

Journal of Multicultural Affairs

Volume 7

Issue 2 *Voices Amplifying Research, Rhetoric,
Rhythm & Rhyme: Teaching for Global
Citizenship While Fighting for the Soul of
American Democracy Part I*

Article 6

December 2022

An Educator's Reflection on the Importance of Embodiment, Imagination, and Liberation

Ashley N. Gibson

Baylor University, ashley_gibson1@baylor.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jma>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education and Teaching Commons](#), [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Tell us how this article helped you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Gibson, Ashley N. (2022) "An Educator's Reflection on the Importance of Embodiment, Imagination, and Liberation," *Journal of Multicultural Affairs*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jma/vol7/iss2/6>

This Current Issue/Trend is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Multicultural Affairs* by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

An Educator's Reflection on the Importance of Embodiment, Imagination, and Liberation

Ashley N. Gibson, Baylor University

In a real sense, all life is interrelated. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be [...] This is the interrelated structure of reality. (King, 1963)

A popular show called *See*, starring actor Jason Momoa, depicts a post-apocalyptic world that looks almost as old as the Viking age (Lawrence et al., 2019). In the show, a virus has wiped out most of the world's people, and those who survived are genetically blind. For the subsequent centuries, in the fictionalized world of the show, humans are not born with a sense of sight, and blindness becomes so normalized that eventually, having a sense of vision is vilified. Those who can see are known as witches. In the show, witches are hunted and murdered because they were born with the gene for sight and dared to utilize their ability within the community. In the show, sight eventually becomes a myth to a world that would rather live in darkness than be introduced to the possibility of seeing the light (Lawrence et al., 2019). When I began watching this show, it immediately reminded me of how dominant thinking and culture work. When one way of thinking is dominant for so long, it can be difficult and jarring when a different way of being is proposed or carried out. Even during the

COVID—19 pandemic, when new modes of education became more central to the public school system, the narrative around critical consciousness that involves tackling issues in diversity has become an even more touchy subject for many.

Ever since the start of the COVID—19 pandemic, educators everywhere have been tasked with figuring out new and innovative ways to go about delivering instruction. It seems that there have been two pandemics running parallel since March 2020: the COVID—19 pandemic and the realization that White supremacy is a natural and present reality in the United States. While COVID—19 was once a novel virus, White supremacy is systemic and deeply embedded in school culture (Allen, 2004; Blaisdell, 2018; Picower, 2009; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). There has been a similar progression from initial pandemic lockdowns to the normalization of living with the virus and the initial wokeness of White people to the normalization of performative allyship and the unfounded attack on critical race theory (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). Once the shock value of a new phenomenon wears off, America is truly a place where it sets the complacency that suggests we were not going to do anything about the issues we are facing in the first place. I would argue that the same derelict ways the delusion of White supremacy and racism have gone unchecked have led to the lackadaisical and downright lazy ways we have tackled the COVID—19 pandemic over time. We are a nation good at avoiding reality until it kills us. This haphazard ethic has made its way into our education system, where all our systemic failure and decline meet up to the detriment of our nation's future people. Whenever I observe this, my biggest three complaints

are that as educators, (a) we do not stay in our bodies long enough to truly engage with the human experience as we should, (b) we often lack imagination, (c) and we can therefore never truly be liberated from the dangers of the systemic cycles we face. To describe the importance of all three of these themes, first, I will share more contexts about myself and my perspective as the author. Then, this paper will describe the importance of embodiment and offer a call to action for educators seeking to become more critically conscious and engaged with social justice in action.

About the Author

As a teacher, author, and researcher, I know that I will always bring my beliefs and philosophical assumptions to my research and writing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, I am a middle-class Black woman who identifies as Christian, particularly in the liturgical expression. These intersectional realities in my life cause me to wonder what it means to be fully human and care about how human interactions in communities shape lives.

My writing is primarily ontological, and the nature of reality is a primary concern. Characteristically, an ontological standpoint allows me to see how reality is seen through many lenses. I am curious about how teachers' experiences of their realities shape their decision-making.

Consequently, I feel research and writing ought to be a reflective, iterative, and emergent process that requires a positive relationship with participants and subjects and reflects a value for their intersectional identities and our collective lived experiences. I also genuinely care about disparities that exist for Black and Latinx students and how teachers across racial lines

misuse discipline measures and other responses to student behaviors; this comes from my understanding of equality, equity, and liberation.

Next, my background in liberation theology informs my teaching ethic. Therefore, this reflection is philosophically grounded in constructivist and transformative worldviews, and my overarching pedagogical philosophy is that teaching is a calling and vocation, not merely a profession (Palmer, 1983, 2000, 2007). I also understand teaching as a deeply spiritual practice, requiring a synthesis of body, mind, and soul, concerning what it means to be fully human (Palmer, 1983, 2000, 2007; Wall, 2016). Through this spiritual lens, my positionality is rooted in understanding *tikkun olam*. *Tikkun olam* means "repair the world" (Cherian, 2008; Leslie, 2016; Rubel, 2005; Winer, 2008). *Tikkun olam* is a Jewish concept that I feel has lasting implications for the work of education, learning, and organizational change. I approach this reflection piece with the more profound value and understanding that as I write, I am also doing the inner work of correcting my assumptions and misunderstandings. In doing this, I can become a more well-rounded human. Bringing my more well-rounded self into educational spaces adds value and richness to those spaces. Therefore, as I repair and develop myself, I can also help transform my environments and communities.

I also understand what it is like to be a public-school teacher in Texas. I have spent time in larger and smaller charter school districts. In my experience, charter schoolteachers have fewer resources than teachers in a larger independent school district (ISD). After six years of teaching as an elementary school teacher, I became a

high school teacher in a nearby ISD. This experience changed my understanding of education. As a larger district schoolteacher, my colleagues and I received many resources, autonomy, grant writing opportunities from an extensive education foundation, and more.

I worked for a smaller charter school as a teacher for six years and then as an administrator for two years. The charter school I once worked for currently has three campuses of predominately Black and Latinx teachers and learners. After teaching for 15 years, I began working at the charter school in 2019, and by that time, I had a broader perspective on education and learning. I also came up with a wheelhouse full of tools such as restorative practices and culturally relevant pedagogy. At that time, I began serving as a district culture coordinator, a role for which I wrote the job description and standard operating procedures. I had access to all the campuses in one charter school district in this role. At each campus, I worked closely with the principals to implement and account for their cultural standards. I helped revise and design the basic principles of their school culture to help the organization align with positive behaviors and instructional support, or PBIS. This system often includes the use of restorative practices and culturally relevant pedagogy. In 2020, I witnessed the impact of the global pandemic on an already struggling school culture and teachers who already faced a lack of access to essential training and resources. My awareness and expertise in teaching, learning, and leading informs this reflection piece.

As the author, I remain reflexive and mindful of how my knowledge of myself informs this reflection piece's interpretive and theoretical ideas. Throughout this

reflection, I refer to embodiment, imagination, and liberation. The work of seeing more authentic, equitable, and democratic schooling begins with educators becoming more self-aware, curious, and embracing our experiences in our bodies as authentic, valid, and capable of creating and co-creating positive changes both as individuals and in communities with others. Being curious about the possibilities for good changes is what is meant by imagination. A way forward for educators is to imagine a world where new and more equitable systems are possible. And as educators actively make moves toward those more equitable systems, teachers can seek to become more liberatory in their approach to instructional practices. As educators experiencing life together, we can become more aware of who we are in our bodies, embrace our imagination, and seek liberation. This reflection describes the hopes and benefits of chasing the realization of all three themes.

Embodiment

We, as humans, must remain in our bodies to see changes that help us. Embodiment is an act of becoming more whole that helps educators go from speakers of the truth to doers of the truth and believers in the truth (Brown, 2017; hooks, 1994; Taylor, 2018). I use the word embodiment here in a spiritual sense because, as an educator with a background in theological studies, I realized something particular about being Black and being a Christian in America that has a lot to do with White supremacy. I realized that if I was not careful and if I continued in the same tradition of faith from my early days as a Christian, I would have believed that to be absent from my body was better than

experiencing life as we know it here on Earth. I observed the impact American evangelical Christianity had on Black Americans, and I realized that Bible-believing Christianity has a way of distracting us from ourselves, our bodies, our needs as individuals, and our needs as a people. Centuries of belief in Christ and the Christian God taught us that heaven awaited repentant sinners and that to be concerned with the desires and the needs of the physical is sinful and less holy. This theology leads many to choose Christian spirituality over an embodied desire for a better here and now. What I see happening in social spaces online and in real life are tensions between Black folks who want to focus on the importance of who we are right here and now and those who want to forgo that focus because heaven awaits. But what this does is distract us, divides our community, and make us complicit in upholding White supremacy as we know it.

To always dwell in our bodies is to remain connected to ourselves and others. It is to share collective pain and pleasure and to know that is all that matters and that we are all connected and share success and failures (Hill-Collins, 2019; hooks, 1994; Love, 2019; Taylor, 2018). Embodiment is an essential aspect of what it will take to see ourselves through oppression to liberation. We must remain in our bodies cognitively and spiritually in whatever capacities we have to help ourselves and one another. By remaining curious about my complicity, aware of my surroundings and how my intersectional realities play a role in how I present myself and show up as an educator each day, I am constantly aware that I have to learn how to stay present and embody the awareness and disruption to White supremacy that I hope to see in my learners.

Imagination

How can we hope to overcome the struggles that we are facing if we can only look backward at what we have always done? In K-12 education, we have lived through an unprecedented pandemic. Yet, it pangs me to see that so many teachers, administrators, schools, and school boards are still talking about learning loss in the same fearful way that we did before implementing crisis schooling (Baker, 2020). At the onset of the pandemic, crisis schooling became a cool buzzword because we were doing something different during heavy lockdowns around the globe. Suddenly, everyone was learning from home, teaching remotely, and figuring out how to do school without the school building.

However, not even the pandemic could disrupt the economy that keeps the powerful in power and the powerless and marginalized exploited, underpaid, underappreciated, and yet striving, hopeful, and willing to risk death for work and school. Where is our hope? Where is our ability to imagine new and better? Where are the dreamers and the doers? The policymakers and the change agents? It seems we are too few and so far between. The only way to fight this is to get more creative. To allow our human agency to allow us to imagine, to will ourselves out of the stagnant thinking that this is how it has always been done, so this is how it must always be (Brown, 2017; hooks, 1994; Love, 2019). I am convinced that the collective imagining of folks around the globe, but very critically in the United States, is what will help us heal from our complacency and see some light moving forward.

Liberation

If we describe transformation without freeing ourselves from racism, bigotry, and inequitable social norms, we are not talking about liberation. Since 2020, greater emphasis has been placed on antiracist education, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging work, and the subsequent sanctioning and banning thereof (Sawchuck, 2021). However, few are willing and equipped to enter a conversation and take a stance on the pressing need for liberation, whether economic, social, or otherwise. Black folks who advocate for collective liberation are moving into spaces together and attempting to shift and orient us in the direction of hope, or intersectionality, interdependence, and interconnectedness (Hill-Collins, 2019). Without a focus on liberation, we will continue to cycle through systemic injustice after injustice, death on death like breathing under a mask that provides little hope for protection. We must seek collective liberation; it is imperative if we are to see any lasting change in our classrooms and in the world.

Conclusion

A wealth of literature suggests that Black and Brown people were disproportionately more affected by the COVID—19 pandemic (Baker, 2020; Kelly et al., 2021). Moving forward, educators would benefit from learning more humanizing and democratizing educational practices. At a time when racial diversity is under scrutiny and attack, educators are on the frontlines of access to young learners who stand to benefit from teachers providing more culturally responsive frameworks to help them become better citizens. Yet the very intelligence we need students to

develop is being stunted with legislation designed to stifle, thwart, and render impossible any hope our children have of becoming well-rounded enough to come up with creative solutions to problems as seemingly challenging to manage as the coronavirus. In essence, we have cornered ourselves. Right now, legislators in Texas, Missouri, New Hampshire, Idaho, and several other states, have laws in place banning teaching that would be considered controversial or that addresses race, historical facts such as chattel slavery in the United States, and its systemic impact on the nation (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). What will the generational impact of this be in five, ten, or twenty years, if our histories are ignored, the truth is erased, and culture is rendered controversial? I would argue that a novel virus will be the least of our worries. We are interrupting our imaginations for a world that is even better than the one we have seen so far; we are missing out on what it means to dwell in our bodies in a way that appreciates this time, space, and the planet that we dwell on together. We cannot creatively seek our liberation or that of others if the tools we need are hidden from us (Brown, 2017; hooks, 1994). Similar to the fictional post-apocalyptic world of the TV show *See*, we may hide these tools for so long that they become a myth. And that is a terrifying possibility. So, I have decided that as a teacher, a consultant, and as a citizen of this country, the three most important things for me to steward well are (a) my own ability to stay in my body and remain present and alive here and now as much as possible, (b) to maintain and perpetuate my imagination, and (c) to live into my desire for liberation for myself and others. I want us to dwell together in authenticity, imagine

better together, and seek freedom from systemic oppression.

References

- Allen, Ricky Lee. (2004). Whiteness and critical pedagogy. *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 36(2), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2004.00056.x>
- Baker, Kelly J. (2020). The editor's notebooks: Schooling amid a pandemic. *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, 29(4), 11–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ntlf.30244>
- Blaisdell, Benjamin. (2018). The new one-drop rule: Challenging the persistence of white supremacy with in-service teachers. *Teaching Education*, 29(4), 330–342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2018.1505841>
- Brown, Adrienne Maree. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds* (1st ed.). AK Press.
- Cherian, Finney. (2008). “Tikkun olam”-to repair and perfect the world: The importance of teaching social justice pedagogy. *International Journal of Learning*, 15(2), 287–294. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1447-9494/CGP/v15i02/45618>
- Creswell, John W., & Cheryl N. Poth. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Hill-Collins, Patricia. (2019). *Intersectionality as critical social theory* (1st ed.). Duke University Press.
- hooks, bell. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Kelly, Lisa M., Deniz Kilinc, Sonia Lawrence, & Cosimo Morin. (2021). Pandemic schooling and the politics of safety. *Queen's Law Journal*, 46(2), 343–357. https://www.academia.edu/49067061/Pandemic_Schooling_and_the_Politics_of_Safety?from=cover_page
- King, Martin Luther. (1963). Letter from Birmingham jail. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 212(2), 78–88.
- Lawrence, Francis, Steve Knight, Peter Chernin, Jenno Topping, & Kristen Campo (Executive producers). (2019-2021). *See* [TV series]. Apple TV.
- Leslie, Alex. (2016). Tikkun olam: Collectivity, responsibility, history: A qualitative study of tikkun olam among Jewish community workers in Greater Vancouver. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 33(2), 291–308.
- Love, Bettina L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive* (1st ed.). Beacon Press.
- Palmer, Parker J. (2000). *Let your life speak: Listening for the voice of vocation* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, Parker J. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Palmer, Parker J. (1983). *To know as we are known: A spirituality of education* (1st ed.). Harper & Row.
- Picower, Bree. (2009). The unexamined whiteness of teaching: How white teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 12(2), 197–215. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320902995475>

- Rubel, Carol Weiss. (2005). Positive youth development and tikkun olam: A path towards healing and responsibility. *Paths of Learning*, 23, 23–25.
- Sawchuck, Stephen. (2021, May 18). *What is critical race theory, and why is it under attack?* Education Week. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>
- Stout, Cathryn, & Thomas Wilburn. (2022, February 1). *CRT map: Efforts to restrict teaching racism and bias have multiplied across the U.S.* <https://www.chalkbeat.org/22525983/map-critical-race-theory-legislation-teaching-racism>
- Taylor, Sonya Renee. (2018). *The body is not an apology: The power of radical self-love* (1st ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Utt, Jamie, & Shelly Tochluk. (2020). White teacher, know thyself: Improving anti-racist praxis through racial identity development. *Urban Education*, 55(1), 125–152.
- Wall, Benjamin. (2016). *Welcome as a way of life: A practical theology of Jean Vanier* (1st ed.). Cascade.
- Winer, Mark L. (2008). Tikkun olam: A Jewish theology of “repairing the world.” *Theology*, 111(864), 433–441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0811100606>