CHAPTER 9

ON BECOMING AND BEING A CRITICAL BLACK SCHOLAR IN MATHEMATICS EDUCATION: THE POLITICS OF RACE AND IDENTITY

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Fifteen years ago, William F. Tate (1994) authored a paper titled, *From Inner City to Ivory Tower: Does My Voice Matter in the Academy?* Building on the work of critical race scholars (Delgado, 1989, 1990; Williams, 1991), and reflecting on his own early schooling and later experiences as a professor in the academy, Tate echoed the call for *voice* scholarship as one way to explain the experiences of minority scholars.

In this chapter, we revisit Tate's earlier discussion and continue to reflect, in a manner consistent with critical race counterstorytelling (e.g., Solórzano and Yosso, 2002), on the politics of race and identity in mathematics education. We do so by sharing our own experiences of becoming and being critical Black scholars in a field dominated by White scholars. We are not suggesting a singular conception of what it means, or should mean, to be a Black scholar, as our individual experiences and trajectories in the field will attest. Nor are we suggesting that our voices receive special privilege simply because we identify as critical Black scholars.

As a result of our attempts to alter research, policy, and practice with respect to Black children and mathematics, we claim that asserting and developing an identity of a critical Black scholar is not just a voluntary assertion of identity but, in our view, a necessary one. It is necessary in order to challenge the masternarrative and discursive, representational practices that continue to construct Black children as mathematically illiterate and intellectually inferior to children from other social groups. Moreover, we are well aware of a disturbing trend in society that attempts to strip Black children of their childlike and human qualities altogether by using such labels as "thugs", "urban terrorists", and "endangered species". These identities are supposedly the result of genetic, cultural, and intellectual inferiority (D'Souza, 1991; McWhorter, 2001; Steele, 1990; S. Thernstrom & A. Thernstrom, 1997; A. Thernstrom & S. Thernstrom, 2004).

In using our voices to foreground issues of race and identity and to centre Black children in our discussion, we realize that there are certain risks associated with doing so. One risk concerns our intentional blending and blurring of the personal, political, and scholarly. Scholarly work is supposed to be neutral and apolitical. However, we believe that *all* scholarship is political and shaped by our personal experiences. To deny this would be intellectually dishonest.

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Some colleagues and readers might also suggest that our focus on race and processes of racialisation are unnecessary diversions from focusing on teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment; an attempt to inject these issues where they have no place. They may believe that race- and identity-centric research borders on advocacy and lacks rigor. In fact, some may believe that we now live in a post-racial society in which race and racism are no longer relevant and that Black scholars should stop "playing the race card" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, 2005). However, we resist this line of thinking. The first author has made compelling arguments that mathematics learning and participation, in addition to being conceptualised as cognitive, sociocultural, and situated activities, can be conceptualised as *racialised forms of experience* (Martin, 2006, 2009c). This perspective reveals the salience of race and racism not only in structuring the ways that learning and participation unfold but also in shaping mathematics identities and the beliefs that people develop about who can and cannot do mathematics.

Some readers might also resist our efforts by suggesting that White scholars in mathematics education do not write about whiteness or explicitly advocate for White children. In our view, this critique is blinded by the ubiquity and normalization of whiteness – represented numerically, ideologically, epistemologically, and in material power (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Smith 1999) – which characterizes mathematics education research and policy contexts. The lack of scholarly interrogation of whiteness in mathematics education – in relation to learning, teaching, assessment, knowledge production, and power – is entirely consistent with the norms of White institutional spaces (Martin, 2008; Moore, 2008). Moreover, this lack of interrogation has the potential to render mathematics education, as an enterprise, fundamentally different in character than the racialised contexts that characterize most of USA society.

TALKING B(L)ACK

It is in the contexts of our characterization of mathematics education as a highly racialised domain and our commitment to meaningful mathematics education for Black children that we share our stories and voices in the dialogue below. We reflect on the processes of becoming aware of, and making meaning for, what it means to be a critical Black scholar and how our evolving awareness has shaped our present sensibilities on issues of race, identity, and mathematics education. We also reflect on the issue of positioning; how we attempt to position ourselves in the domain and, to the degree that it matters, how we might be positioned by others. For emerging scholars, this is a very real concern due to fears that they may be marginalized in the field. Finally, given our relationship as advisor and advisee, we address the dynamics involved in mentoring and being mentored for the purpose of engaging in the discipline as a critical Black scholar.

Danny: I'll open the dialogue by sharing my own sense of what it means to be critical and how this identity is co-constructed with my evolving sense of my Black identity; then I will share an example from my own experience.

For me, being a *critical* Black scholar entails unapologetically challenging the common-sense understandings, routine practices, policies, and forms of scholarship

that intentionally or unintentionally dehumanise, depersonalise, and oppress Black people in symbolic and material ways (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Borrowing from Robin Kelley (1997), I see my efforts as "a defense of black people's humanity and a condemnation of scholars and policymakers for their inability to see complexity" (p. 4). I see this as a floor in my efforts not the ceiling since remaining stuck in a defensive posture is neither desirable nor effective. Yet, given the pervasiveness of academic and everyday assaults on Black identity, particularly on Black children, I find myself compelled to speak up and act.

I also take the *scholarly* part of this identity seriously. Because I place high value on the power of the pen and the power of ideas, all of my writing in the field has sought to challenge mainstream and conventional thinking about Black children and their competencies. And while it may appear that I have a singular focus on those issues, I believe that my writing has offered both a direct challenge to scholarship addressing more conventional topics and made a contribution to understanding these topics and that race-centred analyses have helped me to do this. For example, rather than following the widely-used race-comparative paradigm that considers only the collective status of Black students in relation to students in other socially constructed racial groups and focusing on failure and so-called racial achievement gaps, I have asked student-cantred and agency-related questions such as, *what does it mean to be Black in the contexts of learning and doing mathematics*? and *what does it mean to be a learner of mathematics in the context of being Black*? These questions force researchers to consider the power of Black subjectivities and how those subjectivities confirm or deny the supposedly objective research conducted about Black learners.

I have also asked the question, *who should teach mathematics to Black children?* (Martin, 2007), leading to other important questions about the kind of knowledge, beyond content and pedagogy, that teachers must possess to teach these children effectively. These questions have, in turn, led me to raise fundamental questions regarding the aims and goals of mathematics education and knowledge production about Black children, including, *why should Black children learn mathematics?* and *what is the study of Black children the study of?* How one answers these questions has a profound effect on the ways that learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment are organized for Black children. My critical analyses have shown that these questions have, for the most part, received shallow responses from the mainstream mathematics education community (Martin, 2009a, 2009c, in press-a).

Several months ago, I was reminded how the *Black* part of my identity can be used to position me in the field. In the year 2000 my book, *Mathematics Success and Failure Among African American Youth*, was published. That book was based on my dissertation, completed three years earlier. The dissertation and the book fleshed out my earliest thinking on issues of mathematics *socialization* and *mathematics identity* and laid out a multilevel framework for studying these issues. After nine years in circulation, one would think that my place in the literature on mathematics identity, particularly for Black children, would be well established and somewhat secure. Many students and fellow scholars have utilized and improved on those early ideas.

In early 2009, a prominent White scholar co-authored an article in a well-known mathematics education research journal where he laid out a framework for studying mathematics identity. The article made reference to my book and the work of other scholars who have been focusing on these issues. A few weeks after that journal article appeared, a prospective student for the graduate program in mathematics education at my university phoned me for information about entrance requirements. During the conversation, he indicated that he had read the journal article and suggested that I was probably excited to have my work referenced by such a well-known scholar. In the words of the prospective student “You know you have made it when someone like professor X cites your work, especially in a journal like Y.” It took some time for me to process the conversation but when I did, I realized that despite the book being in circulation for nearly ten years and despite subsequent publications and dozens of presentations across the country, it was not until a White scholar validated my work that I was supposed to feel validated.

I am not recounting this experience for self-serving reasons or due to any diminished feelings about the importance of my work. My identity as a critical Black scholar is not equated with a sense of inferiority. People who know me best can attest to the fact that the validation of my work by White scholars, or any other scholar, is not what drives me. However, I think this example, in its own way, should force us to consider issues of power and voice within our domain.

Surely, the prospective student is not alone in his perception and one is left to wonder how pervasive such thinking might be in the field regarding the contributions of Black scholars to the conversations on mathematics teaching and learning. Richard Delgado does a brilliant job addressing the larger issue concerning the politics of citation and scholarly authority in his articles titled *The Imperial Scholar: Reflections on a Review of Civil Rights Literature* (1984) and *Imperial Scholar Revisited: How to Marginalize Outsider Writing, Ten Years Later* (1995).

Maisie: My trajectory in becoming a critical Black scholar thus far has been a bit different. In fact, my trajectory was rooted in my personal childhood experiences, but has expanded to my academic experiences, as I learn more about the structures that allow racism to persist (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). I would say that my critical orientation was born circa second, perhaps, third grade, when I realized that little girls with long ponytails received hugs and adulation and little girls with cornrows and plaits received pats on the back and half-baked smiles. And, as the story goes, more than choosing to be a critical Black scholar, critical Black scholarship chose me. I had no decision in being Black and, rather than loathe myself, my beautiful mother, and my family, generally, I unwittingly adopted a stance early on that challenged external structures that sought to characterize me (and those that I loved) in demeaning and deficit ways. Growing up in the suburbs of Houston, various slights and insults were heaped on the shoulders of little Black girls: “You have a big nose”; the absence of party invitations; “Aren’t you embarrassed that all the Black people work in the cafeteria?” and, once a year, someone whispering “nigger” to test how those two syllables change the atmosphere. My parents, in their wisdom, guarded and armed my brother and me with knowledge about European versus

African aesthetics, stories of Civil Rights struggles, the reality of inequity: "Come tell me if anyone mistreats you." and "Don't let anyone call you that. Never." In other words, a critical orientation to my small world, even as a young Black child, was part of my socio-emotional development.

Interestingly enough, with all that "good home training", there was an internal tension when I broached the subject of *being a critical Black scholar* in mathematics education. I strongly believe that being an emotionally healthy Black person requires a critical filter on life. However, what does it mean to present yourself as a critical Black scholar to the academy and what does it mean to aspire to be critical Black scholar within the academy, particularly in mathematics education, which is heralded by many as socio-politically and culturally neutral (although scholars such as Valero & Zevenbergen (2004) have critiqued this perspective)? In other words, what does it mean to politically "tip your hand" as to how you see the world and how you protect and preserve Black culture and Black people? Further, where are the spaces within the field of mathematics education that are tractable, unexplored, or underexplored with respect to race critical analysis?

Consider a recent conversation in a research meeting where I posed a question to the team regarding Black and Latino/a students that are specifically targeted within the study. I asked, "How are we getting to know these students outside of their scores on these administered assessments?". Silence and, then, "What do you mean?". Additional conversation ensued that day, but no efforts have been made since that time to pursue an understanding of these students beyond assigning them a rank, percentile, or pseudonym. As a critical Black scholar, what is my responsibility beyond raising critical questions? Does this stance require activism? And, how do I reconcile my position as a mere graduate student within the reality of research and knowledge production that continues to frame students of colour in typical ways?

I didn't ask the question in the meeting to be combative or provocative. But after observing the students in their classrooms, I was compelled. To me, it felt irresponsible to make no effort to capture these students as children with personalities and lives that extend outside of the classroom doors. Thus, I can't help but wonder if I even have a choice in *who* I become as a Black scholar in mathematics education. Can a Black scholar in mathematics education be anything other than *critical* and be whole? And, what are the permutations and striations of critical Black scholarship? And, finally, without a critical orientation can I even dare to maintain hope for the future of Black children in mathematics education?

In his essay, *A Talk to Teachers* (from a speech delivered in 1963), James Baldwin captures the perpetual reality for many Black children and, perhaps, sets the stage for the work of the critical Black scholar.

> As adults, we are easily fooled because we are so anxious to be fooled. But children are very different. Children, not yet aware that it is dangerous to look too deeply at anything, look at everything, look at each other, and draw their own conclusions. They don't have the vocabulary to express what they see, and we, their elders, know how to intimidate them very easily and very soon. But a black child, looking at the world around him, though he cannot know quite what to make of it, is aware that there is a reason why his mother

> works so hard, why his father is always on edge. He is aware that there is some reason why, if he sits down in front of the bus, his father or mother slaps him and drags him to the back of the bus. He is aware that there is some terrible weight on his parents' shoulders which menaces him. And it isn't long – in fact it begins when he is in school – before he discovers *the shape of his oppression* (emphasis added) (Baldwin, 1985, pp. 326–327).

Is our work as critical Black scholars to discover the shape of Black children's oppression or does this work entail more?

Danny: Maisie, I am moved by your early memories and the questions you ask about becoming and being a critical Black scholar, especially as you begin the journey you have embarked on as a graduate student. I am also moved by the example with the research team. Earlier, I mentioned the power of the pen and invoking activism and advocacy in writing. But you raise an important question about what a critical Black scholar should *do* beyond being critical. I wholeheartedly agree that principled action is the key. The "simple" act of you raising that important question about students in a meeting where others on the project presumably had more material power served to disrupt the path characterized by what I see as an unfortunate backgrounding, on one hand, or a conceptually flawed foregrounding, on the other, of race and identity (Martin, in press-b). I am reluctant to attribute intentionality to those present but my guess is that they knew what you meant when you asked the question. So, the response of "What do you mean?" was not one of ignorance. The subtext of the response was probably more along the lines of "We don't want to deal with issues of race and identity" even though nearly 90% of the students in the District for whom the project is intended are African American and Latino. Only resistance – although colour-blindness might be more appropriate – could explain ignoring of this fact. If so, one has to question if these folks can truly intervene in ways that are meaningful. So, the implications of your question are profound. As an emerging scholar, you will, of course, have to pick your spots; when to write, when to question, and so on. But if you are truly committed to challenging research, policy, and practice that dehumanise and simplify Black children, you are likely to find yourself acting more than you might have imagined.

Of course, as a mid-career scholar with tenure I realize that I have a bit more space to be critical. I am simultaneously inside and outside of the enterprise and I realize that I have also been granted (as well as earned) a certain amount of privilege. But because my trajectory into the academy was atypical, I have never feared speaking truth to power and pursuing my own path. I do find it interesting, however, that I have been contacted by many graduate students and new scholars who tell me they want to pursue issues of race and identity in their work but who have been discouraged from doing so, if not overtly then implicitly, usually by White scholars and mentors. They are told to wait until the dissertation is done and then told to wait until they have tenure. My advice has usually been to maintain their sense of purpose and, if necessary, find allies. As a result, I have been asked to sit on dissertation committees at many universities outside of my own. My point here is that issues of status, rank, and hierarchy are real in the field, just like they

are outside of it. But to say nothing, write nothing, and do nothing only leaves those structures in place.

So, a partial answer to your question about the permutations and striations of critical Black scholarship would be that you will exert your identity and voice, and manifest them, in many different ways. In one instance, it might be to change the direction of a conversation by pointing out colour-blindness. In another instance it might be to counter or halt the inhumane representation of Black people that is being implied in research.

IN-BETWEEN A ROCK AND WHITE/BLACK PLACE

Maisie: Danny, it is interesting that you use the phrases "defend the humanity of Black people" and "dehumanise and simplify Black children" when discussing the likely obligation of critical Black scholars to act as a *humanistic defender*. This leads quite naturally to our positioning as Black scholars in mathematics education. Cornel West takes up this issue more generally in an article entitled *The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual* (1985). In this piece, West harkens back to Harold Cruse's seminal work *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967) and quotes in the opening:

> The peculiarities of the American social structure, and the position of the intellectual class within it make the functional role of the negro intellectual a special one. The negro intellectual must deal intimately with the white power structure and cultural apparatus, and the inner realities of the black world at one and the same time. But in order to function successfully in this role he has to be acutely aware of the nature of American social dynamic and how it monitors the ingredients of class stratification in American society…Therefore, the functional role of the negro intellectual demands that he cannot be absolutely separated from either black or white world. (p. 451)

West notes that the precarious position that we find ourselves, as Black scholars is a "self-imposed marginality". Being positioned between the White academy and the Black community results in Black scholars typically functioning within four models of Black intellectual activity. It is beyond the scope of my reflection to exhaustively inspect all four of these models, but I find it worthwhile to explore the bourgeois model (or what West calls the "Black Intellectual as a Humanist"). As intimated by the name, the hallmark of this model is providing a defence of Black humanity. West problematises intellectual activity exclusively situated in this model by stating that "The basic problem with the bourgeois model is that it is existentially and intellectually stultifying for black intellectuals. It is existentially debilitating because it not only generates anxieties of defensiveness on the part of black intellectuals; it also thrives on them" (p. 116). I find navigating this minefield particularly hazardous in mathematics education scholarship, as you noted earlier, where hegemony surrounding Black children in mathematics classrooms maintains such grossly deficit orientations. Simply said, there is an overwhelming need to set the record straight, but there is a question as to how one eventually transcends this need of constantly defending our community.

If this were the only complexity, we could count ourselves lucky. Yet, what remains equally hardening is the strained relationship between Black scholars and the Black community itself. While the work in critical Black scholarship certainly comes at a high premium in terms of "academic legitimation", ironically Black scholars are also often marginalized from the Black community. This marginalisation is the result of a historical legacy that has bred an understandable mistrust of the research community. Among other issues, Carruthers (1994) notes that some of the *first* Black scholars conducted research to subdue the Black community, for example, during the 1919 during race riots in Chicago and during the Civil Rights Movement. The consequences of this mistrust has been the further marginalisation of the Black community – under-researched and demonised by studies conducted at an altitude of 20,000 feet.

In my brief experience as a graduate researcher, I feel a tremendous strain between the interests of the research endeavour and the mathematics education needs of Black children. There is a looming question regarding whom I ultimately serve that comes with every classroom observation within the project. To the point, a distrust of Black scholars is grounded in the fact that Black scholars often do not own their own research agendas and methods (Smith, 1999). The internal strain that I feel is commensurate with my frequent sense of disconnect from the philosophy and aims of the research project itself, over which I have no control.

Danny, what do you make of this Du Boisian double consciousness of knowing two worlds and being "at home" in neither place, particularly as a Black scholar in mathematics education?

Danny: Maisie, I appreciate you raising these issues and problematising the roles, identities, and quite frankly, the relevance of Black scholars. I am sure that many White scholars and Black scholars alike raise similar points and question the very notion of some Black scholars choosing to identify as critical and not just as a scholar. One point to be taken from your comments is that history is a good teacher. West, Carruthers, and others, remind us that Black scholars and self-proclaimed black intellectuals – for me, these are not synonymous – often find themselves in precarious positions not only with respect to the academy but also to Black communities. Personal reflection on this positioning is a good thing. Am I doing work that matters and that is relevant? Am I being complicit in negative constructions of children and their identities and competencies? Am I willing to speak truth to power? Am I being faithful to my core beliefs and values? Am I instantiating my Black identity in ways that make White scholars, and some Black scholars, comfortable with my presence and scholarly perspective?

My own reading of West's analysis suggests that his typology of Black scholars – Black intellectual as humanist; Black intellectual as revolutionary; Black intellectual as postmodern sceptic; and Black intellectual as critical organic catalyst – simply points out the complexity of that identity. As I stated earlier, there is, and should be, no singular conception of what it means to be a Black scholar. Depending on where they are and what their role happens to be, a given Black scholar will be more or less connected to Black communities and more or less critical in their orientation. In my view, West's categories are an oversimplification of this complexity. Pushed a bit

further, one could view West's typology as an attempt to impose levels of authenticity on Black scholars. My own view is that such discussions are not constructive and that they have the potential to devalue the kinds of contributions that do not fall in line with the categories he places at the top of his hierarchy. Moreover, like all typologies, West's categories fail to deal adequately with the agency of Black scholars who strategically move in and across these categories in ways that do not foster self-imposed marginality. In this way, Black scholars are not situated exclusively in one category or another. Their movement across these categories is political for the very purposes of Black empowerment, insurgency, and emancipation. Moreover, the self-imposed marginality within the academy cited by West fails to consider the structural arrangements in place work to marginalize Black scholars no matter what their status and standing. One only has to consider social networks, composition of editorial panels, members of edited volumes, and so on.

In my opening comments, one point I failed to mention is the following: developing an identity as a critical Black scholar is not a destination. To *be critical* and to resist assaults on Black humanity and identity should not be the end goals of one's efforts. One doesn't become a critical Black scholar on a particular day or time or as a result of a particular act. In my opinion, it is a lifetime of work. The PhD doesn't signal this nor does entrée into the academy. And certainly it is not signalled by achieving a distanced and so-called objective disconnect from Black communities. So, my own view is to be mindful, but not deterred, by West's commentary. It serves to point out the dangers of a limited vision on Black scholarly work. No scholar should seek to conform to, or remain trapped in, West's typological categories. Moreover, one can, in fact, do meaningful work on behalf of Black children and communities from within the confines of the academy, if that is where life happens to find us. For example, your work on a research project that gives minimal attention to issues of race and student identity does not define your personal commitment to Black children. However, you can achieve multiple aims and goals on behalf of Black children via participation in such an effort. And if that effort is not compatible with your values, then you always have the option of joining projects and efforts that are more compatible.

A second point that you raise concerns the need to constantly defend the humanity of Black people, a role that West (1993) says is characteristic of the Black Humanist scholar whose actions border on bourgeois behaviour. I think you are absolutely right in raising the question of why this is even necessary. As you know, I have written about examples where it was claimed that Black children and poor children lacked the capacity to engage in abstraction and formal mathematical thinking (Martin, 2009a). Unless questioned, these views are allowed to persist and rise to the level of accepted truth. In constructing arguments against such views, one can simultaneously point out the flaws of the scholarly arguments that support these viewpoints and point out how these arguments contribute to a further dehumanisation of Black learners. Black scholars, working within the context of the academy, are uniquely positioned to do this. If the scholars working down the hall from you are consistently publishing articles that imply Black cultural and intellectual inferiority, fail to report on Black student success, advocate militaristic

discipline for Black children in schools, minimize the diminishing status of Black boys in schools, and so on, it is much harder for someone "outside" the academy to challenge this and do so in the very same forums where this work appears. And considering the fact that such claims can make their way into print is an indication of the willingness of so many other scholars to say nothing.

My own view is that in contexts where claims of Black inferiority become normalized and taken as truth, to say nothing and resist assaults on Black humanity are not options, particularly for Black scholars. The historical record shows that many Black scholars, representing many different traditions, have made such arguments. Beyond the academy, Black people continue to fight for their humanity everyday. We must remain vigilant outside the academy as well as *inside*.

I want to raise another point. And this, again, may be a function of my particular experiences and trajectory. But, just as I indicated that one's identity as a critical Black scholar should not be a destination, I will say the same thing about the academy. It is an important context but it is not a spiritual home, for example. It is a context rife with politics but it will not be a place that will break my spirit. For me, carrying out my work in the academy is just a means to a larger end. While West (1993) gives primacy to the academy, there are many other contexts where one can engage in critical work and take a scholarly, principled approach to that work. My own decision to remain in the community college context, working directly with students who had often been underserved in public schools represented a statement of my commitments. In doing that work, I considered myself to be no less of a critical scholar than I do now. But I also realized that my efforts would forever be limited if I confined my efforts to localized practice alone. I also knew that I wanted to make a contribution to the scholarly debates about Black children and mathematics. When I made the decision to enter the university, I realized that it would provide me with the opportunity to do different work but still consistent with my fundamental beliefs and goals. While my work in the community college was channelled into teaching and working on parent and community math projects, my administrative work in the university context, for example, has allowed me to shape the College mission and vision and its programs in ways that can be favourable to Black students.

Because I find myself working in an administrative capacity, my focus has been on institutional change. My individual work up to now has been less engaged in community contexts. However, this administrative work is just another piece in my overall efforts. For example, when I came to University of Illinois, Chicago (UIC) a few years ago, we had one Black doctoral student in mathematics education. Since then, that one student has graduated and we currently have seven Black students in the doctoral pipeline. None of them came here to shelter themselves from Black communities and the needs of Black children. To be certain, they will learn mainstream methods and be exposed to conventional forms of thinking and problem formulation but they will also help to transform the academy in ways that would not be possible without their presence. I am confident they will raise new

questions, choose contexts for research that are important to them, and produce scholarship that is relevant.

I am going to assume that, in your own case, the teaching you did before coming to UIC was a particular instantiation of your commitment to Black students and that the work you do here at UIC will further that commitment. While your efforts on behalf of, and in concert with, Black students may have taken on particular forms as a classroom teacher, they will take on different forms as a graduate student. My role, in an advising capacity, is to support you in your pursuits. If that means helping you situate your research in Black communities, focused squarely on Black children, then that will be the case. If it means facilitating other opportunities to help you learn valuable research skills, that will be done also.

My overall point here is to say that that there are many different points of leverage for critical Black scholars and while the efforts at these points may seem more or less connected to Black communities, we need work at many different levels based on many different configurations of working in the academy and community. Community efforts that help to empower Black children in mathematics are important. However, if university structures are not favourable to Black students and we do not have Black scholars inside the academy who can alter those structures, the progress of those Black students who enter can be limited.

This does not mean that Black scholars have to shoulder the full responsibility of furthering the cause of the Black community. Moreover, this new generation of Black scholars, yourself included, will face challenges in not only taking up particular subject positions relative to Black communities but also in being assigned various positions within a rapidly changing academy. For example, as the academy moves from a social project to a market force, from producing and disseminating knowledge as a public resource toward the privatisation of knowledge (Newson, 1998), there is a risk, and it is already true to some extent, of Black scholars being commodified based on their identities as Black scholars. As is true in society, the politics of representation will require that those in power appoint some Black scholars as leaders. The price of admission for these appointments should not be a lessening of one's critical perspective or commitment to Black children.

Maisie: This gives me quite a bit to think about. It seems that you are challenging the process of meaning making and assessing value of Black scholarship, regardless of whether these views and metrics are imposed by another critical Black scholar or the academy at large. Also, the point that you raise regarding the commodification of Black scholarly identity is well taken. The lure to "brand" oneself in the academy must be grounded in intellectual integrity. This seems to be a call for epistemologies that allow for Black scholars to exercise the authenticity of *their experiences*, but also an infrastructure that anchors us in academic discourse and accountability. I believe this was West's ultimate point, but his approach was somewhat prescriptive. Mohanty (1989) outlines a thought-provoking epistemological imperative of creating space for marginalized groups by stating:

> This issue of subjectivity represents a realization of the fact that who we are, how we act, what we think, and what stories we tell become more intelligible within an epistemological framework that begins by recognizing existing hegemonic histories. The issue of subjectivity and voice thus concerns the effort to understand our specific locations in the educational process and in the institutions through which we are constituted. Resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional analytic and cultural spaces. Resistance that is random and isolated is clearly not as effective as that which is mobilized through systematic politicised practices of teaching and learning. Uncovering and reclaiming subjugated knowledge is one way to lay claim to alternative histories. But these knowledges need to be understood and defined *pedagogically*, as questions of strategy and practice as well as of scholarship, in order to transform educational institutions radically. And this, in turn, requires taking the questions of experience seriously. (p. 185)

This need for relevant and focused epistemologies and taking questions of experience seriously immediately invokes two frameworks with which I am becoming acquainted—*Black Feminist Thought* and *Critical Race Theory* (CRT). While I agree that the academy cannot be a spiritual home, the four "contours" of Black Feminist Thought, as defined by Patricia Hill Collins, provide a welcome sanctuary and contrast to the dominant epistemologies within mainstream mathematics education. Collins explicated the four contours as *concrete experience as a criterion of meaning*, *the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims*, *the ethic of caring*, and *the ethic of personal accountability* (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Cynthia Dillard (2000) expanded this list through her *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology*, wherein she adds, "research is both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit, a pursuit of purpose" (p. 674). These ways of knowing resonate especially well with me. CRT also provides a compelling epistemological framework, given its attention to counterstorytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, and a critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). I also wonder if these anchoring epistemologies can also be the ties that connect critical Black scholars throughout the African Diaspora.

How do you understand these epistemologies and how have these epistemologies influenced or shaped your work? To what extent do you think that these epistemologies will be embraced and seen as normative, rather than *other*, as cautioned by Beverly Gordon (1993)?

Danny: What you say in your last set of comments is key. First, it is not just that the academy or mathematics education, in particular, should change to create an infrastructure for alternative epistemologies. The academy has typically expanded itself to encompass a number of epistemologies but many are marginalized and regarded as too political and less rigorous by many in the mainstream. Rather than settling for the typical choices of assimilation or accommodation, I believe that critical Black scholars must create and claim spaces for themselves. They should not do so in ways that exclude or re-inscribe new hierarchies and oppressions but

in ways that de-centre White logic and White perspectives and methods (see Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva (2008) for thorough discussion of these terms), and shattering notions of what is normative. I should say that my use of the terms *White logic* and *White methods* is not flippant or meant to essentialise White scholars. I would encourage other scholars in the field to read Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* or Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva's (2008) recent book entitled *White Logic, White Methods* for historical accountings that justify the use of these terms. As noted by Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008):

> Some readers will argue that the logic of social science, like mathematics and physics, is without racial biases, and can be applied regardless of racial and other individual considerations. However, as we have argued, all scientific endeavors transpire in a world where race, gender, and class are important not only as subjects for investigation, but as structural factors that partly shape researchers and their scientific gaze… Hence, whereas the knowledge/experience basis of Whites, as a group, leads them to produce racial knowledge that tends to reproduce the racial order, the knowledge/experience of non-Whites, as groups, leads them to produce racial knowledge that uncovers social relations of domination, practices of exclusion, and the like… (p. 18)

Part of my concern with mainstream mathematics education is the frequent narrowness of research. I understand issues of grain size and units of analysis for particular kinds of studies. However, your example pointing out how the research team failed to ask questions about student identities implies that curriculum design can be done somewhat independent of who the learners are as persons in the world. In my view, this merely reduces students to objects and consumers of the curriculum that we design for them. Their subjectivities as learners and doers of mathematics with emerging identities often do not inform the process. In my view, Black feminist thought, CRT, poststructuralist, Freirian, and other perspectives can certainly inform research on mathematics teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment.

I should point out that I do not utilize scholarship outside of mathematics education, particularly sociology, as a way to be novel. In relation to the issues that concern me, I do so out of necessity. I also do it based on a lifetime of personal experience and in relation to the experiences of those who have been the focus of my research. The complexity of these experiences – often shaped by race and the negotiation of racial identity – often requires more than traditional, mainstream theories of cognition and being in the world.

Maisie: Danny, this raises a whole host of issues that I will eventually navigate under your guidance, which relate globally to graduate students who are interested in race critical work in mathematics education. For example, in the event that students can avoid the pitfalls of physical and cultural isolation within their graduate programs, to what extent can students avoid intellectual isolation when adopting frameworks that stand in opposition to Western[1] positivist epistemologies

(Gay, 2004; Smith 1999)? Further, while my experience at UIC may be supportive and nurturing and pushes away from Eurocentric, male biased curriculum, how does this milieu prepare a critical Black female scholar for the academy at large (Gay, 2004)?

Danny: I think part of the answer to your question is that context matters. Where you study, with whom you study, and what you choose to study matters. Some environments and the people in those environments are likely to be more supportive of an emerging identity as a critical Black scholar and the choice to utilize alternative epistemologies. But I also think you, and other graduate students, might consider the possibility that in environments where there is great support for your work and ideas, even if they seem far-removed from mainstream areas of focus, it is still wise to "master the master's tools". Critique and selective use of these tools and ideas can only come from knowing them and understanding the logic behind them. For example, it is often said in colloquial talk among many Black people that in order to function sanely in the world not only do we have understand what it means to be Black but we also have to understand what it means to be White. Applying this to your development as a graduate student, I believe that part of my role as a mentor and advisor is to help you develop deep understanding of the dominant epistemologies and modes of research in addition to fostering your development as a critical Black scholar. I do not say this to imply the old adage that you have to work twice as hard as someone who is White. But if I only fostered your development by promoting only race-critical methods and perspective, for example, I would be engaging in the very same exclusion of ideas and perspectives that I noted when discussing the experiences of graduate students at other institutions.

On the heels of these last points, I want to loop back to something I mentioned earlier, having to do with the increased number of Black mathematics education doctoral students at our institution. We now have eight Black students in our pipeline and seven of them, including you, are my advisees. And my assessment is that all of you have some critical orientation as it has been talked about in this chapter. Despite the fact that many of you have come to UIC specifically to work with me, you all brought that critical orientation with you. And of course, you will all continue to develop your own individual voices as a result of your experiences outside of working with me. However, what I want to point out is that your collective presence in this program, and eventually in the field, has far-reaching implications. I know this because, as I go out into the field, one of the questions that I often get in response to my critiques of mainstream theory and methods and my characterization of mathematics education research and policy contexts as instantiations of White institutional space (Martin, 2008, in press-b) is *who can do the work of researching Black children's mathematical experiences?*

At the conclusion of a recent keynote address (Martin, 2009b), where I foregrounded Black children, issues of race, racism, and racialisation, and offered a critique of what I characterized as mainstream mathematics education research, I was asked this very question by a White scholar in the audience. If that scholar

were to look at me, you, and your classmates as part of an emerging critical mass, our collective presence could be interpreted as sending a message that only critical Black scholars can study Black children.

Yet, I want to point out how the audience member's question further highlights the politics of race and identity in mathematics education. In my view, such a question can have the effect of momentarily re-centring the discussion to focus on the needs or sensitivities of White scholars, even critical White scholars whose work might focus on Black children.

Clearly, anyone can study the mathematical experiences of Black children, and the history of research in the field will verify this. Moreover, in the same way that I have argued against ineffective teachers, Black or White, I support the work of White scholars whose research facilitates mathematical, social, and epistemological empowerment (Ernest, 2002) for Black children.

Maisie: Danny, I agree whole-heartedly that race is not *the* primary factor as to who can do this work. Using a recent example, I would like to be more specific of what empowerment means in conducting research of Black students and teachers in a mathematics classroom.

In discussions among the research staff, several teachers' names were tossed about for in-depth study; that is, consecutive days of videotaping and field notes. An African-American teacher's name was suggested. I will call her Janice (a pseudonym). Although she was immediately positioned as "mathematically weak", she was selected as a teacher of interest based primarily on her race. While I had already been assigned to observe another teacher, I was concerned about how Janice was being talked about, so I also volunteered to observe Janice as a means to "protect" her from potentially deficit-oriented reports of her classroom practice throughout the academic year. As mentioned before, being from the neither-world – between the academy and the Black community – I was able to see her in what I believed was a different light.

Janice's classroom was 100% Black. During class, Janice was often abrasive in tone and academically demanding of her students. There was always a constant stream of students coming by to visit, to get a hug, or to be verbally and lovingly chastised. It was clear that she was well-liked by her students, despite her "tough love." She did not take excuses and often launched into mini-speeches regarding her background within the same community as her students (Clark, Johnson, & Chazan, 2009). Her style was a sharp contrast to White teachers in the project. At one point during the academic year, Janice's conversations became increasingly didactic and authoritative, more so than usual. This was antithetical to the intended design of the reform-based program, which called for open discourse and mathematical argumentation among the students.

During this time of Janice's heightened authority, there was also a series of physical fights among students in the hallways. In one of these fights, a teacher was struck. One day after class, Janice told me quite directly that the kids were not going to "punk" her. It was clear that she felt that she had to reassert her authority within the classroom or lose her status (as this other teacher had lost their authority). This had a definite impact on classroom discourse. Janice often

employed an Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (I-R-E) model in order to maintain classroom order and her status as the authority figure.

During research meetings, the only information requested from me about Janice was how the conversation went in classrooms or whether I had captured any “good” video. It was clear to me that the design of the reform-based curriculum had normalized open discourse and mathematical argumentation, which was not always a viable, or desirable, part of Janice’s school and classroom culture. It was also clear that the research team privileged mathematical knowledge and practices over classroom culture and practices that provided a stable environment in Janice’s eyes.

Perhaps because of my own background as a Black female mathematics teacher, I was able to understand her perspective whether I agreed with it or not. However, transferring what I learned about Janice’s practice into the research team discussions did not fit into the overarching goals of the research study at large. From the point of view of many on the research team, the lack of mathematics discourse, as called for in the curriculum, worked to further marginalize Janice within the research and solidified framings of her mathematical inadequacy. This is not to demonise the research team, but to recognize that their narrow aims often helped to instantiate and perpetuate deficit constructions of Black students and teachers.

From this experience, I found that one challenge for Black scholars is to interject oneself in the construction of standards (i.e., successes, failures, and models) (McDermott and Varenne, 2006) because, without perspectives that call attention to the limitations in these standards, they can work to harm Black students and teachers alike. So, you asked earlier, who can do this work? I humbly say it is those scholars who can actively and unrelentingly exercise reflexivity, who see Black children (and teachers) as objectified subjects in research projects but as informants whose life experiences and voices can give great insight into their needs as learners (and teachers).

Danny: The example that you provide above is powerful and I hope that its significance is not lost on readers. Clearly, you are not attempting to vilify the members of the research team. However, what you have pointed out is a kind of conceptual blind-spot that that many scholars, of all backgrounds, can have with respect to developing their research or implementing their projects. I do think a responsibility of all scholars is to think about these blind-spots and the implications of moving forward in their work without giving them attention. Although it might be an unfair demand, I think is a requirement for any critical Black scholar. Again, the price of admission to the field or to a particular project should not be the suspension of one’s willingness to demand full consideration of Black children’s (and teachers’) humanity even in the context of research on curriculum.

Maisie: As we begin drawing to a close in this conversation, I do want to make a few final points. I could quite conveniently choose not to study Black children in mathematics education, particularly in the haze of post-racial delusion, yet I have decided to do so. Being a Black scholar in and of itself *is* a political act, being a

Black scholar studying Black children qualifies as further politicisation, and being a *critical* Black scholar can only be understood as political activism.

Danny, in your work, you often repeat several provocative questions that have been raised by other Black scholars (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, p. 19):

- Why should African-American youth take school seriously if they cannot predict when and under what circumstances their intellect or intellectual work is likely to be taken seriously?
- Why should African-American youth commit themselves to doing outstanding intellectual work if – because of the color of their skin – this work is likely to be undervalued, evaluated differently, or ignored?
- Why work hard at school, or anything else for that mater if these activities are not inextricably linked to and address one's status as a member of a historically oppressed people?

While these questions pertain to African-American youth, critical Black scholars can easily turn these questions on their head and inquire simply: *Why do this work?* Every critical Black scholar will have to answer that question for him or herself. Earlier, you mentioned the defence of Black people's humanity. I will endeavour to answer this question poetically, but nonetheless honestly. I believe that the great understandings of mathematics education, American education for all children, will and must be found in the classroom of Black children. I take a page from the great poet, Nikki Giovanni (2002), who makes a similar argument in *The Quilting of the Black-Eyed Pea*. Speaking of future astronauts who set out for Mars, Giovanna wrote:

> So let me slow this down:
> Mars is 1 year of travel to get there…..
> plus 1 year of living on Mars……
> plus 1 year to return to Earth……
> = 3 years of Earthlings being in a tight
> space going to an unknown place with an
> unsure welcome awaiting them…
> tired muscles…unknown and unusual
> foods....harsh conditions…and no known
> landmarks to keep them human…
> only a hope and a prayer that they will be
> shadowed beneath a benign hand and there
> is no historical precedent for that except this:
> The trip to Mars can only be understood
> through Black Americans
> I say, the trip to Mars can only be understood
> through Black Americans
> …
> and that is why NASA needs to call Black America
> They need to ask us: How did you calm your
> fears…How were you able to decide you

were human even when everything said you
were not…How did you find comfort in
the face of the improbable to make the
world you came to your world... How was
your soul able to look back and wonder

RAPPING UP

By engaging in this dialogue and sharing our voices, it is our hope that we have successfully revisited, and extended, Tate's earlier reflections on the experiences of Black scholars in mathematics education. Clearly, our stories are our own and we do not profess to speak for others. As a mid-career scholar and a new graduate student, we enact our identities as critical Black scholars in similar and different ways. However, we share a concern for mathematics education that is meaningful, relevant, and responsive to the needs of Black children as *Black* children. We share this concern while carrying out our work in a domain numerically dominated by White scholars and in a society where Black children continue to be devalued. Our critical engagement with the field is driven by the need and necessity for confronting this devaluation. In doing so, we see our scholarly work as deeply personal and political.

NOTE

[1] I use "Western" as delimited by Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008). They stated, "White logic assumes a historical posture that grants eternal objectivity to the view of elite Whites and condemns the views of non-Whites to perpetual subjectivity; it is the anchor of the Western imagination, which grants centrality to the knowledge, history, science, and culture of elite White men and classifies 'other' people without knowledge, history, or science, as people with folklore but not culture." (Emphasis added, p. 17).

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