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(Re)Membering: Black Women Engaging Memory through Journaling

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Abstract

This manuscript is a confluence of voices: A Black university professor at a Historically Black University in the Southeast and her two pre-service teachers. Using journaling as a catalyst for transformative healing; three young, Black women discuss their intersecting identities and bear witness to each other's memories. To resist racist representations Black women must confront the colonizing ideology by developing a critical consciousness. In short, we must confront massive hate by fully loving and embracing our Blackness. The study elucidates how selfactualization writing can cultivate healing while promoting academic success.

Keywords

Black females, subjects, literacy, urban education, writing, teacher education, teachers of color, subjects

Morrison (1995) declared writing to be "thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, writing is also awe and reverence and mystery and magic" (p. 92). As a Black female educator, I have always used writing to (re) discover who I am/was at various times in my life. Writing allowed me to

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connect my life with that of literary giants and their fictional literary creations. In my journal, I explored brokenness alongside Janie Crawford (Hurston, 1969), Pecola Breedlove (Morrison, 1970), and Celie (Walker, 1982). Much like Janie, Pecola, and Celie, living life as a Black Woman, experiencing the intersectional oppressions (Collins, 2019) of racism, sexism, and because of my plus-size form, sizism had left me beautifully broken. I too, was a survivor of assault and was still terrified of opening my life to new individuals because doing so could trigger another violation. I was ridiculed for dark skin and my size and did not feel loved, much less affirmed. I was deeply connected to each character and to the author through words and memory. Communing with the words of each novel and my own writing created a way to look at the intersections of my identities, and afforded forgiveness, healing, and social action (Collins, 2019).

Like Xiomara, the Black Latina teen protagonist in the young adult novel, *The Poet X*, I wrote in my journal in the late hours "and the pages of my notebook swell from all the words I've pressed onto them. It almost feels like the more I bruise the page the quicker something inside me heals" (Acevedo, 2018, p. 283). I faced depression's suffocation in my words; but writing in my journal also illustrated stark contrasts from writing assignments in my English classes. In far too many English classrooms, writing instruction primarily focuses on editing and the standardization of writing. Many students receive pages bleeding with red ink correcting grammar instead of saturated with praise over the potency of the content. This stance shifts writing from being a source of possibility to one of ridicule and limitation (Baker-Bell, 2017a; Butler, 2018; Love, 2019). Black children and youth need and deserve the space and opportunity to tell their stories without feeling they are going to be met with red marks and feedback that works to stifle their Black voice, creativity, knowledge, and ways of existing and being in the world (Muhammad, 2012; Smith, 2018; Winn & Johnson, 2011). For this reason, writing in my journal was transformational. My journal did not judge me; my journal did not request that I revise my words to make them more palatable; my journal was not littered with red marks correcting my language. My journal simply accepted my words, my stories, my memories as truth. In this manner, my journal became a catalytic act of (re)membering (Dillard, 2012) an "awakening, an opening of the spirit, of something that has, until that moment, been asleep within" me (p. 3).

In this paper, I alongside two of my Black female pre-service educators (Katelyn and Shinaya), present our memories brought forth through journaling as racial storytelling and a call to action for English Educators who work with Black girls and women who are consistently battered by schools and society's silences, marginalization, and strategic erasures (Johnson, Boutte,

et al., 2018; Morris, 2018; Smith, 2016). Furthermore, we advocate for English classrooms to shift from the traditional and linear ways of writing as they are acts of curricular and pedagogical violence against the spirits and humanity of Black girls and women (Butler, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017; Smith, 2018). The questions guiding this inquiry are: What can we learn about journaling as an authentic space for racial healing in the lives of a Black female Professor and two Black female university students preparing to be secondary English teachers? What insights do the preservice teachers take away for creating loving spaces for Black girls and Black youth in their future secondary English classrooms? The paper begins by discussing writing as an act of love for Black girls and women, we then provide a methodological framework that centers journaling as racial storytelling and share excerpts from our journals to demonstrate the vulnerability needed to write to heal wounds long-since inflicted by racial trauma, symbolic and physical violence. We conclude by sharing pedagogical insights for Black girls and Black youth.

Writing as Love for Black Girls and Women

Research has long shown opportunities for authentic writing experiences can provide spaces for students to regain control over their identities and lives in a world where their very identity is constantly under attack. This is certainly the case as we consider the vast body of knowledge about the spirit murdering of Black students in schools (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Johnson & Bryan, 2016; Love, 2016) and Black pre-service teachers in programs of teacher education (Haddix, 2017; Jackson et al., 2017). This murdering comes in the forms of physical violence, like the incident at Spring Valley High School when a Black female student was body-slammed by a school resource officer; systemic violence, such as school suspensions, expulsions, over-representation in special education, and underrepresentation in gifted education; pedagogical violence with rigid writing assignments which limit imagination and prohibit self-actualization; and curricular violence which centers whiteness and limits representation of authors of Color (Johnson & Bryan, 2016; Morris, 2019; Wynter-Hoyte & Swindler Boutte, 2020). These repeated attacks constitute unconscionable and racist assaults on the Black mind and soul and perpetuate inequitable systems of education for Black students in K-12 classrooms and higher education.

The Black girls and women's stories from around the country provoke anger, sadness, and a firm resolve that change must happen now. In August 2019, a school resource officer (SR0) slammed a sixth-grade Black girl into a locker for violating several school rules including taking too many milks and standing up on the school bus. Even the Covid-19 Pandemic could not

stave the violence against Black women. On March 12, 2020, police officers executed a no-knock search warrant in the wrong home and brutally murdered Breonna Taylor (Oppel and Taylor, 2020). At the time this paper was written, no officers involved in this tragedy were charged with her murder. June 6, 2020, 19-year-old Black Lives Matter Activist Oluwatoyin Salau, who was initially thought missing, was later found murdered in Tallahassee, Florida (Nieto, 2020. These events go to prove, Black girls and women need sanctuary spaces and must always be protected. Morris (2019) postulates the "anger and pain experienced by Black- and Brown women and girls must also serve their own liberation" (p. 6). If we are to affect such change, then learning from the Black girls and women is critical. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) argue by focusing "on excellent educational pedagogies for Black women and girls, given their distinct oppressive histories, then Black women lay the foundation for advancing education for all" (p. 300).

If taken up in a critical and humanizing manner, writing can be used as a tool to speak back to anti-black violence and racism that Black girls and women face daily (Cariaga, 2018; Lyiscott, 2019a; McArthur & Lane, 2018; Ohito, 2018). Doing so challenges dominant narratives and creates contested spaces for students to experience what Muhammad and Behizadeh (2015) advocate:

(1) Self-defining their lives as opposed to others writing about their lives.
(2) Nurturing resilience in ways to remain steadfast against society's oppressive conditions.
(3) Engaging others or contemporaries into the fold to strive for better humanity for all.
(4) Building capacity for future generations.

As exemplified in Xiomara's poignant words at the beginning of this manuscript, the outcomes of opportunities for authentic writing when words can "bruise the page," resulting in a kind of necessary healing, a cathartic connection between writer, words, and notebook. It is this kind of catharsis that this paper explores as we share insights from the journaling experiences of a Black HBCU professor and two undergraduates studying to be secondary English teachers.

Journaling to Engage Memory: Racial Storytelling as a Theoretical Framework

Scholars of Color have long heralded the need for authentic writing which affirms the self and critique dominant narratives of whiteness (Johnson,

Boutte, et al., 2018; Muhammad, 2015; Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015). Behizadeh (2014) defines authenticity as "a student's perception that a school task connects to his/her life" (p. 28). This takes writing assignments from the standards on the classroom walls and artfully melds them into the lived realities and wisdom ever-present within our communities (Johnson et al., 2017; Muhammad & Behizadeh, 2015). We argue that journaling is racial storytelling and a powerful example of authentic writing which should be more prevalent within English/language arts classrooms.

Johnson (2017) defines racial storytelling as a pedagogical tool that fosters healing because it asks the writer to interweave their past, present, and future-selves' voices into a complex dialogue with one another. It enables student writers to negotiate a myriad of social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, religion, dis/ability, or language) and examine how the intersections create tensions in their lives within and outside of the classroom. Racial storytelling acknowledges the past cannot be changed but allows a writer to (re)member (Dillard, 2012) and thereby (re)enter memories using a lens of radical Black love and resilience. Consequently, racial storytelling allows the author's past to inform and guide their present and future interactions, thereby strengthening the connections between past, present, and future selves. The results are writings that restore the souls of Black girls and women while simultaneously celebrating both the individual and collective humanity (Johnson, 2017; Smith, 2018).

Pedagogically, I took up Black and Chicana Feminists notion of experiential knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 2000; Cooper et al., 2017; hooks, 1992; Smith, 2018) into my worlds as a Black female Middle-Level English Professor in my secondary curriculum and methods courses where I utilize journaling as a form of radical racial storytelling. With pre-service teachers, I used journaling to resist oppressive constructs which wage war on our emotional well-being and mental health. If we were to heal, we would have embraced the need to embrace our "wild tongues" as "wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 54). Journaling in this manner became testimony in which the reader can bear witness to raw truths and the writer engages in acts of self-preservation and literacy practice (Baker-Bell, 2017b; Toliver, 2020). In this article, I, alongside my students, share analysis of our journal entries, a process of sharing that reflects the vulnerability necessary for healing wounds long-since inflicted by racial trauma, symbolic, and physical violence. Our analysis leads to pedagogical insights for teachers and teacher educators about how such writing is vital as a form of communal bonding, a kinship, which allows both teachers and students to "reimagine ELA classrooms as revolutionary sites that disrupt racial injustice while striving to transform the world and humanize the lives of Black youth" (Johnson et al., 2017, p. 62).

Methodology: Writing to Heal Past and Present Wounds

In this section, I want to make transparent the processes necessary to create liberatory writing spaces. Such transparency demands emotional vulnerability as it invites healing and demands love. This is heartwork and demands authenticity from all participants. To model vulnerability, the section begins with centering myself, my philosophical beliefs on writing, and an illustration of writing has saved my life and cemented my sanity. I then delve into the purpose and steps of creating our affirming writing space. The final section examines how we used journaling as a tool for self-actualization.

Centering the Self

My devotion to writing with Black women pre-service educators as a cathartic, healing, necessary space comes not only from characters like Xiomara and researchers like Muhammad and Behizadeh but from my own life. It is important to note, that I view time and space from a Black Liberatory Perspective in which "time is treated as passing through a social space rather than a material one, and in which time can be reoccurring, personal, and phenomenological" (Boutte, 2015, p.19). This stance rebukes Western notions of time as a linear construct. In Black Liberatory Epistemologies time is circular and memories can be reentered to manipulate as in Woodson's (2014) *Brown Girl Dreaming*; to instruct as in Morrison's (1987) *Beloved* or to redefine self as in Acevedo's (2018) *The Poet X.*

Like Xiomara, I have always considered words old acquaintances. Because I valued my friendship with those old acquaintances, I delved into exploring their intricacies. I wanted to learn about word history, formation, and patterns. I escaped into the worlds of Octavia Butler as I became engrossed in traveling the infinite space of time. I danced to the melodic sounds of Nikki Giovanni and Maya Angelou. James Baldwin taught me the power of vulnerability in writing and Audre Lorde elucidated how words were not only my legacy but also resistance tools against white supremacy and hegemony (Johnson et al., 2017). Writing provides a necessary sanctuary space, a spiritual and affirming space, where time and space are reoccurring and are interconnected to nurture, fortify, and sustain my past, present, and future selves.

As a young writer as well as today, my Black literary heritage were mentor texts for my spirit because they affirmed my brilliance, humanized my experiences, and illustrated how to live and write unapologetically (Muhammad, 2015; Smith, 2016). Their words were also a mirror of reciprocity, one in which, "a love for the self is inextricably linked to a love for others; an

acknowledgment that good ground produces good fruit. . . an endless cycle of regeneration" (Jackson et al., 2014, p. 399). In this manner, writing was more than catharsis; writing was an expression of love: A way to love myself, a way to love my Blackness, and a way to love the world which often hated me (Lyiscott, 2019b).

My journal was more than a dialogic space; it was a liberating place of intense self-love and deeper knowing (Smith, 2016). Writing in my journal allowed me to (re)member my disconnected selves and helped situate my homecoming (Dillard, 2012; Johnson, Boutte, et al., 2018). Dillard (2012) established memories as transformative possibilities and sites of reconciliation, healing, and joy. Writing authentically is important for all students, but vitally so for students of color who are often marginalized, overlooked, silenced in English classrooms. This is the wisdom that guides this work; an insistence that writing can provide a path to liberation, reconstruction of self, revalidation of identity, and immersion in love. Such methodology provides an important analytical lens through which I view my teaching and through which I designed the journaling experience resulting in this paper.

Creating Liberatory Writing Spaces

The writing experience captured in the upcoming sections comprises the memories of two Black female pre-service secondary English students, Katelyn, and Shaniya, and myself, Dywanna, a professor, at a historically black university located in the southeastern United States. We had each chosen to attend or work at this university for the same reason: so that our Blackness would be affirmed, celebrated, and loved. Though we found a liberatory space within the campus, outside its doors we were still riddled with anti-Black rhetoric and violence had taken its toll on our mental and emotional health.

We were fortunate to meet in my curriculum and assessment course, a class that focuses on pedagogical strategies which foster literacies. The class had just finished discussion on journal writing as both metacognitive checks to guide instruction and a tool for critical introspection. As the class ended, both Katelyn and Shaniya followed me to my office. It is important to note that my office, just as my classroom, is a space of agape love blending "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust and as well as honest and open communication" creating an atmosphere of vulnerability, truth, transparency, and openness (hooks, 2000, p. 39). My office is designed to celebrate Blackness in all its forms. The walls showcase a large mix-media collage of young Black woman with a huge afro of colorful butterflies. Quotes by Black literary authors such as bell hooks, Alice Walker, James

Baldwin, Jayson Reynolds, and Angie Thomas dot the walls on colorful paper. Picture books featuring Black skin in a variety of hues, contemporary young adult novels illustrating the Black teenage struggle, and Black literary classics fill the bookshelves. Photos of my family and my students' past and present remind me of my purpose. Depending on the mood, soft jazz, gospel, R&B or hip-hop sounds dance on the wind. My office stands as an artifact and testimony that I will love, respect, and protect Blackness.

As my office door closed, the flood gates erupted. Katelyn discussed the pains of love after ending a relationship. Shaniya explained the pressures of being a young, Black, female in America, and I confessed the demands of a Black female educator in academia. While I listened, I recalled Ms. Galiano, the English teacher from *The Poet X*, and placed journals in front of each of us. I reminded Shaniya and Katelyn that the love ethic which permeated my classroom and office, were also essential elements when inviting their future students to write. I challenged them to review their favorite Black authors for insights and create self-actualization invitations, an idea coined by pushing forth Baszile's (2006) notion of "breakthrough" moments for "people whose identities are denied, troubled, invisibleized must create the medium, the voice through which they become" (p. 95). Black girls and women need a space that allows them to self-define, self-validate, and self-love (Collins, 2000; Cooper et al., 2017). The journal should be a liberatory and space for Black girls and women where vulnerability, truth, transparency, and openness reside. By doing so, we model love as an action for our students but also for ourselves. This also highlights the difficulty in providing a step-by-step instructional guide for this process because we first needed to examine ourselves and let our hearts guide the next action steps.

Journaling Pedagogies for Self-Actualization

Johnson, Bryan, et al. (2018) pose two thought-provoking questions for English Educators: "What does it look like to (re)imagine urban classrooms as sites of love? . . . How might we utilize a pedagogy of love to include Black youths' racialized and gendered life histories and experiences and their language and literacy practices?" (p. 1). Invitations for writing as self-actualization can provide spaces for Black female preservice educators as well as other Black youth to engage in authentic writing experiences that allow them to define their memories, lives, languages, and literacy practices. I call these opportunities; *self-actualization invitations* and they can be found in the classrooms of English Educators who create a classroom community built upon a strong love ethic and a classroom environment of discovery and continuous affirmation. These literacy invitations include the use of literary texts that mirror diverse linguistic

Table 1. Comparing Prompts and Self-Actualization Invitations.

Prompts	Self-actualization invitations
Rigid, limiting	Opens possibilities
Affords one interpretation	Affords multiple interpretations
Requires response in a specific genre	Utilizes multiple genres
Linear view of time	Circular view of time

and cultural backgrounds as students write to celebrate and interrogate their life's stories with teachers/facilitators who model transparency and vulnerability in their own writing.

Self-actualization invitations are not writing prompts, as prompts create false narratives and, because they are void of authenticity and typically center a Eurocentric focus, further academic distance between many youths of Color and their white peers. This extends to writing on standardized assessments which sometimes even include the directions such as "do not write a song, play, or poem," limiting imaginations, creativity, and opportunities for self-actualization in student responses and reifying students' feelings of disempowerment. Our journaling is writing for the purpose of sustaining love not writing to be graded (Smith, 2018), writing in the genre that speaks from and to your heart, or the kind of writing that calls you.

In our work, we three needed spaces of critical self-reflection and self-awareness and, most importantly, to affirm self-love. Centering and deepening self-love, we opened spaces of forgiveness and thereby began to heal past wounds. With our experiences in mind, self-actualization invitations differ from traditional writing prompts in several ways outlined in Table 1.

As demonstrated in the following pages, I demonstrate how self-actualization invitations fostered our critical introspection. By agreeing to journal together and openly sharing our responses without fear of judgment, critique, or grades, we were fully present in a writing kinship which allowed us to bear witness for each other, legitimize our stories, and speak back to issues of racism and sexism which were daily constants in our lives. Channeling Xiomara, actualization writing enabled us to "think about all the things we could be if we were never told our bodies were not built for them" (iv). Because we created invitations from Black authors, they become literary ancestors, providing wisdom to help navigate us through life's gauntlets.

Once a week for 6 weeks, we would meet in my office after class to work on our collaborative project. We devoted an hour and a half to sharing our actualizations and creative responses. It is important to reemphasize that Katelyn and Shaniya's work was ungraded. Course assignments bombarded

Katelyn and Shaniya, yet they never missed or arrived unprepared for our collaboratively journaling session. As we committed to writing, we each chose mentor texts to guide our introspection. Our collaborative venture exemplified the power of student choice as we selected texts we were heart songs: food for the heart, mind, and spirit. Each text was what we each were reading for emotional nourishment. For Katelyn, Acevedo's (2018) *The Poet X* was an important choice as she wanted to reconnect with her poetic muse. Shaniya selected Baldwin's (1963) *The Fire Next Time* because she loved Baldwin's lyrical style and wanted to determine if time had changed the perception and treatment of Blacks in America. I chose Monáe et al.'s (2013) "Q.U.E.E.N." as I needed reminding of the inherent strength I possessed.

As this process provided instruction for English pedagogy and identity actualization, I modeled the practice of reading like a writer. We each vowed to read our self-selected texts within a week and determine the excerpt, which resonated with us the most. The following discussion questions guided our reading inquiry:

- How does the character(s) form identities which are authentic and genuine?
- How does the character(s) create loving definitions for themselves?
- How do racism, discrimination, and prejudice wage war on the character(s)' spirit?
- What strategies does the character(s) use to navigate obstacles?
- What actualization lesson(s) does the text inspire?

The mentor texts embraced multiple genres and reflected the notion that there are various ways to tell a story, and that no one genre is more legitimate than the next. In the same manner, incorporating diverse genres as mentor texts also created expressive freedom to write in various styles. Also, the mentor texts were written by Black women and men as a testament to the commonalities and possibilities which exist within the Black experience (Johnson, Boutte, et al., 2018). Examples of text annotations are below (Figure 1).

The annotations created fertile ground for our discussions. One by one, we read our excerpts out loud, discussed our observations, and analyzed parallels between the characters and our own lives. I probed our critical consciousness by asking, "What introspection does the text invite?" This allowed us to create self-actualization invitations with and for each other—entrees into our writing. As both Katelyn and Shaniya shared reflective moments in their texts, I harvested their ideas on a Padlet document, an interactive online collaborative platform so we would each have access to our thoughts when we

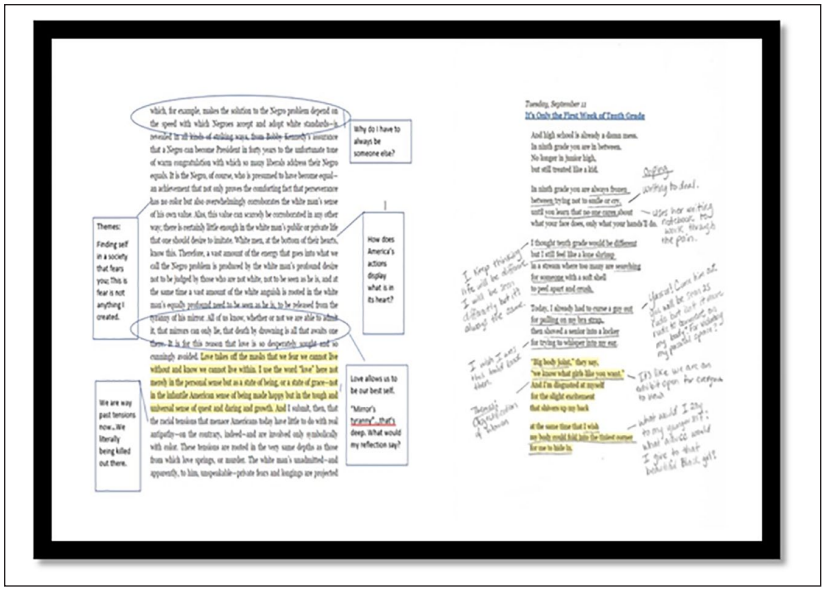

Figure 1. Mentor text annotation examples.

were away from campus. We collaboratively promised to create two self-actualization invitations to anchor our writing (Table 2) and devote six 1-hour sessions to write together—journal collaboratively.

Each invitation blended our musings and memories. As authors create in a variety of manners; we did not limit our genres; we decided to write across them, allowing us to compare their forms, advantages, and their possibilities. Each day, however, featured a new textual artifact. Each week, Katelyn, Shaniya, and I rotated being discussion facilitators. It was the facilitator's responsibility to display vulnerability and share their creative response first. Our discussions, which were organic and pertained to the actualization invitation, personal experiences, and any remaining lingering questions. As we were a sacred community, we knew our writings, our secrets, and our truths would be protectively held. We did as Anzaldúa (1987) described, if the world denies a home, we "will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture. . .with (our) own lumber, bricks, mortar and feminist architecture" (p. 22). The office space, our journals, and the individuals inside it became sanctuary spaces for one another.

Self-actualization invitations are grounded in the notion of reciprocal love. I could not merely ask Katelyn and Shaniya to reveal private aspects of

Table 2. Weekly Self-Actualization Invitations.

Week	Self-actualization invitation	Mentor text
Week 1	Communicate with your younger self and forgive yourself for something.	*The Poet X* Acevedo (2018)
Week 2	Have you ever pretended to be someone else? Why? Why were you not enough	*The Poet X* Acevedo (2018)
Week 3	What are some of your unhealthy coping mechanisms? How can you change these habits?	"Q.U.E.E.N." Monáe (2013)
Week 4	If your mirror could talk, what would it say?	*The Fire Next Time* Baldwin (1963)
Week 5	What goals do you want to accomplish?	*The Fire Next Time* Baldwin (1963)
Week 6	What I've learned about myself through journaling?	"Q.U.E.E.N." Monáe (2013)

their lives if I was not willing to do the same. I have been invested wholeheartedly in writing for self-preservation and self-love. My process with Katelyn and Shaniya went beyond superficial notions of classroom community when teachers know precious little about their students' lives, worries, experiences, or interests. Writing in such an accepting space created a more profound knowing, a communal love, where we cheered our identity reconstruction and our writing growth.

Findings: Our Memories, Our Lives, Our Truths

As we prepared to write the findings of this manuscript, Katelyn and Shaniya and I discussed which writings would we shared. Simultaneously proud and anxious, we struggled on which racial storytellings to release into the world. Shaniya reminds us that our writings were an example of our love. She read highlighted section from Baldwin's (1963) *The Fire Next Time* in which Baldwin reminds his readers, "One can give nothing without giving oneself—that is, to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving" (p. 86). Love requires us to take great risks. For this reason, each author decided to share the excerpt which created the most angst, modeling the vulnerability and courage we hope all teachers would choose to convey. Our racial storytelling journals reveal our findings on writing: (1) Writing helps soothe anxiety and doubt; (2) Writing connects past and future; and (3) writing is an example of discovery and memory. Each finding begins with a paragraph of content, explains why we needed and choose to write, shares a small excerpt from each of our journals, and ends

with what everyone learned from the process. With utmost vulnerability and love, we share our journals to provide a glimpse into the kind of heart work that self-actualization writing can be.

Katelyn's Racial Storytelling: Writing Alleviates Doubt and Anxiety

As a young Black woman growing up in the rural south, anxiety is a way of life. I know I do not suffer alone. Higher rates of anxiety and suicidal thoughts are reported in Black youth compared to their white or Hispanic counterparts (Rose et al., 2013). In 2017, suicide was the second leading cause of death for African Americans, ages 15 to 24 (CDC, 2019). I want my life to be a testimony to the courage needed to stand in the face of depression and doubt. I had to write to save myself. I needed to, as my professor often reminds me, write my way out (Muhammad, 2015; Smith, 2016).

My anxiety makes me feel like I am drowning in an ocean of my thoughts and emotions. I try and I try but I cannot swim with the racing currents and end up sinking into the void of depression. My anxiety makes me feel like I cannot breathe. It starts with a tightness in the center of my chest but grows and soon radiates through my body. I become consumed in my thoughts. A simple conversation with a friend replays a thousand times; each time with a different what-if scenario. In the end, I overthink my reactions and it hurts. My chest feels as if I have been sucker-punched. I hyperventilate and it feels as if I will never be soothed. I am just stuck and there is no escape to be found.

I needed to journal about my battle with anxiety stemming from a past relationship because I wanted to feel free. Journaling helped me place all emotions on paper and feel relaxed during times when I could not escape my mind. Journaling was an act of bravery because I had to come to terms with some of the triggers of my anxiety and be truly honest. Although essays are oftentimes the cornerstone of the ELA classroom, they do not always allow for creative expression or authenticity. I needed a way to love and my anxieties nakedly (Ella Mai, 2018, track 13) and decided to utilize poetic expression. I needed to lean on Maya Angelou, Nayyirah Waheed, and Beyoncé to help me navigate my anxiety. Poetry be it spoken or written, is rooted in unleashing emotion in a healthy way, which is why as we analyzed, unhealthy coping mechanisms, I chose to respond in poetic fashion. My poem discusses the angst which comes with the risk of choosing to love.

Untitled: Inner monologue

You.

Emotions and sentiment will never color your life. You.

You will never let doubt ruin the perfect occasion. You.

Your actions toward me will never haunt you. You will not ask if you did the right thing.

You will never choke down emotions to simply say hello. Your mind will not be bombarded with questions like. . . Did I not say enough?

Did I say too much? Did I touch too much? Am I wrong?

Am I wrong? Why am I wrong? Noooooo!

You.

You are not burdened with a tainted mind.

You are shrouded with luxury and privilege. You.

You don't even realize,

my heart is guarded by the

fiercest warriors in all the lands:

Me and I. . .

I protect the heart of a queen.

There's no way anyone will get past me.

I've built these walls with my own hands,

so I know they are solid.

You did a number on me

but now I know.

Nobody is gonna just "vibe"

their way in my heart.

I will not be owned.

They just wanna get in and do harm to my heart. I won't let them.

I'll be sure of it!

I am all I've got left.

I am everything to me.

Journaling provided me a life saver to stay afloat in an ocean of depression. It allowed me to realize like Michelle Obama, I too was *Becoming* (Obama, 2018). I was transforming because I engaged in a writing space that moved beyond the four walls of a classroom (Johnson, Bryan, et al., 2018; Muhammad, 2012; Smith, 2018). I needed a space that allowed me to speak my truth unapologetically. I needed to face the pain in the wound (Baker-Bell et al., 2017). I could not have done this alone. I needed the security of a Black

female classmate and a Black female professor who understood my pain because they walked the same gauntlet of racism. I needed to be *LoveHappy* (Knowles & Carter, 2018, Track Nine). I had to see love, hear love, speak love, and write love so I would not become a disheartening statistic. I spoke love and wisdom in my journal, and it brought me closer to the center.

Shaniya's Racial Storytelling: Writing Connects Past and Future Selves

As a Black female pre-service English education candidate, I constantly struggled with depression. My body, spirit, and voice had been violently ripped apart dealing with the pressures of being young, Black, and female in America. I felt like my past and present beings were separated and I needed a space where my future and past selves could dialogue (Smith, 2016). I needed to use my voice so I would not lose my body (Johnson & Bryan, 2016). I chose to share an excerpt from my journal which was to write a letter to my younger self, but the letter was too restrictive. I needed the freedom of free verse poetry. My poem begins in mainstream English, but I specifically chose to end it in African American Language because I could not stop midstream to translate my thoughts; doing so would have only further fractured me (Baker-Bell, 2020).

Poem to My Younger Self

This world had me thinking
I was trash.
Melanin tainted.
Feminine curves
Groped and objectified.
But I. . .
I ain't nobody's garbage.
I swallowed poison
That sh—stuff..ain't good for the
soul.
"Poligies for not seeing you.
But today. . .I'm gon' tell you
ten reasons, why I

be lovin' you like crazy.
You is unapologetically Black
You revel in love.
You don' see me as broken.
You ain't never give advice,
you ain't gonna do yo' damn self.
You transparent 'bout grief.
You be lovin' hard.
You be holdin' me tightly,
You is fearless.
You forgive me ev'ertime
You dope.

Journaling allowed me the chance to step from behind the mask and be completely truthful with myself (Johnson et al., 2017; Smith, 2018). Regardless of how painful or traumatic the memory was, journaling allowed me to attack each one with a reflective mindset. It made me understand how important my emotions and feelings do matter. Since I began journaling, I was able to build a stronger emotional relationship with myself. I began to not be afraid of my past, but to understand that its only purpose was to shape me into the person that I am today. Journaling introduced me to the art of "self-care," with the understanding that to fully fulfill my life's purpose I must first take care of myself. It is like Audre Lorde said, self-care is about self-preservation and is both resistance and political warfare (Lorde, 2017).

Dywanna's Racial Storytelling: Writing is Discovery and Memory

As a plus-sized Black woman in the academy, I feel as if I have been broken and reformed countless times. It shocks me that we considering breaking a bad thing. When glass shatters on the floor, we feel angry. When a sentimental favorite such a necklace breaks, we are saddened. Even the simple act of a nail breaking from its cuticle bed causes us to look at our fingers in frustration. We see breaking as bad . . . but, when things are broken, we begin to cherish them a bit more. There are moments that exist in the break. There are mentors which can help us return to ourselves.

For me, admitting that I was broken, was when I began to heal. Owning the depression and anxiety, was traumatic. I was able to maintain my center by holding on to certain truths. First, writing allows the freedom to be my

most authentic self. Second, as we wrote, my journals were always accepted as minute masterpieces. Finally, I was reminded how writing is indeed love and is "always in us, no matter how cold the flame. It is always present, waiting for the spark to ignite, waiting for the heart to awaken" (hooks, 2000, p. 115). I chose to share an excerpt from my journal on what I learned from this experience. What I learned was why we must write. Why English educators and English classrooms must include self-actualization invitations because by doing so, educators open veins of discovery that allow a writer to find and revel in their voice.

Why Write?

You see, to me. . . Putting pen to paper is a
Religious experience.
When words dart across my page,
I know they have slipped from God's lips.
Flowed through the blood in my veins;
Powered my heartbeat;
Traversed the wrinkles of my
brain and spring forth for my hands.
Fortunate? Perhaps.
Blessed?
Certainly.
Writing takes me
to a higher ecclesiastical plain.
I'm allowed to sit quietly.
Reread thoughtfully,
Savor the creative spirit:
That fluttering moment in your soul
when you know you give birth
to something new.
Unfathomable rapture.
My joy comes when I get to take
the amalgamation of wisdom, truth,
guilt, fear and watch it

Flow into a few hastily formed words:
And then tightly pressed sentences.
And then pages form before my eyes
and I smile knowing all that while.
My words recognize that I am flawless.
My words bear no judgement.
My words echo power.
My words are my legacy.
Writing is a communion
with the divine
which brings new enlightenment.
A new revision of my being.
I'm the constant Phoenix.
Transforming.
Changing.
Becoming. . ..
Becoming. . ..
Becoming.
ME.
Every rendition stands stronger.
More robust.
More beautiful.
Poetry is not about perfection.
Poetry is about becoming
A change agent.
Stepping into a destiny
long since ordained.
Poetry is living unapologetically.
Loving unconditionally,
Standing courageously in the face
oppression and declaring,
I am Black radiance and love.
Poetry is being my most

phenomenal and authentic self.
Fortunate?
Perhaps.
Blessed?
Of course.
Beyond measure.
Beyond comprehension.
Miracles occur when my fingertips
touch my pen.
Simply because I write.
I. Am. A. Writer.
I Am A Poet.
I AM A Warrior.
And for that
I say,
Ashe.

Discussion and Pedagogical Implications: Creating Writing Sanctuaries for Black Women and Girls

As we wrote, we reaffirmed that these acts of creation required bravery. Our writing provides important examples of using writing as a means of racial storytelling which bears witness to the realities being Black women. Writing in this manner is an act of courage, vulnerability, and love in practice because it allows writing to serve as testimonies of survival. Our writing also demonstrates the importance of creating writing sanctuaries (Smith, 2016) for Black women and girls. These spaces encourage students to write beyond grades and fully engage memories in a space, that is, vulnerable, open, and honest. When we realized we could be as authentic and raw in writing as we wanted, we realized that expressive writing served as a form of freedom. Knowing that it was acceptable for us to write who we are allowed an emotional release and cemented a deeper understanding of freedom of expression. In our sanctuary space, we wrote freely and honestly; we were open and unafraid to travel to the dark places of the past. In doing so, we courageously illuminated the darkness inside each of us with healing light.

In addition, our writing affirms the tenets from Muhammad and Behizadeh (2015) work by (1) taking up real-life issues such as assault, loss, depression,

anxiety; (2) talking back to oppressive forces with resilience as we owned emotions, found our voices as each author; (3) engaging others as this project was a kinship and collaborations; and (4) building capacity for future generations as insights were shared between teacher educator and preservice teachers. Finally, Katelyn and Shaniya saw implications not just for Black girls and women but for all Black youth.

Writing as Healing

The self-actualization invitations afforded healing because we reflected on traumas and how impacted us and analyzed how to react to similar situations differently. Katelyn processed through depression she experienced due in part to a challenging relationship which she discusses through her poem. Shaniya utilized her poetry to reclaim her Blackness and praise her resilience which imbues her Black skin. I reflected and remembered that my words have always rooted me to this earth. When I find myself lost, my words will guide my return. I only needed to be courageous enough to believe in them and in me. This step was only the beginning and we need further opportunities to heal our minds, bodies, and souls.

Writing to Embrace Languages

Within this writing sanctuary, we welcomed African American Language (A.A.L.) into the English classroom. During our weekly discussions, we always used A.A.L when we talked. Using our mother-tongue enhanced learning because we could express love, determine values, and build and nurture relationships, in a more generative manner. This can clearly be seen in Shaniya's poem written primarily in A.A.L she invokes the perpetual "be" to show that loving herself, her words and her language will continue for perpetuity. As we spoke or wrote, we did not have to bruise our spirits to translate to mainstream English. Our mother-tongue was equally valued, and this provided a sense of communal love. It was a reminder that we must create "an education system where Black students, their language, their literacies, their culture, their creativity, their joy, their imagination, their brilliance, their freedom, their existence, their resistance MATTERS" (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 3).

Writing to Engage Others

Within this writing sanctuary, I wrote beside my students. Like Katelyn, I delved into my childhood and repaired a wounded heart. With Shaniya, I peered into the mirror of soul and screamed the words I desperately wanted

and needed to hear. Together, we displayed our truths simultaneously. Doing so created a community of learners who were willing to witness truths and acknowledge their legitimacy. We embodied the notion that an educator's need for comfort should not eclipse their students' need to share stories. As a group, we reflected on what we expectation English Educators to understand about writing instruction. We do not expect teachers to have the answers. We do, however, expect teachers to display agape love and support by being transparent and vulnerable. We expect you to have a listening and understanding ear as we unpack emotions. We expect you to model writing as love and the struggle of searching for inner peace. We emphatically believe creating writing sanctuaries and centering self-love in writing is a true act of bravery that nurtures forgiveness, acceptance, and healing.

Conclusion: Using Memory to Transform Education

This process reaffirmed my commitment to write alongside my Black female students. Together, we created a community of learners who were willing to witness truths and acknowledge their legitimacy. For other educators wondering how this might look in your own classrooms, there are a few essential insights to remember: when students center self-love in writing, we must appreciate that this is a real and necessary act of bravery that nurtures forgiveness, acceptance, and healing.

To actualize this in your classroom, you must know that there will be no step-by-step instructional guide. As all good teaching should be, this is heartwork, so there is work that teachers will have to discover for themselves. Heart work begins with critical introspection to analyze what pedagogical practices affirm and loves our students. It begins with analyzing classroom libraries and classroom walls to ensure they reflect the diverse faces, languages, sexualities, abilities, religions, and ages of our students. Reflect on my description of our sanctuary environment. Space was designed to showcase and radiate Black love. Heartwork, like love, is a choice and demands that risk our security for our students to reclaim and proclaim their liberation.

Remember that, in our work: (a) We started with issues of concern to Katelyn and Shaniya; (b) As their teacher, I joined in making myself vulnerable through my writing; (c) We introduced and discussed mentor texts that *we chose for ourselves*; (d) We collaborated in the development of self-actualization invitations or entry points to writing based on those texts; and (e) We wrote, shared, discussed, and wrote some more; all from the heart. This cycle displays writing as love.

Finally, we hope you will face your pen or cursor boldly because, as Acevedo's (2018) Xiomara stated, we only "know that learning to believe in the power of our own words has been the most freeing experience of [our lives]" (p. 357). As instructors of preservice teachers and/or adolescents, when we face the pen boldly, we create a powerful model that can open new spaces for them to appreciate the power of their words as a freeing and thereby self-actualizing experience.

Author Note

This manuscript is a confluence of voices: A Black university professor at a Historically Black University in the Southeast and her two pre-service teachers. Using journaling as a catalyst for transformative healing; three young, Black women discuss their intersecting identities and bear witness to each other's memories. Throughout the piece, the pronoun "I" refers to Dywanna's personal as a sojourned to become a professor. The pronoun "we" refers to the Sister Circle consisting of Dywanna, Katelyn, and Shaniya. Though society and educational settings attempt to dissect our lives into past only and present only; we passionately believe that embracing the totality of our lives allow us to honor time's cyclical nature and our ability to utilize the past, present, and future to claim, center, and love our lives.

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