Seeking Healing through Black Sisterhood: Examining the Affordances of a Counterspace for Black Women Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

Calls to increase diversity in the United States teacher workforce emphasize benefits to students without strategic consideration of minoritized teachers' needs. In this ethnographic study, we investigate the affordances of a counterspace for Black women pre-service teachers in a predominantly white institution to support their development as educators. Using a grounded theory approach, we analyze fieldnotes from one meeting to understand how the counterspace offered participants a space to reconcile with contradictions experienced working in schools. The counterspace contributed to participants' healing in three ways: (1) it *made space* for participants to interrogate their own experiences in U.S. schools; (2) it offered *insider connections*, a fundamental sense of belonging and legitimacy; and (3) it *busted the myth of the monolith*, by inviting the breadth of Black women's stories and histories. These findings suggest that building community through shared identity markers can foster a rich environment for teacher development.

Keywords: Black women teachers, pre-service teachers, culturally responsive teacher education

I am a Black Feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my [B]lackness as well as my womaness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable.

—Audre Lorde

Black women preservice teachers…Although stereotyped to be similar, come in all shapes, sizes, and personalities. They are the Pikachu of teachers, a true, rare Pokémon. I am proud to be in the number. I am proud to do this work too. I am proud to work with and create with other Black women. Bingo. When I get the chance, and sometimes it's rare, I love collaborating with Black women. That's what brought me through my teacher prep program at [Historically Black College]. It is amazing to see Black women teachers who will connect, share, and love on one another.

—Collaborative Writing from BWT Participants, January 2020

Introduction

The second excerpt above is from a writing activity completed by four Black women pre-service teachers. In the activity, they were given the prompt, "Black women pre-service teachers..." They had a minute to write whatever came to mind. At the end of the minute, they passed their papers to the next woman and received a new paper to continue writing. In this way, the collectively constructed text represents one collaborative take on what it means to be a Black woman educator. They understand the ways that others stereotype them, but they are proud to be in this historically important group and excited to share and collaborate with other Black women. They do not always get such opportunities, but when they do, they are eager to connect to and love one another.

This connection and love are important because the journey to becoming a teacher can be difficult. Not only must pre-service teachers learn what to do in a classroom, but they also must learn how to think about the work of teaching (Horn & Campbell, 2015). Teacher education programs are ostensibly designed to support this development among teacher candidates. However, historically, teacher education programs have primarily focused on challenges white teachers encounter entering schooling

contexts, ignoring the unique developmental needs of Black teachers (Sleeter, 2001; Gist, 2014; Brown, 2014).

Not surprisingly, this focus on white teachers reflects the current teacher demographics in K–12 schools. In the school year 2015-2016, 79% of public school teachers were white, and 76% were female (Condition of Education, 2020). Exacerbating this, attrition among Black teachers is high: one study showed that in 2012–2013, 22% of Black teachers left the profession or moved schools compared to 15% of white teachers (Deruy, 2016). These statistics become even more troubling when compared to the demographics of students in U.S. public schools. In 2016-2017, the top three racial groups of public school students were white (48%), Hispanic (27%), and Black (15%); (Condition of Education, 2020). Researchers predict that in coming years, student demographics will shift even more towards students of color. If the teacher demographics do not shift, the U.S. will have an even larger racial mismatch between teachers and students.

One proposed approach to bridging the demographic divide between students and teachers has been *racial matching* –– ensuring teachers of color work with students of similar racial backgrounds–– to support racially minoritized students' achievement (Cherng & Halpin 2016). There are compelling arguments for racial matching: teachers of color "may be perceived more favorably" by students of color due to greater cultural alignment (Easton-Brooks, 2014); more Black and Brown students are placed in gifted education programs when more Black and Brown teachers are present (Grissom & Redding, 2016). By looking at the outcomes of these studies, the solution seems clear––increase the number of Black and Brown teachers. However, there are other preliminary issues that need to be addressed in the quest to increase the number of teachers of color and to sustain them in ways that support their initial purposes for entering the profession (Achinstein et al., 2010; Santoro, 2011).

In this paper, we focus on questions of what it takes to support the development of Black women teachers in particular. To do so, we interrogate the reasons Black teachers are underrepresented in the teacher workforce, with an eye toward nurturing their development as educators in ways that attend to their social-historical

position in schools (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Importantly, all Black teachers started as Black students. School environments often mirror oppressive systems found in broader society (Dumas, 2014), doling out what Love (2019) has referred to as "slow violence" against Black children. Black teachers have to reconcile with systems that have often pushed Black children out (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Love, 2016; Morris, 2016) in their quest to become professionals in these settings.

Undoubtedly, all teachers must navigate the contradictions of public education as they develop their practice, especially when the institution's needs sometimes conflict with teachers' obligations to support children's development (Britzman, 2012). If this is complex terrain for *all* pre-service teachers––what Beach (1999) called a *consequential transition*––it becomes even more fraught for those whom schooling has too often marginalized. Thus, an essential question for Black teachers becomes: *How do you become an agent of power in a system that has historically done harm to people like you?*

Black women as multiply marginalized teachers

Black pre-service teachers need to have opportunities to learn, be supported, have their identities and experiences affirmed, and explore the answers to this essential question. Given their sociohistorical position in relation to U.S. schooling, Black teachers, specifically Black women teachers, have unique work to do in order to step into the role of teacher with their whole, authentic selves. They are assumed to be the "right choice" for supporting Black students because of the perceived cultural match described above. These assumptions can be particularly dangerous, if the prospective teachers' own full humanity is not recognized in this often fraught professional transition (Britzman, 2012), and they are not provided with educational opportunities to understand their potential to perpetuate oppressive systems and mindsets (Cherry-McDaniel, 2018).

As the Audre Lorde quote in the epigraph suggests, Black women experience multiple forms of marginalization in U.S. society. As a result, the essential question for Black teachers above has its own intersectional meanings (Crenshaw, 1991) for Black

women teachers, who experience both racism and misogyny––what has been termed *misogynoir* (Bailey & Trudy, 2018)––in U.S. society. Throughout history, Black women have been oppressed, excluded, and ignored in numerous ways, yet, because of the rich resolve for resilience at the core of Black culture, they have persisted. In this article, we focus specifically on the development of Black women pre-service teachers (BWPSTs) through a counterspace group called (B)lack + (W)oman + (T)eacher (BWT). Counterspace refers to a "safe space" that lies in the margins outside of mainstream educational spaces (Ong. Et al., 2018). The first author, who herself comes from a family of Black women educators, co-developed this group to create space for BWPSTs at a predominantly white institution so that they could bring their whole selves to a community that shares key identity markers. This group served as a space of healing, as participants laughed, shared a meal, built community, and critically analyzed their experiences throughout teacher training. The second author, a white Jewish woman teacher educator and researcher, mentored the first author in this work. Her expertise in qualitative research allowed her to support the first author through all research phases from data collection, analysis, interpretation, and write up. At the same time, acknowledging the second author's positionality as a cultural outsider, the authors tapped into this difference as a resource for co-authoring this piece, as when she helped identify cultural forms that might not be understood by outsiders (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Villenas, 1996). The paper is written in Harmon's voice, since she led the study design, data collection, analysis, and writing; this is especially important in the findings section when she narrates Black women's experiences using the first-person plural ("*we*").

As one of the creators of the group, the first author's goal was to bring BWPSTs together outside of classes, removing participants from both the white and male gazes (Morrison, 1992) to critically analyze their shared position as Black women in education. We found that this group, even from the first meeting, built community through 1) making space, 2) offering insider connection, and 3) busting the myth of the monolith. As such, the community showed potential to help BWPSTs *heal* their

relationship to U.S. schooling in ways that supported their development as teachers. Our goal is to help Black teachers who can work authentically and thrive in this work as they work toward the thriving, education, and liberation of Black children—and all children—in their classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

To understand what it means to become a teacher in a system that has done historic and ongoing harm to people who share the aspiring teacher's identity, we draw on several key ideas from critical race studies, cultural studies, and the psychology of racism. As we elaborate, we view the importance of understanding Black women's *intersectional* identities as they reconcile what it means to teach in U.S. schools; the emotional toll of paying the *Black tax* (Burrows, 2016) in predominantly white spaces; and *coping with racism vs. healing and being whole* despite *racism* to allow them to enter the work of teaching in authentic ways.

Intersectionality

We conceptualize the BWT counterspace as a space that supported BWPSTs' healing in relation to an often inhospitable school system and thus supported their authentic development as teachers. To understand BWPSTs' social position in relation to schooling, we use the frame of intersectionality (Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016). Intersectionality pushes for a fuller view of how "race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but build on each other and work together" (p. 4). Intersectionality highlights that Black women's experiences are not additive. They are not Black first and women second or vice versa; their experiences are unique to their Black *womaness.* Intersectionality situates the ways Black women are continuously positioned in different spaces and times throughout their lives. Generally, Black women were first Black girls. Our participants were Black girls and students in K-12 schools in various regions around the United States. As Black girls, they may have often been adultified (Epstein et al., 2017), had their hair criticized by authority figures (DeLongoria, 2018), and been disciplined more harshly or even pushed out of

educational spaces (Morris, 2016). Intersectionality is essential in understanding, unpacking, and navigating the transition from a Black girl student to a Black woman teacher and the ways that oppressive systems, as well as personal and cultural resilience, have played a role in this process.

The Black Tax

As Burrows (2016) explains, the Black tax is the toll paid by African Americans to enter and participate in white institutions. Black women preparing to be teachers within the same educational system that pushes out Black girls have to reconcile with that contradiction, since even schools with majority Black students exist within a society dominated by white supremacist logics. Throughout U.S. history into the current era, schools have not welcomed Black girls and women. Gist (2017) describes this experience of working in an inhospitable setting as a *double bind*, as teachers need to reconcile tensions between *personal* and *systemic ties*. Personal ties include cultural, linguistic, familial affiliations, and connections that play a critical role in shaping individuals' thinking and choices. Systemic ties include written, spoken, hidden, and/or invisible institutional policies and practices that have direct power and influence over individuals and groups. Oftentimes, Black women teachers have to navigate multiple double binds to complete formal teacher training and develop as teachers in often oppressive school systems. Not only are these women dealing with the double bind, they are also having to manage their *double consciousness* (DuBois, 1903/2008). DuBois outlines this double consciousness as "a peculiar sensation, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 9). Looking at oneself, as a Black woman, through the eyes of the American education system can be incredibly painful.

In contrast, spaces designed for Black women can reduce the Black tax. Black people in the U.S. have known the unique healing that is only possible in spaces of belonging, what authors have referred to as *homeplaces* (hooks, 1990) or sister circles (Allen, 2019; Neal-Barnett, 2011; Croom et al., 2017), places where Black

women can be seen and belong, where they can rest and recover from ongoing experiences of oppression. Community can be especially powerful for Black women as they navigate white spaces, sharing experiences and coping strategies, and finding laughter and humor in some of the absurdity of their stories (S. Davis, 2019).

Coping with Racism vs. Being Whole Despite Racism

The Black women who have "made it" through the system typically have excellent skills at *coping* with racism. In order to support their development as teachers, BWT was designed to help them *heal* from some of the racism they have experienced despite their ostensible success. Coping is the process of minimizing stress or conflict, often involving the regulation of emotions (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Suls and Fletcher (1985), there are two types of coping: *approach* and *avoidance* coping. In approach coping, the individual actively attempts to solve a problem. For example, after experiencing racial microaggressions, educators might facilitate discussions on race in the workplace. Avoidance coping, however, is a passive approach where individuals avoid the issue, such as when individuals pretend that they did not experience a racial microaggression (Decuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). As suggested by Mellor (2004), coping with racism requires coping skills beyond those needed for dealing with everyday emotions or situations because these experiences are so often invisibilized or diminished by people from the dominant culture (Sue et al., 2008) in what is known as *racial gaslighting* (A. Davis & Ernst, 2019). Specifically, Mellor asserts that coping with racism requires protecting the self, engaging in self-control, and confronting the racism that was experienced (Decuir-Gunby & Gunby, p. 393). The last, confronting racism, is difficult to do in predominantly white spaces such as most teacher education programs, which vary in the Black tax they place on teacher candidates. Harkening back to the intersectional oppression Black women experience, we assert that dealing with both racialized and gendered issues only adds to that psychic burden. As a part of the double bind, Black women navigate white spaces with the constant burden of weighing out which issues of

racism to confront and which to let slide, and whether to risk the emotional drain of racial gaslighting.

Collectively coping together in the BWT counterspace can be an important step to healing racial wounds. As Ginwright (2015) argues, "structural oppression harms hope"; "healing is a critical component in building hope"; and "building hope is an important political activity"(p. 2). By sharing experiences, individuals can build hope by better seeing the systemic nature of the racism they encounter, helping to depersonalize it. They can also share strategies and insights. In this way, the BWT group provided a political space for BWPSTs to explore not only everyday examples of racism or sexism (or its combination in misogynoir), but to deeply explore their experiences as Black students transitioning into Black women educators. This helped them reconcile and critically consider their double binds by exploring what the institution of U.S. education does to Black girls, even if they personally did not experience all of that violence. There is a need to recognize the inherent contradictions of being an agent of power given this social and historical reality. Black women need a space to interrogate these contradictions to figure out how to do the liberatory work of teaching children without incurring additional harm to students or themselves. This type of intentional work can help these Black women move past coping and move towards healing. BWT is a potential design for teacher education programs to better center the needs of BWPSTs, *see* and *hear* them, as they become teachers. In this study, we explored the question: How can a counterspace foster healing for BWPSTs?

Study Design

Participants and Setting

Study participants were Black women enrolled in a teacher education program at a prestigious private university located in the southeastern region of the United States. Their programs varied across grade bands and subject areas. The first author and another Black woman colleague, Micaela Harris, who is also a former teacher and current researcher, recruited for the BWT group by sending out fliers and email invitations to email lists, along with distributing fliers to professors to share. Once

a few participants showed interest, we used snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997) to recruit additional participants. The group ultimately consisted of eight Black women; however, for the first meeting, which is the focus of this paper, seven were in attendance.

Focal Data and Analytic Methods

The focal data for this analysis is a two-hour BWT meeting in January 2020. Participants gathered at a local Black-owned cafe in a private meeting room. As we further explain below, we chose this location to have our own space outside of the typical university spaces. Harmon and Harris designed activities to support collective reflection and sharing of experiences as Black women teachers navigating predominately white spaces in teacher education. These were: conversation over dinner, ice breakers, collective text generation using a prompt, video analysis, sharing artifacts that reflect salient pieces of each woman's identity, and collective brainstorming of norms and goals for the group. Meeting activities are detailed in Table 1 (facing page).

All of the participants identify as Black women, and represent different teaching specializations which we choose not to share for reasons of confidentiality. However, to give a sense of who they are, we include this list of pseudonyms and a description of the artifact they brought (see Table 2).

Harmon and Harris collected written artifacts produced by the participants and took detailed ethnographic fieldnotes during the meeting (Emerson et al., 2011). We combined both sets of fieldnotes to create a compilation of both researchers' observations. Since it was our first meeting, and we intended this space to be built around trust, we did not utilize audio or video-recording equipment to capture the meeting. We had a discussion with the group at the end of the meeting to discuss recording options for future meetings, and all members agreed to permit recording, which we interpreted as a sign of meeting some goals of trust building.

Since this was an exploratory study, the first author initially looked at the data and artifacts with the low-inference interpretive question, "What is going on here?" (Emerson et al., 2011). Using open coding (Charmaz, 2006), she looked for patterns and

Table 1
Overview of Activities for the BWT Meeting

Activity:	Approximate Duration:	Description:
Dinner	20 minutes	We started the meeting by sharing a meal and engaging in conversation.
Introductions	10 minutes	Each person introduced themselves by sharing their name, home town, year in the program, and their professional goals.
"This or That" (ice breaker)	15 minutes	For each round, participants were presented with two concepts on opposite sides of the room. They were instructed to walk to one side of the room or the other, depending on which thing resonated with them the most in that moment.
Video Analysis	10 minutes	We watched a spoken word video by Porsho O entitled, "Angry Black Woman." After the video, we had a conversation about the participants' initial thoughts and what resonated with them.
Artifact sharing	25 minutes	Prior to the meeting, each woman was instructed to bring one artifact that best represents one salient aspect of their identity. During the meeting, each woman was given an opportunity to show the artifact and explain its relevance. (The artifacts will be shared below in Table 2.)
Write Around	15 minutes	Each participant, including the facilitators, were given the prompt: Black women pre-service teachers... They had one minute to write whatever came to their mind. At the end of the minute, they passed their papers to the next woman and received a new paper to continue writing. The goal was to create a collectively constructed text centering Black women pre-service teachers. Once each woman received her original paper, we talked about their reactions to the finished text. What resonated with them about what was written? Were they surprised? What would they add now? What was still missing?
Setting Goals and Creating Norms	15 minutes	We wrote explicit goals and norms for the upcoming meetings.
Exit Activity	5 minutes	We asked them to write one word, drawing, or any type of representation to show what they want to get out of this group.

themes as she read and re-read the fieldnotes. As themes emerged, she wrote memos linking themes to different data excerpts. As the first author and second author (the second author did not participate in counterspace meetings) reflected on and refined

Table 2
Participants' Pseudonyms, Artifacts, and Related Stories

Pseudonym:	Artifact:	Significance of Artifact:
Zuri	Family picture	She is very close with her mother and siblings. They all live in different places now, so they often do group video calls to stay connected.
Ronda	Running shoe	Discussed how she has recently realized that she really values comfort. She can be the best version of herself when she is comfortable. So she has been working out to also get more comfortable in her own body.
Leanna	Keychain from Italy	Traveling has exposed her to many different cultures and perspectives.
Valencia	Wig	She uses her wigs to communicate different sides of her identity. She wears a particular wig while working and a different one to do social activities in a more relaxed environment.
Kianna	J. Cole CD	She discussed the ways that she and her dad bonded through listening and discussing music.
Janeice	Ear pods	Music has been a big part of her life and something whe uses to stay sane. She can block out distractions and just listen to her music.
Sonja	Father's harmonica	Her mother sent her late father's harmonica to use as a calming tool during stressful times in school.

the emergent themes, they concurred that three central themes (discussed below) pointed to BWT as a space of healing and support for the BWPST participants. We looked for disconfirming evidence of each of the themes (Erickson, 1986), refining the claims as we accounted for different moments in the data.

A limitation of this analysis is that BWT only met once despite being scheduled to meet four times. Due to a natural disaster and a pandemic, we cancelled the final meetings. This analysis builds on data from one session only, so we are careful not to make general conclusions from this limited data; instead, this is a proof of concept paper to illuminate the potential for counterspaces to contribute to Black women teachers' healing in support of their development. BWPSTs have been heavily undertheorized, so this paper will serve as a catalyst for other researchers to continue to center the needs of BWPSTs.

Findings

The BWT counterspace supported healing for BWPSTs in three important ways. First, by gathering together, BWT *made space* for participants to interrogate their own experiences in U.S. schools. Second, as a space explicitly for Black women, BWT offered *insider connections*, a fundamental element to a sense of belonging (Porter & Dean, 2015) and legitimacy. Finally, by inviting the breadth of Black women's stories and personal histories, BWT *busted the myth of the monolith*, the assumption that all Black women have the exact same experiences. Together, we saw these as offering a space for healing by providing the infrastructure for the Black women participants to explore their personal ties and systemic ties alongside other women who were similarly navigating the transition from student to educator.

Making Space

BWT made space for the participants to be seen and heard in a way that cannot be achieved in most predominantly white spaces. *Making space*, in this context, refers to both literal space and temporal space. This space, in turn, allowed the Black women to begin interrogating their positionality as former students in the K-12 system, as current students in a teacher education program, and as future educators.

Making Literal Space

As mentioned in the research design, we met off campus in a private meeting room at a Black-owned cafe. At the start of the meeting, the owner introduced himself and connected us with a Black woman who had started her own business by making tea cakes. Little did we know, this woman also had a background in education, with a doctorate from a prestigious university. Through this introduction, we got a chance to start this meeting by hearing the story of another Black woman finding her purpose and building a business doing something she loves. This encounter was unexpected, and it was beautiful. She told us the history of tea cakes dating back to American slavery. She spoke of how her ancestors made these treats for the white families they worked for, but could not make them for their own children. Instead, these

Black women created new recipes specifically for their own families to enjoy, and her family's recipe is the one she uses to this day. The first time the recipe was written down, her grandmother was on her deathbed and wanted her granddaughter to continue the legacy. Now, after a career in education, she runs her own business using the knowledge and expertise of Black women who came before her. These details are important because we, through BWT, heard her story and were inspired to support her business. By meeting there, we disconnected from the historically white university and went to a place created for Black folx. This choice in venue set the tone and allowed us to feel welcome and seen. Once the owner of the restaurant and the owner of the tea cake business left, only the Black women in the group remained.

Making Temporal Space

Beyond the welcome we felt in the physical space, through activities like the video analysis of the spoken word poem and artifact sharing, we made space for each other's feelings and experiences. We took time at the start of the meeting to laugh and share a meal. We did activities that provided each person the opportunity to share experiences in thinking about being a Black woman pre-service teacher. We took time to acknowledge our similarities and differences. We cheered each other on, we empathized with each other, and most importantly, we understood. We made space to hear and see and interact in affirming ways.

In reviewing the data, moments where the participants encouraged each other to make a statement, discussed particular challenges, or utilized additional time (after a timer rang) to continue discussing or finishing an activity were coded as *making space*. One example of making space happened during the artifact activity. Harmon and Harris had asked participants to come with an artifact that represented a salient part of their identity. As Table 2 describes, participants brought items like family heirlooms, personal items, and song lyrics. One participant, Zuri, wanted to show a picture of her family, but had trouble pulling it up on her computer:

Zuri: I just had the picture up and now it's gone.

Ronda: Is it the picture of you all sitting together?

Zuri: I can't get it [the picture] to show. Y'all know I'm a new Mac user.*[laughter]*

Ronda: Girl, that picture is fire. You need to show it. I can help you.

When Zuri had trouble retrieving her picture, she made a joke, seemingly not wanting to come off as incompetent. By explaining to the group that she had a new computer, and that was why it was taking longer to pull up the picture, she appeared to be defending against such potential judgments. In response, Ronda made space in two ways: first, she reaffirmed Zuri, acknowledging the beauty of her family; second, she made the temporal space for Zuri to find her picture, letting Zuri know that we were not in a rush and not constrained to time limits often present in other spaces. This act of making space is particularly important, because oftentimes in white spaces, speed and efficiency are the key factors of success (Jones & Okun, 2001). Here, Ronda signaled to Zuri and the rest of the group that it was okay to take up space. It was okay to reclaim your time. It was okay to take your time; it was okay to be proud of your family and where you come from.

Making space is important for Black women, because it allows us to bring our whole selves to a space. Black women are often told they are too big for a space (Morris, 2016); they are "expected to be small so that boys could expand and white girls could shine" (Cottom, 2019, p. 7). In a historically white university, many of the classes, policies, and overall expectations, are rooted in whiteness. They reflect white, middle class standards, and often minoritized people have to learn how to operate in this reality. They are taught to shrink to fit into these spaces to be successful. Just as DuBois (1903) states, echoing poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1895), Black women wear two masks: one reflecting the authentic self and one more pleasing to the white gaze. This becomes increasingly difficult to maintain physically and psychologically, and, we argue, hinders teachers' development of pedagogy rooted in their whole selves.

Insider Connection

Unburdened by the tolls of the Black tax, BWT helped promote each participant's connection to other women in the group,

as the members had unique understandings of each other's experiences and shared an *insider connection.* This refers not only to shared experiences, but also knowledge of potential experiences, decisions, ideologies, and dilemmas encountered by people with a shared group identity. Participants understood each other's intersectional experiences, despite them possibly not being their own, because they understood the cultural references and the complexities of their existence. As Black women, they could tell stories about educational experiences, experiences dealing with race within the teacher education program and placement sites without having to explain ourselves; they could set the mask aside, providing a sense of belonging and wholeness. When someone would speak, the responses reflected Black cultural communication styles: heads would nod or words of affirmation would pour out after their statements (Zeigler, 2001). The insider connection helped to strengthen bonds and build community quickly.

During the artifact sharing activity, Valencia presented her wig as a salient piece of her identity. She said:

> Mine is not incredibly deep, but it is this wig. I have a short bob pixie wig for work that makes me look like I have two kids, [am] in my 30's, and teach as my second job. I wear that wig so the people at the school and the kids will not play with me. When I am out, this is my more fun wig. These show my creativity and my versatility. *[laughter from the group]*

Valencia's narrative is significant in so many ways. First, her way of sharing the wig illustrates insider connection, because, although none of the other women were wearing a wig at that moment, they understood her comment about the need to be versatile in the face of the white and male gazes. No one asked to touch her hair or seemed to be confused by her wearing different wigs, something Black women come to expect in white spaces (Brown, 2018). Second, she felt comfortable sharing her thoughts about her hair, and she did so at a time set aside for participants to share the most salient parts of their identities. The politics of Black women's hair in the U.S. has a long history tied to oppressive aesthetic politics reflecting misogynoir (Lewis et al., 2013; Norwood, 2018; Thompson, 2009). Black women are

often asked to change their hair to conform with Eurocentric notions of beauty. Valencia reported using these politics to make statements wherever she went. To be taken seriously as a professional, she wore one particular wig; to be perceived as more laid back and creative, she wore another. In school she wanted to be perceived as more experienced and professional, and she did that so that people in the school will "not play with her." These issues of hair and perception of competence are significant to Black women as something they must think about in their professional world. As hooks (1990) says, "the idea that there is no meaningful connection between Black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated" (p. 23). This insider connection, outside of the white and male gazes, allowed Valencia to talk about her aesthetic choices with her wigs without the need to explain herself or to explain the significance of changing her hair to manage those perceptions.

The insider connection provided a sense of belonging to the members of the group. Participants were Black women enrolled in a teacher education program, which, like most, often centered the needs of white teachers and norms of whiteness (Sleeter, 2001; Varghese et al., 2019). Many Black teachers, especially Black women teachers, must learn to navigate these spaces as they prepare to navigate U.S. schools as Black women. We have to learn how to communicate, appear, and interact in ways that make us more acceptable in white spaces, to conform to what has been referred to as *respectability politics* (White, 2010). Black women are constantly dealing with the politics of their existence, whether it is hair or demeanor (e.g., avoiding the Sapphire trope of the "angry Black woman"), or how we are perceived by others while doing our jobs with integrity. This work is exhausting as we pay the tolls of the Black tax. It is exhausting to have to wear a mask or reckon with the double bind to be taken seriously, seen as a professional, or respected for our talents.

Busting the Myth of the Monolith

We identified moments as *busting the myth of monolith* to describe times when participants' interactions pushed back on stereotypes of Black women that are often used to characterize

their personality, actions, or appearance. Some of those stereotypes include the *Black mammy* (Hill-Collins, 2000), the faithful, obedient domestic servant of the dominant, white masses, and the *Black Sapphire* (Ladson-Billings 2009), the Black woman as an unyielding, aggressive tyrant. These stereotypes often shape how Black women are regarded in professional settings.

Disrupting the myth of monolith is important because it talks back to stereotypes and embraces the diversity within the Black community. Although the Black mammy trope did not come up in our data, the Black sapphire trope came up twice in the meeting as participants discussed the role of Black women as disciplinarians in the classroom––perhaps because of the video analysis we did of a spoken word poem on this theme (see Table 1). Participants cited times that they felt that assumptions were made about their disciplinary abilities because of their appearance as Black women. The women had issues with these assumptions. Many of them approached teaching through a progressive lens (Philip, 2011), so they did not consider goals for classroom management as a reason to punish or yell. For example, Leanna referenced a time that she felt as though the Black administrators at her placement site assumed that she would lead her class in the same way that they had. When she did not fit their expectations, she felt frustrated and out of place. At the same time, she did not feel comfortable critiquing other Black women in non-Black spaces. Prior to BWT, Leanna did not have a space to say these things out loud with other people, including her university instructors, who may not have understood the specific tensions she was navigating.

Leanna was not the only woman who thought about the ways in which her school, administrators––and even professors––positioned her. During the writing activity, each participant was charged with writing a sentence. The prompt started with "Black women pre-service teachers." Several participants constructed the following text:

> Black women preservice teachers have a different challenge than most. They have a looming expectation to be the expert on Black kids, yet, since we are preservice, still have a lot to learn about aspects of the profession

> that should be natural. While we should be enjoying the learning experiences, we are ever aware of the looming possibility that we'll always have to deal with discipline. Why can't we be the curriculum expert in the building? Why is my worth reduced to being a monitor of behavior? I resonate with this. It feels like the loud stereotype of a Black woman teacher is one type in the media/film and one type in our experience/reality.

Disrupting the myth of the monolith allowed each woman to see other BWPSTs with so many beautiful and diverse backgrounds. In the collectively constructed text, the women discussed how they were positioned as experts on Black children despite still being pre-service teachers; that they saw their future as limited to being behavior monitors instead of offering other kinds of teaching expertise. This presumption of their value in schools could be dangerous if left unexplored. By uncovering it as a shared experience, participants could see the pattern, helping them move past *coping with racism* (as would more likely happen if they viewed this as only an isolated experience) to *being whole despite racism*. Recognizing patterns of how Black women educators are viewed in U.S. schools can uncover such instances of racial gaslighting, clarifying these experiences as a product of racist ideas rather than something about the individual person. As mentioned above, Black women are often placed into particular categories depending on their perceived demeanor or appearance, but this group and exercise illuminated the need for disruption of these tropes.

Discussion

In this exploratory study, we examined how a counterspace for BWPSTs stands to offer healing to participants as they grapple with the essential question for all Black teachers; namely, *How do you become an agent of power in a system that has historically done harm to people like you?* We identified three themes that explained the potential healing of the BWT space. First, by *making space* for Black women's identities and experiences, participants could interrogate their own positionality in relation to U.S. schooling in a way not typically afforded in predominantly white teacher education programs. Relatedly, the *insider*

connection fostered a sense of belongingness and reduction in the Black tax so often doled out in white spaces. Psychologists remind us time and again that deeper learning requires the emotional safety of belonging (Deci et al., 1991; Anderman, 2003), so to grapple with issues that cut so close to personal histories requires the belongingness that insider connections can foster. Finally, *busting the myth of the monolith* helped identify patterns in participants' experiences as they reclaimed their own within group diversity. Through sharing stories that illuminated how both teacher education and school placements positioned them, the participants understood how U.S. schooling perceives them as Black women educators, a shift from how they were seen as Black girl students. Together, these stood to support BWPSTs' healing and development as their authentic selves as they transitioned into the role of teacher in U.S. schools.

As we stated earlier, this study was limited in scope because this study group only met once. After the start of the pandemic and a natural disaster, the researchers chose to cancel the meetings to allow the participants to acclimate to life after these significant changes. Nonetheless, even this one meeting illuminates some issues that teacher education programs need to more readily address.

Conclusion

Black women are multifaceted, and their unique experiences stand to bring invaluable perspectives to classrooms and schools. To strategically approach the issue of increasing teacher diversity, education scholars, administrators, and policymakers must look more critically at policies, practices, and pedagogies that potentially affect Black women. Mere identity markers, such as race or gender, do not make educators ready to teach––let alone teach in anti-oppressive ways. BWPSTs need to be provided with opportunities to analyze their experiences, confide to others who will understand with insider cultural knowledge and without judgment, understand the structures in schools to be able to dismantle them in order to provide students with the strongest education possible. They need a space to cope and heal and interrogate their place within the education system.

Teacher education programs must expand their scope and focus on Black women to better serve a more diverse group of future teachers. One approach to centering the needs of Black teachers is providing them with counterspaces like BWT. *Making space* for folks to interrogate their own experiences in U.S. schools, offering *insider connections,* and inviting the breadth of stories and personal histories by *busting the myth of the monolith*, teacher education programs can begin to better support and center the needs of BWPSTs.

Future research should continue to explore the affordances of counterspaces for BWPSTs to survive within the racist and oppressive nature of current education institutions, alongside research on the use of counterspaces to disrupt such oppressions. Future research will also include, we hope, studies that are longitudinal, that follow teachers after their participation in a counterspace group to explore how the growth and healing in the group may shape their practices and ideology in the classroom. Additionally, as we push to disrupt the myth of the monolith, further research will help to illuminate the within-group diversity. In our case, by recognizing the diversity of the "Black experience"––the ways in which Black women are more or less privileged within white supremacist logics by other levels of oppression marked by colorism, class, education, and so on––we can do more as teacher educators to support Black women to heal and regain hope so that they may bring their whole selves to the work of teaching. By fostering BWPSTs' understanding of their own social positionality in U.S. schools, both historically as students and presently as teachers, such experiences can contribute to Black women's wholeness as educators and, we hope, help sustain them in the profession.

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