students’ behaviors that others may consider defiant (Nasir, 2004), resulting in fewer behavioral referrals (Henry, 1998; Milner, 2006).

The existing scholarship on Black teachers focuses primarily on Black women prepared in traditional teacher education programs, leaving out the voices of Black male teachers, and those who pursue alternate pathways into teaching, despite calls for recruiting and retaining greater numbers of Black men into the profession (Byrd et al., 2011; Lewis, 2006; Lynn, 2006; Pabon, Anderson, & Kharem, 2011; Rogers-Ard et al., 2013). One reason for this may be that teaching has typically been considered “women’s work” (Milner, 2006, p. 91) and the Black male perspective has been largely ignored (Jackson, Boutte, & Wilson, 2013; Lynn, 2006). Less is known about teaching philosophies of community-based and critical Black pedagogy.

The burgeoning literature on Black male educators suggests that Black men become teachers to be agents of change within the educational and social conditions Black students—particularly Black boys—encounter in schools (Brown, 2009; Davis, Jones, & Clark, 2013; Foster, 1997; Lewis, 2006; Lynn, 2002, 2006; Tafari, 2013). Although not well documented in the research literature, Black male educators use a variety of approaches to working with their students. Some Black male educators have a commitment to working specifically with, and are compassionate about, Black children and utilize critical race pedagogy; in practice, this means they contextualize content for students and pay close attention to the ways in

which the content is applicable to their students' lives (Lynn & Jennings, 2009). Others focus on culturally relevant pedagogy, performance strategies unique to working with Black male students, or focus on the use of connecting their understandings of students' lives to implement mandated curricula (Brown, 2009; Davis et al., 2013; Lynn, 2006; Lynn & Jennings, 2009). Scholarship suggests that the pedagogies Black male teachers employ are based on their decision to teach, are guided by their beliefs around Black male students' academic and social needs, and the fact that they see themselves in their students (Brown, 2009; Foster, 1997; Lynn, 2002, 2006; Milner, 2008; Tafari, 2013). Brown (2009) points out that the fact that these teachers are both Black *and* male is significant, affording these teachers an "insider" status with their Black male students (p. 433).

In this study, we take up the question: How do Black male community educators (what we call "organic instructors") understand the work they do, and what frames, philosophies, or theories guide their pedagogy? We argue that the instructors viewed their work in the classroom as connected to a broader project of challenging systemic issues that are products of the racialized state. They did this work from an insider perspective, where their shared identity with students became a resource they drew upon in the classroom. The following section provides a theoretical lens on this work to help elucidate how the themes of humanization and reciprocity emerged in the educational philosophies of the instructors in this study.

## Theoretical framework

We employ Mills' (1997) and Leonardo's (2013) theory of the subperson and substudent, respectively, and Dumas' (2014) notion of Black suffering in educational contexts to understand how the teachers in our study function as organic instructors with organic pedagogical philosophies rooted in a counter-hegemonic political project. In this instance, countering dominant ideology is a project of humanization and Black self-love in a highly racialized society—the work of developing subjectivity from subpersonhood. Utilizing the notion of Black suffering in the educational context, we explore how instructors reimagine students' individual racialized experiences in the context of a collective Black suffering; adopting a group framework allows students and instructors to explore how race and racism operate within institutions and lays the foundation for collective racial healing.

### *Subpersons and substudents*

Leonardo (2013) notes that using Critical Race Theory (CRT) allows researchers to go beyond interpreting "objectifications of race" and speak out against them and offers Mills' (1997) Racial Contract as methodology for CRT. The Racial Contract (RC) argues that dominant notions of the "social contract" in political philosophy fail to properly account for racism, specifically white supremacy, in the social formation. Using the concept of white supremacy illuminates "the differential privileging of the whites as a group with respect to nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them" (Mills, 1997, p. 11).

The politics structured by the RC are heavily predicated on the concept of subpersonhood, where subpersons are "humanoid entities who, because of racial/phenotype/genealogy/culture, are not fully human" (Mills, 1997, p. 56). The ability of persons (whites) to dominate subpersons (non-whites) is rooted in non-whites' lack of humanity and, hence, lack of rights and considerations. In the RC, subpersons are "lacking in the essential rationality that would make them fully human" (Mills, 1997, p. 59). Leonardo argues that in the same way Mills' theory of racially proscribed personhood designates whites as persons and non-whites as subpersons, within the educational RC, non-white *children* may be understood as substudents, and are deemed uneducable. Hence, Leonardo (2013) utilizes Ferguson's (2001) notion that Black boys are "adultified" in schools and punished for vague defiances that white children are excused from, pointing out "the fundamental distinction between students (children) and teachers (adults) does not hold for Black children" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 9).

## **Black suffering**

Dumas' (2014) concept of Black suffering in the educational context is a powerful tool for developing a deeper understanding of the collective racialized experiences of Black students in U.S. public schools, in particular how "racialized bodies endure suffering in the spaces of schools, and how their suffering appears almost normal—unfortunate perhaps, but not fully realized" (p. 20). Importantly, Dumas situates his theory within the context of "a cultural struggle to reconstitute a positive sense of meaning and purpose for self and society against the brute force of events in which these are violated and destroyed" (Wilkinson, 2005, p. 45, as cited in Dumas, 2014). Dumas' (2014) notion of the school as a site of Black suffering helps us to understand how the instructors in this study conceptualized their teaching as the "life work" they do as Black men with Black boys to counter hegemonic ideas about Black male identity. Mills' (1997) subperson and Leonardo's (2013) substudent serve to call into question the applicability of commonsensical notions of categorical claims of equality and presumed humanity; where we see instructors begin their work from an epistemology grounded in de facto subpersonhood, we can examine the ways teachers are engaging students in exercises of self-love and positive self-recognition in the face of processes of dehumanization within the larger society.

## **Methods**

### **Context**

This study was conducted in a Manhood Development Program (MDP) administered by the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) in Oakland, CA. The MDP classes were developed by the African American Male Achievement Initiative (AAMA) within OUSD, which was established to improve the academic outcomes of Black male students. Specifically, the AAMA was created to address concerns about the high rates (20%) of chronic absenteeism and suspension (23%) and low performance indicators for Black males in OUSD high schools, who comprise 17.3% of the district's students. The AAMA's mission was to increase attendance rates, lower suspension and expulsion rates, promote self-awareness, and help cultivate healthy identities among Black male students.

In the fall of 2010, the AAMA launched a program for adolescent male students in the district, serving Black boys with classes at their middle and high school sites. The MDP class was offered as an elective during the regular school day. Before the school year began, the parents of Black male students were contacted and their children were invited to take the class. This included a public event hosted by the AAMA in which the program was explained and parents were able to meet AAMA staff and some of the instructors. A focus was placed on bringing together Black male students of differing academic proficiency levels together to create solidarity.

The course's curriculum sought to address students' socioemotional and academic needs. More specifically, the courses aimed to encourage students to learn more about themselves, their cultural and racial histories, and their communities, with the goal of helping them think differently about their education, in part by reconfiguring notions of Blackness and manhood. While each MDP teacher had his own unique pedagogical approach, there were several key shared classroom practices across all sites. One key feature of the MDP learning practices included frequent and explicit conversations about race in America, particularly conversations that were designed to help students develop critical perspectives about how Black boys and men are negatively depicted in the media. A myriad of learning activities sparked these conversations—watching videos that introduced students to a variety of scholars and activists doing racial justice work, discussing current events (such as the shooting of Trayvon Martin), and journal writing activities where students were asked to respond to prompts like "America wants you to fail." Related to these discussions, another key classroom practice was the sharing of personal stories and experiences. MDP teachers created academic spaces that invited students to share problems they were having both inside and outside the classroom. These conversations were sparked in a variety of ways, sometimes structured formally by explicitly opening the floor for students to share personal stories, other times woven into the broader discussions of race and struggle referenced above, and yet other times these

conversations emerged spontaneously in response to discussions or interactions that may have been unrelated to a specific learning activity. A final important feature of the MDP learning environment was the practice of meta-discussions, reflecting on the success or failure of particular learning activities. For example, after an outdoors activity designed to promote collaboration and teamwork did not go as smoothly as intended, an MDP teacher engaged students in a meta-discussion to assess their own performance, both individually and as a group. These conversations often were politicized by drawing attention to the significance of Black boys working together in solidarity toward common ends, as well as to the urgency of success and collaboration in the face of structural and systemic societal barriers.

## **Methods**

The data for this study are drawn from observation and video data from MDP classrooms and interviews with 48 of the students and 6 instructors from across the program sites. The research included observations twice a week and video recordings of the MDP classes at six different sites across three years. The team of researchers consisted of one African American male graduate student in his late 20s, two African American female graduate students in their early 30s, and an African American professor in her early 40s. Given that these were all-male spaces, the male graduate student conducted the video-taping and field notes, remaining quiet in the back of the room unless asked explicitly to join the conversation. Interviews were conducted on the school grounds (in classrooms and on the yard) by the entire research team. As a research team, we positioned ourselves as objective supporters who were curious to hear the perspectives of the students and instructors.

Field notes were taken during and, at times, immediately before or after observations, and focused on capturing the interactions, activities, and artifacts of the class. Videos documented the instructors' pedagogical choices and discourse with students, while teacher interviews focused on gathering information about the instructors' backgrounds, and their vision for, and experiences within, the MDP class. Our analysis process began by creating activity logs of the classroom videos, and transcribing all interviews. Next, each researcher independently read through and open coded the transcribed instructor interviews. After an initial set of codes emerged, the team split up into smaller groups, each exploring specific instances of a particular code. In our next stage of analysis, we turned our attention to the activity logs and field notes of classroom observations. After an open coding process, to gain a broad sense of themes emerging in practice, we triangulated with our refined codes from instructor interviews, looking for conceptual categories that were prominently showing up in both interviews as well as field notes and activity logs. We found two key aspects of the instructors' teaching philosophies as organic instructors that also was evident through their teaching practices: (1) Humanization/Love, and (2) Reciprocity.

Before we describe the findings, we note two key limitations of this study. First, the analysis presented here is focused on the instructors' underlying teaching philosophies and motivation, and less on a full description of the teaching practices or student outcomes, which has been published elsewhere. Second, our sample was small, and in only one geographic location; findings should not be generalized beyond this limited sample.

## **Findings**

### ***MDP instructors: The urgent life work of working with Black male students***

Elsewhere we focus on the pedagogical and disciplinary practices in MDP classes, including how students participate and articulate their experiences in those spaces and how the MDP classes impact student achievement in schools (Nasir et al., 2013; Givens et al., [in press](#)). In this article, we give voice to the MDP instructors by exploring who they are and how they frame their racial-educational understandings and conceptions of their "work" with Black male students. This is non-trivial as a major consideration AAMA makes in choosing MDP instructors is that they have "Black male competency"—or an understanding of the complexities of being a Black male in American society—and be able to employ these skills within a school setting. While the MDP program provides guidelines for instructors and frames the purposes

of the MDP classes, AAMA administrators are clear that the instructors themselves make the principles of MDP come alive through their interactions with students, and through the unique perspectives they bring to the classroom. AAMA administrators see the hiring of instructors as one of the most critical aspects of making MDP successful.

We begin with profiles of several instructors to highlight the ways these community-based instructors saw their work with MDP as “life work,” embodying tremendous urgency and importance. We highlight five instructors from the first three years of the program to provide a sense of the kinds of experiences and perspectives they brought to the classrooms.

### ***Brother Jay***

Brother Jay was particularly articulate about the need to affirm Black male students because of their negative experiences in schools. He explicitly discussed his care for the students and the need to have a curriculum based on academic and non-academic content given the institutionalized nature of stigmas his students faced. Brother Jay was a credentialed teacher and worked as a lecturer in the African American Studies department at a local community college. Brother Jay has worn many hats in his work with Black youth and their families, including teaching high school students in a predominantly Black school, coordinating a local initiative of a national campaign to address the needs of Black men and boys, counseling Black students and their families in a school-based setting, and managing community-based programs for Black youth. In his early thirties at the time, students saw him as an older brother.

### ***Brother Tonio***

Brother Tonio’s approach highlighted the communal bonds between instructors, students, and their families. A Black school administrator in his early 40s, Brother Tonio had lived in Oakland for most of his life. He was the only instructor who was a teacher in the district and taught an MDP class at his home school. Brother Tonio had a stern, affable approach and adhered closely to the college-readiness curriculum to which MDP instructors had access. This orientation reflected his existing role within the school. His age and demeanor led his students to see him as a father figure. He was centrally concerned with supporting the academic achievement of the young men, emphasizing the importance of graduating and choosing a college or career path.

### ***Brother Jelani***

Brother Jelani had extensive experience working with Black youth in school settings, including colleges, afterschool programs, and juvenile facilities. A musical artist by profession, his curriculum drew upon a repertoire of cultural forms—music, film, television—in addition to providing students with homework support. His interest in working within the schools was a desire to provide alternative role models in schools because “the only Black adults they see in schools are the security guards or the Black assistants working for the white administrators.” His MDP students also saw him as a father figure, an apt perception given Brother Jelani’s age (mid-40s) and his own admissions that he brought his fatherly expertise (from two adolescent sons and a daughter) to bear in his teaching.

### ***Brother Phil***

Brother Phil was a poet and writer who ran a popular open mic night in the area and has appeared on national television reciting his poetry and spoken word. His poetry focuses on analyzing the social condition of African Americans. He views his poetry as one aspect of a larger social mission to support young people in the service of social justice. He also had experience working for local academic enrichment programs for Black students. Like Brother Tonio, Brother Phil’s relationships with his students went beyond the classroom, to lunch breaks and passing periods.

### ***Brother Paul***

Brother Paul was a recent graduate from an east coast Historically Black College, but was born and raised in Oakland. He was a writer, a journalist, and a photographer, and brought aspects of his creative practice to the classroom. He often brought local artists who were a part of his professional community to his

classroom to talk with the students, and engaged them in analyzing music and movies with a racialized lens. He saw his work with young Black men as about empowerment, caring for and protecting them in the context of schools that too often exercised racialized disciplinary practices.

These instructors shared a commitment and a sense of urgency about their work. As one instructor noted, they saw their work within the MDP as a part of a much larger “life work” that was critically connected to Black racial uplift or a commitment to changing the (urgent) reality for Black males, and Black people as a whole. They used MDP as a space to counter typical schooling experiences by both acknowledging difficult Black male realities in Oakland, as well as using the space to imagine different possible futures. Urgency was articulated as a descriptor for the work these instructors saw themselves doing across sites. One instructor shared:

It's ... like life or death. Where I feel, like, if we don't get 'em, the streets will get 'em, and it's death, whether it's in prison or six feet under, it's death, whether it's today or ten years from now, it's death.

This sense of deep urgency stems from the MDP instructors' insider-position as Black men and as members of the community, having experienced (and still experiencing) the “suffering” associated with being Black and male. These life or death sentiments highlight the instructors' commitments to nurturing young Black males in the face of numerous societal challenges, including violence and incarceration.

### ***Teaching philosophies of organic instructors***

We argue that there are two key aspects of the instructors' teaching philosophies as organic instructors: (1) Humanization/Love, and (2) Reciprocity. These philosophies of teaching constitute a shared and expanded notion of what it means to educate Black boys. Key to this newly imagined notion of Black education is a resistance to the way Black boys are viewed and treated as “subpersons,” and instructors' explicit intention to attend to their students' full humanity.

Before we analyze the instructors' philosophies, we present a vignette (excerpted from field notes) from one of the MDP classes to capture how the themes of humanization and reciprocity emerged in these spaces, and to better contextualize our discussion of the teacher philosophies undergirding the pedagogy in MDP classes.

#### ***MDP Class, June 4, 2012***

Through the windows of the classroom, I can see Brother Phil rearranging students' desks into a semi-circle, arched around the whiteboard. The floor is Black and white checkered tile and there is a purple and green airbrushed banner that covers the stretch of the wall adjacent to the Blackboard that says, “No Human is ‘Illegal.’”

Phil is wearing the crisp, slightly oversized, white hoodie that all the instructors of the Manhood Development Program received. The words “Manhood Development” are draped across the chest of the sweater in a purple graffiti font. A total of 12 students arrive today; Phil instructs them to “begin working on the free write, I have to take care of something with one of y'all's brothers outside.” After Phil leaves, students quiet down and begin writing. I can see Phil standing in front of a student outside of the classroom with his back to the window. A few minutes pass, and two students start talking, but it never gets too loud. Another student across from them addresses them in a tone as if he was playfully mocking Phil, “My Brothers.” They chuckle and continue writing until Phil and the student return and take their seats.

After a check-in about the weekend, Phil says, “I think today is one of those days, it seems like one of those days where we have a couple of individuals who are going through some things, including myself, and may be a little stressed. ...” The student to the right of Phil, Corey, says, “I know I'm going through something” and the student right next to him tells him to shut up. Phil says, “You know what ... No, no ... it's cool. You're going through something?” Phil seems to say this to make sure the student feels heard and affirmed. “I think what's important for us to understand especially when we're all around each other and we're all struggling is that one of the benefits of this class is that we can help each other and we can give advice for things when we can't get it in other places.”



I recall Phil talking to another student a couple of days before where he said the student had been “doing a lot of death talk recently,” speaking to the fact that this particular student had mentioned a number of people who were close to him—peers—that had been killed.

This conversation eventually leads to Corey sharing the fact that his “grandmother is on her deathbed.” This leads to a discussion of how the young men cope with death, and students sharing their own experiences with death, and giving Corey advice. One student recommends that he try to be around her as much as possible, another recommends that he talk about it. Phil continues facilitating responses, and then asks the question, “How do you deal with loss?”

A student mentions crying about the death of his aunt, seeming embarrassed at admitting to crying. Phil says, “Yeah, Tre cries. ... You know, we all ... we all human right? You know sometimes we show different sides you know [popping his shoulders up and down], sometimes you don’t see all of us and that’s okay. It’s not necessarily meant that everybody needs to see every aspect of our personality. But we gotta remember that people do go through things and one thing that I want you guys to remember, for you, Corey, especially, and anybody else that’s experiencing something that, you know, you think is really gonna be devastating to you, is that it is ok to cry. There’s nothing wrong with it. Everybody does it, no matter how much you try not to. You know we were watching that film and it was talkin’ about masculinity in the film ... You know they were talking about masculinity in the film and, you know, it’s a part of masculinity as well. It’s not a sign of weakness; it’s a sign of emotion, a sign of feelings. So that’s something to keep in mind.” Phil brings it back to the students to see if any more of them have anything to share on the topic. He then transitions to another topic.

He asks the student, David, who he was speaking with in the hallway if he would like to share what was on his mind. After a bit of a negotiation, David gives Phil permission to share with the class that he is in a situation at home where his stepfather was just released from prison and he has witnessed some domestic abuse. Phil and David go back and forth, further detailing the story, ultimately sharing that David and his stepdad have a very strained relationship. David shares that his stepfather is violent to his mother and the history of physical altercations with his stepdad. Phil opens up the dialogue to the class, “How many people are not fans of men who put their hands on women?” All the students raise their hands, prompting a discussion around how to respond to a situation like this, especially when it is someone you care deeply about.

Phil then shares childhood experiences of his mom being beaten by his father and other boyfriends. Phil shares that just a few weeks prior, during a MDP class, he learned via a phone call that his father had died. While Phil is sharing, a student asks Phil if his dad’s funeral had already passed. “Yeah, it’s done,” he replied, then brings it back to how they can help David work through his situation. “What do we do as a son when our mother is in a situation that we may not like?” The students share various potential strategies, as Phil frames students’ responses in a manner that lead towards positive solutions for David.

This excerpt of the conversation in one MDP class session illustrates the kinds of conversations and relationships that developed in the MDP space. Although the instructor, Phil, begins the conversation, it is clear that students are co-creating the dialogic practices of the classroom by the ways they take up and employ these practices. For example, at the beginning of the vignette one student playfully imitates the instructor’s discursive practice of using, “My Brothers” to respectfully, but firmly, reprimand student behavior. Likewise, as the vignette unfolds, students clearly take up the opportunity to share their experiences—“I know I’m going through something”—or to support and give advice to one another. We argue that what makes such interactions possible are the teaching philosophies of these organic instructors. Below we detail two philosophies that were made explicit during instructor interviews: humanization and reciprocity.

### ***Creating spaces of home: Humanization and love***

The first philosophy is humanization, namely, that these instructors’ teaching is motivated by a commitment to recognize and love the humanity of Black children. This commitment is, in part, borne out of their own experiences as Black children and as adults that currently interact with and possibly parent Black children. Mills’ (1997) notion of the subperson is predicated upon a system of white supremacy,

which reproduces itself via the dehumanization of non-Whites. These organic instructors aim to resist this system by aiding students in developing their own (Black) subjectivity. MDP teachers elaborate on their philosophies of humanization and love in three central ways: (1) Everyday humanity, (2) Knowledge of (real) self and self-love, and (3) Boys will be boys. These elements of their teaching philosophies confront the prolonged and often mundane suffering that Black male students face in schools.

### ***Everyday humanity***

For MDP instructors, the notion of “everyday humanity” is core to their interactions with students. For instructors, a part of the process of dehumanization is being made invisible. As one instructor commented, “And I think a lot of our kids, Black male kids get ignored.” In an effort to make students feel seen, heard, and felt, instructors regularly checked in with their students and carved out space for them to discuss aspects of their lives. Another instructor commented,

Kids have a lot on their mind, probably have nobody to talk to at home or in the neighborhood. So, I think that, you know, it’s [important] to hit on the curriculum piece of things, but we need to know what’s on the kids’ minds. Like, “What your day looking like?” You know, so a kid gonna tell you man, like, “I’m not eating” or “I can’t sleep” or you know, so, I mean, and then we can hit on that. If that kid is not eating, not sleeping, or some other major things are going on, then we need to take care of that before we can take care of anything else.

This instructor understands that meaningful learning is virtually impossible when you don’t acknowledge what students may be dealing with in or outside of the classroom. While the standard curriculum remains significant, this instructor reshapes what constitutes necessary pedagogy within his classroom. Dealing with the whole child becomes a strategic tactic toward reinforcing students’ importance—that they matter, as individuals, as Black boys, as human beings.

### ***Self-knowledge and self-love***

All of the MDP instructors discussed the significance of self-knowledge and self-love in the education of Black boys. In fact, one of the learning objectives for the Manhood Development Program was to “increase awareness of the legacy and challenges of being an African American male.” While Black boys struggle to navigate racialized school environments and the larger racialized society, developing an understanding of their connection to a legacy of struggle can be particularly powerful. One instructor noted, “Why do I do what I do? To heal and restore and rebuild the legacy of our people.” For these instructors, there is an acknowledgment of something to be healed from, recognition of a greater legacy unknown to most, and a shared dedication to teaching young Black boys about those who struggled before them. A key aspect of this connection to a legacy of struggle is that students develop pride and self-love in relation to their cultural and racial history.

When asked why they chose to teach in MDP, one instructor noted, “I do this because I can. I do this for my people. I do it for those that did it for me. I do this to create men. I do it because we don’t see enough Black educators. I do this because I care about young Black folks. I do this for every reason America doesn’t want me to.” This instructor’s last sentence is particularly salient, because in it, he implies that the condition of subpersonhood is endemic to being Black in America. In his opinion, disrupting this reality by battling notions of subpersonhood, substudenthood, and counteracting the processes of racialization and dehumanization, will alter the status quo in this country.

### ***Boys will be boys***

While the saying “boys will be boys” has traditionally been used to point to racialized differential disciplinary sanctions between white and non-white boys (Ferguson, 2001), MDP instructors invoke this idea to counter the adultification of Black boys and insist upon their ability to exist as children—as students. One instructor noted, “For them, for the young men, create a safe space for them, in the middle of the school day, within the middle of their school house. ... they can come in and just let their guard down, and learn, and crack jokes, and be little boys for a minute again.” This instructor is keenly aware that within the larger school, Black boys are often seen as men and met with similar hostilities

Black men face within the larger society. His desire to allow boys to be boys “for a minute” is a temporary reprieve from the adultification they experience within the larger school. This adultification can have severe consequences—particularly when school discipline systems may mirror the larger repression Black men face in society. Specifically, when criminal and Black man become synonymous and conflated in society’s collective consciousness as “criminalBlackman,” they “inevitably become the primary target of law enforcement” (Russell, as cited in Alexander, 2012, p. 107). Likewise, Black boys, when viewed by white, middle class women as men, are more likely to be punished for nondescript offenses such as “disruption,” “defiance,” or “disrespect” (Noguera, 2008). Thus, the instructors’ belief in creating space for Black boys to relax in their boyhood is deeply connected to mitigating racialized disciplinary practices within the larger school.

### ***Towards a collective Black freedom: MDP classrooms as a site of reciprocity***

As a part of the educational racial contract, which casts Black children as substudents, many Black students experience school as “outsiders” where they are positioned as not fully students, not fully human. This erasure was taken up by the MDP instructors who saw themselves as inherently connected to the students through communal and racial bonds. Committing themselves to the humanization process for their students also was a part of a larger project of humanization for all Black people. These processes were built on a notion of reciprocity, whereby the humanity of Black teachers was inherently tied to the humanity of their Black students. In the MDP classes, this theme of reciprocity manifested through notions of shared authority and accountability.

The MDP classes were created as counter-spaces against the dominant schooling experiences of Black students. In cultivating these spaces, the MDP instructors and their students developed a class culture that transformed classrooms—which were often described as a site of suffering for these students—into environments where they shared collective accountability and authority. This was particularly demonstrated through the discipline practices of the class, which consisted of physical activity (jumping jacks, push-ups, etc.), and through the enforcement of the class norms, such as refraining from using the “n-word” or talking down to one another. In reflecting on the discipline practices in his class Brother Tonio states:

Naw, it was very simple. I know at first a lot of the guys didn’t agree with it, but then, as class went, they were even like, “Man, you just said the ‘n’ word. Man you got to drop and give me 25” ... Or, “Man you just put me down, give me 5 put-ups.”

Here Tonio shared that while it initially took the students time to adjust to the new processes of accountability for the class, they eventually came to understand the importance of holding one another accountable. It was employed as a tool by which they could all maintain the norms of the class. Tonio mentions that students requiring one another to do 25 push-ups if they used the “n-word,” also demonstrates how they addressed speaking negatively about one another. In the previous passage he mimics a student saying, “Man you just put me down,” meaning the accused had spoken badly about him. To address this, the person that committed the act would have to give “5 put-ups,” or five positive affirmations about the student he had just spoken ill of. These moments demonstrate how students were empowered to hold one another accountable in the MDP classes and to rectify their errors.

Students’ authority over maintaining accountability in the class also applied to the teacher, who was expected to collectively share in maintaining the class culture and norms. For example, on one occasion, Brother Paul arrived late to the class and students held him accountable for punctuality. When he walked in, ready to begin the lesson for the day and while students were settling in, students pointed out his tardiness, and before another word was spoken he dropped down and did push-ups; afterwards, he immediately went right into greeting the class and shared the day’s agenda. This encounter demonstrated the norm that was set in the class—rules equally applied to everyone, including the instructors. In his interview, Brother Paul also recalls moments where he had to hold himself accountable, even when students did not call him out on it; he did this both to be transparent and to respect the class culture, stating:

There were times where I would have a chip on my shoulder and would let something get the best of me and then the next day I'd come back to class and say, you know, "before anything starts, I'd like to apologize to you for putting you on blast or to make you an example when you didn't have to be." They respected my accountability. Like, you know, to say I needed to plant some flowers where I did some dirt, that kind of thing.

In these moments, Brother Paul views modeling accountability as an important aspect of his pedagogy. This reflects a value on collapsing traditional power relations to create a reciprocal relationship between MDP instructors and their students.

### ***Organic instructors: From an "outsider within" standpoint***

The MDP instructors occupied a unique "standpoint" as instructors to their Black male students, especially given the paucity of Black male teachers. Black feminist scholar, Collins (1986), offers the term "outsider within" to describe the positionality of Black women in a racialized U.S. society. Collins grounds this notion in their experiences as domestic servants, where they were exposed to private spaces of Whiteness. Black women were "within" given that they were often perceived as fixtures in white families, yet "outsiders" given that "they could never belong to their white 'families'" (Collins, 1986, p. 14). She conveys how Black women who are in touch with their marginality may use their insider knowledge in "producing distinctive analysis of race, class, and gender" (p. 15). This concept is useful for conceptualizing the role MDP instructors occupied as "outsider[s] within" at the school cites they worked in—particularly in the eyes of the Black male students in the MDP program. The analysis these instructors had of the school system in which they worked also reflects their positionality as outsiders within. The MDP instructors, as Black male community members and as instructors, often positioned themselves as independent of the school structures in which they worked, and were vocal about the particular challenges that Black male students experienced within those structures and society more broadly. At the same time, the instructors were aware of the currency that their personal narratives as Black men from the local community carried, and they intentionally leveraged this to connect with students personally and academically.

### **Discussion/Conclusion**

In this article we address a significant omission in scholarship on Black teachers by examining the philosophies and pedagogies of critical Black male educators who have taken a non-traditional teacher educational trajectory. We understand these educators as "organic instructors" in that they are directly connected to a specific social group (i.e., Black male students from Oakland) and that they embody the interests of that group. In other words, these Black male instructors demonstrated unique relationships to their Black male students and shared understandings of their collective racialized and gendered experiences.

Understanding their "life work" as vitally urgent (as "life or death"), these organic instructors iterate theories of humanization and reciprocity that serve to counter dominant racial ideology and resist the processes of racialization and Black suffering students experience in their schools and in society at large. Where the educational racial contract positions Black boys as substudents, MDP instructors effectively resisted this paradigm by assisting students in developing a Black subjectivity. Through notions of everyday humanity, knowledge of self/self-love, and allowing boys to be boys, these instructors developed their classrooms as Black counter-spaces where students and teachers worked collectively to counteract structural dehumanization and cultivate new possibilities for Black male subjectivity.

Likewise, MDP instructors' philosophy of reciprocity served to explore a collective Black suffering and transform individual struggles into shared racialized experiences and create moments for potential healing. Through ideas of shared authority and accountability and shared struggle and empathy, MDP instructors worked with students to shed light on a collective Black "we" and a shared Black suffering. MDP philosophies thus represented an intentional approach for racial healing, moving from acknowledging processes of Black dehumanization to collectively creating space that fiercely recognized students'

humanity. This process opened up powerful alternative subjectivities that allowed Black students to envision possibilities for themselves and other Black males outside of dominant racialized and gendered scripts.

This study theorizes and brings empirical evidence to bear on the pedagogies and educational philosophies of Black male instructors in an alternative program for Black boys. This work brings into focus the racialized ways that these instructors enact their teaching, and the ways in which they see it as transgressive and political. Importantly, they view teaching as a racial project (Omi & Winant, 1994), whereby they, as organic instructors, actively participate in creating a counter-space where Black boys' humanity is fully acknowledged and allowed, thus working to counter Black suffering in the educational context and reimagine the possibilities for a liberatory Black educational experience.

Still, this study does not imply that simply increasing the number of Black male teachers will create the processes of humanization and reciprocity we examined in this article. Our exploration of an "outsider within" positionality problematizes the notion that shared racial and gender characteristics automatically lend themselves to positive teacher-student relationships. The critical philosophies of these teachers, as organic instructors, in conjunction with their shared communal history, are what allowed for the kind of liberatory Black educational project explored in this study. Further, while these instructors' positionality as Black males from similar communities as their students privileged them within these contexts, we are not implying that non-Black, non-male teachers cannot create liberatory educational spaces for Black boys. Indeed, Black male teachers cannot be the only ones expected to engage in countering Black suffering and reimagining liberatory possibilities in schools. We simply offer the educators in this study as examples of the teaching philosophies of community-based, critical Black educators who follow non-traditional paths.

We also offer that understanding race in these all-Black, all-male spaces, requires an acknowledgment that the spaces were intrinsically gendered, both because of the constitution of the classes, and because of the classes' goals of reconfiguring notions of Blackness and manhood. While instructors may have leveraged their shared racial and gender positionalities to forward student buy in, this process may have served to reinforce heteronormativity and reify notions of the hyper-masculine Black male. Utilizing push-ups as a way to develop shared accountability, for example, may have worked because of the connections students made between physical strength and "manliness." We presume these kinds of techniques would not have been used in a mixed gender or all-female space. Still, while instructors may have strategically utilized stereotypical masculine acts to establish consistency with what students understood as normal to develop trust within the space, they also worked to challenge students' often restrictive notions of Black manhood through facilitating conversations about relationships, utilizing homophobic terms such as "that's gay," and demonstrating support or emotional and physical affection for one another (for specific examples of this process see Nasir et al., 2013).

In the process of describing the commitments, values, and philosophies of these Black male teachers, we begin theorizing around the connection between race and the teaching of Black male students, and the ways that theories of humanization and reciprocity are essential aspects of their approach to teaching Black male students. Still, the study pushes us to consider important questions related to what it means to create powerful educational spaces for Black children (or Black males) when teachers do not share similar "outsider within" positionalities or the racial and gendered backgrounds of their students. With a public school teaching force that is exceedingly white, middle class, and female, this is increasingly germane.

We acknowledge that these findings are not prescriptive—particularly given our focus on five educators within one program. Nonetheless, frames of Black suffering and dehumanization advance our thinking about what kinds of philosophies and pedagogies are crucial towards developing educational projects that counter the racialized experiences of Black students in public schools. Further, if we accept that engaging Black students in conceptualizing their racialized experiences as structural (as opposed to individual) is a necessary prerequisite for educating the whole child, additional research must be done in order to understand how to create meaningful educational experiences for Black children. This becomes particularly significant in an era of purported post-raciality that can render racial discourse verboten.

This study, then, is an invitation to further explore how we reclaim silenced narratives and a call for research that explicitly examines how Black youth are racialized in schools; this study also represents the potential for transformative resistance in spaces that eschew theories of a colorblind, post-racial society in favor of confronting race and racialization directly. In other words, these teachers' narratives should compel us to examine spaces that understand “radical healing” (Ginwright, 2010) as a necessary component of overall educational success. It is these spaces—that validate and encourage Black students to interrogate their racialized experiences—that may, in fact, be the catalyst for developing their will, desire, and capacity to change them.

## Note

1. Gramsci notes that “hegemony ... is characterized by a combination of force and consent which balance each other so that force does not overwhelm consent but rather appears to be backed by the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion (which in certain situations, therefore, are artificially multiplied)” Gramsci, Buttigieg, & Callari, 2011). Hence, hegemony can be understood as the ruling class ensuring their values, interests, and beliefs are accepted as common sense by the larger society while ensuring this process appears natural. Although it is often portrayed as synonymous with domination, hegemony relies heavily on the consent of the people of a society. Still, that consent can be achieved only because hegemony is always supported by the threat of force and force will do the work that consent cannot.

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