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My Reasonable Response

Activating Research, MeSearch, and WeSearch to Build Systems of Healing

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Critical Education Special Issue – The Legacy of Ferguson: A Referendum on Citizenship Denied

Abstract

I am a border crossing brotha-scholar, a Black male academician who has traversed many geopolitical, cultural, and physical borders. In this paper, I draw on three interrelated concepts of “searching” for understanding about life’s phenomena: external investigations (research); internal interrogations (mesearch), and outward investigations (wesearch). Through this framework, I attempt to share reasonable responses to the recent uprisings across the United States.



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The tragic and untimely deaths of Freddie Gray in Baltimore; Michael Brown in Ferguson; Sandra Bland in Hempstead, Texas; Tamir Rice in Cleveland; and the numerous other Black men and women whose lives were taken prematurely by law enforcement (or while in custody) demand a response from those who claim to value human life and believe in the collective agency of the citizenry live up to proclamations about the rights of all. Certainly, the uprisings across the country have incited heated debate, reawakened fears, and exposed the naiveté of those who believe(d) we live in a post-racial society. In many spaces where I function, racial tensions are palpable and obvious, yet the average citizen has no idea how to reasonably respond to this reality.

Sadly, it has become apparent to me that many administrators and leaders in Congress, colleges, churches, classrooms, and community organizations are not only unsure how to respond to the current racial and political climate; most are also unwilling or uncomfortable to engage in meaningful and healthy conversations about privilege, race, racism, and white supremacy. While I do not claim to have all the answers, I do have a responsibility to respond in word, deed, action, and any other medium that can positively impact those with whom I have influence and access. I also have a responsibility to challenge you to do the same.

I am a *border crossing brotha-scholar*, a Black male academician who has traversed many geopolitical, cultural, and physical borders between Bermuda—my country of birth and rearing—and the U.S. university classroom. My personal journey challenges the assumption that *academic researcher* is my only salient identity. Beyond western understandings of academic “research,” I live and engage in *mesearch*—the study of my personal experiences and journey—to extrapolate pedagogical and leadership possibilities that can be replicated, modified, or systematized toward the healing of others that share my marginal identities.

I draw on three interrelated concepts of “searching” for understanding about life’s phenomena. First, I investigate externally what is known (*research*), interrogate inwardly who I am at the core (*mesearch*), and question outwardly what is needed for those we serve (*wesearch*). In this paper, I will not debate the evidence that surrounds these cases of police violence nor discuss the disturbing rulings and rhetoric that perpetuate the notion that Black people – and Black males in particular – are disposable members of society. Instead, my intention is to offer a reasonable response. I define a “reasonable response” as thoughtfully-urgent, culturally and critically-grounded engagement that accounts for and draws on the best of what we know (*research*), the core of who we are (*mesearch*), and the needs of those we serve (*wesearch*). In this response, my identity will dictate the perspectives I take and the moral stances I uphold. To be clear, though I am a professor at a research-intensive institution, I am also a Black man, husband, and father of two Black sons who understands my vulnerability and responsibility in this complex social milieu. I know what it is like to be feared—and to fear because of the skin I’m in. I know what it is like to be both *seen*—hyper-visible because of my dark complexion in an ivory tower, and to be *scenery*—an imperceptibly dark “unknown” in a large crowd on campus or in a corridor.

Research: Contextualizing Disproportionalities

Arguably, Barack Obama’s tenure as president of the United States has added additional layers of complexity to discussions related to the experiences of Black males in the United States. Paradoxically, although a Black man has now occupied the highest political position in the

United States, the condition of Black males in the U.S. continues to deteriorate. Black males are still disproportionately underrepresented in nearly every statistical category of *success* (e.g. low high school and college graduation rates) and overrepresented in nearly every statistical marker of *failure* (e.g. high unemployment, incarceration rates, overrepresentation in special education) (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007; Ferguson, 2001; Harper, 2012; Morris, 2009). Certainly, achieving educational equity in U.S. schooling has been an elusive goal, and the individual and political accomplishments of President Obama do not account for the systematic conflicts and challenges Black males face in institutions like schools and colleges. While the average Black citizen will not likely cite academic journal articles as evidence to explain his or her frustration, no one needs a PhD to conclude that *one* intelligent, eloquent *Black* man in the White House can automatically change systems of oppression.

Educators who seek to make sense of the recent Baltimore uprisings must first seek to understand the historical injustices related to educational access, social policy, and economic displacement of Black families. We must remember that every major institution in this country was created when White supremacy was the overt, explicit national prerogative. Said another way, we currently operate in educational systems that were not created for the healthy development of people of color and legal systems were birthed in the belief that liberty and justice “for all” excluded Black and Brown people. Moreover, educational systems were complicit in slave labor and expanded with profits from chattel slavery (Wilder, 2013). These understandings can be difficult for some educators to consider, since these assertions may be perceived as unpatriotic. As such, it is helpful to define key terms like White supremacy and racism in order to explicate its systematic and systemic nature.

In my work with students and teachers, we define racism as *race prejudice + social and institutional power* (Okun & Jones, 2000) and White supremacy as *White racial domination* (Leonardo, 2004). These definitions push us beyond the narrow constructs of individual prejudices or personal achievements, and instead challenge us to consider how prejudice and privilege can be supported by access to power. I share with my students that we all have prejudices. We all make judgments of others based on previous information and assumptions. But how our prejudices are supported and reinforced by social and institutional power varies greatly.

Research can help educators understand that race matters and racism persists. But not only that, research also helps educators realize the global dimensions of White supremacy and racism, and that the disparities and inequities in Baltimore also transcend the borders of the U.S. to affect countries across the diaspora. For example, having been born and raised in Bermuda and being a keen follower of news there, I am aware of recent protests related to the economic disparities that Bermudian Black families face. I share with my students in the U.S. the reality that nearly every victim of gang violence in Bermuda has been a Black male, despite the fact that Black people only make up approximately 54% of the population (Bermuda Department of Statistics, 2010). I make my U.S. students aware of the reality that nearly 50% of our Black males in the public education system in Bermuda fail to graduate from the public school system (Mincy, Jethwani-Keyser, & Haldane, 2009). This information is not shared to reify stereotypes about Black males; instead, I share this context so that students can begin to ask different questions about systems of oppression.

I often share the *fish in a lake* metaphor with my students to illustrate the tensions between individual successes or challenges and institutional issues: If one or two fish are found

24 *Critical Education*

floating dead in a lake, the most prudent approach is to ask questions about the health of the individual fish. But when over 50% of the fish in the lake are floating dead in the water, it is prudent to ask questions about the lake: the water, the eco-system, the environment, and the conditions in which the fish must survive. Asking different questions while sensitive to how and where oppression is replicated opens new vistas of opportunity. Certainly, anyone who understands research also understands the significance of the questions we ask and the frameworks of those initiating the research. Rather than approaches that frame Black people as the problem, we need to ask questions that appropriately account for the systematic nature of racism and interrogate the deficit lenses that often frame Black males and Black communities as the source of the problem.

A Reasonable Response

Educators must understand the historical injustices related to educational access, social policy, and economic displacement of Black families. Moreover, educators who want to effectively utilize research must critically consider the nature of the questions being asked and the lenses being used in the research. This is an important aspect of cultural and media literacy.

Reasonable Questions for Educators

Is the information or research under consideration utilizing an anti-deficit lens/approach to Black males or Black families/communities; does the approach to or conclusion of the research seem to suggest that Black males and Black communities are deficient?

Reasonable Resources

Race Matters (Cornell West); *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (James D. Anderson); *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (Gloria Ladson-Billings); *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Eduardo Bonilla-Silva); *Black Male(d): Peril and Promise in the Education of African American Males* (Tyrone C. Howard) .

MeSearch: The Bridge

Identity construction is a messy and oft-misunderstood process that involves the intersectional merging of differences across and within a continuum of races, ethnicities, genders, social classes, sexual orientations, religions, (dis)abilities, languages, political allegiances, and a myriad of other culturally and historically contextualized markers (Gresson III, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Schwalbe, 2005; Villaverde, 2008; West, 1993). Indeed, Leonardo (2000) explains, “identity is only achieved in the context of difference...thus, identity is relational and one typically constructs themselves as ‘I’ and those different from them as the ‘other’” (p. 113). Various identity dimensions and markers can function distinctly from, in concert, or in conflict, with each other, thereby embodying conceptual borders that are encroached, pushed, redefined, and reestablished within individuals, communities, institutions, and in society at large (Hall, 1993; Johnson, 2006). The extent to which identity markers and the borders they designate are affirming or oppressive usually rests on the extent to which the differences of others are perceived as positive, neutral, negative, or threatening. This is significant to our understandings of self and our perceptions and responses to Baltimore and Black males across this country.

As a professor teaching critically about race and racism, I have come to understand that personal and community identities are tenets that ground the intersections between race, epistemology and positionality in my praxis. I also recognize that identities are not static, “essential (whether in the biological or even cultural sense) ... [or] benign” (Wright, 2003, p. 207). Identities, like positionality, are complex, contextual, and constantly in flux. This means that we need to be willing to question our *ways of knowing* others and ourselves, since all of these dynamics intersect at the point of identity. As a responsible pedagogue, I try to balance and respect the individual and communal *readings* of reality, even as I remain open to the fact that the best courses and classroom discourses are always unfinished, contextual, and always needing to be unpacked.

While research explores what is known about the world, *mesearch* recognizes how one’s identity informs one’s approach to the world. For example, as an international scholar whose work is undergirded by a social justice ethos, I am usually in *teacher mode*. From passionate conversations at the dinner table with my 21-year-old son about the insidious nature of racism to impromptu exchanges with fellow church members who would describe Michael Brown as a thug, I am always engaging others in critical discussions and reflections. In these contexts, I draw on the various aspects of my identity to forward this teaching about racism. I remind my church friends who struggle to value the humanity of Michael Brown that my sons and I are no different from Brown. Despite my Bermudian accent, I am actually an American citizen whose biological father and extended family were raised and live less than 10 minutes from where Michael Brown was gunned down.¹ Sharing this information challenges my White Christian brothers and sisters to consider how they can claim to “love me and my family,” but feel no sadness or concern for the humanity or salvation of a young man who looks like me. I could have been raised in Michael Brown’s neighborhood had I not lived in Bermuda with my mother’s side of the family. I could have attended the same school as Michael Brown if I had been raised in St. Louis. Despite my education and positionality as an educator and leader, I am aware of my inherent vulnerability as a Black man in this country, and this awareness affords me greater opportunities for reflection and teaching.

My history ... my story ... *mesearch* undergirds my role as a *border crossing brotha-scholar* because they influence how I *know* reality and also influence my approaches to students who often confess that I am their first Black male teacher at any level. As a Black Bermudian/American male who has been afforded the opportunity to prepare future educators and leaders in the United States, I am both an insider and an outsider on multiple levels—a border crosser. No single definition can fully capture the fluidity, breadth, and transience of what it means to be a border crosser. Metaphorically and literally, border theory is a theory on the edge (Hicks, 1991)—on the borders or boundaries—that must remain flexible in order for theorists to recognize and rupture the “epistemological, political, cultural, and social margins that structure the language of history, power, and difference” (Giroux, 2005, p. 20). Some branches of border theory capture the multidimensionality of perspective, experience, and Otherness embedded within an individual’s identity (Larson, as cited in Hicks, 1991). Moreover, border theory embraces the use of hybrid positionalities (e.g. to problematize and reconfigure how

¹ There is something to be said about how White supremacist systems within the Black/White U.S. binary function and position Black immigrants who aren’t American citizens in one bubble—this idea of “when the police arrive on a scene they will put all the black people in the back of the police car no matter how one nationally or ethnically identifies.

power is distributed within and across difference). As a scholar, I embody a hybrid positionality as a Black man with African Bermudian and African American lineage.

Certainly, I believe that to transcend borders, an educator must be fully aware of his/her limits. Drawing from the work of West (1993), it is also clear that for academicians, researchers, and scholar-practitioners who see their work as part of a larger emancipatory project and/or a fulfillment of their “prophetic-socratic” calling, it is essential that they themselves are first emancipated. I see my work in this vein. The question remains: what is your story and history, and how can you harness *mesea*rch as an impetus to unpack and utilize your privilege and platforms? What are your strengths and under-developed strengths that can be leveraged as you engage the work of a border-crossing activist-scholar to bring healing? At stake in my classroom, then, are not just the individual and ideological identities of my students (usually pre-service educators and school leaders) who are often experiencing their first constructive dialogue about race and racism in a classroom setting, but also their perceptions of the cultural and collective identities of peoples whose national and native histories have come under the onslaught of racism. Arising from *mesea*rch, I consider a reasonable response to the events of racial violence of these events.

Reasonable Response

Consider the borders (literal, figurative, etc) you have been required to cross (or not). Your story matters. Your survival matters. Who are the people who facilitated your survival? Thank them (e.g. send an email, a card, etc) and make a list of students who need you to now do the same for them.

Reasonable Questions

What’s your story? Why did you choose the noble profession of teaching? What are your fears related to this border-crossing work? How can you activate your story and those of others to connect with and inspire your students? How would your life be different or similar if you were raised in neighborhoods and schools like those that nurtured Michael Brown or Freddie Gray?

Reasonable Resources

Take some time to journal in response to the questions above; my commitment to *mesea*rch requires that I challenge you to first look at yourself and the resources that you may be overlooking right in front of/within you. Then make a list of local, national, and international allies and colleagues who can contribute to your class or faculty meeting, and this ongoing conversation in person or via Skype.²

WeSearch: Toward Systems of Healing

*We*search is where the intersections and disjunctures between *re*search (what scholars have found, espoused, and written) and *mesea*rch (what you know experientially and

² I utilize an activity called “Skype-a-Scholar” in my courses, which allows me to expose my students to experts and authors of the articles they are reading in class. I acquired the title “Skype-a-Scholar” from the work of my colleague, Dr. Nicholas Hartlep.

epistemologically) meet and are activated for pedagogical, social, systematic, and systemic impact. *Wesearch* is about the people. In truth, none of the stages of the *research-mesearch-wesearch* continuum are meant to be static or narcissistic in nature. Our work as border-crossing activist scholars is always about the people and working to help uplift others, in so doing we also uplift ourselves and our families.

I believe most people have some level of privilege. Our access and opportunities related to privilege may vary but most people have privilege in some context. I recall a discussion with students during an overseas study abroad program. The group was predominantly White and exclusively female. One or two of the students were of the opinion that they had “put down their privilege” because they were serving in a community organization with the *locals* for a few weeks. The students were suggesting that I hadn’t “put down my privilege” because I was still “Dr. Douglas” in this educational space and because, amongst other variables, my engagement looked different from theirs (e.g. I couldn’t fully unplug from the U.S. because of my online teaching and community responsibilities). This was a teachable moment. I reminded the students that it was impossible for them/us to put down our privilege. While our service to the community had value, I reminded them that our privilege would allow us to spend the night in warm and comfortable accommodations while those we were ‘serving’ with would likely live in a township or informal settlement. I also sought to clarify that my privilege as a Black male professor is different than White privilege, as exemplified by the microaggressive manner in which they sought to question me.

This conversation reinforced the idea that because everyone has some form of privilege in some contexts, we need to question how we utilize this privilege. I think it is helpful to acknowledge and even voice this reality. While we acknowledge our privilege, it may also be helpful to get comfortable understanding and using words like *White supremacy, racism, gender, social class, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, oppression*, etc. and to think about how our privilege or lack thereof in these areas color the lenses we use to see ourselves and others. In this work and in the study abroad vignette above, it is equally important to help students understand that privilege functions through systems of domination. White privilege is the outcome of White domination, and checking your privilege is key. I found that it was difficult to address topics and concepts that we were unwilling to talk about. So, I recommend three strategies that will aid in the work of understanding how privilege functions as we engage in *wesearch*.

Commit to the Journey

This work of scholar-activism is a process. The good news is we (humans) made the systems we have. The bad news is we (humans) made the systems we have. It is vital that we be balanced, pragmatic, and hopeful in this work. To this end, we must continue to understand the systematic nature of oppression in our classrooms. I’ve found the film *Race—The Power of an Illusion* to be an important and helpful resource in this work. Students are exposed to the fallacy that race is real and yet it is has real implications for how we live our lives and see each other. Part 3 of this film in particular, *The House We Live In*, is a staple in my work to help students understand the systematic nature of oppression. Students learn how the housing markets of many Black families and neighborhoods were intentional sabotaged by racist policies (e.g. redlining and blockbusting), and how these edicts institutionalized the mechanisms that maintain wealth gaps between Black and White families today. I typically partner the showing of this film with a Monopoly activity I gleaned from Jost, Whitfield, and Jost (2005) entitled, *When the rules are*

28 *Critical Education*

fair, but the game isn't. Students are prompted to play Monopoly with modified rules that staggers starts in order to create opportunity disparities. Even students who are resistant and question the significance of racism today usually find this activity to be eye-opening and powerful.

Challenge Narrow System-Thinking

I had the opportunity to attend the doctoral graduation of a friend and colleague who also happens to be one of the top innovators and leaders in his field in the world. During the course of his doctoral program and even during his graduation weekend, I encountered colleagues of his/ours who critiqued his decision to write books prior to finishing his dissertation. The problematic reality of their critiques is that my friend has a national and international movement that is changing the lives of demographics (e.g. urban youth and Black families) that many traditional academicians merely *write about* in journals that are typically only read by other academics. I also reminded my colleague that while many scholars go into debt to earn an advanced degree, my friend has managed to experience financial freedom while presenting his messages in culturally relevant, accessible packages. He has finished his dissertation, but—unlike many—he didn't have to rely on the system that just schooled him to now employ him. He created a system of healing by combining *research* and *mesearch*. As you engage in *wesearch*, be on the lookout for folks who may not understand your desire to challenge and change systems. Stay encouraged and find allies; they exist.

Moving Beyond Moments to Instigate Movements

I had the opportunity to create and teach a course called Black Masculinity, Leadership and Education. The class took on a life of its own. Black male scholars, politicians, administrators, leaders, recording artists, stay-at-home-dads, and local high school and elementary students from the community were invited members of our learning community, either in person or as “Skype-a-scholar” guests. My students represented a broad range of disciplines across campus and our commitment was to move beyond moments to incite moments. In fact, this was one of the courses I was teaching as the riots raged in Baltimore in the spring of 2015. Hence, our responsible response to Freddie Gray's death and the riots was to open up our class to the community in the form of a forum entitled: *Our Reasonable Response: Baltimore, Black Males, and Creating Systems of Healing* (see Appendix 1).³ The result was a dynamic community event that was standing room only. In addition, students challenged our college and university to find more systematic ways of addressing the issues of oppression on campus. This work is ongoing, but there are some signs that our efforts were not in vain (e.g. the creation of a new space called *The Bridge* in our College of Education which is designed to be an educative and collaborative locale for honest and critical dialogue about issues of social justice).

The work certainly continues as we seek to create systems of healing. For me, one of the key takeaways of this work and the Black masculinity course is that even as we seek to work toward systematic and systemic change, the first system that we have agency over and first system that must experience change and healing is the system of self. We—humans—are more than living, breathing organisms. We are institutions that are fully staffed with electricity,

branches (e.g. limbs), communication systems (e.g. mouths, minds), influence, and opportunity to positively and reasonably respond to the injustices in our communities.

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30 *Critical Education*

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