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Remote Portals: Enacting Black Feminisms and Humanization to Disrupt Isolation in Teacher Education

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Cover Page Footnote

We would like to acknowledge the members of "Homeroom" who provided substantive feedback: Awo Okaikor Aryee-Price, Nicol R. Howard, Tia C. Madkins, Erica D. McCray (who originally coined the phrase).

Remote Portals: Enacting Black Feminisms and Humanization to Disrupt Isolation in Teacher Education

Mildred Boveda and Keisha McIntosh Allen

Since 2020, a group of Black scholars affiliated with US colleges of education across four time zones have logged into Zoom for writing sessions. Each morning, the on-screen video images have displayed a range of colorful bonnets, head wraps, T-shirts, and lipsticks donned by Afro-diasporic women. We developed a routine for checking in, writing for 30 to 45 minutes, taking breaks, and repeating this cycle for two hours. During breaks, we not only rested from productivity, but also shared tips like which earrings to wear to events and which podcasts affirmed Black women. We discussed the different challenges we faced as we managed family members falling ill during the COVID-19 pandemic, attempted to meet the needs of the students and teachers in our lives, and followed the activism happening within our individual regions of the country. An improvisational decision to come together in the midst of a global crisis became an intellectual community where we continually support one another.

Affectionately described as “Homeroom”—an allusion to the P-12 schools where we once taught—this Black and womanist space grew to include a dozen scholars. It began in April when Boveda asked Allen if she wanted to join her for morning writing. The two of us, teacher educators and married mothers in heteronormative relationships, needed dedicated time for our scholarship. Our research focuses on preparing educators to teach multiply-marginalized students (Boveda in special education and Allen in urban education contexts). Before COVID-19, we sought culturally situated and community-embedded ways of being in community with like-minded scholars. As the pandemic continued, we invited others who shared this desire. Given that many of us were mothers monitoring our children’s virtual schooling, there were times our children also appeared on screen. Together, we named how we exhausted ourselves meeting the demands of neoliberal (Au, 2017) and westernized (Grosfoguel, 2013) university-based teacher education programs. The restrictions posed during the pandemic slowed us down from the daily pace we kept as we fulfilled multiple roles both within and outside the university.

The deceleration we experienced offered an opportunity to analyze the scope of inconsistencies involved in researching and doing teacher education. We articulated the isolation that education scholars who center marginalized children and families experience, even while researching and teaching in programs that market themselves as focused on equity and inclusion. Coming together, we realized how, long before COVID-19, we were already “socially” and “intellectually” isolated given our positionalities as Black women scholars concerned about how teacher education contributes to disparities in P-12 student experiences. We had participated in virtual spaces dedicated to Black women’s wellness (e.g., [GirlTrek](#)) and followed online discussions about the challenges of academia (e.g., [Cite Black Women](#)). Homeroom, however, was distinct. We specifically brought together Black women in colleges of education. The morning sessions functioned as remote portals to each other’s experiences across institutions and homes.

In this essay, we draw from intersectionality as informed by Black feminism (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989), James’s (2016) notion of the captive maternal, and Freire’s (1970) conceptualization of humanization to elucidate several tensions we have encountered as Black teacher education researchers. Between (a) the commitment we have to accessibility for all P-12 students, including students with disabilities, emergent bilinguals, and historically marginalized populations and (b) the resistance we feel toward the elitist incentive structures within predominantly white institutions, we name what has isolated us prior to the pandemic. Moving forward, we no longer wish to be complicit in our own dehumanization—nor that of the students and families we prepare teachers to serve. By leveraging our experiences as Black women scholars, we make sense of these challenges. We identify how those of us in teacher education who embody multiple marginalities, like canaries that warned coal miners of environmental toxins, are especially attuned to and affected by the toxicity these tensions produce (see Figure 1). We conclude with a list of ethical considerations for those engaged in equity-based teacher education research (e.g., special education, urban education).



Figure 1. Black women teacher educators’ imaginings of the miner’s canary

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our analysis is anchored by three concepts that coalesce to reveal the challenges we face as Black women in the westernized university and as researchers of equity-based teacher education. With an emphasis on multiple and interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., ableism, classism, racism, sexism, white supremacy) and a focus on the ways markers of differences matter in how individuals experience ableist, imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 1994), intersectionality as conceptualized by Black feminist theorists underscores the structural conditions that shape our work. That is, we not only examine how P-12 schools and/or institutions of higher education (IHEs) are implicated in the marginalization of students at the intersections of race, gender, class, ability, and other(ed) sociocultural

categories, but also indicate our heightened intersectional consciousness as Black women studying educational inequities (Boveda, 2019).

The second construct, captive maternals, serves to describe (a) who functions within teacher education research, as both the sustainers and the exploited of the field, and (b) why they persist despite an awareness of these dynamics. The captive maternal—a figure of any gender who has been “feminized into caretaking and consumption” (James, 2016, p. 255)—is compatible with Collins’s (2000) focus on intersectionality and the matrix of domination. Collins noted that each individual “derives varying penalties and privileges from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives” (p. 248). James (2016) explained that “to better understand the meaning of Captive Maternals requires context” (p. 255). James articulated how the West created a “womb” that reductively uses Black bodies to further Western ideology. In addition to supporting knowledge systems advanced through the westernized university, the intersectional matrix of domination creates conditions that produce varied captive maternals. That is, captive maternals differ in social standing, from incarcerated people to university faculty. We offer our narratives to explore how Black women teacher education researchers committed to equitable outcomes for multiply-marginalized youth embody the four qualities of captive maternals:

nontransferable agency; combative peer relations, usually with privileged males; a radical vision for life without trauma; and the desire and capacity to “love” through familial and communal ties that cross boundaries and sustain freedom. (James, 2015, p. 185)

The third concept, *humanization*, serves as both an organizing thought for this essay and an intervention in response to the central question: *What are we refusing to return to post-COVID-19 as we move forward as equity-based teacher education researchers?* We are committed to preparing teachers to recognize and build upon the brilliance of all children. We simultaneously contend with the isolating and dehumanizing pacing of the westernized academy that obligates us to prioritize production and the prestige of institutions over the consequential work involved in teaching and service. Although it is intellectually rigorous work to, for example, engage preservice teachers in unpacking and remedying oppressive educational practices or to mentor emerging researchers to practice ethical inquiry, those efforts are not incentivized at research-intensive institutions as much as publishing and generating grants are. We employ Freire’s (1970) notion of humanization—that is, the vocation of asserting one’s humanity by engaging reason to name and transform the world around oneself—to disrupt the conditions that create the temporal agency and toxicity that Black women in teacher education have learned to navigate. The weight of disrupting oppression may subsume captive maternals. We thus turn to humanization to pursue liberation in agentic ways that restore, are rooted in love, and generate humanizing futures.

PORTALS AS METHOD: IMPROVISED APPROACHES EMPLOYED DURING A PANDEMIC

Roy’s (2020) invocation of pandemics as portals resonates with our use of web services to access and understand each other’s experiences during these perilous times. Teacher education happens across multiple contexts, with distinct licensure requirements that shape foci on equity and the general substance of teacher preparation programs (Au, 2017; Blanton et al., 2017). “The labor of teacher educators has become hyper-regulated as professors of education end up falling into line with state and federal mandates because they want their students to earn their teaching credentials” (Au, 2017, pp. 283–284). Regardless of state-specific demands on our labor, our decision to meet and sustain our

scholarship afforded us a unique opportunity to learn about the educational contexts informing each other's research agendas. In that way, COVID-19—coupled with the improvised remote gatherings we enacted to resist social isolation—served as a portal to understanding multiple context-specific challenges.

We also enact portals as method by inviting readers to examine our two distinctive, yet interconnected, narratives. Critiquing one's field is a risky venture, especially for tenure-earning faculty; it is thus critical to move and work collectively to carry out these agendas (see Phillip et al., 2019). Our use of narratives as portals aligns with the work of prior collectives (e.g., Arizona Group et al., 1996) and women of Color teacher educators (e.g., Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Prieto & Villenas, 2012) who presented multi-voice analyses of tensions encountered in this work. The especially destructive blow COVID-19 dealt to Black communities, moreover, pushed us toward a more focused, Black feminist, and captive-maternal-informed analysis of teacher education. For us, mothers of children enrolled in public schools, research about multiply-marginalized students is not merely a professional or academic exercise; we study and theorize about dynamics that are consequential to our daily lives. As such, our critique of and offering to teacher education come from a place of love and desire for liberation.

In our narratives, we highlight intersectionality, characteristics of captive maternals, and the need for humanization. Boveda underscores how captive maternals in teacher education paradoxically sustain Western ideology, embody nontransferable agency, and experience contentious peer relations. Allen emphasizes a radical vision of life without trauma and a commitment to love through familial and communal bonds.

TEACHER EDUCATION'S CAPTIVE MATERNALS

At 19, I (Boveda) read Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and felt compelled to become a teacher. I was a student at Dartmouth College and expressed the incompatibility between its prestige and the marginalization encountered by Black and Brown P-12 students overrepresented in special education. Similarly, throughout various stages of my academic and professional trajectory, I repeatedly named my unease with how elite institutions "granted me access to theorists who name critical pedagogy and intersectionality, while simultaneously exacerbating constraints I mitigated as a Black woman with familial ties to the Global South" (Boveda, 2019). The 2020 pandemic stilled me enough to process how now, as a faculty member affiliated with a research-intensive school of education, I embody these paradoxes.

As I discursively reject ableism and affirm the value of all students, regardless of their cognitive, functional, or behavioral abilities, I perform for institutions that consistently rank, critique, and question the merit of its emerging—even established—scholars' ideas and intellectual contributions. I cite Black feminism and critique neoliberal institutions, yet recruit women and young people of Color to participate in institutions built upon the exploitation and exclusion of women and Black and Indigenous people (Grosfoguel, 2013); more specifically, I recruit them to colleges of education that have repeatedly been referred to as "cash cows" for universities (e.g., Hartlep et al., 2015). While I write about the importance of acknowledging my Dominican heritage and of de/colonizing teacher education, I understand my nontransferable agency as a Western-trained US citizen who writes in English. That is, I reluctantly contribute to the epistemic hegemony I lamented when I first encountered Freire.

These epistemic frictions nagged me for some time, yet came to a head as I witnessed how much more relaxed my children were when they were physically distant from high school. Although they expressed missing their classmates, they were less stressed than they were prior to pandemic-related school closures. Before moving to Arizona for my current academic position, my children attended schools in Miami, Florida with mostly Black and Latinx educators. Speaking to a *New York Times* reporter, my daughter once expressed her surprise at encounters with teachers' racialized low expectations. My son described the microaggressions his **overwhelmingly white teachers** enacted, a dynamic I recognized from my work with preservice teachers. My research within a predominantly white field reminds me of the entrenched and deficit-based ideologies embedded in educators' preparation. My children's frustrations remind me why I cannot become complicit.

I have not evaded the demonstrable fact that women and people of Color are given lower teaching evaluations than their white male colleagues (Chávez & Mitchell, 2020). To complicate these contentious dynamics, I teach courses that, because they emphasize the needs of students with disabilities and emerging bilinguals, are framed as "controversial." More seasoned faculty know which courses to steer clear of to avoid low student evaluations and the energy student conflicts extract; ironically, and perhaps relatedly, there are preservice teachers who never get the opportunity to study with the most accomplished education experts in their IHEs. I have repeatedly been advised to "be selfish," not stress teaching, and avoid potential conflict. Historically, there has been indirect evidence of grade inflation in colleges of education (e.g., Eiszler, 2002). As a Black mother and advocate for students with disabilities, I cannot help but make connections between neoliberal universities' customer service approach to appeasing students, the westernized academy's hegemonic prioritizing of research productivity over pedagogy, and the lack of teacher preparedness for addressing multiple marginality in P-12 schools.

Homeroom made space for discussions about these ethical quandaries. I brought up how disconcerting it is for "equity scholars" to advise others to be selfish. I understand and appreciate those who encourage junior faculty—and especially women of Color—to avoid exploitative dynamics. Being selfish, however, is incompatible with the community focus that attracted me to education in the first place. Allen understood where I came from. She compared my repulsion to self-serving individualism to the reaction of a miner's canary. I recognized the metaphor, as it has been alluded to when describing education at the intersections of race and (perceived) disability (Shalaby, 2017; Waitoller et al., 2010). When she used it to describe Black women in the academy, I remembered captive maternals who similarly were made to sacrifice their wellness for the collective.

Since establishing Homeroom, we have discussed how Black women are pressed and "peer reviewed" their entire lives in ways that are both refining and crushing. Regardless of context, for the benefit of our families, communities, and future goals, we learned to persist under constant scrutiny. Moreover, we have witnessed a range of teacher education programs, having both attended Ivy League universities and minority-serving institutions (Boveda, a Hispanic-serving institution; Allen, a historically Black university) and worked at predominantly white state universities. We find it critical to interrogate knowledge systems that have erased or diminished Black women's epistemologies. We also are concerned that teacher education professors are disincentivized from performing pedagogical excellence. Similarly, equity-based teacher educators are often punished for holding preservice and in-service educators to high standards of praxis that center multiply-marginalized learners.

CAPTIVE MATERNALS' INTERVENTION: HUMANIZATION

I, (Allen) am the great-granddaughter of two coal miners who died of black lung disease. The canary in the coal mine has always been an effective allusion for me. I write this narrative with the understanding of my ancestors' sacrifices and driven by familial and communal ties. I am also driven by the futurity represented in my children. Pre-pandemic, the birth of my daughter taught me the need to prioritize wellness and wholeness. During the pandemic, seeing my son's brilliance threatened by remote learning motivated me to learn more about humanizing pedagogy; I needed to rebuff the uninspired and decontextualized schooling I witnessed. As someone who studies asset pedagogies in urban contexts, I felt compelled to recalibrate my scholarly focus. I turned to examining what digital "access" means during distance learning. For example, while provisions for devices and the Internet are necessary, teachers may also render curricula inaccessible by engaging in culturally alienating and technocratic instruction.

When Boveda asked me to join her in writing in the morning, she reminded me of a question I posed during the 2019 American Education Research Association annual conference: "Can we start a Black teacher educator group? This has been soul-draining work and I want to talk through it." It was not until the pandemic, however, that either of us had the capacity to return to that question. I work at a mid-size honors university. I teach an equity-oriented literacy course and courses that unpack the sociocultural context of schooling. When COVID-19 happened, I was recovering from the fall semester, which is always fraught with passive resistance from students in my literacies in the content areas class. The undergraduates, who had limited prior coursework focused on these topics, did not understand or appreciate talking about culture and social injustice in a literacy course.

Every semester, I spent considerable time developing curricula that centered white preservice teachers' understandings of racism's manifestation in education, thus working to supplement their lack of prior engagement with equity. This effort competed with time dedicated to write or think deeply about asset pedagogy research. I felt responsible for preparing the type of humanizing teachers (del Carmen Salazar, 2013) I would want teaching my own children. I envisioned teachers who can see and build upon the brilliance that all students, especially multiply-marginalized children and youth, have.

One would imagine that my teaching commitments and scholarship would integrate seamlessly; however, the overwhelming whiteness of teacher education constricted me. Spending time trying to convince undergraduate students and in-service teachers of Black people's humanity was not generative. Ironically, as I affirmed culturally relevant practices, I was centering whiteness and undermining myself. The work required to understand white emotionality and resistance well enough to craft curricula and professional development opportunities is arduous. Although necessary, it consumed the time and space needed for me to map out my research. I defaulted to pursuing "convenient" research opportunities.

The pandemic, however, was a conduit that led me to remember Toni Morrison's statement about the function of racism: distraction. Unlike caged canaries who could not escape the toxicity they detected, Homerom, the remote portal created with Black women, enabled me to name how I no longer wanted to react to the distraction of whiteness and its incessant demands that I prove my worthiness. Moving forward, I must anchor myself in my lived experiences and cultural ways of knowing to reframe academic engagement. I named how the ontology and epistemologies of Black teachers are marginalized and outright ignored in teacher education literature (with the exception of studies such as McKinney de

Royston et al., 2020). Shifting my scholarship to the professional contributions of Black teachers, including their spirituality, has energized me. This focus can potentially reshape the conversation and standards for quality teaching. I also envision a fundamental shift in what teacher education looks like when it no longer centers whiteness.

While conducting an investigation on humanizing pedagogy in the midst of the pandemic, a Black middle school educator articulated the dehumanizing outcome of education that normalizes white, male, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class, cisgendered, English-speaking individuals: It renders anyone outside of those characteristics invisible or deficient. Having witnessed how often those assumptions inform the education of preservice teachers and the mentoring of teacher education researchers, Boveda and I must intervene on behalf of ourselves and our children.

PRESSING FORWARD

Our stories demonstrate how our embodiments of the captive maternal position us as visionaries who seek reprieve from the toxicity we experienced as Black academics and mothers with children in P-12 schools. While we benefit from our status as Ivy League-educated university professors, those societal privileges do not necessarily transfer to how our Black children, or the multiply-marginalized children our scholarship centers, experience schooling. Our professional achievements have not shielded us from the combative nature of academia vis-à-vis the peer review and tenure and promotion processes that often penalize Black women scholars for our social justice commitments. In spite of these pressures, we forge on, grounding our work in possibilities that prioritize community and wholeness. It is in that spirit that we co-construct humanizing and ethical praxis.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

We can no longer move in individualistic ways within the westernized academy, which centers those with the most advantages in our society. Instead, we will continue to prioritize marginalized students, colleagues, and community members, not only in word, but also in daily practice. As such, we co-constructed ethical considerations in question format to hold each other answerable to one another and to make sure we do not continue the dehumanizing path set prior to the pandemic. We offer these to our colleagues in equity-based research communities who are teacher educators, as reminders that we are pedagogues advancing equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all.

Alignment. *When positioning oneself as an equity-based education researcher, is there alignment between espoused values and how one navigates one's role as an academic? For example: Does the teacher education researcher consider how dis/engagement with research activities, teaching, and service affects multiply-minoritized educators and P-12 learners?*

Although university structures provide fewer rewards for teaching and service—and both empirical and theoretical contributions are of utmost importance—to claim to focus on equity and inclusion in P-12 schooling while engaging in self-aggrandizing and self-serving moves is antithetical to the purpose of this work. Recognizing and naming the competing messaging education researchers receive will help us recognize and, perhaps, resist the disciplining that trains us to represent the interest of the ableist, imperial white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy. Moreover, if there are instances where concessions must be made, the question of alignment helps us to move with intentionality and clarity, without overstating liberatory agendas in our roles as academics.

Sociohistorical context. *Is there an understanding of the dynamics between marginalized groups and the sociohistorical context in which teacher education and research is occurring? For example: Does the teacher education researcher have knowledge about the historical trajectories of the field, the equity-based research community, and the IHEs that they are or have been affiliated with?*

As Black women teacher educators and researchers, we embody multiple markers of diversity while simultaneously shouldering the loadedness that affiliations with academic institutions carry. In addition to recognizing the oppressive history of the westernized academy, it is important that equity-based teacher educators study the trajectory of their field. For example, Boveda and McCray (2020) acknowledge how a social justice agenda for people with disabilities produced special education; the field's alignment with academic traditions tied to eugenics, however, has rightfully engendered mistrust from racialized and other minoritized communities. Furthermore, the specific histories of IHEs matter. With over 2,000 institutions in the United States and a range of policies that affect families from diverse backgrounds, equity-based teacher education research must be contextualized. Similarly, the researcher must understand the contexts, both where they were trained and where they are faculty.

Peer-review/community evaluations. *When articulating and assessing the quality of equity-based education researcher activities, how are the communities that teacher educators claim to support informing evaluative dynamics?*

As academics committed to teacher education, we find that one of the most disheartening aspects of receiving negative evaluations from predominantly white students is the challenge of parsing out constructive feedback from white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal resistance. Allen has learned of Black women colleagues who, instead of dismissing student evaluations altogether, created student feedback questionnaires centered on equity and justice. As tenure-earning researchers, we find the critiques colleagues offer helpful for conveying our intellectual contributions to academic communities. It is not only important to receive individualized affirmation; we desire critical feedback that interrogates our contributions to solutions and the betterment of those most affected by multiply-marginalized identities. Critical race praxis from critical legal studies is a potential way for us as teacher education researchers to move forward in this regard. Yamamoto's (1997) conceptualization of critical race praxis articulates the need to recognize the interplay between theory, practice, and community to assure one's knowledge-making is grounded in the lived experiences of those who are consistently subjugated within oppressive institutions, such as P-12 schooling and the westernized academy.

PANDEMIC AS PORTAL: WHAT WE MUST LEAVE BEHIND

COVID-19 served as a portal to create space, with other Black women academics, where we could fully bring ourselves and our cultural expressions, concerns, and sociolinguistic practices. Collectively, we paused, reflected, and named what we can no longer uphold within our roles in equity-based teacher education research and university communities. Although COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated marginalizing dynamics we and our children experienced, we have always dealt with competing demands, since the rewards and expectations of the neoliberal and westernized university are often taxing. Therefore, we co-constructed ethical considerations to navigate tensions we encounter as captive maternals in teacher education and to avoid defaulting to activities that privilege what least serves the most vulnerable and marginalized members of our communities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Mildred Boveda, EdD, is an associate professor of special education at the Pennsylvania State University. In her scholarship, she uses the terms “intersectional competence” and “intersectional consciousness” to describe teachers’ understanding of diversity and how students, families, and colleagues have multiple sociocultural markers that intersect in nuanced and unique ways. Drawing from Black feminist theory and collaborative teacher education research, she interrogates how differences are framed across education communities to influence education policy and practice.



Dr. Keisha McIntosh Allen is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Dr. Allen’s research acknowledges the full humanity of Black teachers and students by examining how schools can be spaces that are life-affirming. Her current research examines culturally informed initiatives and practices that help to recruit, induct, and retain Black pre-service and in-service teachers in the profession. Her work also examines humanizing pedagogies and their impact in educational spaces. She has published in top peer-reviewed journals focusing on urban and multicultural education.