

Liberation Kitchen: Annotating Intergenerational Conversations Among Black Women in Art and Education

*“We cannot
ignore the deep
learnings that occur
across generations
and professional
occasions within
the field.”*

For all of the Black women art teachers
and art educators we have encountered
and for those we have yet to meet.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25889/deys-ab90>

gloria j. wilson

University of Arizona

Amber C. Coleman

University of Arizona

Pamela Harris Lawton

Maryland Institute College of Art

Asia Price

Middle Tennessee State University

ABSTRACT

In this essay, we, four Black women art educators, draw from Black feminisms and Afrofemcentrism. Our practice considers nuanced ways that Black women curate spaces of communal care, which position forms of dialogic encounters with one another. We put forward aspects of Black life, as lived in and through sharing intimacies of the geospatial and as continuation of Black radical traditions. We argue that a kitchenspace indexes a Black praxis, centering intergenerational knowledge-sharing and methodology toward liberation. We think with Black feminist scholar/artists and insist a method of self-annotating, indexing our lives into the otherwise absences of Black women's narratives in the field of art education. We practice the theorization and method of using images of personal artwork and our dialogues. These annotations realign new centers of knowledge and refuse cannibalization by Euro-dominant narratives.

KEY WORDS

Critical arts-based research, kitchen, Black feminism, liberation, Afrofemcentricism, Black radical tradition, Black praxis

To correspond with the authors regarding this article:

gjwilson@arizona.edu

amberccoleman@email.arizona.edu

plawton@mica.edu

asiapricecheer@gmail.com

// annotation //
 an-no-ta-tion

/,anə'tāSH(ə)n/

noun. a note of explanation.

We begin this essay with recognizing the importance of centering Black women's experiences in the wake of living and working within the historical and contemporary effects of the afterlife of enslavement in North America (Hartman, 2019; Sharpe, 2016). With this acknowledgment and reckoning in mind, we, the authors, four Black women art educators, offer an arts-based (wilson, 2018; wilson, 2020a) critical-activist project (Rolling, 2013), which documents our on-going conversation and theorization. Beginning with a conversation at an in-person conference panel presentation held in February of 2020, our initial public dialogue served to annotate (Sharpe, 2016), or imagine how Black women art educators might connect and render our experiences visible.



Figure 1. Seated l-r: Asia Price, Pamela Harris Lawton, gloria j. wilson, and Amber C. Coleman at Art and Education for Social Justice Conference.

// Theoretical Framework: Black Women's Artstories¹ //

For the purpose of this essay, we center Black women's artstories as a theoretical frame. Theorizing this form of storytelling we connect Black feminisms and Afrofemcentrism to think with and enact radical communal care and healing justice for ourselves and other people of color in our field, opening space to share our stories and knowledge with each other. Black feminisms articulate that Black women's voices have often been suppressed or silenced as they represent existence at the intersections of two marginalized groups: Black people and women. In response to this erasure, Black women advocate for themselves and

¹ An artstory is one's personal quest for identity and meaning through art and story; or alternatively as a group's collaborative search for communal, intergenerational, and multicultural understanding through shared oral histories, collaboratively written identity pieces on life themes related to psychosocial development, and visual treatments of these themes created by the group (Lawton et al., 2019, p. 35)

cultivate community to care for themselves and others, often through dialogue (Collins, 1990). Black feminists advocate for ethics of caring and love as liberatory and healing strategies (Lorde, 1984/2007; Nash, 2019). In addition to Black feminisms, as artists, we utilize Afrofemcentrism (Tefagiorgis, 1992), a theory of art history and art-making that “focuses on the Black woman subject as depicted by the Black woman artist, exploring the distinct manner in which the latter envisions and presents [the] Black woman’s realities” (Tefagiorgis, 1992, p. 475). The centering of history and various forms of making by/about/for Black women necessitates the interconnectedness between storytelling and art. Afrofemcentrism focuses on the individual and collective realities of Black women to actively and thoughtfully center Black women, their experiences, and histories as subject matter (Tefagiorgis, 1992). The combination of Black feminisms and Afrofemcentrism as theoretical frames help us articulate the unique ways that Black women communicate their experiences and tend to each other in creative and dialogic ways.

// Methodology: Liberation Kitchen //

If you don’t understand us and understand what we’ve been through
Then you probably wouldn’t understand what this moment is about
This is home
This is where we from, this is where we belong
(Knowles, 2016, 0:00-0:13)

Our methodology pulls from ancestral, cultural, and embodied ways of communing with one another. This methodology, conceived as “liberation kitchen,” allows for thinking with politics, experiences, and uses of a kitchenspace, a private and domestic space with which Black women: 1) first occupied as “propertied domestic help” and 2) since the civil rights era, in excess of being propertied, have imagined themselves otherwise (think, “free”). Specifically, we think metaphorically with the kitchen table in order to center the ways that Black women operate in relation to shared spaces and curate opportunities for connection and belonging. As the Solange lyrics (Knowles, 2016, 0:00-0:13) state above, this methodology recognizes the importance of homeplaces (hooks, 1990) to identity and relationship-building, connecting the individual and community as Black women enact multiple forms of care and dialogue in the pursuit of their and others’ liberation. Extending this logic, we also think with Carrie Mae Weems’ *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990/2016) and Black women’s conversational methods and communal spaces such as knitting circles, talk shows, community organizing, and beauty salons.

These kitchen conversations often occur in circles, non-linear formations with no specific beginning or ending. Within a circle, or kitchen-table style conversation, those in conversation can start and stop at any point, with the circle remaining intact. The methods and spaces of these conversations blur notions of public and private as Black women share their own stories and the stories of others round after round. Moreover, the table setting can be a fruitful medium for continuous and continued connections and critical conversations (Wilson, 2020b). In bringing these experiences to the table, Black women create and claim seats at their own table. This sharing of experiences requires vulnerability within the dialogue and active listening. While sitting at the table, those who are participating can reimagine what the table can be and how it can function. Ultimately, the goal of sitting at the table is to extend dialogue and action beyond the table.

Engaging in conversation with one another via kitchen table reflexivity (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) and art-making, we extend prior critical arts-based research methodology, which centers racialized identity in art education (wilson, 2018). In doing so, we aim for evocative and critical engagement with and through the intersections of aesthetics and historicized legacies of oppression. Our narratives serve as aesthetic and material inquiry, provocation, and representation, seeking to build bridges across generations as well as historical and contemporary limitations. As such, we map our diasporic inheritances, artistically and conversationally, emphasizing and sharing our distinct and collective experiences as Black women in the field of art education. Our scaffolded narratives and embodied inquiry-knowledge bridge diversity across generational experiences of Black women art educators. Additionally, we represent these experiences through acts of art-making as other Black art educators have done (Coleman, 2020; Coleman & wilson, 2020)

// Annotation as a Method //

Through the process of annotation, as articulated by Sharpe (2016), we tend to our various experiences as Black women living within the context of the United States. Acknowledging the history and continuation of violence and erasure that has characteristically impacted the experiences of Black people in this context, we use annotation to highlight our unique experiences at the intersection of being racialized as Black and gendered as women. We also stress and elucidate how our racialized and gendered experiences impact our varied academic positionalities and experiences within the field of art education as an undergraduate student, graduate student/emerging scholar, mid-career scholar, and established scholar.

In this essay, we offer several annotations as engagements from our on-going dialogue, offering shared intimacies through text and visuals. We weave annotations of our initial dialogue, images of our personal creative work and practice, and private messages with one another via posts to a private Tumblr (social media) account. These annotations reflect not only our personal experiences and perspectives, but a connection to a larger Black diasporic history and our intergenerational learning.

// Conversational Intimacies //

“...simply because a Black woman’s body is present in a White dominated space, does not mean she has power, voice, or access to the same knowledge-making opportunities as her White counterparts with whom she shares the space.”
(Acuff, 2018, p. 202)

Previous research acknowledges the absence of documenting the experiences and contributions of Black women in our field (Acuff et. al, 2019), and indicates a gross omission of Black women and Black feminist discourses in art education (Acuff, 2018; Acuff et. al, 2019; Coleman, 2020). However, this essay and our corresponding (on-going) dialogue serve as refusal of these omissions. Insisting on making space, we annotate our tending to collective relationships and intergenerational knowledge. Additionally, we view this essay as a means to map new research methodologies through dialogues, which take place across geospatial and generational positionalities of Black women situated in the arts and education (Carruthers, 2018; Evans-Winters, 2019; McKittrick, 2006).

While our formal learning experiences occurred in art education programs situated in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast regions of the United States, we are thrilled that our paths have intersected. As such, we are intentional about staying in close touch. Through these intimacies (Nash, 2019) we refuse and disrupt epistemological, ontological, and axiological negation in addition to material manifestations of marginalization, while simultaneously building our own understandings in community with one another and with others who insist on Black visibility within the arts in/through education.

As we began our conversation at the above-mentioned conference, four questions sparked our initial dialogue: Who or what influenced your decision to pursue a career in art education? How many (if any) Black women art educators have you had contact with? What support and consideration do we need, demand, expect from the field? What are some possible strategies or pathways to increase the number of Black women art educators? What follows are excerpts from our conference dialogue, in response to each of these questions. Accompanying the quotes are images from the conference presentation slides. Each excerpt and image serve to annotate stories of Black women, which have been devalued and redacted within art education histories and scholarship.

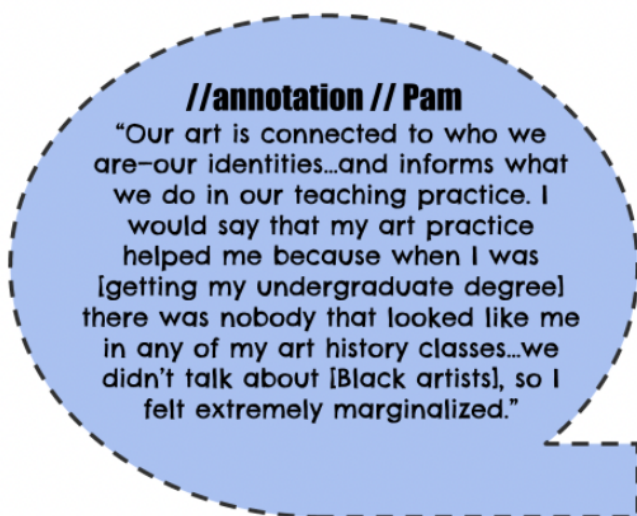


Figure 2. Pamela H. Lawton. (1990). *The Rainbow of Black Womanhood*, linocut.²

² Pamela Harris Lawton completed this reduction linocut at the beginning of her art career, 30 years ago, as part of her MFA thesis. Like our collective, it speaks to the broad and scintillating array of women that inhabit the African diaspora—each with a different story, gifts, and outward appearance but all connected through the common experience of systemic oppression, living in a world dominated by whiteness and toxic masculinity. Her earring is the Asante (Ghanaian) symbol *Osram ne Nsoromma* (star and moon) meaning faithfulness, love, harmony, and femininity. The colors have a dual meaning, they represent the red, brown, yellow, and black skin colors of BIPOC cultures. In West African color symbology red means active, seriousness, blood of the ancestors; green symbolizes fertility and growth; and black is synonymous with spiritual maturity, purity, dignity, and status (Dr. Kwaku Ofori-Ansa, personal communication, 1990).



Figure 3. Asia Price engaged in curriculum building and creative practice as an art education student at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, TN.



//annotation // gloria
"I had no idea Pam existed in the world of art education; that Joni Boyd Acuff existed in [art education] until I started connecting through conferencing and reading articles outside of what was provided in my graduate courses. It never occurred to [my professors] to connect me with someone who might have been doing [similar] research or already paved a path for the research that I was doing."



Figure 4. gloria j. wilson. *The Blackademic*, textile with text transfer.³



// annotation // Amber
"Where do we [Black women] fit in this world of art education? [This question] set me off on the trajectory I'm on right now. When I started applying for Ph.D. programs I asked 'where are they?' They have to teach at somebody's school. I want to be able to have interactions with Black faculty, with Black women faculty."

Figure 5. Opening of *To Be Black and Female: Reflecting on Black Feminism and African American Women's Art in Museums*. Curated by Amber C. Coleman, October 12, 2017, Lamar Dodd School of Art Galleries, Athens, GA. Photography credit: Mikael Coleman.

³ Black women are knowledge holders. This hand-made doctoral gown represents the legacy of Black women in and outside of the academy who resist precarity and erasure within dominant narratives of intellect. The signification in academic regalia signals limited notions of what is valued as knowledge. Black women's "knowledges" exceed these notions and are often passed along, intergenerationally, through oral traditions.

// When and Where We Enter //

“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say, ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’”
Anna Julia Cooper (1892/2016, p. 12)

Using our liberation kitchen methodology, we offer multiple annotations from our initial conference conversation as well as our recent Tumblr conversations. These annotations take you in and out of our conversation, with no particular beginning or end in mind, and reflects how we continued our conversation. We also offer artistic provocations as annotations throughout this essay as means to visually connect with our work and experiences, individually and in community. We recognize that many connections can be made across these annotations and we are continuing to think and work with them as well.

As we continued our conversation after the conference and during the COVID-19 pandemic, we addressed a pivotal question via a private Tumblr page: How has this collective of intergenerational art educators transformed your thinking, teaching and professional aspirations? What follows are excerpts from this burgeoning Tumblr dialogue, responding to this question. Accompanying the quotes are images of our recent art-making. Each excerpt and image serve to annotate an aspect of our engagement with one another across generations. What is more readily apparent is the mutuality of respect we have for one another. Although Pam is the eldest (self-identified) and from a generation that gained freedoms from the U.S. civil rights movement, she treats the “young-uns” in the collective as peers. She also acknowledges her growth in learning from “contemporary Black life” (personal statement, March 2021). This sentiment supports our “liberation kitchen” model, which, rather than being hierarchical, is circular. We cannot ignore the deep learnings that occur across generations and professional occasions within the field. Asia notes a growth in her confidence, since being connected to our group, while Amber signifies her growth in learning toward becoming an art educator. Gloria makes note of the mentoring and mentorship opportunities that exist within the group. This designates the strength of working alongside and across generations of professionalization.

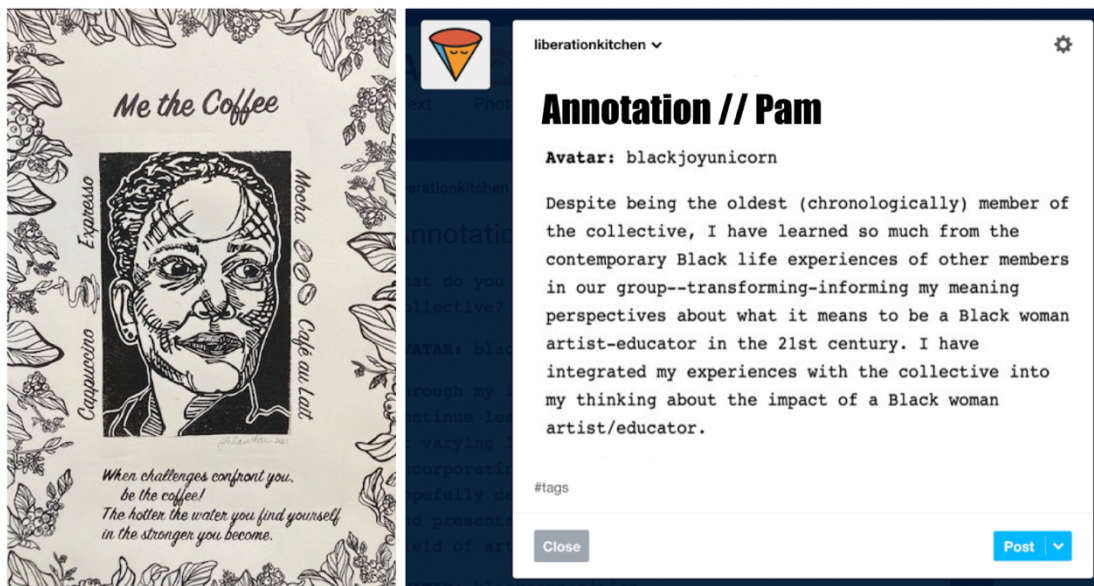


Figure 6. Pamela Harris Lawton. (2020). *Me|Be the Coffee*. Woodcut with drawing and hand lettering.⁴

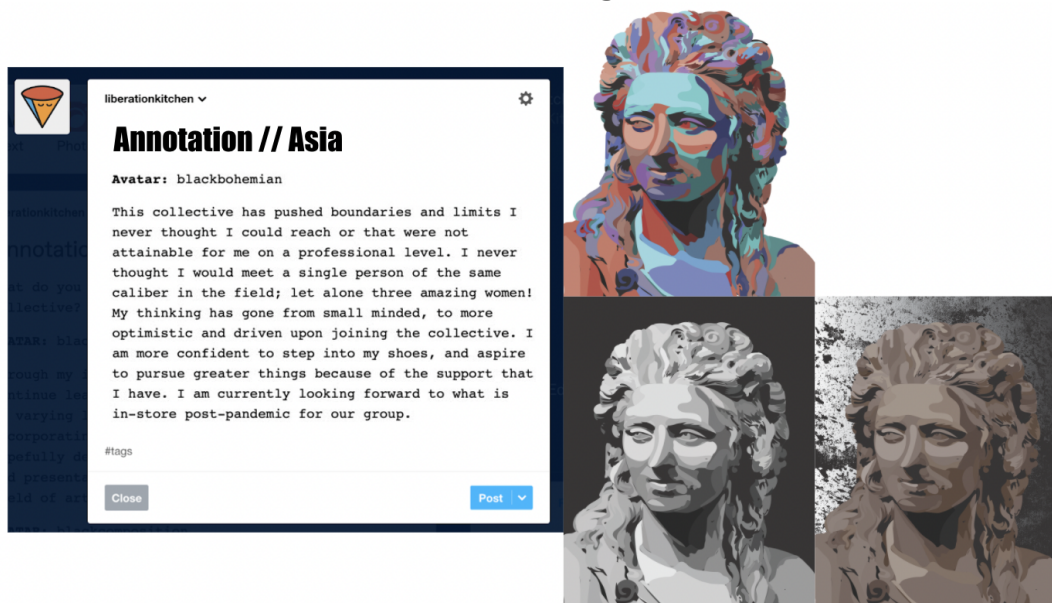


Figure 7. Asia Price. *Untitled*, digital print⁵

⁴ This print illustrates a proverb about strength and resilience using coffee as a metaphor. Black women, like coffee come in many flavors, tints, and shades from espresso to mocha, cappuccino to cafe au lait—each with its own strength. The global pandemic, which struck a few weeks after our conference tested Pam’s resiliency and flexibility, this proverb spoke to her on a personal level.

⁵ My work explores the relationship between being a young woman and being African American. With influences as diverse as Takashi Murakami and Faith Ringgold, new combinations are generated from both explicit and implicit structures. Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated by the ephemeral nature of relationships. What starts out as hope soon becomes debased into a hegemony of power, leaving only a sense of failing and limits of our existence. As shifting phenomena become reconfigured through boundaries and critical practice, the viewer is left with a testament to the outposts of our culture.

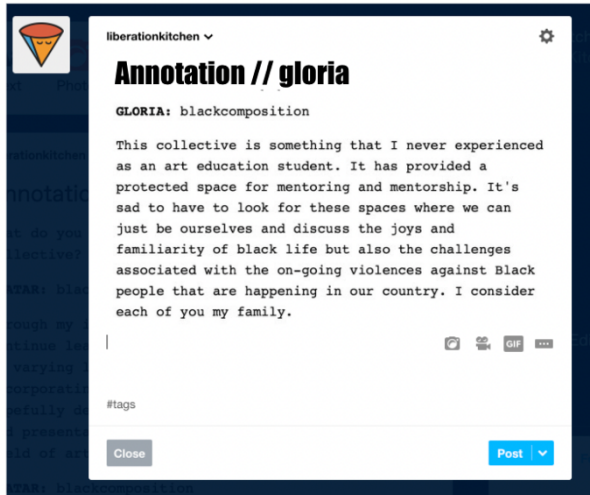


Figure 7. gloria j. wilson. (2014). *Kitchenspace: Pressing comb, circa 1985*.⁶

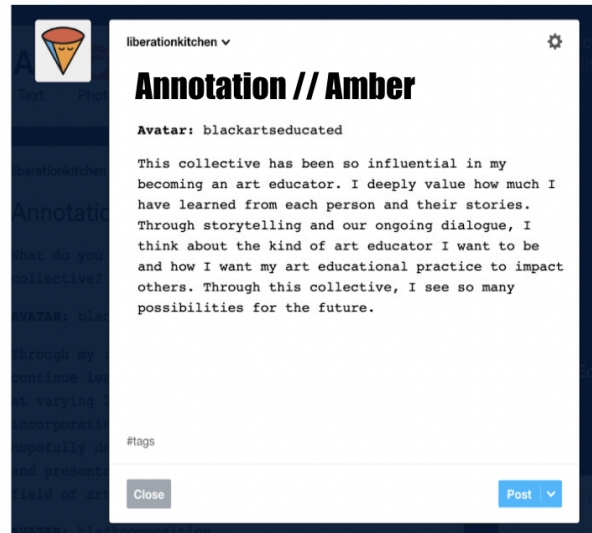


Figure 8. Amber C. Coleman. (2021) *Dear Black Woman: A Self-portrait, linocut*.⁷

⁶ For many Black women, the “the kitchen” references the curly-coiled hair at the nape of the neck. The pressing (hot) comb—a metal comb, when heated on the kitchen stove, is a tool used to loosen the curl pattern for versatile styling. This tool brings back memories of my youth and when I received my first “pressed” style, in the 7th grade, from my grandma Vera. She taught my Filipina mother how to press my hair. The burnt smell of the paper towel used to “buffer” the heat from the comb is still fresh in my senses. This kitchenspace reflects an interiority of my Afro-Asian life, mamas and madeas.

⁷ This artwork is a continuation of a series of art-making that began with the 2017 exhibition *To Be Black & Female: Reflecting on Black Feminism and African American Women’s Art in Museums*. “Dear BLACK Woman” is an open love letter to the author and other Black women, insisting that our lives, experiences, and dreams matter.

// Forging Intergenerational Relationships & Learnings //

As art educators whose lived experiences span three generations, our interactions are those of fictive kinship, co-mentorship, shared authority (Wilson, 2017; Vaughn & Feinberg, 2016). Bonds of fictive kinship (establishing family-like connections with biologically unrelated persons) are often established among communities of color whose shared experiences arise from histories of systemic violence, subjugation and oppression. It was easy for us to find these connections with one another and to see our gathering together as a form of mentorship and radical care across generations. Mentorship, for us, occurs as a reciprocal and dynamic exchange. We share authority in the co-authorship of this article, while “actively acknowledg[ing] the relevance of [one another’s] story” (Vaughn & Feinberg, 2016, p. 252). Our conference presentation, artworks, subsequent texts, Zoom calls, and Tumblr social media posts serve to annotate how co-mentorship occurs, within our group, while also activating a cypher “call and response” performance (Coleman & Wilson, 2020) of our lived experiences as Black women art educators.

Our intergenerational relationship activates the “four main components of the transformative learning process: life experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action” (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 134). Mezirow (2000), who developed the theory of transformative learning, defines it as “the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (p. 5). According to Mezirow (2000), transformative learning occurs when a “disorienting dilemma” or concern surfaces triggering critical self-reflection. Lawton (2008) contends that “critical self-reflection can also occur as the result of an empowering event” (p. 80) such as sharing personal stories and collaborating on visual/verbal artstories.

In our case, both a disorienting dilemma and empowering event come into play. As Black women art educators, we have transcended numerous barriers within our personal lives and the profession: systemic racism, lack of role models who affirm and value our knowledge, and professional standards/tests designed to exclude these knowledges (Lawton, 2018). Yet, when we do encounter other Black women art educators, we feel a sense of kinship, joy and empowerment; we begin building supportive networks within an oppressive system, as a means to sustain us and generate change. Johnson-Bailey and Alfred’s (2006) race-centric perspective examines transformative learning through the lens of cultural boundaries, emerging from the experiences of racialized communities living in opposition to the cultural norm (whiteness), from childhood through adulthood. While each of our journeys as Black women art educators differs, the destination remains the same—teaching in arts/educational institutions created for and dominated by White culture.

In order to move from survival to thrival (Love, 2019), we must engage in care that resists being pushed to the margins and works to disrupt power structures that do not have our interests and well-being in mind. The race-centric approach “revolves around three key concepts: inclusion, empowerment, and intellectual growth” (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006, p. 52). Despite being categorized as the “most oppressed” in academic discourses, Black women educators spring from a long tradition of excellence in emancipatory education (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006). We stand on the shoulders of the many Black women educators and art educators who came before us: Mary Church Terrell, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, Grace Hampton, Augusta Savage, Lois Mailou Jones, Elizabeth Catlett, Alma Woodsey Thomas, and countless other Black women across time and space.

// The Future of Liberation Kitchen //

“won’t you celebrate with me
 what i have shaped into
 a kind of life? i had no model.
 born in babylon
 both nonwhite and woman
 what did i see to be except myself?
 i made it up
 here on this bridge between
 starshine and clay,
 my one hand holding tight
 my other hand; come celebrate
 with me that everyday
 something has tried to kill me
 and has failed.”

Lucille Clifton (1993, p. 25)

From our desire to celebrate the fruitfulness of our collective, we began these conversations with a series of questions to explore and ground our experiences across the span of 20 years in the field of art education. Our conversations have since guided us to consider how to align our “knowledge centers,” projecting our voices as an act of refusal (Sharpe, 2016) of continued marginalization of Black women in the field as well as the history of the field. For us, kitchen liberation is about building bonds of community while also appreciating the unique experiences and abilities we bring to the table. It is about joy, healing, care, love, accountability, thriving when as Lucille Clifton (1993) notes, “that everyday/something has tried to kill me/and has failed” (p. 25). The future of liberation kitchen means that this dialogue and our work will not end here with us. We consider this essay as a second iteration of our unfolding conversations in support of future curation, mapping, and archiving of the onto-epistemologies of Black women in and through the arts and education. In reflecting on our on-going dialogues and art-making, we realize that we learned much from actively listening and sharing our stories with each other and our past and future audience members and co-conspirators. Liberation kitchen as a methodology aims to prompt on-going conversation and action. We view our conversation as a necessary provocation for thinking about the need of mentorship strategies and career pathways and throughways for supporting Black women and others from marginalized groups in the pursuit of art education. Liberation kitchen necessitates that we think about the need to enact Black radical traditions of social movement-building and community organizing, which are less hierarchical and that support our and others’ existence, thrival, and futures in the field of art education (Acuff, 2020; Carruthers, 2018; Love, 2019). Thus, it becomes important to not only share our stories, but to annotate and archive them for future use, strategizing on behalf of those whose lives and work have historically been and continue to be redacted in our field.

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