

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:

**LEARNING TOGETHER: THE LIVED
EXPERIENCE OF BRIDGING IN SCHOLARS
STUDIO**

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This hermeneutic phenomenological investigation tends to the connections made in Scholars Studio—an interdisciplinary learning community for first-year students at a public Historically Black College and University (HBCU). In this study, I ask, What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio? I conceptualize bridging as a pedagogical orientation characterized by making connections across disciplines, between theory and praxis, across time and distance, and with one another. Bridging creates dynamic spaces that resist binary relationships, thus creating the potential for transformation. This study is grounded in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Mariana Ortega, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Edward Casey, and David Michael Levin, and follows the methodological structure set forth by Max van Manen. This research captures conversations that bridge the experience of twelve participants—including faculty, students, and staff—who partook in a learning community focused on Black men in education. Through these conversations, the participants affirm the importance of curricula

grounded in African American and African history and culture. As participants cross the metaphorical bridge, they consider the “edges” they encounter that are both full of risk and possibility. These edges push them outside of their comfort zones in search of wholeness and create potential sites for improvisation. I end by opening new possibilities for Scholars Studio, including grounding the work in African principles and considering future directions.

LEARNING TOGETHER: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BRIDGING IN SCHOLARS

by

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CHAPTER ONE: BETWEEN NOW AND NOW: A PEDAGOGY OF BRIDGING IN SCHOLARS STUDIO

What does it mean to embrace a *pedagogy of bridging*? What is *bridging*? What is pedagogy? These are the questions that have propelled my work in higher education and reside at the heart of this inquiry. Van Manen (2015) describes pedagogy as choosing to do what's good for students: "Pedagogy involves us in distinguishing actively and/or reflectively what is good or right and what is life enhancing, just, and supportive from what is not good, wrong, unjust, or damaging in ways we act, live, and deal with [students]" (p. 19). Though strong teachers necessarily have well developed skills and methods, *pedagogy* is not a toolkit of skills or a prescription for how to teach. It is an orientation, an ethical positioning, a process of tuning in, listening to, and responding; it is a way of bringing what is best in ourselves to bear in the world so that we may bring out the best in others.

Pedagogy is understood as reflexive in this inquiry. Faculty do not only think about what is good for students but also what it means to help students make their own pedagogical decisions. Interpreting van Manen's definition broadly, I do not limit the notion of *pedagogy* to the realm of teaching. Students will make pedagogical decisions in the sense that they will weigh choices about what is good and right for themselves, the people around them, and the environment in which they live and interact. In the sections that follow, I introduce Scholars Studio—the program from which the *pedagogy of bridging* emerged—and I explore what it means to bridge in Scholars Studio, the focus of my inquiry.

Scholars Studio as Bridge

Scholars Studio is an integrated, interdisciplinary learning experience for first year students, housed at a mid-sized, public Historically Black College and University (HBCU). I have struggled to define Scholars Studio because I am often describing something that is subtly

and qualitatively different from what listeners understand. I liken this disconnect to the experience of drinking coffee. Most adult speakers of the English language understand what coffee is, even if they have never tried it themselves. But if a coffee aficionado were to ask for coffee, they would likely have particular expectations related to quality, taste, and aroma. Instant coffee in a Styrofoam cup might not meet their expectations and may be galaxies away from what they imagine when they think about coffee. Similarly, someone who is accustomed to the taste of instant coffee might prefer its flavor and convenience.

I am in awe of how universes unfold in single words and think often about how the words that I use every day, and especially the words that come to life in this research—such as *teaching*, *learning*, and *pedagogy*—mean different things to different people. The subtlety and significance of these nuances compel me to engage in this inquiry—to not only move deeper into the *pedagogy of bridging* in Scholars Studio but also to explore the geography of language so that I may edge ever closer to shared meaning.

As I describe Scholars Studio, I do so with the understanding that those reading this will come with their own thoughts and experiences, and if they were to close their eyes at any given time and conjure images about the phenomenon, their images may differ from the images in my mind. I accept that and trust that as I spiral inward, moving deeper into the descriptions and interpretations of my phenomenon, both of us—reader and writer—will move closer to our understanding of the *pedagogy of bridging* in Scholars Studio. We will, in a sense, *bridge* our understanding.

The Blueprint: Scholars Studio in its Unfolding

The seeds for Scholars Studio were planted long before it was a reality. In fact, I attribute its existence to a lucky convening of people with like-minds whose vision for education was

oriented toward connection and wholeness. Throughout this research I share first-hand accounts and reflections of my work in Scholars Studio. By sharing those accounts, I do not wish to imply that Scholars Studio is mine or exists because of me. It has been a communal effort from the beginning, and without the support of many people it would not exist.

My thinking about what would become Scholars Studio began in my old home in the North East. I was teaching writing courses part time and supplementing my income with overnight shifts at a call center. My days were long and exhausting. I showed up to work at the call center, coffee in hand, unsure how I would make it through the night. Then, the following day, after a few hours of sleep, I'd embark on the hour-long drive to the college. I felt like a robot as I moved from one job to the next with little room for sleep. On occasion, I connected with what it meant to feel human during quiet walks around the city: down alleyways, past docks, beyond remnants of the narrow-gauge railroad, to the pebbled beach—the air filled with pleading gulls and the whoosh and hum of boats.

There I found myself deep in thought, re-imagining my working world. *What would it mean to teach in this space?* I wondered. *What would it mean if the city were the classroom? What could the graffiti teach? The cobbled streets? What if we opened books on the rocks? Swapped stories with the refugees who tended Halal markets on side streets?* I felt alive in the city. Standing atop its hills, I traced the lines that streets drew, connecting tall brick buildings on one end to bridges spanning the length of the bay at the other—all giving life in their own way, all a piece of a bigger whole. Flocks of birds formed constellations. The man-made and natural world fused and broke over one another. I wanted my pedagogy to reflect the pulse and spirit of the city to build connection, cultivate wholeness, and take flight. I wanted it to spark desire and imagination. I wanted it to bridge, build, crumble and disrupt.

I recognized that my experience was probably similar to many of my students who were working or caring for families while earning their degrees. I deeply desired an education process that was humanizing and affirming for all of us. A few years later, the seed that was planted on those walks was given space to grow. I had moved to Maryland to work at a four-year, public Historically Black College and University (HBCU). A few close colleagues and I recognized that bright, capable students were struggling to complete their gateway courses. Their reasons for struggling varied from lacking confidence or struggling with personal issues to feeling disconnected from their learning experience.

We also recognized that faculty were flailing. Many of them were tasked with teaching from a common syllabus; they struggled to connect with the material because in an effort to break it down into digestible pieces, it had become unrecognizable as the discipline they loved. Moreover, they were expected to cover so much material that it was impossible to go deep. My colleagues and I began to ask what a life affirming, connected learning experience would look like. From that question, Scholars Studio emerged.

Our vision was brought to life when we received a \$100,000 grant from the Institute for Higher Education Policy and the WalMart Foundation. Our grant team consisted of four faculty members and two staff members, myself included. Most of our team had offices on the same floor. In retrospect, I understand that is not an insignificant detail, as the physical proximity naturally gave rise to conversations and collegiality in what one might say was our first bridge. In an early conversation about Scholars Studio, Shandra¹, a founding faculty member, describes her aspirations for teaching and learning accordingly:

¹ I have used pseudonyms in all my preliminary conversations.

I try to reflect on how it was when I was their age, how limited I think my thinking could have been and how important it is now that I see things differently. And a little bit older, I can look back and see where there were times when I didn't ask for help and I probably should have, or didn't think I could do things, or didn't inquire about things because I didn't think I could or should. [I'm] just trying to challenge students to think bigger and do more than they think they can. (Personal Communication, 2011)

From the beginning, Scholars Studio has helped faculty think holistically about education by using insights from their own learning experiences to build bridges for students. Scholars Studio has continued to evolve. Today it is simultaneously a creative and collaborative space for faculty to bring their passions to life in the classroom, and an integrated learning community for first-year students. Studios bring together 2-5 courses around a common theme or problem. Each course lends its own disciplinary perspective and method to the inquiry, and participants enroll in all courses associated with the Studio. Studios—which I also refer to as learning communities—are typically capped at 20 students, which has, anecdotally, been an optimal number for engagement and community-building. Studios share a number of common elements, including a cross-disciplinary project, contextualized learning experiences, and an emphasis on community building and teamwork. Studios are designed to help students bring together or *bridge* ideas, disciplines, and experiences.

The Bridge

I return to the original question: *What does it mean to bridge?* How might the metaphor of *bridging* advance our understanding of what unfolds in Scholars Studio? Octavio Paz's poem, "The Bridge" offers insight. The poem opens with the line, "between now and now," tracking the moments that came and went in the brief time it took for those words to slip across the tongue: there is *now* (one moment) and *now* (another moment) and the space that lingers in between. The conjunction "and" serves as a *word-bridge*, bringing together *you* and *I* and one moment that has passed into another and so-forth. But, the bridge does not simply link. "Entering it/you enter

yourself,” Paz writes, suggesting, perhaps, that by joining with the *other*, one becomes more aware of oneself—one, indeed, becomes one-self (Paz, 1990, p. 119). Here, there is an interplay between the power of collective action and the necessity of relationships. To bridge in the classroom is to expect to be changed in the presence of others.

The deeply personal aspect of bridging that Paz taps into does not come without risk. Bridges facilitate crossing but do not guarantee safety. I think about the bridges I have crossed: the natural ones (the fallen tree over the mountain stream) and the engineering marvels, such as the Golden Gate Bridge, which connects San Francisco to Sausalito in one long, graceful sweep. When I hike in the springtime and encounter a stream rushing down the mountain’s edge, the uprooted tree laid across the water may grant passage to a portion of the natural world that would have otherwise been inaccessible. In choosing the invitation, I would note the risk and step gingerly, wary of the rotting bark that could let loose at any time, the slippery moss, or my own precarious balance. Without doubt, my heart would pound in my chest as I inched toward the other bank. Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) suggests:

To bridge means loosening our borders, not closing them off. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy. (p. 3)

The opening that bridging begets as we step into new terrain—whether physical or psychic—requires *us* to be open as well. Bridging is not passive, and requires all participants to enter with a degree of vulnerability. When I think about *risk*, death defying feats often come to mind: scaling a rocky bluff, jumping from an airplane, or cave diving, perhaps. Less dramatic, but equally terrifying for teachers, is the risk of not being received by students. So significant a risk is this that many faculty place distance between themselves or jump immediately into

“fixing” mode. Parker Palmer (1998/2007) suggests that the vulnerability that risk reveals offers as much insight into our strengths as it does our weaknesses:

If my gift is a powerful analytical mind, I have an obvious asset with problems that yield to rationality. But if the problem at hand is an emotional tangle with another person and I use my gift to try to analyze the problem away, the liabilities that accompany my gift will quickly become clear. (The Limits and Potential of Self section, para. 24-25)

Allowing ourselves to sit with our vulnerability offers insight into who we are and how we relate to others. It helps us connect with our strengths and contend with the aspects of ourselves that get in the way. Doing so may help us connect better with students, who are also faced with the choice to take risks in the classroom.

Students may fear being exposed as unprepared, incapable, or under-resourced; or, they may recoil at the thought of looking foolish in front of their peers. But when students sit with the discomfort and reach out rather than retreat, they often find strength and support that they did not know existed. Daniel, a Scholars Studio participant, shares how his professor helped him overcome his fear of math:

Math is not my strong suit. [My professor] did take his time every morning to come in. He would also come back at night. That part, *wow, OK. Maybe he does care about us. He's not just trying to get that money. You know?* He was telling us how he started off hating math, like he didn't want to go to math class; he wasn't good at math, and he's like...he went into engineering and then went to math because in engineering he had to take a lot of math and over time he just got good at it. That just really stuck with me, that story, so he is one of the most influential. (Personal communication, 2018)

Notable in Daniel's reflection is the professor's understanding of what is “good” and “supportive” for his students (van Manen, 2015, p. 19). Having been in his students' shoes, he understands that when students feel confident in their math abilities, they are more willing to step onto the log that crosses the stream. They feel confident in their capacity to navigate a slippery surface or enchanted by the idea of entering new territory. On the other hand, students who lack confidence often feel uncomfortable stepping onto the log. They might ask: *What if I slip? What*

if it collapses under me? What if I cannot return to this spot? For the latter student, attempting to improve their “performance” by demanding that they work harder or respect authority—as so often happens— would be counterproductive. Rather, encouraging fearful students, as Daniel’s professor does, involves extending a hand to guide them across the bridge. Daniel’s professor provided support when he “came back” in the evening—a physical gesture that elicited surprise and struck Daniel as sincere—and again when he shared his own story about struggling with math.

Our fear of crossing bridges is not unfounded. Our own vulnerability is mirrored in them. We need only look as far as the 2007 collapse of the interstate bridge in Minnesota to be reminded that they, like us, are impermanent (Sander & Saulny, 2007, p. A1). Likewise, the tree that connects two banks of a stream will return to the earth in a few seasons, and perhaps in so doing create new possibilities for bridging in the years to come, as its pulpy flesh fertilizes the soil and it lets go of its last seeds. Bridges are temporary and less stable than the ground they gather. They are relentlessly exposed to the wind, currents, rain, and other elements. They must be cared for, improved, and reinforced.

A World in Flux

The Golden Gate Bridge, the first bridge to grant easy passage between San Francisco and Marin County, has been duly cared for with hundreds of millions of dollars invested into earthquake retrofitting, suicide barriers, and other repairs and improvements (Nolte, 2007). Pedestrians who cross the structure may experience a sense of disorientation as the bridge vibrates under the pressure of traffic and sways in the wind. There, they may find that water swirls beneath them, rocking boats that appear miniature, as the city rises to one side and the hills fold into the horizon on the other. On the bridge, one is neither in San Francisco nor

Sausalito, east nor west, above nor below, but rather suspended in transition. Crossers may stop to take in the scenery, catch their breath, or orient themselves, but they do not dwell long. This is a space in flux. Here, perspectives widen, and the world opens in surprising ways. Anzaldúa (2002) observes:

Bridges are thresholds to other realities, archetypal, primal symbols of shifting consciousness. They are passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives. Bridges span liminal (threshold) spaces between worlds... Transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. (p. 1)

Bridges are spaces of awakening and transformation. To elucidate this thought, I invite readers to imagine crossing the stage at graduation. Moving from one side of a stage to the other (*a bridge*) symbolizes the journey of the graduate, during which time they (hopefully) grew and transformed. An audience member witnessing the event sees the graduate move from having no degree to holding a degree, but that's a drastic oversimplification of the movement that was made to obtain the degree. The graduate crosses into new territory, but the movement from one place to another is meaningless without the being-becoming that happens in the university. If Scholars Studio were shaping this journey, it may have, in Robinson-Morris's (2019) words, oriented them "toward being more human, and toward active engagement in the universal web of interconnectedness" (p. 140). In this sense, bridging offers at least two crossings—the representational movement from one territory to another and the longer, inward journey that unfolds on the bridge.

This resonates with my own experience as a doctoral student. My graduate education wasn't simply a journey toward a degree; it was a process of intellectual and personal transformation. Early in my journey, coursework informed my thinking about Scholars Studio. During that time, exposure to transcultural studies—including post-colonial, liminal, borderland,

and contact zone theories—was particularly helpful for thinking about how to create transformational spaces within rigid systems. Once I reached candidacy, I was confronted with the need to look inward. I would learn that I had internalized messages about my potential and worth that I would need to shift in order to complete the process. This dissertation reflects the parallel journey of pushing through mental barriers and opening new thinking about Scholars Studio.

I envision the bridge as a third space or a liminal space. To open this thought, I turn to artist Renée Green (2014) who plays with the idea of liminality in her installation, *Sites of Genealogy* in which she uses the architecture of a building (attic, boiler room, stairwell) to explore hierarchies and interstitial spaces. She explains, “Literal references to hierarchical movement (higher/lower, heaven/hell) also determined my choices of architectural space. The stairwell can be viewed as a liminal passage between the two realms with indication of closeness to or distance from other regions” (p. 309). Bhabha (1994) describes Green’s stairway as an in-between space—characterized by temporality and movement—that resists fixed identities (p. 5). Similarly, bridging in Scholars Studio disrupts hierarchal relationships between teacher and student, classroom and “real world,” personal and social, etc. To that end, a few questions open, including, *What does it mean to think about learning spaces in Scholars Studio as liminal? What binaries does it disrupt? What new possibilities for being does it open?*

One of the disruptive possibilities that bridging offers is awakening us to new ways of being with one another. Jana, a participant in Scholars Studio, describes how her professor’s pedagogy helped her develop a more compassionate perspective:

My professor, she was just so passionate. She was just really passionate. I didn’t matter what you looked like, what you wore... she would never base your intelligence off how you look or how you speak. There was an instance where one of the gentlemen...he didn’t really know what he was saying and it was hard because every time she would ask a

question, he would raise his hand, and he'd just always have something to say, and we'd just always be like...but she would always encourage him to keep talking. That's just like also an eye opener to me: always listen to what people are saying. Don't just cut people off because you can't really understand them because at the end of the day, they could say something extremely powerful. (Personal Communication, 2018)

Jana describes being led into a disorienting space when her professor did not respond to her classmates as expected. She was surprised that her professor did not judge students who seemed to be unaware of academic cultural codes. And, she was particularly surprised that her professor would make room for the voices of people who struggled to communicate. For Jana, being in Scholars Studio was akin to standing on the Golden Gate Bridge. Looking out from the shaking and vibrating structure, new possibilities unfurled: miniature ships passed below, rocks unfolded at each bank, and glittering cities climbed toward the sky. Jana's story points toward the transformative potential of the *pedagogy of bridging*.

The Studio model is designed to facilitate *bridging*. While it may be possible to remove or change some of the structural elements associated with Scholars Studio, it is not possible to forego the deep introspection and engagement for which bridging calls. This inquiry seeks to address the question, *What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio?*

In its most distilled form, *bridging* might be thought of as bringing two or more disparate ideas, experiences, disciplines, people, objects, etc. together with the potential for transformation. Though there are countless methods for *bridging*, Scholars Studio's structure includes the following: (1) bridging from the inside out—a process of authentically bringing the self into the teaching/learning space; (2) bridging understanding by “walking with” students; (3) bridging geography, time, and space—an exploration of how the journey connects, builds upon, and enlarges lived experience; and (4) building bridges with others in community and across disciplines to generate new ideas, build solidarity and support, and rupture traditional structures.

I will unpack each of these in the sections that follow, offering examples from past Studios that illustrate how they manifest in the learning space.

Bridging from the Inside Out: Inviting the Inner-Self into the Teaching-Learning Space

Fundamental to Scholars Studio is the idea that personal experiences, perspectives, and worldviews show up in the classroom—often unwittingly. Being conscious of who we are and what we bring to the learning space is essential for “distinguishing...what is good or right and what is life enhancing, just, and supportive from what is not good, wrong, unjust, or damaging in ways we act, live, and deal with [one another]” (van Manen, 2015, p. 19). Faculty dedicate time to exploring their inner lives and reflecting on their experiences in order to tap into strengths and avoid inflicting their wounds on others. Similarly, students are offered supportive space to explore and reflect on who they are and how that shapes who they are becoming. In this regard, the first and most foundational form of bridging that Scholars Studio community members practice is bridging their inner and outer worlds.

Vulnerability

Bridging is simultaneously a process of knowing the self, giving of oneself, and receiving of others. Indeed, as others have found, it’s difficult to build bridges without embracing vulnerability. The fiction writer David Bradley (1983) discovered the value of vulnerability at his father’s church. He used to listen to his father’s sermons as a child. They were dry and analytical and did little to stir his emotions. One day his father began just as he always did, but instead of explicating the original Greek, as expected, he veered into a story about nearly dying in a forest fire. Bradley was deeply moved by this story and realized, his father, who never allowed anyone to see him vulnerable, had borne it all and in so doing moved his audience. Of that experience he wrote:

I had not understood that [writing] would cost anything. I had believed that I could do those things while remaining secure and safe within myself—I had even believed that writing fiction was a way to conceal my true feelings and weaknesses... That night I realized that no matter how good I became in the manipulation of symbols, I could never hope to move anyone without allowing myself to be moved, that I could only reveal slight truths unless I was willing to reveal truths about myself. (p. 17)

Similarly, faculty may find that no matter how skilled they become in the use of teaching techniques, their work will not move others, nor will it hold the possibility of transformation, until they bring themselves fully into the learning space.

Letting Go in the Asylum

Scholars Studio's pedagogy was forged collaboratively over time in response to observations, conversations, and deep reflections. In the same way, faculty embrace the pedagogy in their own time. Tectonic plates shifted beneath my feet in 2014, five years after the founding of Scholars Studio. That semester, one Studio explored the now defunct Crownsville Hospital—originally the Crownsville Hospital for the Negro Insane. The story of Crownsville mirrored the story of race in the United States. Established shortly after emancipation on former plantation land, the hospital was built with the forced labor of Black men who would become its first inmates. The hospital remained segregated through the 1960s—a stretch of time when psychiatric disorders were poorly understood, and treatment was brutal for all sufferers, but particularly gruesome for those of African descent who were subjected to medical experimentation without consent (Stuckey, 2017).

We visited Crownsville that fall. The leaves had turned yellow and begun to drop. The main building was boarded up. We gazed at it from a distance, emotions stirring. Some in the group related to the indignity of medical apartheid, others the objectification of people with brown and black skin. I remember feeling my breath catch as I took in the scene. I was not prepared for the emotion that stirred in me. I had never seen a mental institution. My

grandmother had been institutionalized at a state hospital in New England when my father was twelve years old. My family never talked about those times. I learned bits of information here and there. I knew that my grandmother had been subjected to painful rounds of electro-shock therapy. My father visited her in the hospital one time; she screamed when he left, begging him to take her with him. He was so shaken that decades later, when my sister went from working full-time to thinking that her co-workers had implanted tracking devices in her skull, he resisted the idea of helping her seek psychiatric treatment. He thought she would be locked up forever. He remembered the look on his mother's face and how he could only turn and walk away. My sister had been dealt a bad genetic hand. While the word schizophrenia never passed my family's lips, it was clear that it wove through our lineage like thread.

Vancouver-based artist, Stan Douglas, observed, "History does repeat itself. Things do come back. Symptoms do recur, but they often recur because what caused it [sic.] in the first place never went away" (cited in Wagner, 2016). Never had this been truer than at Crownsville where the plantation had been reimagined and the insanity of slavery reified in the asylum. I found myself shaken by my own history as it intersected with the collective history. I saw clearly, for the first time, my family's dysfunction—how shame and stigma had prevented us from talking about mental illness, and without that context, we were left to believe that the skewed worldview we inherited was reality—that we were somehow *off* and didn't quite belong in the world. It was a story bigger than my own. I was split open, and there, innards glistening and nerves exposed, I saw how the trembling in my lips reverberated in the hands and arms and lips of the people around me. We stood on the grass that autumn day rapt in silence, not because we didn't have any thoughts but rather something inside was shifting. Space had grown. Thoughts had gathered. Learning had become much bigger, more sacred. I could not stand in that

space and probe for understanding. That would come. For the time, the experience would be human, embodied, and raw. We would allow space for emotions and uncertainty.

We turned from the hospital, its bricks and cast-iron bars seared in our memories, and walked together toward the outskirts of the property, passing a rusted gas pump, a sagging barn, clusters of non-descript buildings, and finally, a gate with hazard signs. Through the gate, at the end of a dirt pathway, was a cemetery with unmarked graves—the final resting place of residents who died in state custody. The journey propelled us into the semester—stirring curiosity and inviting deeper exploration. Later, I’d revisit this scene in my mind, struck by how the experience called to the fullness of our being and connected us with realities bigger and older than ourselves; and now, as I conjure this memory years later, I think about the significance of our collective vulnerability—the importance of allowing what is inside to dwell in the external world. When I let go, my jaw softened, and my breath deepened. I was aware of how much energy it takes to erect walls, a process that inevitably translates to control in the pedagogical space. By allowing myself to feel the emotions of that moment and accept my vulnerability, I had built a bridge from the inside out. It was a mindful act that helped me see more clearly what was required of that pedagogical moment. In that case, it was important to allow space for the pain—to allow it to be a humanizing moment rather than focusing on orchestrating the objects of our learning.

Expose(d): The Paradox of Learning

To be vulnerable, I had to allow part of myself to be exposed. The word *expose* “to leave without shelter or defense,” derives from the Latin word *exponere*, meaning “set forth, lay open, exhibit, reveal, [or] publish” (Etymonline, n.d.). To be exposed is to simultaneously let one’s guard down and to uncover new meaning or insights. The two processes are inextricable. For the

latter to occur in a learning space, safety and a sense of care must be established. Situated at an HBCU, Scholars Studio has the advantage of being located in an environment that offers safe space for Black students. According to Shuler et al. (2022), HBCU students, “claim to feel included, valued, believed in, and welcomed...These feelings contribute to a sense of well-being and what Jay Kumar calls a ‘happy brain’...a state in which students are capable of deep thinking, innovation, and learning” (para. 7). Despite the advantages, students and faculty—many of whom are first-generation college students— still feel a great deal of vulnerability.

Exposure in the academy is paradoxical. On the one hand, exposure to ideas, culture, research, knowledge, and experience are an important aspect of becoming a scholar. Exposure contributes to the so-called *expertise* that faculty bring to the academy. Faculty often feel quite comfortable discussing ideas related to their discipline or research area. On the other hand, when they feel less confident in the pedagogical space, they often avoid exposure. If I were to walk down the hall on any given day, I’d pass plenty of classrooms with students engaged in robust conversation. I’d also pass classrooms that are pitch dark, save for the PowerPoint glowing at the front of the room. I’d pass classes with glassy-eyed students staring into space while their professors lectured about the day’s topic from behind a lectern. Or, I might pass a class in a computer lab, perfectly silent with no human interaction occurring. The latter scenarios are examples of using technology, physical barriers, and other means to avoid exposure. Having taught college writing, I acknowledge the discomfort that a sea of blank stares or silence elicits. I understand why instructors would want to protect themselves from that experience. It brings out an animal fear and calls us to respond accordingly, as reflected here:

The first day of every semester is the same. It doesn’t matter how many times I’ve stood in this spot, looking at the sea of unfamiliar eyes, I forget everything I know about teaching. I tremble inside and entertain all the self-conscious what-ifs: *what if I stumble over my words? What if I forget everything? What if they’re bored? What if my class feels*

irrelevant? What if they don't like me? I am alone on a riverbank. My students sit on the opposite shore. We look over the water at one another. We distinguish human figures but are too far away to *see* one another. From this distance, it's easy to make assumptions: *he is on his phone the entire time; he must not care. She hasn't said a word. Does she know what's going on?* It is tempting to stand behind the safety of a lectern and fling knowledge across the river. The distance protects me from exposing my fears and positions me as the authority. It's the safe choice. But, it's a choice. If I choose to lob knowledge across the water, I risk encountering headwinds that push the bits and pieces off course. I risk never knowing or learning from my students, and I miss an opportunity to connect. Another choice is to build bridges so we might meet and linger in the space above the water or move together to new places and "build [bridges as we] walk." (Personal Reflection, 2019)

The distance I describe is not physical. There may only be a few feet between us but unless we connect, we may as well be miles apart.

One may reasonably ask, *How do faculty and students connect when the maw of blank stares feels so wide?* Those of us who have attended faculty or other university-sponsored meetings are familiar with the narratives projected on students when their behaviors are not understood: *they don't care, they're not motivated, they aren't prepared, they're lazy, they're entitled.* While there may be inklings of truth in some of these responses, it's helpful to ask, *What if we're wrong? In what ways do these interpretations shape our interactions with students?* And, perhaps even more revealing, *How do the norms of higher education contribute to the disconnect?*

One does not need to go far to understand why students feel disconnected. In a conversation about the college experience with Asia, a sophomore, I was told:

I don't really think that [professors] *don't care*, but it's hard to tell because of the way that they teach. They teach to get the job done, like they want you to pass so they say, "this is the deadline. I need you to do this." They say, "if you need me, email me," and they go away. (Personal Communication, 2018)

Asia's courses had not helped her make connections. There is no sense that her professors are animated by passion or enthusiasm for the course material, that they are driven to connect with

their students, or committed to ushering them into the living world of their discipline. *Learning* has been supplanted by *passing*; it is an exercise in completing tasks and meeting deadlines. With increasing pressure from administrative offices to improve course completion, retention, and student success, focusing on “passing” is a reasonable response; however, rather than increasing student success, it often has the opposite effect, as Asia’s reflection implies. In fact, as Parker Palmer (1998/2007) suggests, professors’ effectiveness depends on their ability to connect students’ learning with the life-world:

Bad teachers distance themselves from the subject they are teaching—and in the process, from their students. Good teachers join self and subject and students in the fabric of life. Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. (Chapter One, para. 10)

The connection Palmer describes is multifaceted. For faculty, it involves a deep love of, passion for, or interest in the subject matter; a willingness to connect with students; and the ability to help students connect learning with the life world. Aaron, a former Scholars Studio participant, shared the following thoughts during a conversation about his experience in a Business Law course:

We had a professor who didn’t care. He was basically throwing out A’s. You know, all students are missing stuff, so then we went to Business Law II—similar class, everyone was like, *this is going to be a breeze*, obviously not knowing the content as much as we should have. [The professor] was aware that that was the situation, but she didn’t feel the need to adjust the content at all or to adjust the teaching approach. She just made comments about her frustration like, *didn’t we just go over this? How many freshmen are in here? No freshmen? Y’all are acting like that*—so very condescending, and it just made you feel like *OK, is class over yet?* It just made you want to completely unplug from what’s going on. (Personal Communication, 2018)

It is significant that Aaron described his professors as lacking care rather than failing to meet obligations or providing poor value. Emotions are inextricably linked to cognitive processes (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). His professor’s demeaning comments served to

not only push him away from her but also made him want to unplug from the classroom.

Oftentimes interactions like Aaron describes are with adjunct faculty who don't benefit from the same professional development opportunities and pedagogical conversations that fulltime faculty enjoy. Unfortunately, high numbers of general education courses, which constitute the bulk of first and second-year students' schedules, are taught by adjuncts.

The Emotionally fraught interactions that some students experience may be exacerbated when they lack confidence or fear that they may not succeed in college, as Jared, a third student, describes here:

I thought [college] was really hard because I have an older sister who basically aced high school like nothing, but when she got here it was so challenging. I was in high school, and I was thinking that if she couldn't get through it, I didn't think I would make it up to my sophomore year. I was thinking that it would be one year and that would be it. I thought it would be really hard because for most incoming freshmen, high school doesn't really give you the necessary kind of tasks to build study habits... I was scared. (Personal Communication, 2018)

Jared's reflection gives rise to all sorts of questions, perhaps most pressingly, *What does it feel like to invest in something for which you have no roadmap and are unsure whether you can complete?* Lingering on that question for a while may raise questions about how faculty can be present with students who share Jared's struggle. I am curious about what would happen if faculty leaned into the paradox of exposure. Might they think about how exposure increased their comfort with their discipline? Might they also think about how the vulnerability, uncertainty, or fear that they experience in the classroom is similar to the vulnerability, uncertainty, or fear that Jared and others face? Might that understanding be used as a bridge?

Palmer (1998/2007) tackled these questions in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, in which he recalls an uncomfortable experience that forced him to confront the fears that classrooms

often uncover. He was invited to teach in another professor's class and found himself singularly focused on drawing one particularly distant student out:

I committed the most basic mistake of the greenest neophyte: I became totally obsessed with him, and everyone else in the room disappeared from my screen. For a long and anguished hour I aimed everything I had at this young man, trying desperately to awaken him from his dogmatic slumbers, but the harder I tried, the more he seemed to recede. Meanwhile, the other students became ciphers as my obsession with [the student] made me oblivious to their needs. (It's a Fact section, para. 19)

Unconsciously, perhaps, Palmer interpreted the student's refusal to engage as a sign of his own obsolescence. Palmer felt most alive and productive in highly interactive spaces. Absent interaction, he sensed his own weaknesses; he was afraid that he was too old or out of touch to connect with students. Decades of experience and well-honed technique were inadequate to overcome the unexamined shadow-sides of his identity.

Palmer's story did not end in the classroom. That evening, a student had been assigned to drive him to the airport. He was surprised to find that the driver was the same student he had failed to reach earlier that day. He learned that the student's father, an alcoholic, did not support his efforts to pursue a college degree. Palmer recalls:

It is hard to believe that I was afraid of that young man... There I was in my early fifties, career in full flight, doing work I find rich in meaning, blessed with health and family and friends. There I was, face to face with a forlorn young man in his early twenties who had no apparent power over me— and I was so afraid of him that I lost my bearings, my capacity to teach, my sense of self and self-worth. (The Teacher's Fearful Heart section, para. 4)

It is difficult for faculty to admit when students scare them, get the better of them, or reveal their weaknesses. Absent self-awareness, it is easy to make assumptions about students and build pedagogies around those assumptions. Palmer's experience points to an uncomfortable, yet important, aspect of teaching: the inner-world is externalized in the classroom. It is impossible to separate who we are from how we teach. Despite our best efforts, our fears,

uncertainty, etc. seep through the walls we attempt to create. If we are not honest about those aspects of ourselves, we may project them on our students or ask them to carry the weight of our anxieties.

In Scholars Studio, I witnessed a similar interaction after an African American history tour, which had introduced students to the slave trade in Richmond, Virginia. At the end of the tour, our guide attempted to debrief with the students who met her with silence—not because they were disengaged. Rather, they were processing the immensity of what they had just experienced. The tour guide chided them for being disinterested in their history. Had she paused or even stopped to ask the students how they were feeling, she may have understood that she had already had a chance to process the history. The students were taking it in for the first time. Moreover, she may have recognized that her need for feedback or affirmation was interfering with understanding the students' experience. Both Palmer and the tour guide held the best intentions. Palmer desperately wanted to connect with a distant student, and the tour guide cared deeply about exposing young people to Black history, but their own unexplored needs precluded them from making the best pedagogical decision in that moment.

Acknowledging how difficult it is for faculty to be vulnerable in the classroom—especially when they receive contradictory messages about being seen as experts and authorities—Scholars Studios encourages faculty to take small steps toward dropping their walls. A simple place for faculty to begin building connection is committing to “mutual vulnerability” by only asking students to reveal aspects of their lives that they are willing to reveal themselves (Berry, 2010, p. 21). Berry offers an example:

We covered the similarities and differences in the educational philosophies of W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. I likened their differences to those of my parents regarding my post-secondary experience. In my effort to illustrate their differences, I

explained that my father wanted me to follow his footsteps and join the Air Force to gain some practical experiences. My mother wanted me to attend college. (p. 21)

Scholars Studio instructors meet bi-weekly to reflect on their classroom experiences together. They talk through challenges and remind one another that growth is often slow. Many times, in the beginning of the semester, the faculty enthusiastically introduce students to engaging, hands-on experiences that they spent great amounts of time preparing, only to be met with unmatched excitement. At times, students are reluctant to participate, complain about the process, or turn in poor quality work. Years of experience have taught us that this resistance is not necessarily a consequence of bad pedagogy or poorly designed assignments. It is indicative of adjustment. Students are often accustomed to taking a passive role in their learning. When they are given agency, responsibility, and room to think creatively, they initially feel unsafe. They don't know if they can trust their instructors to support them through the process or if they are even capable of meeting the challenge. The resistance usually subsides, but to get there, faculty members must be willing to endure the turbulence. As with any painful situation, it can be hard to see beyond the circumstance. It's helpful for faculty to remember that they have been there before, that undoing years of *miseducation* is messy, and what emerges on the other side has the potential to be beautiful. Without support and accountability, it's tempting for faculty to revert to old pedagogies that place safe distance between themselves and the students. The pedagogy of bridging is a mindful practice that requires continual renewal.

Inner-Renewal: Reciprocity and the Open Heart

Maintaining a sense of connection with the self often requires disconnecting from the distractions that jar us from the present. In Scholars Studio, we intentionally reconnect with our inner worlds during planning retreats. When I reach the retreat location, I take time by myself to

allow the natural rhythms of the land to sync with the rhythms of my body. I pay attention to thoughts that have rushed through me all day.

This summer, the retreat is on the river—a sprawling home that opens to a terraced backyard, made habitable by a network of wooden steps and tiered gardens. The flora, cultivated and prim in their plots near the home, let loose as they approach the river, spilling into pathways—leaves and stems and bright bursts of flowers opening and curling in a primal dance I long to remember. I want to sink into the space—to let go in the hammock and watch clouds drift. I want to feel the air against my skin. Most of all, I want to be present with what it means to breathe, to love, to be alive in this body at this time on this soil. I move from hammock, to bench, to pier in search of a still place. This time is helpful because it reminds me of my humanity. I am human-being, not human-doing. Here, I feel connected to a larger world that nurtures and soothes my tired body. I want to bring this feeling with me into my working world.

The earth has a way of reminding us that we are, indeed, alive and part of a larger, more complicated organism. Though my mind shimmies with thoughts, my body begins to loosen in time with the sun sinking beyond the ridge. Crickets scrape their wings and shadows drape the valley. As my body settles, so does my mind. I am aware of my breath. I find comfort in it. *This* is the still place. It's always with me. I am captivated by the reciprocity of the breath. *In-and-out-in-and-out-in-and-out-in-and-out*. To take in air requires me to give it back. “Such reciprocity,” Abram (2011) notes:

is the very structure of perception. We experience the sensuous world only by rendering ourselves vulnerable to that world. Sensory perception is this ongoing interweavement: the terrain enters into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up within that terrain. (p. 58)

I breathe into the stillness and give it back. It transforms me just as I transform it. Oxygen nourishes my blood, and I return it, carbon dioxide. I take shallow breaths when I barricade my

heart from the world, and in so doing, only open myself to an infinitesimally small amount of the abundance that we all share. But when I allow myself to breathe fully, I remember I am part of the world, not separate. Inhalation and exhalation become indistinguishable. They are one breath on a single continuum. They rely on one another; they are changed by one another. This is the pedagogy of bridging. To sow the seeds for transformation in the classroom, I/we must let the world in. We must transform ourselves.

Walking With: Bridging Understanding

There has been a lot of talk in higher education over the last decade about *gaps*. Usually used to describe differences in performance between historically marginalized groups and their more privileged peers, this term brings to mind two looming cliff faces, separated by a crevice or *gap*. Seeing the two facing cliffs, one might conclude that a logical solution to *gaps* is to build *bridges*. Indeed, the institution where Scholars Studio is housed serves large numbers of students who attended underperforming high schools as well as students who will be the first in their family to receive a bachelor's degree. Consequently, there are significant gaps in academic skills and understanding of cultural codes. There is often a vast distance between where faculty assume students should be and where they are.

In Scholars Studio, we have found that with adequate academic and personal supports in place, students can pick up missed skills fairly quickly, that, indeed, underdeveloped skills are secondary to confidence. In other words, for students to be successful, they need to feel confident in their ability to learn at the college level. Many of them have internalized messages that they are not “college material.” To assuage students’ anxieties about being underprepared or not having what it takes to be successful, Scholars Studio faculty position themselves as *walking with* students. This orientation requires that they let go of unreasonable expectations and meet students where they are.

Just as our own bridges in Scholars Studio are built from the inside-out, our work of “walking with” starts on the inside, with faculty. We practice *walking with* one another before meeting the students. This process begins with an off-campus retreat, designed to explore pedagogy and sculpt new learning experiences. The retreat location is nearly as important as the work that happens in the space. We may meet in a spacious bed and breakfast at the end of a long dirt road or a home in southern Maryland, where the Patuxent and Potomac Rivers converge on their way to the ocean. Each location provides inspiration and—distant from routines on campus or in the home—resets time. For a brief moment, we aren’t beholden to the rhythms that orchestrate everyday life: office hours, commutes, emails, phones calls; we are present and called to our bodies when the breeze rustles papers on the porch or the tree frogs announce themselves at the end of the day. Wherever we find ourselves, we commit to walking together.

Calling the Waters: The Quiet Pause

Walking together requires us to be mindful of ourselves in relation to others, a process that necessitates slowing. A poignant image of this slow walk is captured in Francis and Pugh’s (2017) documentary *Walk with Me*, a meditation on life in Thich Nhat Hahn’s French Monastery, Plum Village. In an early scene, the camera captures a procession of monks, nuns, and lay people from the village moving slowly and deliberately together in a walking meditation. Thich Nhat Hahn is at the front of the group, surrounded by senior monastics. All participants step deliberately with no visible sense of urgency. Elsewhere, the filmmakers subtly push against the popular culture image of meditation as transcendence and bliss. They depict it as a challenging practice that requires practitioners to face the parts of themselves that are wrought with suffering. It’s not hard to imagine that those accompanying Thich Nhat Hahn on that crisp autumn morning bring with them the range of human emotions: some, perhaps, manage to find moments free from

the cacophony of voices and memories that circle their mind. Others are, no doubt, overcome with boredom, grief, or unexpected amusement. No one attempts to outrun those emotions, and no one is left behind.

The slowing and settling that happens in this space is akin to the stillness that accompanies artists waiting for clay to harden in a kiln or paint to fix on a canvas. Liz Magor, a Vancouver-based artist, revels in the tediousness of casting molds. Once the material has been poured, she gently rocks and shifts the mold to remove air bubbles. She explains, “All the slowness of it is how I get to know it; in fact, the slowness of this process serves the slowness of my intellectual awareness” (Cited in Wagner, 2016). Indeed, slowing allows ideas, like air bubbles, to rise to the surface. It invites intimacy so faculty may better know the shapes and forms of their work.

During the retreat on the water, we call in the stillness by gathering at the end of the pier. The land behind us bears the scars of slavery. We acknowledge this as the water continues its journey toward the sea. We exist in the liminal space between the beauty and horror of the land. We breathe with the current and listen for the gulls, silent and aware. We return to the porch, sensing each step: the wooden boards on the pier, the crunch of the rocks at the shore, the soggy grass, the concrete steps. We gather our books and paper, setting a pace that allows awareness in.

The rituals and practices that emerge in the planning spaces provide an entree into pedagogical possibilities in the classroom. Slowing, done with intention, has the potential to shift the tenor of learning spaces that may otherwise lean toward speed or breadth rather than depth. To support faculty in maintaining these practices, Scholars Studio meets bi-weekly for pedagogical discussions and reflections throughout the academic year. Shandra, one of Scholars Studio’s founding faculty member notes:

I definitely think [the bi-weekly discussions] challenged us to think about our teaching philosophies. I think for me because we get so caught up in the day-to-day and week-to-week things throughout the semester, I haven't really been able to stop and think about what I can do differently until the semester's over, as I'm preparing for the next semester. (Personal Communication, 2011)

When we take time to reflect, and in turn, bring the slow, intentional walk to students, it communicates that we recognize their humanity. It says: *I see you. I'm here for you. We will work to understand this together.* Alexis, a Scholars Studio participant, describes her experience in a writing course:

The difference was every time our English professor gave us an essay everybody always came back to her office to get more information on it, and she'd actually tell you more information. These other teachers, they just wrote on Black Board, *there do it, bam! There's a mistake.* Our [Scholars Studio] professor is like, *you can rewrite it.* Yeah, she even gave us more than two chances. She actually checked it over. Her reading every line actually showed that she cared. My other teacher [outside of Scholars Studio], she's like, *oh the thesis is wrong. You fail.* (Personal Communication, 2014)

We often hold expectations for students that do not match reality. Our expectation for reading is one example. Many of our students have never read a book cover to cover. They rarely read for pleasure, and when they are assigned reading, they struggle to maintain focus because there are so many distractions coming from the digital sphere. A few years after Scholars Studio's founding, we offered a Studio that explored Carter G. Woodson's book, *The Miseducation of the Negro*. The experience included visits to the Woodson home, which was being renovated at the time, the Frederick Douglass House, and the Mary McCloud Bethune Council House, along with contemporary schools.

While those sites provided context, they could not replace the richness of the text. It quickly became obvious that students were avoiding their reading assignments. They told us the text was intimidating because the language sounded archaic. We asked them to pull out their books so we could read aloud together. Reading out loud requires slowing down and paying

attention to how language rolls off the tongue. It gave us an opportunity to talk about vocabulary and strategies for interpreting the text. It provided space for questions, insight, and disagreement. We made note of how many scholarly practices were made explicit in that space.

Faculty members often avoid reading out loud because they think it's the work of elementary school teachers and to engage accordingly would "dumb it down." In Scholars Studio, we have learned to pay attention to our assumptions because they shape our pedagogies. It is easy to get lost in the expectations that we have for others and that others have for us. Instead, we aim to be mindful of the needs each situation presents. In this case, reading out loud helped us understand how students were approaching the text and provided an opportunity to demystify academic processes.

Still/Here

The goal of walking with students is not to bring them close so we can mold them in our image or assimilate them into the institutional culture. We do it to honor their humanity and ours, so we can grapple with challenges and experience joy together, so we can learn from one another and be changed by one another. In Scholars Studio, when we begin thinking about how to deepen our walk with students, we often turn to the documentary *Still/Here* (1997). The film offers a blueprint for the reflexive power of walking with one another. It features renowned dancer, Bill T. Jones, who is HIV positive and lost his partner to AIDS. Facing the prospect of a premature death, he facilitated dance workshops for people with terminal illnesses. He used his participants' experiences to choreograph a dance. From the outset, Jones expected to learn about the meaning of dying from his participants, but through that process, he also gained insight into what it means to be alive. He explains:

Here is the place where I cannot be distracted by pain, not be in the future, in the past. I can be loving. I can be responsive. Here is the New York City subway when I have to be there and I'm rushing from one appointment to another and I'm worried, am I failing? Did I get a bad review yesterday? What's going to happen? But, suddenly, in that moment my flesh...I'm upright. I'm doing. I'm not on a breathalyzer. I'm not connected to an IV. Hey, look. Look where you are. You're here. (Cited in Moyers, 1997)

The interpretive space between Jones and the participants was a site of *bridging*. In this sense, *bridging* is an act of translation. *Bridges* join individuals whose language, culture, experiences, or perspectives may differ radically from their own in a location where translation is possible; however, through the act of translation, aspects of the original meaning are lost. Healthy dancers can approximate the gesture of the individual from whom it originally emerged, but they cannot replicate it perfectly, nor will they know exactly what the person was experiencing. The fact that it is not a perfect copy does not diminish its beauty or the power of its expression. The translated movement generates new possibilities.

To understand the nuances of translation space, I turn to Aoki (2005). He explains that the English translation of the Japanese word 個人 *ko-jin* is an amalgam of 人 (*hito*), roughly translated, “it takes at least two to make a person” or “one cannot stand alone,” and 個 (*ko*), an “undivided individual.” He adds:

For now, we can see that 個人 says that it is both divided and undivided, an admission perhaps that in translation there is ever some slippage, something left untranslated, and thus ever incomplete. So interpreted...*ko-jin* as an articulation in that enunciatory space between Japanese and English, is seemingly Japanese but not all Japanese. It is a hybrid. It is both Japanese and English yet it is neither Japanese nor English. It is a space of paradoxical ambivalence with its built-in contradiction. Yet, it is a generative space of difference, an enunciatory space of becoming, a space where newness emerges. (p. 310)

For Jones, merging dancing with dying opened an *enunciatory space*. While he and the participants were facing the prospect of early death, they were *still/here*. “Still/here” communicates a sense of bought time—the understanding that they will not be here one day, but

today they are, indeed, alive. Their bodies have not been claimed by the ultimate stillness. They are *here*. In the word pairing, there is also the sense that there is stillness in the present *here*.

The participants' illnesses may have placed them on the margins of life, requiring, at times, machines and medications to maintain function, but they were breathing, loving, grieving, doing all the things that humans do. Their marginal position placed them in touch with death and, perhaps, showed them that life and death were not separate states. One is inherently in the other. Through that reckoning, they developed more generative understandings of life. One workshop participant explained that before her diagnosis, she maintained walls to keep people out. Now she relishes connections.

Once Jones' participants have coalesced and feel a sense of safety, he asks them to draw an expressive map of their life from birth to death. They embody the movements depicted in the map individually and then guide others through the movements of their life. Their collective walk is strikingly similar to Thich Nhat Hahn's walking meditation. All of the participants gather in a cluster and move slowly together, mindful of each step. As they cross the floor, Jones asks questions that bring the guides closer to their lived experience. They pause at the path's end—their imagined death—and hold space for the simple and profound images that emerge. One participant imagines:

It's early evening, I guess about the time that *Roseanne* is on... I want to go out with some laughter. I don't want to be real sad. The TV is on. It's like a regular family day with everybody crowded into my bedroom. We're maybe cracking a few jokes, kids eating popcorn and drinking Nestea. My husband's there and we tried to prepare for this last day. He's real sad, but I tell him that no matter where I'm getting ready to go, I'll always love him. And he let's me know that he will always love me. I think that's about as special as it could get. (Cited in Moyers, 1997)

Another participant adds:

If I only had a brief moment, the last thing I heard, I'd want to hear waves on the shore and a foghorn... I can hear waves on the shore and a foghorn. I join the waves on the shore and the foghorn. (Cited in Moyers, 1997)

While we don't often think about pedagogical situations as carrying the weight of death, the image of the life map helps place our work in perspective. One step moves into the next. Every moment has impact. In the classroom, we have the opportunity to walk a path that is humane and life affirming.

Mateo's Story

We have the opportunity to slow down and hold space for one another, as exemplified in Mateo's story:

The classroom falls silent. The faint rustle of paper replaces chatter as students sink into their work. Notebooks open, the class gazes at photocopied sheets of paper. Mateo, in the front row, headphones pulled over his ears, stares into the computer screen. Dr. Jackson passes him, placing her hand at the top of the screen. "Are you with us, Mateo?" She whispers.

"Yes, I'm just trying to find the prologue. "

"It's not online. Do you have the sheets I gave you last class?"

"Oh... no, I forgot my folder."

"OK, Amir went to my office to get extra copies." (Personal Observation, 2017)

The encounter is brief and, under ordinary circumstances, barely worth mentioning, but as small and subtle moments often are, it is ripe with significance. Had peers from Dr. Jackson's department been observing, they may have been critical of the interaction. *Mateo is a college student. We need to teach him responsibility*, they might have admonished. And while it is true that we hope and expect that all students come to class prepared, it would be important to know, as Dr. Jackson does, that Mateo was raised in foster care. He had been forced to care for himself at an early age. Unlike most of his peers, he has to figure out where he will stay during breaks, whom he'll join during holidays, how he'll pay for supplies or transportation or any of the other items not covered through financial aid.

Mateo knows responsibility and Dr. Jackson knows Mateo. He had been in her class the previous semester. He was angry. Small slights triggered outbursts and strings of curses, but instead of being met with equal force, his classmates offered him grace, and the faculty and staff who surrounded him, pulled him closer rather than pushing him further away. They recognized his intelligence and potential as a writer. They saw him, and seasons later, he is still growing.

As with any human interaction, Mateo and Dr. Jackson will never come to a perfect understanding. One will never see the world exactly as the other does. Fortunately, teaching and learning in Scholars Studio is not about developing carbon copies. Their work together is an act of translation. As they walk together something new, and potentially transformative, emerges in the space between them.

**The Journey: Bridging Geography, Space, and Time—An Exploration of how
the Journey Connects, Builds upon, and Enlarges Lived Experience**

The *pedagogy of bridging* is a call to connect. Integrating the concept of *journey* into the teaching/learning experience situates the curriculum in its broader context and connects learners' embodied experiences to their studies. In Scholars Studio, the idea of *journey* is translated quite literally as leaving campus to explore how the curriculum lives in the world. We have traveled to Quebec, Canada to explore alternative approaches to incarceration; Harvard University's Hip Hop Archive in Cambridge, Massachusetts to learn about the intersection of scholarship and hip hop; the CIAA's conference on mental health and athletes in North Carolina to engage in conversation about psychology and sports; and we have visited a lot of spaces in between. In the sections that follow, I use our journey to Cambridge, Maryland, Harriet Tubman's birthplace, to draw out the lived experience of the journey in Scholars Studio.

The Underground Railroad: Journey Toward Freedom

The Choptank River is gray with white caps scattered, like marbles, across its surface. We cross the deck to see how the riverbank drops—how grass gives way to rocks and water. We study the stirring currents and birds dropping like dive-bombers after fish, hoping the land will reveal something about the past that shifts where we stand today. We imagine the river without the concrete bridge or motorboats cruising easily from one side to the other. Crickets trill in the morning heat, and off toward the marshes, the sun burns through the fog. Centuries ago enslaved Africans crossed these channels toward freedom, the same currents pulling toward the sea—sparrows chattering, hope blossoming, the human spirit rising with the North Star. Here, our imagination renews.

With the land's contours clear in our minds, we gather at the bus. We have come to Cambridge, Maryland, Harriet Tubman's birthplace, as part of a semester-long exploration of *Dreams and Conflicts*. Today we journey to the countryside where Tubman and a vast network of freedom seekers guided enslaved Africans out of bondage. More than a century later with daily headlines of brutality against people with brown and black skin dominating news cycles, we are still on a quest for freedom.

Farms that were once plantations stretch along both sides of the road. The landscape has changed little since Tubman's time. The bus moves slowly, barns shrinking in the rearview mirror, bringing the distance that Tubman traveled on foot into perspective. We are drawn here for much more than historical facts and land markers. The journey itself serves an important role in our personal and collective growth. As Casey (2009) remarks:

I cannot grasp what is there in the next stage of my journey except in relation to the here of where I am just now. My journey, in other words, is not simply from here to there but from here to here to here, or more precisely from the here-in-view-of-there to the there-reached-from-here. (pp. 278-279)

The journey brings the possibilities of alternative narratives into view. We move across the ground where Tubman walked, placing one foot in front of the other, as she did, and recognize the remarkable in an ordinary patch of grass or stand of trees. Here is the grass that cushioned Tubman's feet. Here are the woods that provided shelter. What's more, the Underground Railroad, and by extension, the much more elusive path to freedom, is not an abstract concept in a textbook. It is a doorway in a wooden shack, a river, a stream. It is a dirt road and strangers lending hands, strategy, community, hope, and an incredible dose of bravery. It is, again and again, placing one foot in front of the other, moving "to the there-reached-from-here" (p. 279). We make this journey because the "there" of where we want to be is reached from the "here" where we now stand.

The history of this place reaches for us as we reach for it. The deeper we journey, the more we understand how deeply entangled we are in the roots that stretch from *here* to *there*—splitting and sprouting anew in every direction, weaving among other roots until we can no longer distinguish one tendril from another, the *there* from the *here*. We witness in this awakening, the largess of life—the brilliant interconnectedness that is part of us, the connection we felt from the umbilicus while in the womb, the connection that continued to nurture us, sometimes gently, sometimes with an exacting harshness, as we began to breathe and move in the world. Here, we witness the bridging of ideas with their lived experience—something that for many of us had been schooled away. The heirs of a curriculum that breaks down and fragments the world, we are hungry for integration. We thirst for connection. For many of us, academic disciplines, such as math, were not presented in their full forms, as ideas that emerged from the world and spoke about the world. We did not trace our fingers over the unfolding logarithmic

spiral of a seashell, nor did we muse about the alien-like fractals in *romanesco*. Instead, we grappled with equations, distilled to their barest form. Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2008) note:

Education is being driven by an analytic idea of “basicness” inherited from a limited, literal-minded, and out-dated version of the empirical sciences. This idea can be simply stated even though its consequences are profound: that which is most real or more basic to any discipline we might teach are its smallest, most clearly and distinctly isolatable, testable and assessable bits and pieces... the aim is to improve...by clearly, carefully and meticulously marking off, isolating and separating distinguishable knowledge, skills and attitudes. With such improvements, a particular [student’s] mastery of specific knowledge, skills and attitudes can thus be clearly, carefully and meticulously tracked, tested and assessed. (pp. 3-4)

While there are times when it is appropriate to break concepts down, problems arise when fragmentation becomes the curriculum. Jardine (2006) equates the breakdown of curriculum to environmental degradation. It leads to “a certain loss of who we are, a sense of the wholeness of our lives” (p. 172).

Getting There: The Journey and the In-Between

The journey, on the other hand, invites connection. It reassembles the pieces that may be lost when knowledge is whittled down for systematic assessment. Even the most monotonous aspects of the journey orient us in the world. The passage from here to here to here gives us a sense of how time and landscape shape us. It matters that the Chesapeake Bay Bridge is uncomfortably long or that heavy rains flood roads in the countryside. These details provide context. They speak about our relationships with the natural world. They are integral in understanding history, politics and the movement of people over time and space. They create larger pictures, and in so doing, enlarge our inquiries. We don’t simply show up to point B having left point A. We traverse what lies between. Interstices become important.

These in-between spaces are teeming with possibility. Movement and change characterize them. In the way that *up* is relative to *down* on a staircase—step number five is up

from four but down from six—nothing is fixed; therefore, center-margin dichotomies cannot be enacted. We need only move east, beyond the protection of the Chesapeake Bay to the Atlantic coast, to see this concept play out clearly. We might imagine children playing at the water's edge on a cloudy day. In this scene, one can barely make sense of where land begins and ends. A rock wall to the right of the children is nearly submerged. Seaweed dredged from the ocean's bottom rests on the sand. Water creeps into the foreground and leaps toward the sky. There are no firm horizons in this image that Bhabha (2004) might describe as *in-between*. There is, as he notes:

a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-delà* – here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth. (p. 1)

The world is in flux. The tugging current becomes a feature of the beach's sand, just as the ocean's mist becomes indistinguishable from the sky. This constant up-turning resists the formation of binaries—the constructions of *black-white*, *good-bad*, *light-dark* to which Westerners organize their lives; we cannot be certain that the ground will hold, as the children retreat from waves looming taller than they stand. It is easy to imagine their screams, a palpable blend of terror and delight. They are living the thrill of escape, born anew in each moment. As their bodies shift in the wave's shadow, we are reminded of the horizon's obscurity. This image calls attention to the movement of the in-between and the *there reached from here*. Boundaries are constantly revised as land, water, and sun mingle at the edge of the earth at the end of the day.

The Precarious Journey

Once again, we find ourselves in Tubman's territory. The bus turns. This time we are on a wooded road flanked by gullies. Herons dip and rise, marking our approach to the water. We reach a fork in the road and swing to the right, around a corner to a dead end. The land bends,

cradling the slow-moving water of the Transquaking River. To the left, a bridge crosses the water. Reeds stretch to the horizon on the opposite shore. Enslaved Africans hid here on their journey to freedom, sometimes as long as days or weeks, until they received word that it was safe to depart. It's not difficult to imagine the humid air licking their skin, the snakes and birds and bugs, and at night, the consumptive darkness with its endless sea of stars shifting and glimmering somewhere far off. A small group of men and women are fishing for crabs on our side of the shore. Their buckets brim with blue crustaceans—tentacles and claws flailing mindlessly in the harsh air.

The fishermen invite our students to pick up the crabs. Jordan reaches for one. He raises his cell phone to take a selfie. His friends reach into their pockets for their phones. My gaze shifts to one of the men who seems as amused as our students. He raises his arm, revealing a confederate flag tattoo. I freeze. I am acutely aware that my white skin serves as a passport, allowing free movement from one location to the next. My colleagues and students don't share this privilege. In the United States, their bodies are racialized—considered threatening, violent, and less susceptible to pain (Yancy, 2008). With objectification comes a threat of its own. We have all kept count of the lives so easily taken—Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, George Floyd. And when members of our own community are killed—an Academic Advisor while in police custody, a student at the hands of a proclaimed racist—we are shocked by how easily the breath is drained, but also aware that some parts of us are always on the lookout. Despite this, or perhaps in spite of it, we reject a pedagogy of fear. We want our students to be brave and take risks. We want them to know the world and be comfortable in it.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) whose upbringing taught him to remain wary of others, describes the difficulty and necessity of not succumbing to fear in a letter to his son:

The children were running, jumping, and tumbling. You took one look at them, tore away from us, and ran right into the scrum. You have never been afraid of people, of rejection, and I have always admired you for this and always been afraid for you because of this. I watched you leap and laugh with these children you barely knew, and the wall rose in me and I felt I should grab you by the arm, pull you back and say, “We don’t know these folks! Be cool!” I did not do this. I was growing, and if I could not name my anguish precisely, I still knew that there was nothing noble in it. But now I understand the gravity of what I was proposing—that a four-year-old child be watchful, prudent, and shrewd, that I curtail your happiness, that you submit to a loss of time. (pp. 91-92)

Indeed, the reality of racial inequality and violence in the United States complicates pedagogical decisions. Referring to van Manen’s definition of pedagogy as “distinguishing actively and/or reflectively what is good or right and what is life enhancing, just, and supportive from what is not good, wrong, unjust, or damaging in ways we act, live, and deal with [students]” (p. 19) faculty might reasonably wonder whether to emphasize safety and survival or freedom and bravery; and, if there’s a third option that marries the two, how do we get there?

We return to the bus. As the river becomes a memory and the farmland meets us once again, it is clear that the journey is more than movement from here to here to there. Sometimes movement is inhibited by the history inscribed in the land. It is fearful, worrying, and heavy. Sometimes we move easily and bravely. Sometimes we build bridges and find another way.

Community: Building Bridges with Others

In Naomi Shihab-Nye’s poem, “Gate A-4,” strangers find themselves stranded together in an airport. The narrator recounts using her Arabic language skills to reassure a Palestinian woman on a delayed flight. Returning the gesture of kindness, the Palestinian woman offers her own form of comfort by passing out cookies to her fellow passengers:

To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a Sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California,

The lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same
Powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies. (Nye, 2008)

In quick succession, the kindness spreads as passengers build bridges—through translation, shared relations, and food—to create an impromptu, albeit fleeting, community. The connection the women at gate A-4 share breaks through the confusion and apprehension that had just moments earlier consumed them. She ends the poem with, “This is the world I want to live in. The shared world” (Nye, 2008).

The university resembles an airport terminal in the sense that both are passageways—one between geographic destinations and the other between life stages. They assemble people from diverse locations who bump against and look past one another until an extraordinary moment jars them out of their solitude. While communities may form in university departments, residence halls, or organizations, a strong sense of independence persists. Disciplines are separated into silos, courses are disconnected, and students assemble in classes only to work independently, and in some cases, competitively. Palmer (1987) suggests:

The competitive individualism of the classroom is not simply the function of a social ethic; it reflects a pedagogy that stresses the individual as the prime agent of knowing. But to say the obvious, knowing and learning are communal acts. They require many eyes and ears, many observations and experiences. They require a continued cycle of discussion, disagreement and consensus over what has been seen and what it all means. (p. 22)

Building community at the university is not only affirming and supportive, it is a necessary aspect of learning. As with all other aspects of pedagogy in Scholars Studio, community begins with faculty who support one another’s development as educators.

Communal Acts: Learning Together

One instructor, Janiece, expressed frustration because her students weren’t meeting her standards. She teaches Freshman Seminar—a first year orientation course. She explains:

“I consider following directions one of the main goals of this course.” She pulled out a stack of papers and pointed to surface errors, “See, their names were supposed to be written on the left-hand side of the page, the text was supposed to be double-spaced, the margins half an inch. This one’s double-spaced, the margins are wrong here, the name’s in the wrong place on this one. I don’t understand. This is so simple.”

“There are a lot of reasons why this might happen,” her colleague offered. “To begin with, when I listen to your standards, they feel random. I might think you are simply asking for compliance. What’s the purpose? Why not ask them to use APA style—the same format they are using in their other classes? You can have a conversation about the purpose of the format—how it will be useful in their discipline, how it will serve them. Point them toward resources that they can use to figure out how to format their work. You can also use this experience to encourage editing and peer review.”

“Actually,” another faculty member added, “whatever you’re doing is working because they always turn in their work on time in the proper format. It’s thoughtful and well done.” (Personal Observation, 2015)

When faculty feel comfortable revealing their frustrations and listening to one another, subtext is often revealed. Janiece admitted that her standards are high, and she may have been imposing the standards she sets for herself on her students. She acknowledged that her articulation of Freshman Seminar’s purpose may have been a reflection of her own needs—that, in fact, non-reflectively enacting her own needs may have interfered with the students’ experience. Perhaps the purpose of the course was not to follow directions, but rather to help students identify and interpret academia’s cultural codes, become more resourceful, practice strong habits of mind, build community, and understand themselves better.

Janiece’s teaching community helped her disentangle her needs and desires from her students’, thus allowing all of them to enter the space more fully and intentionally together. Later, Janiece mentioned that all of the students in her class had visited her during office hours for feedback on their assignment: “The content of their work was incredible.” Having let go of her attachment to following directions, an aim she no longer held steadfast, she could see the

quality of thought and care with which her students were actually approaching their work—an arguably more important end.

Our Relations

Faculty bring a complex web of thoughts, metaphors, methods, histories, and practices with them. In the communal space, strands from each of the webs mingle with one another forming a new web. This new web, woven of people, ideas, methods, and inquiries, becomes part of the community. Friesen, Clifford, and Jardine (2002/2008) call this inclusive notion of community a “community of relations.” Similarly, Palmer (1987) describes it as thus: “a capacity for relatedness within individuals, relatedness not only to people but to events in history, to nature, to the world of ideas, and yes, to the things of the spirit” (p. 24).

Extending the definition of community to ideas and other aspects of academic pursuits offers a method for rethinking the structure of atomized disciplines in the Academy. Rather than thinking about disciplines as distinct units, it’s helpful to recognize how they work together to bolster our understanding of the world. Barnett calls this approach an “ecology of knowledge” and situates academic disciplines within the ecology of the university and the world the university serves. Using the ecology metaphor, disciplines need one another to thrive. Science and humanities, for example, are not in competition with one another. Rather, they uncover different aspects of a unified inquiry: they help us understand the universe and our place in it. Barnett (2011) calls this form of inquiry a “wisdom inquiry” (p. 147).

Love

Working in community is challenging. It is hard work. It requires patience, communication, and a will to understand. It is much easier to retreat to individual silos. So why do it? I believe it is the only way to achieve Shihab Nye’s vision of a “shared world,” one that is

connected and empowering with the capacity for healing. Having worked at an HBCU for over a decade, I have repeatedly observed steadfast commitment. People who could easily make more money and carry smaller workloads elsewhere choose to stay at the institution out of a deep love for their community and the people they serve. Simply put, love is the glue that binds the community and makes transformation possible. Martin Luther King, Jr. (2001) recognized the necessity of love. “What is needed,” he said:

is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. And this is what we must be as we move on. (p. 191)

Love can give us the clear sight needed to meet people where they are and recognize their potential. In his book *United*, New Jersey Senator, Cory Booker (2016), adroitly captures the ways in which *love* frames social justice work. He describes the day he met Ms. Virginia Jones, tenant association president of Brick Towers, a low-income housing complex in Newark. A young, confident Yale law student, Booker had imagined the community embracing him. Instead, Ms. Jones regarded him skeptically. At the end of their meeting, Booker was ushered to the front steps and asked to describe what he saw (p. 39). He surveyed the neighborhood: “I see Brick Towers. Two buildings in rough shape. I see the street. I see the house I live in, the bodega... Happy House... the abandoned building” (p. 39). Ms. Jones stopped him:

You can’t help me... You need to understand something. The world you see outside of you is a reflection of what you have inside of you. If all you see are problems, darkness, and despair, then that is all there is ever going to be. But if you are one of those stubborn people who every time you open your eyes you see hope, you see opportunity, possibility, you see love or the face of God, *then* you can be someone who helps me. (p. 39)

When we push aside test scores and other measures used to justify a deficit approach and see our students for the brilliant, caring, passionate individuals that they are, they become unstoppable. We have had several occasions where our most dedicated students return and share

that they performed poorly in high school. They were dreading college and certainly did not think they would find joy here, nor did they expect to make the Dean's list. We are always surprised when this happens because we had assumed their success in Scholars Studio was simply a continuation of prior success. They benefited from not being seen as the person who suffered through high school, but rather the person with the spark of brilliance, the person with humanity, and the person deserving of love.

In her exegesis on resistance methodologies, Sandoval (2000) positions *love* as a mode of “oppositional conscience.” It provides a “set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement” (chapter 6, section 1, para. 2). Love has the ability to bring together individuals who are ideologically opposed. It punctures fixed realities and provides an opening to new consciousness. Sometimes it decenters, merges, *melts*, as Barthes (1978) describes:

Either woe or wellbeing, sometimes I have a craving to be engulfed. This morning (in the country), the weather is mild, overcast. I am suffering (from some incident). The notion of suicide occurs to me, pure of any resentment (not blackmailing anyone); an insipid notion; it alters nothing (“breaks” nothing), matches the color (the silence, the desolation) of this morning.

Another day in the rain we're waiting for the boat at the lake; from happiness, this time, the same outburst of annihilation sweeps through me. This is how it happens sometimes, misery or joy engulfs me, without any particular tumult ensuing: nor any pathos: I am dissolved, not dismembered. I fall, I flow, I melt. Such thoughts grazed, touched, tested (the way you test the water with your foot) can recur. Nothing solemn about them. This is exactly what *gentleness* is. (pp. 10-11)

These moments cause us to step outside ourselves. Who among us hasn't gazed at a sunset or surrendered to an embrace that opened our hearts so wide that we thought we might dissolve in unexpected joy? These experiences, if we allow them, reconfigure us. Barthes described subtle, present moments that might be lost in the whirl of an ordinary day. Egos, which fix us solidly in

the body and bind us to a particular reality, are softened, dropped, or dissolved. They are overcome with the desire to merge with that which has captivated them, to, indeed, become it.

When we bring an ethic of love to our work, we eschew the boundaries, prevalent in education, that cause us to see students as the maligned *other*—a positioning that often devolves into conversations about how much they lack. We recognize in them an inherent goodness that runs through all of us.

Recently, a small group of faculty and staff in one learning community expressed frustration that their work with students that year seemed to have had little impact. The year had nearly come to an end and students were just as disengaged from learning as they had been when they entered the institution. They didn't seem interested in exploring ideas that extended beyond their pursuit of a job, and very few of them had taken advantage of faculty office hours. They were struggling to complete a culminating interdisciplinary project, and unsure about how to address this tension, we canceled class to meet with them in small groups. In retrospect, we had probably intended to inquire about the challenges they faced—*what was at the center of their struggle*—but we would find the answer was in the inquiry. The students came alive in the intimate spaces of our offices. Although the faculty had shown care in the classroom and made an attempt to drop hierarchal boundaries, the students had not been able to find an entry point into academic conversation.

Their K-12 schooling had taught them to prepare for exams, but most of them had not been encouraged to think critically or creatively. They did not know how to engage text. Years' worth of worksheets and scantrons had conditioned them to complete work but not enter it, to crave the reward of an A without developing a love for learning. In our offices, the figurative distance between faculty and students narrowed. Students entered the dialogue as equals rather

than individuals clamoring for participation points. A metaphorical merging occurred as faculty and students intertwined in conversation.

Bridging the Future: Resistance and Healing

As I close this section, the COVID-19 pandemic has been ravaging nations worldwide for over a year. It has forced social isolation, tested the limits of healthcare systems, and sent millions of people to early graves. By the time the virus emerged, the United States was already fragmented from years of political division and reeling from seemingly endless cases of violence against who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). These problems point to a long history of fragmentation and brokenness. The Academy's traditional practice of operating in silos and elevating individualism exacerbates these crises. The pedagogy described in this research, which relies on community and connection, offers alternatives to fragmentation, and gives way to a number of questions, including what serves the highest good in these times? And, what possibilities does *bridging* open?

Phenomenology as Bridge

I have selected hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the experience of *bridging* in Scholars Studio. I am drawn to this method because it requires researchers to build bridges in order to deeply understand and describe others' experiences. My research is guided by the following method:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;

6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (van Manen, 2007, pp. 30-31)

This inquiry turns to the question, *What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio?* In this chapter, I open the phenomenon and explore engagements that facilitate *bridging*. Chapter Two is an existential investigation of the phenomenon. Using sources to open an understanding of bridging in Scholars Studio, I explore how connections are made through the framework of play. Chapter Three explores this inquiry's philosophical grounding in phenomenology, incorporating thinkers who address issues of intersectionality. Chapter Four explores the people and places relevant to this study by (a) discussing the institutional context, (b) describing the Black Men in Education learning community—which serves as the basis for this research, and (c) introducing the participants. Chapter Five is an interpretation of thematic elements that emerge during conversations, including (a) the transformative potential of an embodied connection with history, (b) what it means to navigate edges, (c) thinking the world whole as an antidote to fragmentation and oppression, and (d) improvisation as a means of creatively holding tension. The final chapter elucidates the meaning that emerged as I explored the phenomenon, and emphasizes a concept I call *The What and the Wonder*. This concept offers a framework for moving closer to the meaning of a thing, and wondering it into being by tapping into joy and curiosity. I see this process as an important next step for manifesting transformational change in Scholars Studio. I close the final chapter by presenting possibilities for what Scholar Studio might become.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PLAY OF THE BRIDGE: AN EXISTENTIAL INVESTIGATION

Most of the students I encounter were taught to operate in isolation and dispensed fragmented bits of knowledge. Their learning experience was akin to reaching into a box of puzzle pieces and pulling out a random handful, all displaying different colors and patterns. On their own, the puzzle pieces may take interesting shapes or reveal artful abstractions, but without looking at the image on the puzzle box, it would be difficult to discern the full picture. Students spend years memorizing and making sense of the pieces with the promise that they will understand the bigger picture one day. They are told, “You need to learn quadratic equations or dates in history to score well on exams,” or “You will need this in the *real world*,” as if they are living in a world that is somehow other. Absent are conversations about the richness that makes life meaningful or the nuance, beauty, and uncertainty that stir curiosity.

This disconnection is a reflection of a more widespread disconnection. It’s not surprising that the global crises that we face today are fundamentally about fragmentation and disconnection. Our students are inheriting a world that some argue is on the brink of environmental collapse; an economic situation that has contributed to the widest wealth gap our nation has ever seen; and a democracy so politically fraught that it’s hard to imagine finding common ground. These problems, at their root, are about fragmentation. They are the natural consequence of an epistemology that thinks the world apart.

If we are willing to accept that Western intellectual tradition perpetuates a fragmented worldview, it would follow that a partial antidote to disconnection in higher education would be a curriculum and praxis that cultivate connection, as Jardine (2006) reflects here:

In dwelling upon the mathematical changes in the gait of a bear as it moves from a walk to a run, I cannot avoid coming to reflect on my own living involvement in such Earthly rhythms, “an anciently perceived likeness”...that embraces us both and makes the life of

each complicit in the other. In walking up this hill and feeling the fluttering mathematical patterns of breath and pulse and steps, I come to better understand this creature and its mathematical being in place, housed by flesh and humus, housed by a mysterious immediacy. And, in understanding this creature in this way, I come to understand myself and my own living involvement in the ecological conditions under which this creature lives and which I live with it, pulling hard at this same air as it curves up the steep valley sides. (pp. 151-152)

The intellectual engagement that Jardine illustrates does more than simply bring two topics or disciplines together—calculating the speed of a bear romping up a hillside, for example (p. 150). It tunes learners into how deeply and inextricably they are connected to the living world and how mathematics provides a language for thinking about relationships and the ecology that sustains them. It holds the potential to transform thinking as questions bubble up that are both mathematical and philosophical and may include: *What patterns unfurl in this space?* And, *What is our place here?*

Another question consistently asked in Scholars Studio is, *What engagements orient faculty and students toward wholeness and purpose?* This is another way of asking van Manen's question, *How can we do the most good?* Our responses change depending on the situation, and in this sense, the *pedagogy of bridging* is ever evolving, yet oriented in a direction that helps us “think the world together” (Jardine, 2006, pp. 152). We have found that there are particular modes of interacting and being that cultivate the responsiveness, openness, and expansiveness that this pedagogy requires. One of these modes is *play*. While there are many possible ways for faculty and students to create bridges, *play* has consistently been at the crux of transformation in the Studios and is considered here as one possible way of *becoming-with* one another.

Entering Play

This chapter investigates the solidarities, free spaces, and connections that bridging begets in Scholars Studio. In Chapter One, I turned to the phenomenon of bridging and identified some of the structural elements that facilitate bridging in Scholars Studio. In Chapter Two, I

continue the inquiry through an existential investigation, drawing on lived relation, place, body and time. Using sources to open understanding of bridging in Scholars Studio, I explore the experience of *being-with* and *becoming-with* through the framework of play.

Being-With

Heidegger (1927) posits that *being-with* is an aspect of *Dasein* (the experience of being human). It is an existential state and does not require an individual to be in the presence of another for the phenomenon to exist. Heidegger offers a parallel example, showing how even inanimate objects are thought about in terms of their relationship to people:

When, for example, we walk around the edge of a field but ‘outside it’, the field shows itself as belonging to such and such a person, and decently kept up by him; the book that we have used was bought at so-and-so’s shop and given by such-and-such a person, and so forth. The boat anchored at the shore is assigned in its Being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes voyages with it; but even if it is a ‘boat which is strange to us’, it is still indicative of Others. (The Dasein with Others and Everyday Beingness section, para. 3)

In this same way, we declare our relationship to others. We are aunts, sons, mothers, cousins.

Dasein doesn’t merely exist as an isolated ‘I.’ As social beings, humans rely on one another.

Their existence in relation to others is shaped by *das man* or *they*, which is the socially constructed aspect of *being-in-the world*.

The modes in which people greet one another is an example of *das man*’s influence. Greetings are social constructions that are mediated by culture and other influences. When I pass a stranger, I might say, *hello* or *good morning* and acknowledge them with a nod or a wave. Because they understand the meaning of the gesture and feel compelled to respond in a socially appropriate manner, they may return the greeting in kind. When I encounter a friend, on the other hand, my greeting may be casual and more effusive or warm so as to signal familiarity or enthusiasm for seeing them. Another possible encounter occurs when the taken-for-granted

action of greeting someone awakens me to cultural or regional differences. In my community, the majority of my neighbors greet me with, “How’s it going?” instead of the greetings I was brought up to use. I have observed my tendency to respond unthinkingly with “hello.” Meeting their greeting in kind calls for a degree of intentionality and presence that I often lack in those situations.

Heidegger (1927) may view my response as an example of the “dictatorship of the they” (Everyday Being-one’s-Self and the “They” section, para. 4). The influence of the public environment has shaped my thoughts and actions in such a way that they are not always my own. He contends:

This being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of “the Others”, in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the dictatorship of the “they” is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge... The “they,” which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being everydayness. (Everyday Being-one’s-Self and the “They” section, para. 4)

The notion of *being-with* is especially important for my research because it involves the experience of making connections with others. These interactions are not only influenced by proximal encounters, but also the public *they*.

Becoming-With

Ortega (2016) notes that the impact of *being-with* is not relegated to social conditioning. It carries the possibility of bridging understanding, but she cautions that Heidegger’s account of *they* also reveals a fear of the other. Heidegger breaks *they* into deficient and positive modes and dedicates considerably more time to unpacking the negative aspects of sociality, including a desire to avoid accountability (p. 149). In response, Ortega turns to the notion of *becoming-with*,

which considers how people are shaped by those with whom they are in close proximity. In describing the concept of *becoming-with*, Haraway (2008) explains, “To become one is always to become with many” (p. 4). She continues, “We know that becoming is always becoming with—in a contact zone, where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake” (p. 244).

When I think about my journey of *becoming* a scholar and higher education professional, I am acutely aware of how profoundly my growth has been influenced by the people at the HBCU where I have worked for over a decade. Through Scholars Studio, I have read Carter G. Woodson’s *Miseducation of the Negro* and visited his home in Washington, D.C. I have visited Frederick Douglass’ home in South East, D.C. And, I’ve toured the Seventh Ward in Philadelphia where W.E.B. DuBois conducted one of the first sociological studies in the United States. Through those experiences and many more, I have come to understand the profound impact that Black people have had on shaping this country, and as was so well put by Nikole Hannah-Jones (2019) in the *1619 Project*, I have come to appreciate that “our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.” Further, I have had countless open and honest conversations. I’ve grieved the violent loss of students and staff. I have been surrounded by brilliance, and I have been welcomed into the community in ways that I never experienced in predominantly White spaces. Consequently, I see and situate myself differently in the world. Certainly, my interpretation of and relation to the world would have looked much different had I been working at a Predominantly White Institution for the past decade.

Ortega(2016) discusses the possibilities of understanding *becoming-with* in relation to transformational change.

While becoming-with captures a sense of the way that we are in worlds, it is also always connected to ontic embodiment and to others. The process through which one becomes

with another is multilayered and involves not only affect but also cognition and what has been characterized as a “sensuous knowing,” a socially situated, embodied knowing that may or may not be propositional and that gives us a sense of freedom or alienation, as well as possibilities for developing new attunements to features of worlds and new possibilities for change. (pp. 168-169)

Ortega acknowledges that *becoming-with* does not guarantee change. Transformation depends on the willingness of participants to stretch themselves and embrace vulnerability. This inquiry reflects on play and how it drops barriers, builds connections and helps us *become-with* intentionally and bravely.

Play

A natural and primal instinct, play is essential for survival, learning, and socialization in both animals and humans. Play works by building connections (bridges, if you will)—whether by connecting neural networks (through role play during childhood, for example) or individuals (through games or sport, etc.). Play breaks down barriers and opens space where disbelief can be suspended. And, when play is well practiced and players are open, it has the potential to connect individuals to the cosmic or divine, and in this sense, it is utterly transformational. Play is the artist’s domain and the “work” that happens in the Studio. As such, it is the most direct and accessible descriptor I can think of to capture the nature of bridging in Scholars Studio.

Scholar: Being at Ease and Inviting Play

Popular culture often depicts scholars as disheveled, solitary figures, consumed by work. They may be serious or absent-minded, but rarely are they imbued with playful qualities. One such depiction portrayed in the movie, *A Beautiful Mind*, tells the story of John Nash, a brilliant mathematician, gripped by paranoid schizophrenia. As the plot unravels, viewers are drawn into Nash’s world, which is punctuated by genius and psychosis. His ability to create and push the boundaries of conventional thinking are attributed to his mental illness. In fact, academia is characterized as a yoke that stifles genius. Nash explains, “Classes will dull your mind, destroy

the potential for authentic creativity” (Howard, 2001). Here, he uncovers a “truth” that the audience is willing to accept: creativity and play are at odds with the stern halls of the academy. But, what if one doesn’t have to lose grip with reality in order to bring brilliance into the world?

The word scholar traces back to the Greek word *scholastes*, “one who lives at ease” and the Latin word *scholaris* “of a school.” *Schola*, the root of *scholaris*, refers to “intermission of work, leisure for learning, learned conversation, debate” (Etymonline, n.d.). The Greek and Latin roots both share a sense of *leisure* and *ease*, but how does one reconcile the etymological roots with the popular culture images of stern, humorless professors?

Indeed, as Stanley (2017)—a college professor— found, faculty often attempt to establish control by presenting an authoritative persona. This persona may help cement authority, but it does so at the expense of building connections and showing up authentically in the teaching-learning space. She describes the moment when she first let down her guard:

My first classroom joke triumph, of course, happened by accident. We all knew that the class wanted tomorrow’s exam to be canceled, so when I unexpectedly teased them about it, they laughed appreciatively. Who knew that I could be so playful *in the classroom*? I later gained the courage to open up about a personal matter: how much I love snow days. I was as gleeful about a college closing (and we had already had three!) as they were, and I wasn’t bashful about revealing my excitement to them. We were really connecting.

Stanley (2017) reflected, “Ultimately, the key to better teaching was not to become funnier or more funny. It was to become *more me*.” Playfulness provided a safe bridge for her to bring herself more fully into the teaching-learning space.

Similar to Stanley’s experience, *play* has not always been central to Scholars Studio’s work. Although it did not occur to us that *play* would become one of our tenets, there must have been something subconscious at work when we named the project *Scholars Studio*. The word “Studio” conjures images of an artist’s workspace, and as we’ll explore later, artists are masters of play. The studio metaphor would act as a compass guiding our work toward its true north.

After offering Scholars Studio learning communities for several semesters, we observed a pattern: the start of every term was painstaking. Students resisted our attempts at engagement, and the work of teaching in the Studio was akin to walking upstream. At some point in the semester, there was, to everyone's relief, a palpable shift that seemed to materialize from nothing. Studying the patterns, we noticed that these transformative moments often occurred during collective instances of spontaneous play. These events usually took place off-campus. They weren't planned "play" activities, but rather rose out of situations that were both novel and inviting. The example of the students playing with the crabs in Chapter One was one of those moments. Another example occurred at a science museum in Philadelphia where one room was dedicated to the hands-on exploration of the cardio-vascular system. The main exhibit was a giant heart, spacious enough for guests to walk through its chambers and follow the flow of blood. Introducing students to experiences like this is risky because there is the potential that they will interpret it as childish; nevertheless, they settled in and moved through the exhibits with a sense of wonder and an open mind. Their willingness to play in that space may have been mediated by their assignment, which was to develop a short video that teaches third graders about the heart. It is possible that their "serious" task freed them to let go of self-consciousness.

When students let go into play, they radiate joyfulness and presence, and they are more receptive to learning. We are still learning what it means to play in the higher education teaching and learning space, and we continue to explore how play and our orientation toward social justice might create a third space that embraces a vision of a just, whole, and joyful world. What follows is an attempt to move deeper into the experience of play in Scholars Studio.

Playing with Survival

Play is evident across the animal kingdom. It is just as common in squirrels and house cats as it is in humans. Unlike other biological functions, say, eating or sleeping, it is inefficient and doesn't appear to contribute to organisms' basic survival. As I think about play in the teaching and learning space, I begin by thinking about all of the examples of play around me. My cat is stretched out on the floor and looks up to see a camera strap dangling over the edge of a chair. He taps it gingerly a few times to gauge how it will respond to his touch. It moves easily and does not retreat or strike back. Emboldened, he taps harder and the strap swings higher. He is entranced by the movement. Tap. Swing. Tap. Swing. Outside a pair of children play with a ball. They roll it to one another, toss it, strike it with their fists, and kick it. Each time it makes a different sound and lands closer or further than it had the last time. They shriek and fetch the ball, chasing one another, tussling, and falling.

The Trance of Play

As play unfolds around me, I am struck by how completely absorbed the players are in the act. The trance isn't broken for my cat until the slam of my neighbor's door startles him out of the moment, and the children continue until they can no longer catch their breath, and they tumble to the ground, exhausted with delight. Gadamer (1975) suggests that play holds the possibility of transformation because it shifts players' horizons. He writes, "Play fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play. Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play" (p. 103). Play pulls us out of our everyday realities, and calls us to inhabit new space.

There is an intelligence behind the seemingly simple acts of play that both cat and children enter. Brown (2009) explains:

Play is nature's greatest tool for creating new neural networks and for reconciling cognitive difficulties. The abilities to make new patterns, find the unusual among the common, and spark curiosity and alert observation are all fostered by being in a state of play. When we play, dilemmas and challenges will naturally filter through the unconscious mind and work themselves out. It is not at all uncommon for people to come back not only reenergized, but also with fresh ideas for work. (p. 127)

Play, for both cat and human, teaches them about their world and helps them adapt to changing conditions. My cat, who doesn't understand why new objects come and go in his environment, has developed playful techniques for determining the trustworthiness of new things. He bats at materials that appear to be lightweight or easily manipulated, he crawls into boxes, and he leaps on top of large objects. It's stimulating and instructive; it provides a sense of security in his ever-changing world.

Gazing upon the children playing ball in the grass, one might dismiss their game as childish or less immense than the serious work that adults do at their desks all day, but to say such things would ignore the fact that the children are unconsciously applying a scientific method each time they test a new technique for launching their ball. They are learning about physics when they approach the ball from different angles or apply varying degrees of pressure. They are recognizing that there is more than one solution to a problem and that taking different perspectives yields different results. They are learning to cooperate, and they are learning how their bodies move. All this in a childish game.

It is, indeed, remarkable that both cat and human can learn so much from games that are so utterly captivating. Had the experiences felt tedious, painful, shameful, or boring, they likely would not have endured the process for so long, nor would have they learned so much. I remember learning Latin in high school. We were required to copy words or conjugate verbs over and over until they were seared in our memories. I recall stooping over a notebook at my kitchen table, caught in the drudgery of the process. Any little noise or thought distracted me.

The exercise didn't invite me to plunge into the rich context and history of the language, nor did it cause me to wonder how its grammatical structures helped shape thought. I was not entranced by my studies in the way my cat or my neighbor's children had been in theirs. I contrast that experience to learning basic Russian and Mandarin using a cell phone application, which approached vocabulary building and grammar using game design. I learned quicker and invested more energy into language acquisition using the latter approach.

The Pleasure of Play

Despite evidence that people learn more when the experience is pleasurable, faculty often uphold the binary between serious work and play. Further, many faculty—perhaps well intending—attempt to motivate students with threats (*you won't pass, you won't graduate, you won't succeed*) or shame them into completing requirements. These tactics rarely work and often cause students to feel more alone. Play, on the other hand, is pleasurable and intriguing and helps them feel connected.

There is, however, the risk of using play as merely a form of entertainment to make learning that is tedious, dry, or challenging more palatable. This is not the kind of engagement that I address in this chapter. Play that occurs in Scholars Studio is held in tension with serious work. It is a vessel for bridging and thinking the world whole.

Playing as Bridging

It is fascinating that play is fundamental not only to survival and adaptation, but—as I'll explore later—there are few aspects of life that it does not touch. Evidence of its importance is found across the animal kingdom. In the animal world, there are no contradictions between play and the work of survival. Play and work are inextricably linked. Humans, on the other hand

(especially those from Western traditions), have compartmentalized the two, placing them in opposition.

To reclaim play in the learning space, it may be instructive to turn to animals. Brown (2009) notes that in the animal kingdom, play is not simply a functional activity that teaches survival skills. In fact, animals often engage in play during times when it appears counterintuitive to do so. He shares the story of a sled dog that had been tied to a stake in Northern Canada. Warmer than usual weather had prevented the sea from freezing on schedule. The polar bears, who counted on the ice cover to hunt seals were slowly starving in close vicinity to the encampment. A musher noticed one of the bears headed in the direction of his dog. He was certain that the dog would not survive the encounter, but then noticed the pup was wagging its tail, an invitation to play. Brown (2009) explains:

The bear responded to the dog's invitation. Bear and sled dog began a playful romp in the snow, both opening their mouths without baring their teeth, with "soft" eye contact and flattened hair instead of raised hackles—all signaling that each was not a threat...The two wrestled and rolled around so energetically that at one point the bear had to lie down, belly up: a universal sign in the animal kingdom for a time-out. At another point during their romp, the bear paused to envelope Hudson in an affectionate embrace. After fifteen minutes, the bear wandered away, still hungry but seemingly sated by this much-needed dose of fun. (p. 21)

This story is remarkable because although the bear was hungry and had access to an easy meal, he chose a fun social interaction over satisfying one of his most basic needs. While Brown does not speculate about why the bear made this choice, he notes that there are lots of examples of animals and humans, alike, seeking out play during times of suffering and hardship. Play makes challenges bearable and creates a sense of expansiveness.

The poet Jack Gilbert (2005) captures this idea in one of his later poems, "A Brief for the Defense." "Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere," he begins, offering the flat images of suffering that most of us have seen broadcast on television, "If babies are not starving

someplace, they are starving somewhere else. With flies in their nostrils,” (p. 3). These images bring the most dire of human circumstances to mind, but rather than playing into the dehumanizing trope of the hopeless and powerless victim, Gilbert insists that none of us can be reduced to suffering. Joy is our birthright and expressing it is an act of resistance. He continues:

There is laughter
every day in the terrible streets of Calcutta,
and the women laugh in the cages of Bombay.
If we deny our happiness, resist our satisfaction,
we lessen the importance of their deprivation.
We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless
furnace of this world. To make injustice the only
measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.
We must admit there will be music despite everything. (p. 3)

Gilbert transitions from third person to first person, signaling that suffering is not an abstract condition a continent away. It is in us and around us, but despite its omnipresence, it is not everything. I linger on the line, “We must admit there will be music despite everything” and John Coltrane’s song “Alabama” comes to mind. Composed as a eulogy to the four girls who were killed in the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing and patterned after the speech Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered in response, Coltrane’s song was an act of defiance (Scheinfeld, 2017). The piece begins with a mournful melody. The percussion accompaniment, which at first blends with the other instruments, amplifies as the song progresses, and then crescendos, signifying resolve and refusal to surrender, seemingly declaring that from the ashes, music will rise.

Over fifty years have passed since Coltrane brought “Alabama” into the world, and while progress has been made, racism and its accompanying violence persists. Since its inception, Scholars Studio has been oriented toward social justice. Early experiences taught us the

importance of bringing light and levity to the dark spaces. Doing so is an act of defiance, a refusal to slip into the dehumanizing realm of hopelessness. Moreover, it opens the possibility for transformation.

The Crownsville Studio, described in Chapter One, engaged students in a particularly heavy inquiry. They learned that not only did the state-run psychiatric facility—built on former plantation land—reimagine slavery in a modern institution, the details of daily life were fodder for horror stories. One could draw a straight line between the history at Crownsville (and similar institutions) and the stigma surrounding mental healthcare. The subject matter was heavy; in an attempt to push back the shadows, students were tasked with thinking about how to end the cycle of oppression that had been attached to the land since the 1800s. Specifically, they were asked to consider how the land might be repurposed to honor the memory of those who died and suffered in state custody while also providing economic or social benefits. This was a real-time problem, as the State had been grappling with what to do with the land for over a decade.

There were four courses associated with the Studio—a writing class, which invited students to research, read, and write about Crownsville; a business course, which helped students think about business, economics, and the practical application of developing a land-use proposal; Freshman Seminar, which helped students process their thoughts and hone their academic habits; and a math course, which offered perspectives on problem solving. To contextualize the experience, we visited the hospital, toured Annapolis' African American History sites, and visited the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C. The building museum offered a guided experience to help students think about the relationship between geometry and architecture, as they considered the kinds of structures that would be included in their land-use proposals. Here is a reflection from that experience:

We are ushered to the middle of the building and invited to sit on the floor. The facilitator has brought out bins, brimming with objects—some are plastic and look like they came from an elementary school classroom; others are more easily identifiable as gum drops, toothpicks, and paper. The students are quiet. Stoic countenances have replaced the grins that crossed their faces moments earlier. After everyone has settled, the facilitator poses a question. Silence. There are murmurs in the back. More silence. Someone finally volunteers an answer. Perhaps they feel bad for the facilitator standing awkwardly before the group, or perhaps the silence is too heavy. Someone whispers, “this is for babies.” Undaunted, the facilitator instructs the students to grab supplies and form groups. They stand and slowly move toward the bins. They return to their patch of floor and work together, creating shapes with toothpicks and using gum drops as joints; chatter begins as a hum, at first, and then rises, spilling into corridors and reaching the balconies above. Their voices echo. The room is lighter. They talk about the strength and integrity of the shapes they have constructed and joke about their lop-sided designs. The culminating task is to create a dodecahedron. The facilitator presents a series of differently sized rods and joints. She offers a few instructions and steps back to let them figure out how to construct the object. The closer they get, the more confident they become. There are moments of silence, but this time, the quality is different. It is focused and intentional. When the structure is complete, they gather inside together and take selfies—a ritual that seems to happen when they are content and want to identify with the experience. (Personal Reflection, 2014)

The invitation to play is an invitation to cast off—if only momentarily—one’s public persona and bring the self fully and authentically into the space. In other words, play acts as a bridge between our authentic selves and our serious work lives. First-year, traditionally aged college students often have the sense that college is a transition-point into adulthood without fully grasping what it means to be an adult. One student shared that she thought that being an adult meant that she had to work all the time. During her first semester of college, she spent most of her time in her dorm room studying. She was miserable and wanted to drop out. Her perspective changed when she allowed more enjoyment into her life and discovered that it was possible to strike a balance between work and play. When students don’t have a sense of what it means to be an adult, they often define it by what it’s not: it’s not childhood. Since play is closely associated with being a child, there is no space for it in the serious life of an adult, the

logic goes. It is no surprise that when confronted with opportunities to play in the learning space, students would resist.

Complicating matters, play is immersive and requires players to drop their walls. Students are accustomed to being in performance mode. In learning spaces, they are often expected to show up with the answers. They are graded on what they do or don't do and what they do or don't know. Discovery, experimentation, and failure are rarely rewarded, and students have received messages throughout their schooling that it is inappropriate to "play around." Moreover, a lot of students are deeply enmeshed in social media where they are expected to present a curated image of themselves. They bring that consciousness with them to the classroom where they are subjected to others' gaze. These realities aside, we do ourselves and our students a disservice when we forego play. Brown (2009) suggests:

Play and work are mutually supportive. They are not poles at opposite ends of our world. Work and play are more like the timbers that keep our house from collapsing down on top of us. Though we have been taught that play and work are each the other's enemy, what I have found is that neither one can thrive without the other. We need newness of play, its sense of flow, and being in the moment. We need the sense of discovery and liveliness that it provides. We also need the purpose of work, the economic stability it offers, the sense that we are doing service for others, that we are needed and integrated into our world. (p. 126)

Play bridges the authentic, vulnerable aspects of ourselves with our serious, purpose-driven selves. It shows us that the two are not mutually exclusive. Play requires serious focus. It helps us drop rigid boundaries and erect new ones, and it helps us look at problems in new ways.

Playing to Learn

What does it mean to learn? On its surface, the question is deceptively simple, but as it's unpacked, more questions come: *Do traditional teaching methods produce quality learning?* *What does learning look like? How do we know when learning is happening?* These are important questions because we often assume that there is a certain set of conditions that

generate learning and that by having those conditions in place, learning will occur. Further, we assume that exams and other assessments provide an accurate snapshot of learning and are content when students perform well. If these assumptions were not true, the logic goes, why would learning spaces look so similar in so many different places? There are historical and political explanations to the latter question, but these details are not central to this research. Instead, I am interested in what faculty and students experience in the Scholars Studio learning space. As hard and as passionately as we work, it does not prevent challenges, as evidenced by this conversation among faculty:

Gina: It was a case study—reading and discussing it and they’re not saying anything. How do you do it when you try everything and they still won’t? You put a grade on it and they still won’t do it. I’m not asking you to write it down and turn it in, I’m asking you to state your opinion. No one wants to talk, so what do you do?

Lanna: Is it the whole class?

Gina: No, I had... the class is like eleven. I think I had four people talking. I had one kid who just told me he was in Ocean City. “Yeah I just got to Ocean City so it might be du du du du du...” *But you’re in class*, and he’s on vacation for the weekend, so it’s like, hmmm. He volunteered to go first. I guess he understands that he wouldn’t be able to where he was, but M. most the time, he’s in the car, and it’s like, you’re in class. Do I really have to sit there and give them busy work to make them take this serious? I try to make this class as interactive and informal as possible since it’s non-majors, but are we tipping it into too informal?

Lanna: I mean, what are your standards? Do you know what I mean?

Gina: Yes, it’s mostly just participate. They have the reading so they can read before they come in, and then we’re just talking it through, so you, know, I’m going over the lesson, but in a very conversational way.

Lanna: In Scholars Studio, I feel like there’s always that resistance in the beginning. And, then there’s that push to... Ok, it’s not working, so let’s do it the way that we always have. And, I don’t know that that’s the answer. I don’t know. Do you call on people?

Gina: yeah

Lanna: What’s their response?

Gina: I called on one, and he turns his mic on to speak, and you can hear that he’s on the phone. The girl’s like, “huh, I can’t hear you. You’re muted.” (laughs). I just muted him because it’s like, OK.

Lanna: They’re not there. If you were doing a lecture, they’d still not be there, but you know they’re not there because you’re trying to engage them. That’s something to have a conversation about. I don’t like grades because I feel like that’s like coercing students to... but they grew up in that system and that’s what they know. Sometimes it’s what

they know. When I used to teach writing... this isn't the issue you're having but I'm trying to see if there's something similar that can be done. The students were being very selective about when they came to class and what time they came to class.

Gina: OK (laughs)

Lanna: I was like, "that's OK, we will do something for credit." The first thing we do [in class] is for credit, or they passed papers in at that time. It's coercion, but they came. It always makes me feel a little... that's not what education is about—tracking attendance and points and stuff, but I'm trying to figure out if there's a way to make a link between what's happening in class and what their assignments are. If you're paying attention and taking notes, and if you're involved, this would be easy, but if you're not...

There were a lot of elements working against Gina—the most glaring among them was the teaching space. The coronavirus pandemic had forced her class online. She did not have the benefit of meeting students face-to-face. Normally, the physical classroom serves as a third space that aids in students' transition from high school to college. It helps students mentally shift in the way that games invite players to enter an imaginary space where time and the standard norms are suspended. The built space and accompanying rituals contribute to the shifts and transformations that occur in these spaces. Classrooms are designed to facilitate a particular kind of learning, just as a kitchen is built to facilitate cooking, or a bedroom, sleeping. Casey (2009) offers:

The gathering power of place works in many ways and at many levels. At the mundane level of everyday life, we are continually confronted with circumstances in which places provide the scene for action and thought, feeling and expression. Think only of where you are when you read these words in my Atlanta room, you read them in your somewhere. Of course, I could write in a different place and you could read in another place. But the loci you and I are in nevertheless influence, sometimes quite considerable, overt actions such as reading and writing, and they influence still more what Malinowski called the "imponderabilia of actual life," such things as emotional tonality, degree of impatience, and the understanding of a test, relation consociates, and so forth. (p. 341)

In Gina's physical classroom, students sit at round tables, facing one another. The classroom is designed for small group conversations and lab work. The space invites students to physically separate from other aspects of their lives and lose themselves in their work as the cat and the children did while at play in the earlier examples.

The rituals that emerge from *place* serve as a mental cue for making the shift. Rituals, whether daily events or one-time occurrences, call on individuals' imaginations or visionary capacity to help them cross into new realities. Athletic events in the United States, for example, are steeped in rituals. They often open with a rendition of the National Anthem, a gesture that is intended to unify and connect participants to a larger purpose. Some fans develop their own rituals by wearing "lucky" socks or other accessories to bring favor to their team. In games, rituals usher players into the imaginative space and create a sense of order. Huzinga (1949/2009) describes it as thus: "Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life they [bring] a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order... The least deviation from it 'spoils the game,' robs it of its character and makes it worthless" (p. 10). Inherent in the spaces where play occurs is order and justice, which, in turn, provide a degree of safety.

Moreover, just as rituals bridge everyday life with imaginative or visionary space, they also bridge different aspects of our lives. Potawatomi Nation member and environmental biologist, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2003) recalls the rituals that her father created during their summers camping in the Adirondacks. She recalls him waking up early to boil water for coffee:

He pours coffee on the ground in a thick brown stream. The sunlight catches the flow, striping it amber and brown and black as it falls to the earth and streams in the cool morning air. With his face to the morning sun, he pours and speaks into the stillness, "Here's to the gods of Tahawus." The stream runs down over smooth granite to merge with the lake water, as clear and brown as the coffee... So begins each morning in the north woods: the words that come before all else. (pp. 33-34)

Rituals are powerful because they transform ordinary things, momentarily putting them—and by extension us—in touch with something larger and more sacred. Kimmerer continues, "The water turns to wine, the coffee to prayer. The material and the spiritual mingle like grounds mingled with hummus, transformed like steam rising from a mug into the morning mist" (pp. 37-38).

Rituals in Scholars Studio take on many forms. Some work as initiations to move students from one stage in their life to another, and some bookend class sessions to facilitate a mental shift. Daily rituals sanctify the learning space. The specific rituals vary from Studio-to-Studio and may involve students in brief centering exercises or group activities, among other possibilities. Regardless of how they manifest, they remind the community of their collective values, and they bridge “the mundane and the sacred” (Kimmerer, 2003, p.37). Rituals invite participants to begin anew each time they are performed. They open space for questions: Why are we here? What will we create together? What possibilities does this day bring?

More involved, one-time rituals offer students an entrée into thinking differently about learning. One example is the community *launch*, an immersive activity, designed to introduce students to the Studio and community of support. The launch serves as a metaphoric *crossing* into an engaged, empowered learning space. It is designed to stir students’ curiosity by providing a taste of the inquiries and engagements about to unfold. Some Studios bring in guest speakers or facilitate role playing activities. Others travel to sites that contextualize the Studio’s project or theme.

The launch for the Crownsville Studio, described in Chapter One, offered a preview of major intellectual movements that the students would make that semester. They were brought to the hospital grounds, where most of the imposing brick buildings were boarded up and eerily empty. They could see the vast space the hospital occupied, and the thick forests flanking the campus—a detail that would become important when the students learned about attempted escapes. There was something sacred about that site—the feeling that we were bearing witness to a history that might soon be bulldozed and forgotten. The land, a plantation that would become a mental institution shortly after emancipation, bore many questions, but foremost in our mind

was, What could this site become? What could be done to end the cycle of oppression that had taken root on this land? What would a truly liberated space look like?

The Crownsville Studio project was practical. Students would develop a business proposal that would both impact the surrounding area economically and honor the people who suffered on the land. At the same time, the project brought larger questions to the fore. At Crownsville, the mental institution replaced the plantation. The specific example that Crownsville provided, opened other questions: Where else is this pattern repeated? How does recognizing this pattern help us build more just and humane institutions? These questions led to our final stops, an African American history tour in Annapolis—which contextualized the history of free and enslaved Black people in the county—and an inter-generational center, which exemplified how space could be repurposed to serve the community. The *launch* set expectations for the semester and gave students a glimpse of the qualitative difference between high school and college.

Rituals create a container in which a whole constellation of possibilities exist. Kimmerer’s coffee was sacred and worthy of gods in the short span of time in which the ritual took place. During those moments, she and her family were in touch with the cosmic. Moments later, they would return to a world populated with mortals who drink ordinary coffee. Fink (2016) suggests:

The “scenery” of play of course always needs actual space and actual time in order to be able to unfurl itself at all, but space in the playworld and time in the play - world never coincide with the surrounding space and time. On the substratum of spans of time and pieces of space functioning as mere bearers of the playworld, the imaginary scene elevates itself with its inner space, which is nowhere and yet here, with its inner time, which is never and yet now. And the player, too, through his role, is removed from the context of the life he otherwise lives. Through this demarcating exclusion an innerworldly part is determined for the representation of the world - whole: individual things and persons are clothed with the feature of being “proxies” for the power that is at work in all. (p. 209)

In Scholars Studio, rituals suspend ordinary time. They carve out a space, if only momentarily, that puts students in touch with bigger worlds or ideas. They invite students to imagine potential and see themselves and their work as part of a bigger whole.

Taking Play Seriously

In Gina and Lanna's earlier conversation, both faculty and students were struggling to find balance between play and serious work. The students interpreted the more relaxed atmosphere as an invitation to disengage, and Gina wondered if it would be more fruitful to return to a traditional teaching structure. In an effort to resolve this problem, it might have been helpful for Gina and the students to observe river otters, which are naturally playful creatures. Brown (2009) shares the following anecdote:

One biologist who studied river otters decided to train some of them to swim through a hoop by offering a food reward for completing the task. Shortly after the otters learned to do this, the animals started introducing their own twists to the task. They swam through the hoop backward and waited to see if they got a reward. They swam through and then turned around and swam back through the other way. They swam halfway through and stopped. After each variation, they waited expectantly to see if this version of the task would earn a reward or not. Through their behavior, the otters were testing the system. They were learning the rules of the game, the rules that govern their world. (p. 37)

For play to be transformative in the learning space, it needs to leverage serious work rather than sit in opposition to it. The otters could have easily earned rewards by performing a single trick repeatedly in the way that a student could earn a good grade by learning a single set of facts or skills; however, by adopting a playful attitude both otter and student broaden their perspectives and are better equipped to solve problems. They are also more confident because they understand their world better. *Play* that bridges necessarily reconfigures the learning space. Rather than being an action distinct from work (playing a game while on break, for example), it

provides structure for engaging in a holistic exploration. Play helps us see and experience the range of possibilities.

Friesen et al. (2006) offer insight into playful exploration with the story of Anh Linh, an eighth grader who learned to “inhabit” the ideas and landscape of mathematics. She was initially drawn into math when her teacher invited her to explore the path that spiders traveled along a pursuit curve and later through the captivating story of Pythagoras (p. 22). She noted a similarity between the 3:4:5 triangle in the Pythagorean Theorem and the pursuit curve’s logarithmic spiral and wanted to know if they were related. She and her classmates spent several days drawing spirals created by right angles. Friesen et al. (2006) recall:

We were experiencing what it meant to create mathematics. We were beginning to understand how creating new mathematics begins with asking questions. Sometimes a question that is easy to ask is impossible to answer. Sometimes a question that sounds difficult turns out to be something you already know, just dressed up to look different. Sometimes the question leads, not to an answer, but to another question. And for these questions, the answers are not in the back of the book. It’s the posing of questions that kept calling us on to new possibilities, wondering what might be around the next corner, helping us understand that mathematics is not finished, it’s work in progress, it’s a living, breathing, contested, human discipline that has been handed to us. (pp. 24-30)

When Anh Linh’s teachers originally posed the spider problem, they had intended to teach about area, ratio, similarity and limits (p. 22). The students eschewed that inquiry for the richer, more complex exploration described above. I wish to dwell here for a moment because this story reveals a number of pedagogical nuances. Foremost, the invitation to playfully explore mathematics requires faculty to relinquish a degree of control. Had Anh Linh’s teachers insisted that the students focus on ratio and limits during the initial exploration, they may have reluctantly learned skills in those areas, but they would have missed out on the opportunity to experience math as whole and deeply, intricately connected to themselves, and by extension, the world. Anh Linh and her classmates dwelled in math in the way that that a player engages with a

game. They were pulled into the ever-unfolding world, captivated by the possibilities, and supported by a defined set of principles.

For faculty, the engagement is an improvisation—a well-practiced process of authentic listening and responding that cuts through the silence and opens, for the listener, a beautiful and wondrous world. Coltrane put it well:

I myself don't recognize the word jazz. I mean, we're sold under this name but, for me, the word doesn't exist. I just feel that I play John Coltrane. I think that the main thing a musician would like to do is give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things that he knows of and senses in the universe. That's what music is to me. It's just another way of saying this is a big beautiful universe that we live in that's been given to us, and here's an example of just how magnificent and encompassing it is. (Scheinfeld, 2017)

I imagine the jazz musician as attempting to bring an idea, thought, vision, memory, feeling, truth, or emotion into the world. Moreover, I imagine that when musicians improvise, they engage in a conversation about that which they are attempting to convey. There is not a clear path by which the conversation must take place; after all, there are infinite possibilities for expressing a single idea. Anh Linh's teachers took the playful path of improvisation. Her teacher viewed math not as a fragmented and disconnected set of skills but rather as a "living inheritance" and key to understanding the world wholly and fully. He understood that in order for students to connect to it, they had to see it as something that was connected to them—something that they could play with, theorize, and create; something that could help them understand the world, and by extension, themselves better. This understanding guided their pedagogical decisions.

In Scholars Studio, we begin the planning process by helping faculty identify the purpose of their courses along with their aspirations for teaching and learning. During this process, we draw heavily from the Washington Center for Undergraduate Studies' heuristic, which invites faculty to do the following:

In the context of your discipline, field or program area, what questions, issues, inquiry, and/or learning do you care deeply about? What *enduring learning* do you want students to gain from studying and working with you? Select a course/ program that will be the starting-point for designing integrated learning. Think of actual students and imagine their lives, three or more years from now, in multiple contexts (further education, workplace, community, family, another country, etc.). *What do you want students to know and be able to do as a result of their participation in the course?* Write each of your responses to this question on a sticky-note (one point per note). Treat this as a brainstorming activity, getting down as many responses as you can (try to avoid single word responses). (Gillies et al., 2003, pp. 7-8)

Often, course curricula contain so many learning outcomes that it is impossible to promote deep learning. Examining purpose and aspirations helps faculty identify learning experiences that bring their aspirations to life, and just as importantly, make decisions about which assignments or readings to remove in order to make room for deeper exploration. This process helps faculty make connections between their goals for a course and the curriculum, which are often not aligned.

Playing to Connect with Others

In the animal kingdom, play is integral to socialization. Brown (2009) explains:

The idea is that when animals play-fight, they are practicing to fight or hunt for real later on. But it turns out that cats that are deprived of play-fighting can hunt just fine. What they can't do—what they never learn to do—is to socialize successfully. Cats and other social mammals such as rats will, if seriously missing out on play, have an inability to clearly delineate friend from foe, miscue on social signaling, and either act excessively aggressive or retreat and not engage in more normal social patterns. In the give-and-take of mock combat, the cats are learning what Daniel Goleman calls emotional intelligence—the ability to perceive others' emotional state, and to adopt an appropriate response. (p. 31)

Among college-aged humans, *play* might present itself as joking around. It's easy to imagine a group of freshmen hanging out in their residence hall and light-heartedly teasing one another about an incident that happened earlier in the day. Jokes allow speakers and listeners grace. The person telling a joke is permitted to enter more vulnerable territory than is customary because, as with any game, jokes come with rules, among them: by their nature, jokes are “not serious” and

to be laughed off. In reality, jokes often speak deep truths or, at least, emerge from honest thoughts. By couching these thoughts in a joke, the speaker is able to test the boundaries of their relationships. A person who takes offense or is caught off guard may be jarred from the trance of the joke, signaling that the speaker has gone too far. Brown (2009) explains:

What play signals do is invite a safe, emotional connection, if even for an instant. Even in casual interactions, the sincere compliment, the remark about the hot/rainy/freezing/damp weather, a joke or sympathetic observation opens people up emotionally. It transforms a grim, fearful, and lonely world into a lively one. (p. 161)

Light-hearted interactions in Scholars Studio can help students test the limits of what they think is possible for themselves and their relationships. This played out in the summer of 2019 when our students toured the university's Nursing Simulation Center—a practice space with high tech dummies, designed to simulate different aspects of patient care. The tour groups were small because space was limited. Our leaders assigned them to gender-homogenous groups. Here is an observation from one of the groups:

Five young men enter the Nursing Simulation Center for the first tour of the day. There's a single dummy in the cardiac unit. Our tour guide offers one of the students a stethoscope to listen to the dummy's heart. Another student places his sunglasses on the dummy. They all laugh and snap photos. The next room—the nursery—has cribs with baby dolls. The students reach into the cribs and tenderly grab the babies. They laugh and rock the babies as if they are real. “This never happens,” our guide remarks to me. “Men don't usually show much interest; they especially keep their distance in the nursery.” (Personal observation, 2019)

While joking around may not be appropriate during a live simulation, the playful encounter helped the students enter the space in a way that they might not have otherwise. Men may typically be stand-offish in that space because they consider nursing—and childcare, in particular—gendered-work. In this instance, the combination of the single-gendered group and the playful introduction to the Center gave them permission to be themselves and fully enter the experience. Moreover, while the students appeared to be “playing around,” they asked a lot of

serious questions, and one student who had an undecided major, expressed an interest in majoring in nursing. It was significant that our tour guide was willing to join in on the play. Had she insisted on a sober experience, the students likely would not have interacted in the same way.

The Art of Play

To this point, I have avoided offering a formal definition of *play*, mainly because what constitutes *play* is open to interpretation. Where one person delights in running a road race or knitting scarves, another person may consider these activities absolute drudgery. Huzinga (2009) suggests that play contains “order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, [and] rapture” (p. 14). Further, tracing the historical roots of the word reveals a broad and differing use over time, from “Old English *plegan*, *plegian*, [which meant] “move lightly and quickly, occupy or busy oneself, amuse oneself” to the Old Frisian *plega*, meaning “tend to,” and the German *pflegen*, to “take care of, cultivate” (Etymonline, n.d.). As these differing historical uses of the word suggest, *play* has carried both frivolous and whimsical connotations as well as serious ones. *Play* was placed in a binary relationship with *work* as early as the fourteenth century, possibly for its association with the fantastical or unreal (Etymonline, n.d.).

The power of play in the teaching-learning space is a product of both its accessibility (we innately know how to play) and the many avenues through which it helps bridge or build connections. Whether developing neural connections (as through role play) or social connections (through joking or playing games), play holds an important role in learning and development, facilitates exploration, and expands possibilities.

Presenting *play* as the antithesis of work forecloses on its many possibilities. To reclaim the intricate link between play and work—and by extension, the transformative power of play—

it is helpful to turn to artists who, by nature of their profession, play for a living. One such form of play, discussed earlier, is musical improvisation. Brown (2009) writes, during improvisation:

We aren't locked into a rigid way of doing things. We are open to serendipity, to chance. We are willing to include seemingly irrelevant elements into our play. The act of play itself may be outside of "normal" activities. The result is that we stumble upon new behaviors, thoughts, strategies, movements, or ways of being. We see things in a different way and have fresh insights. For example, an artist or engineer at the beach might have new ideas about their work while building a sandcastle. A kid playing tea party might come to understand that good manners and social conventions can provide safety and power rather than being something imposed merely to make her feel uncomfortable. Those insights weren't the reason they played, but they arrived as the result of it. You never really know what's going to happen when you play. (p. 18)

Improvisation may be uncomfortable for faculty and students who are accustomed to an instrumental curriculum. They may fear missing out on essential learning in their discipline or wasting time on superfluous inquiries. But, what improvisation offers, Ted Aoki (2005) suggests, is an invitation into an *inspired* curriculum that brings to life and gives meaning to the planned curriculum. In an attempt to think about reclaiming the curriculum from instrumentalization, Aoki (2005) invited jazz musician Bobby Shew to a curriculum meeting in his department. He remembers:

[Shew] told us how he would allow the student to hold the gleaming trumpet, not in front, but at his back, and to withhold him from bringing the trumpet to his lips. The first few lessons would be all lip and scat-singing work. And only when Bobby Shew felt that the trumpet in joining his lips would become a part of the body—become and embodied trumpet—would he allow trumpet and lips to meet. He insistently said, "the trumpet, music, and body must become as one in a living wholeness. We were impressed by Bobby Shew's pedagogy that seemed to say that musicianship is more than a matter of skills and techniques, that music to be lived calls for transformation of instrument and music into that which is lived bodily. (p. 368)

Aoki's experience reminds me of my own early teaching experience. I knew little about curriculum development or teaching theory and had no pedagogical experience to draw on. At that time, I knew a lot more about writing poetry and used that understanding to shape my pedagogy. I recall:

When I was teaching at a community college, I felt pulled between the department mandated curriculum and my own writing experience. I did not know how to join the two in the dance I imagined unfolding in the classroom. I remember stopping mid-sentence in a creative writing class. We were exploring rhythm in poetry and learning to scan poems in the formal manner the textbook prescribed. Students were stooped over slips of papers. The frustration was palpable. *This isn't it*, I thought. I wasn't averse to challenge in the classroom. I understood that giving birth to new insights requires that we give something of ourselves. I was concerned that the exercise was creating a chasm between poetry and their lived sense of it. It was complicating something that was quite simple. I was certain my students would learn to identify stressed and unstressed syllables—to mark them on the page, but would they learn to hear their heart beat in their words? Would they hear the current of sound as it broke over their tongues? I asked them to follow me outside, copies of poems in hand. *We'll stamp the sound with our feet*, I said. With that, together we read aloud, allowing our bodies to step into the rhythm. The night was dark and chilly. A faint light burned in the distance. For a few moments we were words, footsteps, heartbeats, warm breath curling around our cheeks. We were part of the night. We were poetry. (Personal Reflection, 2017)

Fifteen years have passed since my students and I gathered outside that evening. My ignorance and inexperience may not have carried me far back then, but in that moment my lived understanding of and commitment to poetry helped bring meaning to its study. That lesson has been carried into Scholars Studio where we attempt to *inspirit* the curriculum by encouraging faculty and students to tap into the aspects of their discipline that they find exciting or engaging. But, perhaps the more revelatory aspect of Shew's description is the significance of bridging. His connection with the trumpet was not merely one of sympathy or mutual benefit. Benny Shew and his instrument merged and became *one*. His ability to enter that space distinguished his music as not just skillful and well-practiced but also transcendent.

Artists do not need to lose touch with themselves in order to become deeply and intimately connected with the music. Rather, *tension* inspires the process. The moments in Scholars Studio when the boundaries dissolve and faculty, student, and subject are held in tension with one another often marks a turning point, as described here:

The bus stops in front of a historical marker. The site would have been easy to miss. Beyond the marker is a field and far off, behind a cluster of trees, a hunting cabin. This is

where Harriet Tubman, then Araminta Ross, spent her early years. “The land owners dumped a pile of sand where we’re parked,” our tour guide explained, “because they didn’t want anyone to park here, but the State told them they couldn’t stop us.” We filed off the bus. The field was ordinary, and the sun cast shadows as it would have anywhere, but we knew this was no ordinary place. Tubman had walked in the spot where we stood. We kicked off our shoes, the grass prickly beneath our feet. We were touching history, and we somehow felt it rise to meet us. Tubman, with no manumission papers of her own, figured out what it meant to be free. Could we do the same? Here we were, in spite of the land owners’ wishes. Here we were with decisions to make. Lives to live. Here we were with hands to extend and lingering questions about what it meant to be free. (Personal Reflection, 2018)

Many complicated factors were held in tension during those brief moments. Despite the fact that we were learning about the history of enslaved Africans and had come to understand that the White landowners had fought a legal battle to continue controlling the historical narrative, there was much to celebrate. Tubman had done monumental work. We were honoring her strength, joyfully and playfully. And, as we kicked off our shoes and stepped tenderly on the land, each step slow and pronounced, we were, ironically, moving closer to the present. The usual distractions were suspended, if briefly. In the process, we gathered our own strength, and touched upon our true nature. This brief and simple moment was a highlight of the summer, one we talked about for years. By connecting deeply and intimately with history and one another, and allowing dissonance, we were given a new and inspired view of our own lives. We understood that honoring ourselves is risky because it means that we might have to move beyond others’ expectations. Living authentically and moving toward self-actualization can be scary for freshmen because it requires silencing external critics.

Students are not alone in their struggle to silence critics. Coltrane faced a deluge of critics when his musical style evolved. Of that experience, he recalls:

I have no fear of my music being way out. My goals remain the same, and that is to lift people as much as I can to inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives because there certainly is meaning to life. (Scheinfeld, 2017)

Coltrane describes his work as a bridge that serves a larger purpose. With an eye on that purpose, he was able to stay focused on his music rather than the critics. He is not alone in describing his art as tapping into a source bigger than himself. Neruda (1962/1995) offers another take in his poem, “A Poet’s Obligation” where he writes:

...So, drawn on by my destiny,
I ceaselessly must listen to and keep
the sea’s lamenting in my consciousness,
I must feel the crash of the hard water
and gather it up in a perpetual cup
so that, wherever those in prison may be,
wherever they suffer the sentence of the autumn,
I may be present with an errant wave. (p. 3)

Neruda defines his work as divine. It is “destiny,” he writes, describing how the boundaries between himself, the earth, and his readers disappear as he carries out his duties. The work of the poet, he explains is to dissolve the ego—like salt in the sea—and edge closer to cosmic consciousness. He imagines himself a conduit, helping those who are shackled know freedom, and those who have lost hope, reclaim it.

In thinking about Coltrane and Neruda, I’m brought back to the story of the bear that opened this chapter. The learning Friesen et al. (2006) describe is humanizing and connects students on a grand scale:

It is the fleshy mysteries of my own life and my own wholeness and integrity that this bear and its steps pace out. ... I must help [students] (and myself) place mathematics back into the embrace of the Earth (into the embrace of its kin, like the symmetries of these pine branches). Such embrace will make it more generous and forgiving and livable than it has become in the severities of our curriculum guides and severities and violences of our unsustainable beliefs in its dominion as a “Father Tongue”...which silences all others. It will help make it (and ourselves, and our children, and this bear, which paces out a life beyond our dominion) whole. (pp. 151-152)

Indeed, Scholars Studio’s work is an invitation to connect with the whole. To move in that direction, it is helpful to follow the artist’s lead and connect deeply and intimately

with our work. Many students and faculty, especially those who were the first in their families to pursue a college degree, do not feel like they belong, and that they are, in fact, outsiders or visitors. With this relationship, it is difficult to achieve the deep connection Benny Shew or Pablo Neruda described. In this instance, it may be helpful to think about ourselves and our relationship with the academy as being in tension with one another. The tension may animate us, and if we remain true to ourselves and our missions, as Coltrane did, we may be able to use the tension to our advantage to forge a new and transformative way forward. And, perhaps in so doing, we may be able to provide vision for the world we are creating together. Cornell West pushes this thinking further:

I don't think that [Contrane's] music is a thermometer. It's a thermostat. See a thermometer just reflects the climate. A thermostat shapes it. So, when we hear "Alabama" it's not just his deep love of the precious girls who were killed by cowardly white supremacists in the 16th St. Baptist Church. It's not just the refiguration musically of speech patterns of Martin Luther King, Jr. He's looking at black people all the way down the road. He's already telling us that you're going to need courage, vision, and most importantly love at the center of it. (Scheinfeld, 2017)

Play is a bridge that facilitates not only learning and socialization, but also profound reconfigurations of what is possible for ourselves, our communities, and humanity. It can open visionary spaces when it is oriented toward wholeness and connection versus feeding the higher education trend of the day.

What's so Hard about Play?

Play requires that we relinquish a degree of control in the classroom. That alone is reason for some faculty and students to reject it. But, why is control given so much clout? Bell hooks (1994) observes that professors often start out using progressive pedagogies:

but when students did not appear to "respect their authority" they felt these practices were faulty, unreliable and returned to traditional practices. Of course, they should have expected that students who have had a more conventional education would be threatened by and even resist teaching practices which insist that students participate in education and not be passive consumers. (pp. 143-144)

It is a paradox that faculty who are concerned about unhealthy power dynamics and authoritarianism—and who are equally committed to helping students develop a sense of agency— would recoil at the idea of not being regarded with the respect that authority brings.

Palmer's (2007) experience from Chapter One, of losing his composure when a student refused to engage with him, resonates here. He reflects:

It is hard to believe that I was afraid of that young man... There I was in my early fifties, career in full flight, doing work I find rich in meaning, blessed with health and family and friends. There I was, face to face with a forlorn young man in his early twenties who had no apparent power over me— and I was so afraid of him that I lost my bearings, my capacity to teach, my sense of self and self-worth. (The Teacher's Fearful Heart section, para. 4)

If Palmer, an accomplished educator, could be rattled by a student's reticence, it would follow that junior faculty who are inexperienced at teaching would also be intimidated when students resist their efforts. They may feel uncomfortable with the prospect of tenured colleagues witnessing them fumble; they may not have mentors to help them work through the challenges; or they may witness others effortlessly interact with students and feel inadequate in comparison. But, what other possibilities exist?

Structural inequality adds another layer of complication to this discussion. Women who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) have noted differences between students' interactions with middle-aged white men versus other women of color. Turner (2011) observes that students are often hesitant to question White male professors, even when they know they are wrong; however:

[There is] a different expectation for us when we walk in as a minority, they automatically assume that we know less than our colleagues in the same department...It doesn't matter whether it's undergraduate level or graduate level... They challenge females more... So I wear dark, tailored suits and I am very well prepared. (Turner, 2011, p. 386)

Inter-personal dynamics like these are less pronounced at the public Historically Black College where Scholars Studio is housed because Black women constitute a large proportion of the faculty and administration; nevertheless, racial and ethnic issues still persist. I was recently in a meeting with an African American colleague and an African graduate student. The graduate student turned her chair to face me (a White woman) and attempted to defer questions my way, despite the fact that my colleague was my supervisor and had more authority. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to understand why someone who is disregarded in this way would want to garner respect from students.

What does it mean to *respect*? The word *respect* derives from the Latin word *respectus*, meaning “act of looking back or at one” (Barnhart & Steinmetz, 1988, p. 917). At its foundation, to be respected is to be seen. Being seen is a profound and deep human longing; it is necessary for corporeal and psychological safety. The United States has witnessed considerable racial violence, which is, in part, a failure to recognize and honor the humanity in others. The death of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man in Georgia, is yet another reminder of our nation's longstanding failure to see the humanity in all people. Shot and killed by two white men while he was jogging unarmed through a suburban neighborhood, Arbery was yet another casualty of the White man's fear of the Black body. The perpetrators claimed to have mistaken him for a burglar who had been targeting the neighborhood. When Arbery did not submit to their demands, they killed him. Clearly, they thought they would be protected by the law (Fausset, 2020). The morning I read about Arbery in the *New York Times*, I had run through my neighborhood—a Black neighborhood—and despite the fact that White people have historically perpetrated more violence in America than any other racial group, I didn't have to worry about being mistaken for

a criminal. The matter of being respected or seen is much larger than the need to have an ego stroked. It is about reflecting one's humanity, recognizing innate value, and honoring that value.

In another scenario, a colleague is in a meeting. The man leading the meeting refers to himself and others with doctoral degrees as *Doctor so-and-so*, and he refers to my colleague and others who do not have doctorates by their first name. Had he referred to everyone by their first name, it would have communicated familiarity or comfort, but by distinguishing the meeting attendees based on education attainment, he was sending the message that those with doctoral degrees deserve more respect, and perhaps, add more value to the conversation.

These examples give rise to the question, what does it mean to be seen? Moreover, what does it mean if it's only safe for parts of ourselves to be seen? As a Latina immigrant, Ortega (2016) feels uncomfortable revealing her playful side in the predominantly white, middle-class university where she is employed. She writes:

The value of playfulness...stems from the fact that it allows us not to take ourselves so seriously that we cannot construct and reconstruct ourselves, others, and societal norms. In other words, nothing is sacred, and it is okay for me to be a fool. Yet I suspect there are moments when those who are marginalized experience world-traveling that is deadly serious. For example, I as a political refugee can land in a completely different country, find myself traveling to a completely different world, and I must try to get things as right as I can in order to survive—and to have the possibility of later doing more surviving. In this particular kind of world-travel, I have to make it, not in the sense that I will win or dominate, not in the sense of agonistic play, but in the sense of my well-being and to some extent, my life depends on not failing, whatever this failing means in the particular construction of the world to which I have to travel. (p. 133)

Being willing to play is often predicated on safety. Many students and faculty feel uncomfortable being themselves in the classroom. First-generation status exacerbates the problem. Students who are the first in their families to pursue a bachelor's degree often don't have a sense of what it means to be a college student. They are told throughout high school that college is hard, but they aren't given a key to translate academia's cultural codes. One participant in Scholars Studio

recalled, “I was told *you had to be an adult now*. I associated adults with working a lot, so I stayed in my room all semester studying and didn’t go anywhere. I was miserable. I hated college” (Personal communication, 2020). Another participant added, “I didn’t know how to study. I didn’t want to ask for help because everyone would know I didn’t belong here. I kept failing. I pretended like I didn’t care so no one would know how much I didn’t know” (Personal communication, 2020). Students understand that college is different from high school, but they often don’t know how to negotiate that difference. They are left to figure it out on their own.

Complicating the matter, our students, who are steeped in the world of social media, carry with them a degree of self-consciousness. Much of social media is about curating image and performance. When students feel compelled to perform in the digital sphere and are also expected to perform in the classroom, they often do not feel safe being themselves. Similarly, tenure track faculty often don’t always feel safe being themselves because they interpret tenure as a subjective process. Some faculty members fear that tenure decisions are based on how their peers view them and not the quality of their work. Accordingly, they feel compelled to tread lightly so as not to jeopardize their chance at tenure.

It is important to recognize these challenges and ensure that members of our community are not cut off from play, which is so vital for development and transformation. Scholars Studio serves as a bridge, offering a safe space to play. It is our hope that becoming-with one another through play will open creativity, help us be agile and respond to changing conditions; offer pleasure and joy, connect us to one another and ourselves, and open the possibility for change.

As I move to the next point along the bridge, it is helpful to take stock of where we have been and survey the path ahead: In the first chapter, I described the elements that facilitate bridging in Scholars Studio, and in this chapter, I explored bridging as an experience of

becoming-with through the lens of play. In the next chapter, I describe how van Manen's methodology is used to open the phenomenon of bridging in Scholars Studio. In so doing, I bridge hermeneutic phenomenological philosophy with post-colonial and Latina feminist literature in an effort to attend to the intersectionalities represented in my study.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL GROUNDING OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

I recall sitting around a table early in my career surrounded by faculty. I don't remember what we were discussing. I only recall having the sudden realization that there was lots of chatter and little listening. One person offered an idea and another rejected it for lack of empirical evidence. I observed the exchange, intrigued, as data and researchers' names were slung like weapons. By the meeting's end, the only thing we accomplished was raising tension. These dynamics were repeated in other spaces, and in every case, the result was the same: nothing changed. While I appreciated the need for data, I recognized that limiting inquiries to the scope of empirical/analytic research was constraining our ability to move forward. We were asking questions that statistical research and other quantitative methods could not address, and by limiting our inquiries to these approaches, we were identifying solutions that moved us away from the heart of our work. I suspected there was another way. Surely, there were methods that would open our understanding of the issues and help us move beyond taken-for-granted assumptions. Surely, there were methods that accounted for situatedness and recognized individuals' unique experiences. And, perhaps, there were even methods that could help us be *with* one another better.

Indeed, as I'd discover, there were research methods that better addressed our questions. Long after whatever we were grappling with had been resolved, I'd find an answer to my appeal in *hermeneutic phenomenology*. Confronted with the need to make a methodological decision before undertaking this research, I reaffirmed phenomenology's fit. Foremost, my research question—*What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio?*—is phenomenological in nature. It calls for deep engagement with and understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover, while I seek to understand the lived experience of bridging, I envision this research primarily

opening possibilities for pedagogical practice. Pedagogy cannot be reduced to duplicable techniques or measured to evaluate outcomes, as most empirical/analytic methods require.

According to van Manen (2015), pedagogy is the act of thoughtfully responding to students with the desire to do the most good:

The primal meaning of pedagogy is beyond rational understanding. The child is born crying and the parent experiences the cry as an appeal, as a transforming experience to *do* something: to hold the child, protect her, smile, and perhaps worry whether everything is all right. This first overwhelming sensual and sensitive sensibility that a new parent experiences is often this ability of a seemingly natural responsiveness: response-ability, the unfolding of our pedagogic nature. (p. 22)

Pedagogy involves uncertainty, for as soon as we establish a sense of what it means to respond pedagogically, we begin to wonder if we made the right choice (van Manen, 2015, p. 23). In this respect, pedagogy is reflective. It requires us to recount and ascribe meaning to experiences while shaping future pedagogical engagements.

Pedagogy is not a state at which one arrives. Pedagogues are always in a process of becoming; they are continually working to understand what it means to respond pedagogically. Pedagogy is necessarily situated in its worldly context and, as such, cannot be adequately understood through objectification or fragmentation, as empirical/analytic methods require. I chose hermeneutic phenomenology as my method for understanding bridging in Scholars Studio because it is a process for understanding experience and is oriented toward interpretation.

Phenomenology as an Act of Bridging

I am particularly interested in phenomenology because it is a process of *bridging*. Phenomenology requires researchers to immerse themselves in the lived world of the inquiry. As revealed in Chapter One, truly opening ourselves to experience means accepting the invitation to be changed by the experience: “We experience the sensuous world only by rendering ourselves vulnerable to that world. Sensory perception is this ongoing interweavement: the terrain enters

into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up within that terrain” (Abram, 2011, p. 58). It is not possible to engage phenomenologically from the sidelines. Van Manen (2007) writes:

From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. (p. 5)

Not only does phenomenology help elucidate lived experience, but it is a process of bridging. It requires the researcher to build bridges as it seeks to reveal the meaning of bridging.

Phenomenological text is descriptive and aims to bring the reader as close to lived experience as possible. The written word is a bridge that stretches imaginatively from one bank to another, constructed of descriptions so alive, so immediate, so embodied that they elicit in the reader a visceral sense of knowing. To get there, the writer becomes a bridge, opening herself to vulnerability as she translates her own lived experience of the phenomenon to the page. She tunes into the felt sense of experience and gathers words that reverberate at a similar frequency, inviting readers into the depth and vulnerability of that space.

This is not a narcissistic endeavor. The researcher-writer who seeks to open a phenomenon is committing to understand others deeply. This understanding necessarily comes from a space of love or care. Van Manen (2007) writes, “When I love a person (a child or adult) I want to know what contributes toward the good of that person. So the principle that guides my actions is a sense of the pedagogic Good” (p. 6). Here, another aspect of bridging comes into play: the bridge built between researcher and conversant—the bridge stabilized by an ethic of care.

Phenomenological text gathers lived experience and understanding from a plethora of sources and places it within the context of the lifeworld. Because phenomenology begins in the lifeworld and takes seriously relationships with one another, it is an exploration of the whole. As an act of bridging itself, phenomenology informs and deepens understanding of bridging.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology: A Meaning-ful Pursuit

Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences. Unlike most empirical/analytic methods, it seeks to describe the world by offering “the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (van Manen, 2007, p. 9). It elucidates and deepens understanding of phenomena that are often taken for granted. It’s easy to assume that we know a great deal about the phenomena we experience consistently; however, we need look no further than our daily commute to be reminded of how mindlessly we move through much of the day. How often do we arrive at work or home only to realize that we don’t remember anything about the drive? Or, how many times have we passed breathtaking scenery and barely registered its existence? Likewise, how many times do instructors walk through the classroom door, not particularly conscious about how class begins—only that it does as it has for many years? Or, how many times do students respond to their instructors’ requests without internalizing the experience?

Traveling in Familiar Land

Researchers who use phenomenology understand that phenomena are teeming with life waiting to be uncovered. To tune into them, the researcher may position herself as a traveler in familiar land. I evoke the “traveler” image because traveling often heightens the senses. I traveled to India nearly a decade ago, and while I can barely remember any of the events that transpired the year before or after the trip, I can recall almost every day of my travels in vivid detail. I remember attending the Wagah Border Crossing ceremony in the Punjab and watching

military personnel, dressed in formal uniforms—clearly a vestige of British colonial rule—oscillate between joking with the crowd and assuming a controlling demeanor. I remember the busses passing into Pakistan when the gates opened. And, I particularly remember being crushed momentarily—skin-against-skin, heart racing, thinking *is this how I'll die?*—when the guards beat back the crowd with a baton as it closed in on the gate. I remember waking up in Amritsar to prayers broadcast from Gudwaras. I couldn't understand a single word but somehow felt myself lift with each note. I remember constant motion and noise. The only still places were the holy places—the Golden Temple, the Lotus Temple, the Dalai Lama's temple. There, small noises were discernible—the bracelets jangling, the gentle press of bare feet against cold floor, the breath, which was somehow deeper and calmer. I remember water buffalo pulling carts, cows asleep in the markets, curries and fiery peppers, lime soda sweet, momos, naan, lassis, and all the curious questions and stares. Life in all its colors, sounds, and smells leapt up—the complexities, the joy, the trembling fear, all of it. I remember these details so vividly because I entered the experience with curiosity, took it in with love, and allowed it to transform me.

The Journey

The idea of researcher as traveler is worth unfolding. There is the obvious connection with the *journey*, as described in Chapter One. As the researcher moves between her experience and the experiences of others, a generative in-between space emerges, which offers rich layers of context and opportunities for transformation. A researcher tuned into the concept of the journey in the classroom may think about the journey she made to get there and what is revealed by looking at the road she took. She may, in turn, think about the journey on which the students and faculty embarked. She may hone in on the intellectual journey or focus on the actual places where students and faculty travel together. She will, necessarily, think about the numerous paths

one might take alone or together and the paths left untaken. She might also think about the untouched spaces where paths are laid.

The Laborious Journey

The word travel is closely related to *travail* and traces its roots to mean labor or toil. It's speculated that travel is associated with hard work because in the Middle Ages it was, indeed, a labor-intensive endeavor (Etymonline, n.d.). While modern technology has simplified travel, labor—albeit subtler—is still required. Walking through a market in the United States would require little effort, save for the energy it took to place one foot in front of the other. I'd almost instinctively know where to find items, even if I'd never been there because markets are laid out in familiar—most likely, culturally constructed—patterns.

Shopping in a market or *bazaar* in India, on the other hand, would require considerably more effort, as I negotiated language and cultural differences. I'd have to make the Rupee-U.S. Dollar conversion in my head, I'd have to make sense of unfamiliar brands, ingredients, and language. I'd have to assertively push my way to the front of the line to get service, and as is customary, I'd have to haggle over price—something my introverted nature would desperately resist. I'd also likely have to explain myself several times—who I am, where I'm from. And afterwards, I'd have to think through the process of returning to my temporary home. No doubt, I'd be exhausted at the end.

The researcher with the traveler's mind looks at mundane activities as if each step is novel and deserving of careful consideration. Suddenly, the way faculty and students choose to orient themselves in the room or the language they use to address one another takes on renewed significance. Positioning oneself phenomenologically means laboring to understand the phenomenon deeply by constantly looking and listening for possible openings.

World-Traveler

Sometimes traveling between worlds doesn't require a passport. Many people in the university, students and faculty alike, experience the academy as a new world—a place with different rules, customs, culture, and language from their world of origin. Ortega (2016) suggests:

Traveling to different worlds might highlight different aspects of my multiplicitious self. Even though different attributes might be highlighted or animated in different worlds, I still have a continuity of experience through my temporality and mineness or a sense of how I am being or faring in the particular world that I am in—a continuity that helps explain how I am able to have a first-person experience in the first place. (p. 98)

In other words, different worlds may serve to stifle or open aspects of the self. Ortega describes herself as playful in the Latina world and serious in the White, middle-class world. She is quick to add that she does not present distinct selves in different worlds. Rather, in the way that a flashlight cast upon a globe might illuminate different continents when its axis shifts, different worlds may open or foreclose certain possibilities. In the academy, world-travelers may feel compelled to hide aspects of themselves—perhaps the rich language of their homeland or the desire to work in community—in order to adapt to the norms of the environment or to protect themselves from scrutiny.

World-traveling may either maintain the status quo or serve as an act of resistance. Ortega (2014) warns that if world-traveling becomes an aspect of everyday life, “then it is connected to publicness and runs the risk of losing its liberatory potential. This possible loss is connected to the fact that, according to Heidegger, publicness aims at averageness” (p. 127).

Heidegger (1927) writes:

We have shown earlier how in the environment which lies closest to us, the public ‘environment’ already is ready-to-hand and is also a matter of concern [mitbesorgt]. In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's

own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of ‘the Other,’ in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the “they” is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as they shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what they find shocking. (Everyday Being One’s Self and They section, para. 4)

The public “they” serves to normalize not just behaviors, but also thoughts and tastes—aspects of our lives that we often assume to be deeply personal and individualized. Heidegger continues:

In this averageness with which it prescribes what can and may be ventured, it keeps watch over everything exceptional that thrusts itself to the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed. Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated. (Everyday Being One’s Self and They section, para. 5)

In this way, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s message is distilled to a *dream*, stripped of the radical vision of racial equality’s inextricable link to economic justice; and just as swiftly, hip hop with its potential to move people and speak to power, is commoditized, and what once promised to be a revolutionary vehicle is used to fuel the capitalist engine. “Averageness” ensures that not only will those in the public sphere function and flow with continuity but also that radical visions don’t dramatically upend norms. Indeed, the revolution *cannot* be televised.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that universities—which were developed to propagate “high culture” and thought, and more specifically, Euro-centric culture and thought—are thusly vehicles of normalization. Similarly, it’s unsurprising that people without legacy in the academy often do not find themselves reflected in its *world*. In Ortega’s case, the academy may not provide safety for the expression of playfulness or, perhaps, does not ascribe value to play. If Ortega were traveling between worlds, code-switching to minimize resistance in both spaces, she might recognize two identities—the serious person in one world, the playful person in the other.

This example illustrates how easily one could experience world-travel as bifurcation, or as DuBois describes, double consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (as cited in Ortega, 2016, p. 121)

DuBois adroitly captures the *schizophrenic* feeling that many people of color experience in the United States—the sense that there is a split between who they are and how they are perceived, that they are, indeed, two selves. This split often plays out in the classroom when students perceive that their academic experience is designed to take something essential from them.

Acknowledging the historical and contextual differences between DuBois' account and the notion of *world-travel*, Ortega (2016) offers an alternative to double-consciousness: “I propose we think of multiplicitous selves as capable of having not a double image but a multiplicitous imaging or consciousness, given the fact that they are being-between-worlds and being-in-worlds and are constantly world traveling” (p. 123). She adds:

We can look at world traveling... [as] a deviation from dominant norms and practices, and, as such, an opening for possibilities of resistance or an act of resistance as such. This reading would mean that to have an opening through which I understand myself differently in a particular Latino world (the world of Nicaraguans who have lived in the United States for a while) and where I understand myself differently in a dominant world (the world of primarily white academics or philosophers) is to perform a disruption of publicness. It is to shatter the so-called background of intelligibility on which the world is to make sense; it is to understand that the background itself can be looked at differently, and, thus, that I can have alternative meanings. (p. 128)

When Ortega is viewed as serious in the predominantly White academy and playful in the Latin world, she questions the structures in the White world that cast her as serious. Moreover, as an LGBTQ Latina immigrant, she brings perspectives that “point to lacks, deficiencies, problems, oppressions and erasures happening in this world that are not always seen by those

fully immersed in it” (p. 128). The “between-worlds” positioning is just as vital to the liberatory process as being-in-worlds. Anzaldua (2012), hooks (1994) and others remind us to resist romanticizing the worlds we consider home because they, too, can be sources of violence, oppression, and erasure. Rather, the vantage that world-traveling provides is similar to the perspective from a bridge. The view of San Francisco from the Golden Gate Bridge or the view of San Francisco from Sausalito—which looks on the city from the other side of the bay—is wholly different from the perspective one gets while planted in the heart of the city. Stepping onto the bridge allows one to take in the city’s contours, to appreciate the play between the natural and built world, to perceive patterns, darkened enclaves or bright patches of light. As travelers move between San Francisco and Sausalito, over the bridge, along the streets, from the Tenderloin to Presidio Heights, they develop a bigger sense of the whole. They may ask questions, or they may question taken for granted assumptions.

Ortega suggests that the awareness and perspective that world traveling offers opens possibilities for transformation. To avoid succumbing to “averageness,” world travelers might adopt a critical position. Ortega (2016) writes,

The new mestiza that I have in mind is the one that keeps the multiple histories alive and does not try to reconcile them as to assimilate. She needs to examine her experience of world-traveling, dissect it, and never let it lose its force...Critical world-traveling requires that the world-traveler be engaged in an ongoing process of evaluation and interpretation of not only what is learned through traveling but also of the very practices of traveling across worlds. (p. 131)

Taking a critical position in a university might mean recognizing who is privileged and who is excluded; this position provides a vantage point to see beyond the everyday taken-for-granted aspects of academic life: to see the possibilities and shortcomings, the layers of oppression and openings for transformation.

Prereflectivity and Privilege

Researchers who engage phenomenology forego the term *subject* for *conversant* to more accurately capture the relationship between the two, which van Manen (2007) describes as *intersubjective* (p. 11). Phenomenology is an attempt to explain that which has been brought into consciousness. It is not the study of consciousness but rather an inquiry into pre-reflective experience (van Manen, 2007, p. 9). The idea of pre-reflectivity is worth examining. Ortega (2016) argues that having non-reflective experience is a matter of privilege. People who live in the margins do “not have a nonreflective, nonthematic sense of all the norms and practices of the spaces or worlds [they inhabit]. Thus, [they do] not always navigate [their] daily existence in terms of know-how” (p. 59). Ortega describes adapting to cultural norms in the United States. In Nicaragua, it is customary to eat cake with a spoon instead of a fork, greet people with a kiss on the cheek, and stand when a teacher enters the classroom. She reflects:

In the US cultural context to which I arrived , the aforementioned practices were not expected of me. As I was given a fork to eat cake, as I got looks of surprise or even uncomfortable and unfriendly looks when I approached people to kiss their cheek, and as I was looked at with mocking or confused glances as I stood up to greet teachers, I stopped relating to the world in terms of a practical orientation or know-how that, according to Heidegger, is the primary way in which the self is in the world. Suddenly, having to think about using a fork rather than a spoon to eat cake, having quickly to move my body away from people whom I was greeting, and quickly sitting down and realizing that I had not done what was expected of me brought about a host of reflections about my actions. (p. 60)

With Ortega’s account, one might take issue with semantics, given that the prefix in the word *reflect* refers to going *back*, and it is, indeed, challenging to look back while simultaneously engaged in experience; however, such an argument would only point to the limitations of language. Consciousness cannot be reduced to a state of pre and post-reflectivity. Experience is filtered through socio-cultural positioning. The example of the racial dimensions of travel in Chapter One brings this point to the fore. Understanding the experience of travelers who are

Black is dependent upon understanding the historical context of race in the United States and understanding the ways in which historical trauma continues to be reified. In a sense, consciousness of race relations in the United States is a lived experience unto itself. This observation points toward a critical phenomenology that recognizes intersectionality as not an adjunct to phenomenology but rather a “redeployment of phenomenology” (Davis, 2020, *The Phenomenological Method* chapter, para. 1).

Al-Saji (2014) suggests that pre-reflectivity is tempered by “habits of seeing” (235). She offers a personal example: while living in France, her partner professed unwavering support for a headscarf ban. Years later, they moved to Montreal to be close to Al-Saji’s family:

The question of veiling arose again in the context of the debate that led up to the 2004 French law. In the meantime, my mother and grandmother (who both wear the hijab) had been very much a part of our everyday lives. At this juncture, it became apparent that my partner was not only critical of the proposed law but had revised his reaction so thoroughly that his previous attitude seemed alien to him. Instead of owing to my persuasive abilities, it was the transformed affective tissue of collective living that seemed to have shifted my partner’s perceptions. Women wearing the hijab, and the modalities of interaction that such veiling dictated, were now, to him, part of intersubjective life. New habits of seeing had emerged: veiling was no longer perceived as a homogenous object (hiding subjects from view); rather, differentiations in ways of veiling and interacting were seen as adumbrations of individuated and concrete subjects who commanded singular and contextual responses. (p. 135)

She provides a second example of a teacher who is revolted by the hijab. A girl attempting to circumvent the hijab ban wears a high-necked shirt and bandana:

The teacher responsible for the class reacted with immediate and visceral repulsion; she could not (physically and emotionally) tolerate the presence of the girl in her classroom, expressing violently and vocally her desire for the girl to leave. What was clear was that the teacher saw the girl as willfully incarnating religious dogmatism and gender oppression; her reaction was not that of worked-through argument or judgment, but of prereflective perception and affect. (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 134)

In both examples, prereflectivity plays an important role in shaping a racializing vision. When the author’s partner is immersed in Muslim culture, he reflexively supports allowing

women to wear the hijab, whereas years earlier he had unhesitatingly been against it. Similarly, when the teacher has a visceral response to the idea of veiled women, she mistakes it for a natural response “to the way things are (rather than as a culturally, socially, and historically constituted comportment)” (Al-Saji, 2014, p. 140).

Prereflectivity is filtered through the lens of what Gadamer (1975) describes as horizons, defined as “the range of vision that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 301). To understand horizons, one might picture a lone figure standing outside in the dark with a flashlight. The light’s reach represents the horizon. The figure’s horizons shift when he shifts, as was evident in the example of the author’s husband who, once in close proximity to a Muslim family internalizes the richness and complexity of the decision to veil. The horizon of the teacher in the second example does not stretch far enough to recognize that women who choose to wear a hijab may, in fact, be exercising agency. She considers her response “natural” because she feels it in her body in the way that she might feel her heart pound in her chest if a stranger were to leap from behind a closed door. She doesn’t entertain the possibility that her perspective is limited, nor does she recognize that felt sense is subjective. Levin (2003) explains that “the ambiguity of the word ‘sense’ should serve to remind us that meaning, embodied in the sensuous element, is subject to endless translation...our relation to the texts *is always in question* as a sentence of becoming” (p. 210). Sense may offer potential interpretations but never definitive answers.

The limitations of prereflectivity are not limited to creating a racializing vision. They may stymie our ability to see the richness and complexity of a situation. A recent experience in Scholars Studio provides an apt example. A Studio studying reparations in higher education traveled to Georgetown University to meet with scholars and students who are grappling with the university’s legacy of slavery. Our students’ professor and I observed that they did not take

notes. We were concerned because we considered note taking an important aspect of academic work. Our response was mediated by our vision of what it means to be an academic and exacerbated by our visceral response—which may have presented itself as a pang in the gut that signaled concern or disappointment.

Later, when their professor asked them why they had not taken notes, they explained that they were aware of the University's history. They were angry and, though they were attentive during the experience, they did not want to signify interest by taking notes. It was an act of resistance. Their response raises a number of pedagogical questions about power, agency and academic priorities: In what ways do our horizons limit how we respond to our students? Were we communicating that note taking holds higher value than students' development of agency or self-authorship? Is note taking more important than grappling with emotions? Does academic work have meaning if students cannot find themselves in it or if they cannot choose their relationship to it? What would happen if we didn't acknowledge the emotional dimensions of learning and only promoted academics? These questions are not intended to make the case for a lackadaisical approach to scholarship. On the contrary. Our students' resistance gives us an opportunity to become better bridge builders.

Our curricula and teaching methods are culturally constructed and, by design, transmit cultural values. It's easy to duplicate the methods that we inherited—methods that consequently replicate unjust social systems. In the same way that a person who is expected to eat cake with a fork when accustomed to using a spoon cannot have a nonreflective experience, academic experiences cannot be simply experienced as things themselves. They are inextricably linked to the histories that shape them and the cultural dimensions that drive them. Tuning into lived-context provides rich learning opportunities for pedagogues and researchers.

As this chapter progresses, a complex picture of the academy and its relationship to people who have been traditionally marginalized emerges. On the one hand, the academy offers hope for students seeking to shape their future, and it provides intellectual space for academics. On the other hand, it presents continual reminders, overtly and covertly, that it was not built to support *all* people who pass through its doors.

Phenomenology as the Study of Essences

Phenomenology is the study of essences. Van Manen (2007) explains: “Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience” (p. 10). Rather than asking how bridging works in Scholars Studio or the degree to which it is successful, phenomenology seeks to understand the nature of bridging. Through this inquiry, experience is better understood.

Studying essences is not a process of *essentializing*, which seeks to assign distinct attributes to things. Essentialism, for example, assigns stereotypical qualities or characteristics to a particular ethnicity or makes claims about all members of a group. In contrast, the phenomenological study of essences is a dynamic process that identifies possible ways of being. Heidegger (1927) explains:

The “essence” of Dasein lies in its existence. Accordingly those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not “properties” present-at-hand of some entity which “looks” so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that. All the Being-as-it-is [So-sein] which this entity possesses is primarily Being. So when we designate this entity with the term “Dasein,” we are expressing not its “what” (as if it were a table, house or tree) but its Being. (Exposition of the Task of Preparatory Analysis of Dasein chapter, para.1)

In other words, people do not have essences. Their nature is understood through their interactions with the world. Beistegui (2003) adds:

Now, the entire force of the ontico-ontological difference in Heidegger’s sense is to show how the relation between condition and conditioned is, first, not a relation between a

thing or a being, or even a principle, and another thing, but a relation between a process, or a verb and a being, or a participle, and, second, not a relation of likeness and identity between a universal law or kind and a particular instance, but a relation of difference between a preindividual singularity and an individuated thing. (p. 87)

Essences are not fixed objects or identities but rather possibilities for being. They are recognizable aspects of experience. An essence is what makes the experience of bridging in a classroom unique— different from attending a lecture or listening to a podcast, different from caring for a child or reading an instructional pamphlet. While one could distinguish the experience of *bridging* in a classroom from reading a list of instructions, there is not a set list of items that constitute bridging. Bridging can't be measured with a Likert scale, nor evaluated to determine which bridging experience is better or more bridge-like, just as the footbridge that crosses a tributary on a hiking trail is no less bridge-like than the Golden Gate Bridge. The footbridge does not need to be the Golden Gate Bridge, nor would it be appropriate for the two to be the same. They do, however, share certain similarities that make them recognizable as bridges. They both join two pieces of land to permit effortless travel; they are constructed to meet the needs of those who use them, and they are built to the scale of the chasm they heal. When we encounter a bridge, we recognize it as a bridge even though it may not look like the last bridge we encountered.

Similarly, students and faculty distinguish the experience of bridging in Scholars Studio from the experience of teaching and learning in the traditional classroom. In the traditional learning environment, faculty and students may actively create distance between one another by positioning themselves behind a podium or inserting earbuds in order to avoid feeling vulnerable. Bridging requires faculty and students to embrace vulnerability by sitting with, facing, listening to and receiving one another. The lived sense of these two phenomena are different. The two spaces have a different felt sense.

People inhabiting those spaces may even feel as if they are in different worlds when they cross into new learning environments. Students in Scholars Studio have repeatedly described the experience as humanizing. Ryan, a student who participated in Scholars Studio, explained, “[the faculty] made the classes relatable, like they made class time our time. I mean, when I go into class, I don’t feel like I’m in class. I feel like I’m in a haven where I can speak how I feel” (Personal Communication, October 2018). In comparison, he described feeling like a robot in traditional classes:

Some of my classes, they say, OK, I’m going to read off this PowerPoint. I’m going to teach you what it is. There’s an assignment, and boom. Email me if you need me...I feel as though it’s like I have to get everything right. I have to study or I have to memorize to get it right. (Personal Communication, October 2018)

The comparison between the two environments is stark. Ryan felt free to be himself in Scholars Studio. Education belonged to him. He was heard, and interestingly, the experience was so unique that he didn’t identify it as “class.” The nature of learning in a class for him was, apparently, not one of comfort or belonging. Scholars Studio was different. It was a “haven.” In contrast, traditional classes were oriented around assignments. They were transactional. The teacher’s role was to ensure that students understood and completed their assignments. The students’ role was to complete assignments. Ryan didn’t feel like he could be himself. Instead, he thought he had to figure out how to meet the expectations of his instructors by “get[ting] it right.” The essences of the two learning experiences were unique and distinguishable.

Phenomenology as a Practice of Describing and Poeticizing

It is important to acknowledge that faculty and students who commit to bridging don’t all put forth the same effort, nor are their efforts identical. A person who was raised in an unsafe or violent home may not feel as comfortable letting their guard down as a person who grew up in a loving home. Simply having the courage to look others in the eye may be a victory for a person

who has been traumatized. Comparing their efforts to a person who can effortlessly articulate their feelings is akin to comparing the footbridge to the Golden Gate Bridge. Fortunately, comparisons are not the domain of human science. Phenomenology seeks to open understanding; it is a process of describing the meaning of lived experience and doing so in such a way that it evokes wonder and felt sense in the reader. Van Manen (2007) writes, “Phenomenology is a poeticizing project; it tries an incantive, evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein we aim to involve the voice in an original singing of the world” (p. 13).

I offer the passage below as an example of using embodied, “primal telling” to describe a struggle with bridging during a meeting with colleagues:

I am talking fast. My words skitter in space. Am I making sense? Should I pause? Should I go back to where I began—where it felt safe? *I am not present*, I tell myself, as words fall robotically—different words related to the meeting’s content. *Is it possible to have two sets of thoughts at the same time?* I wonder. I am in a familiar state. I see my colleagues across from me. They are attentive, but I can’t feel them. I don’t have that sensation that I do when I’m connected. It’s a slight tugging and warming in my torso—as if an invisible cord stretches between me and them and my chest opens wide enough to hold all the air I need, all the things we share, and all that grows between us. Now it feels as if a chalk board separates us, and I’m throwing illegible words at it.

Psychologists might call this dissociation. I am not in my body. I’m not connected. But why?

This isn’t trauma. It’s a meeting. I do this all the time. I stop talking and breathe. I feel the air stretch my body. I feel trembling spill out. Are those tears in there? I want to choke them back. I want to deny them because I’m in charge, and how can I be in charge if I’m broken? *That*, right there. I stop. I don’t need to be in charge. I need to be present. “Let’s start over,” I say. “How are you? I want to know how you are because I don’t feel OK.” (L. Nardi, March 28, 2020)

Here, I aimed to capture a moment when I was conscious of my leadership role and attempting to perform my duties but doing so in a manner that stifled my humanity and the humanity of those around me. My anxiety is manifest in truncated sentences and series of

unanswered questions. I draw on metaphors and similes to distinguish subtle bodily senses, and at the end, I attempt to expose my vulnerability by acknowledging that I'm on the verge of tears. The description seeks to find meaning in failure. In this case, I had failed to bridge and through that failure, I opened an important aspect of bridging: to bridge means to be human first. Sometimes agendas interfere with bridging. What may seem most important, particularly during challenging times, is insignificant. Leading in the context of bridging isn't about control. It necessarily involves bringing humanity to bear. It is a constant process of becoming.

Phenomenological text helps readers understand the experience of others. Gadamer (1975) suggests:

The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus, the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. (p. 303)

Gadamer denounces absolute and objective knowing because the standpoint is always in flux. He suggests that a person can understand the experience of another by placing himself in a similar situation. Phenomenological text that captures lived experience well may give readers a sense of what it means to dwell in another horizon. Gadamer refers to this process as the fusion of horizons. He explains, "Common subject matter is what binds two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other" (p. 389). The poeticized and descriptive text of phenomenology has the potential to shift horizons, thereby enlarging readers' perspectives.

The Phenomenological "Method"

Phenomenology does not prescribe a strict set of procedures, as found in the natural sciences, but rather offers avenues "to animate inventiveness and stimulate insight" (van Manen, 2007, p. 30) as a human science. To grasp phenomenological *method*, it's helpful to trace the history of the term. Indeed, its etymology reads like an ancient tree with thick branches reaching

in different directions. The Latin word *methodus* and the Greek word *methodos*—which referred to systematic treatment of disease and scientific inquiry, respectively—are cognates of *meta* and *hodos*, meaning the pursuit of a way or manner, and journey, path, or road (Etymonline, n.d.). The latter notion of *journey* or *path* offers an apt guide for phenomenological method. Rather than providing a lockstep process, phenomenology offers guidance for uncovering lived meaning through a process that, like a journey, moves the researcher through a series of interconnected experiences that have the potential to illuminate and transform understanding. This research follows the hermeneutic phenomenological method set forth by Max van Manen (2007). He describes the method as “research activities” and breaks them down accordingly:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

In the section that follows, I unpack these methodological themes and their relationship to my inquiry.

Turning to the Phenomenon

Phenomenological research begins with an inquiry that is deeply and personally interesting to the researcher. Van Manen (2007) notes:

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (p. 36)

My own interest in bridging in Scholars Studio arose out of a decades worth of work building and growing the program, and more broadly, a longing to humanize the learning experience. I had always loved learning. I spent a great deal of time as a child reading, writing, drawing, and

creating my own learning experiences. My perception of school was quite different, however. I was not encouraged to explore my passions, nor did I feel a sense of belonging or joy. In school, I was expected to complete tasks and follow rules. When I began teaching, I had a similar experience. The course curricula, which had been created by someone else, felt detached from the lifeworld that animated the subject matter. I longed to connect students to learning that was inspiring and life affirming, and I longed for my teaching to be an extension of those connections. Scholars Studio represented a lifelong attempt to reclaim educational spaces that were humanizing and spacious. My research interests grew from a desire to better understand the nature of the work I was undertaking.

Turning to the phenomenon is a processing of *orienting*, which involves the researcher in reflecting on her own lived experience. This process helps the researcher identify questions that deeply interest her and move her toward developing a *phenomenological question*, which asks what the lived experience is “really like” (van Manen, 2007, p. 42). The process of *turning*, gives the researcher an opportunity to examine her horizons—the vantages from which she sees the world—so she may remain ever vigilant of her own *assumptions* and perspectives. Each of these concepts is explored below in the context of my inquiry.

Orienting to the Phenomenon

When working with Scholars Studio, I orient myself as a pedagogue and learner, and filter my engagements and inquiries through those lenses. I am invested in exploring what it means to *bridge* in that space and begin phenomenological research by turning to my own lived experience. Van Manen suggests, “Lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we (reflectively) gather them by giving memory to them” (p. 37). During the phenomenological turning, I might conjure memories of traveling with students, for example, and as I interpret

those memories, I recognize how the experience is different from traveling alone or with friends. I might also recognize how the act of reflecting and interpreting enlarges the experience. Jardine (2012) adds:

Hermeneutics is...about becoming educated, becoming experienced, and this freedom...is not had through cutting ourselves off from difficult, convivial life...but finding ways to open up and understand that very life, my life, with all its lived entanglements that I knowingly or unknowingly inhabit...There is thus a pedagogy to hermeneutics, the cultivation and work it requires, and freedom it portends, and it is not for the faint of heart. (p. 96)

Unlike the empirical/analytic sciences, hermeneutic phenomenology requires the researcher to close in on the inquiry—to dwell in it, to look at it straight on and not just to understand it but to live it fully and significantly.

Developing a Phenomenological Question

Phenomenological questions are deceptively simple and ask, “What is the nature of lived experience?” A phenomenological question may be framed as thus: What does it mean to teach? Or, what is it like to learn? As the researcher turns to the phenomenon, she may find how little she knows about the very thing that grips her because as it moves further from the source, there is often a degree of slippage. Using the previous example of my early teaching experience, I might answer the question—*what does it mean to teach?*—by listing aspects of the job that took up time and filled faculty meeting agendas yet were not the essence of teaching. These areas might include grading or classroom management. As I sat with the question, I would begin to recall the moments when teaching felt alive, such as the experience of bringing my students outside to teach rhythm in poetry, as described in Chapter Two.

My teaching example captured an “ah ha” moment when I recognized that breaking down concepts into manageable pieces was moving the class away from a lived, embodied understanding of poetry. I was conscious of the fact that many of my students had been taught

that literature and art were complex and out of reach. Poetry had given me purpose in college, and I wanted to offer my students a glimpse of its power to speak to the human condition. To get there, I attempted to return to the source. I invited my students to feel the rhythms of the earth and their own bodies and how poetry's resonance could be felt in those beats. In that memory, I would begin to see that connecting, remembering what it means to be alive, and becoming whole were all aspects of teaching.

The phenomenological inquiry that I'm pursuing asks, *What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio?* Contained within that question are other questions, including what does it mean to be a pedagogue? What does it mean to be a learner? What does it mean to walk with one another? What does it mean to embark on a journey together? And, what does it mean to build community? My task is to invite readers into the inquiry by offering a textual rendering that is adequately compelling to keep them wondering about the nature of bridging.

Bringing Awareness to Assumptions

By exploring their connection to the phenomenological inquiry, researchers necessarily uncover their own assumptions. Van Manen (2007) suggests:

It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions not in order to forge them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character. (p. 47)

The previous example of teaching poetry at the community college demonstrates the importance of examining assumptions. It was valuable to recognize that social conditioning prompted me to focus on assessment, classroom management, and the breakdown of concepts, but it would be folly to think that was the essence of teaching. Returning to my early experience reminds me of teaching's tension—the tug between the life affirming, connected feeling that I

experienced that night teaching poetry and the inherited curricula and pedagogies that have roots in other spaces, and at times, work against learning.

Investigating Lived Experience

Phenomenological research draws on sources that are grounded in the lifeworld. This section explores possible “data” sources and collection methods. I’ve placed *data* in quotation marks because the use of the term in a phenomenological context is problematic. The term *data* has lost aspects of its original meaning due to its close association with quantitative methods (van Manen, 2007, p. 53). The term usually conjures images of objective information that is destined to undergo a computation or analysis. By nature, phenomenological data aren’t objective, nor will they be used to make comparisons or generalizations. To understand the meaning of data in hermeneutic phenomenology, it is helpful to trace the term’s roots. Van Manen (2007) writes:

Originally, “datum” means something “given” or “granted.” And there is indeed a sense in which our experience is “given” to us in everyday life. And yet, we need to realize, of course, that experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions—whether caught in oral or in written discourse—are never lived experience itself. All recollections of experiences, reflections on experience, taped interviews about experiences, or transcribed conversations about experiences are already *transformations* of those experiences... we need to find access to life’s living dimensions while realizing that the meanings we bring to the surface from the depths of life’s oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence. (p. 54)

Beginning Within

Phenomenological “data” collection begins with personal experience. While looking at my own memories, I’m wary of the fact that my mind fashions memories into stories in order to make sense of them. Orr (2002) suggests that we “arrange and rearrange details and events, sequence, and characters in such a way as to tell, in a kind of code *how* we felt about something or someone in the past” (p. 18). He explains:

The child's memory of the dangerously weird Uncle Al may not be factually accurate (according to adults), but it is an extremely accurate story about the child's feelings or intuitions about Al... The child's memory is his or her attempt to make sense out of the disturbing disorder Uncle Al embodied. Our personal memories, especially those from our earliest years, tell us important things about our feelings and attitudes toward the world and the people we encountered in it. (pp. 18-19)

Recognizing the mind's tendency to shape memories into narratives, phenomenological data collection involves recalling experiences without attempting to make connections or draw conclusions (van Manen, 2007, pp. 54-55). In my conversations with faculty and students, I am not focused on checking the factual accuracy of events, but rather how they make sense of and interpret their experiences. Their narratives help me understand their feelings and attitudes.

Uncovering Etymologies

Researchers often dwell in the language used to describe a phenomenon in order to get inside lived experience; however, as words become commonplace, they tend to lose the virility of their original meaning. Tracing etymologies gives researchers insight into the power the words once possessed. Earlier in this chapter, I traced the word *travel* in relation to the concept of a world traveler. In the age of inexpensive airfare, travel is commonplace and depicted—particularly in social media and other online environments— as exciting and whimsical. Countless social media accounts are dedicated to capturing the adventure that travel portends with its exotic foods, brightly colored scenery, and seemingly endless opportunities for selfies. Being able to hop on a plane at will signals a certain degree of freedom and privilege. But, what lingers behind the veneer of the carefully constructed images that we have come to associate with travel?

As my earlier etymological investigation revealed, the word travel has roots in the words *travail* and *toil*, and was once associated with hard work (Harper, n.d.). Indeed, Ortega's (2014) description of world traveling aligns with the idea of travel as labor. She conceptualizes world

travelers as those who cross borders during their daily existence. Existing in multiple cultural spaces is taxing and requires a degree of shapeshifting. Pausing to dig into the meaning of language helps amplify understanding of the phenomenon.

Gathering Descriptions of Lived Experiences from Others

Researchers use descriptions and reflections from people (conversants) who have experienced the phenomenon. This inquiry gathers “data” from faculty and students who are participating in Scholars Studio’s learning communities and actively engaging in *bridging*. I am interested in talking with both faculty and students rather than one or the other because bridging is about actively building connections in places where rifts may exist. I am interested in learning what it means for faculty and students to bridge in a learning space. Van Manen (2007) notes:

From a phenomenological point of view we are not primarily interested in the subjective experiences of our so-called subjects or informants, for the sake of being able to report on how something is seen from their particular view, perspective or vantage...the deeper goal, which is always the thrust of phenomenological research, remains oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of this phenomenon...as an essentially human experience. (p. 62)

I find this aspect of van Manen’s method slightly challenging. While I concur that there are aspects of most experiences that are human, there are a number of experiences that are fundamentally different to people of different races, classes, and gender identities. As noted earlier, traveling in the United States—particularly in certain areas—takes on different meaning for people who are Black versus White. Similarly, people who are transgender or undocumented may have experiences that are unique to their situations. The experience may also be tempered by historical circumstances. My colleagues who drove from Washington, D.C. to family homes in Georgia or Alabama during the 1960s and 70s packed enough food and gas to carry them the entire distance because stopping presented too much of a risk. They may experience travel differently than my students who were raised in a different generation and did not have those

experiences. Further, my experience of traveling with Black colleagues for over a decade has heightened my sensitivity to what it means to move freely in this country. I have likely developed an awareness that many of my White friends have not.

This observation points to the importance of identifying context. A phenomenological researcher would not assemble a random sample of individuals from which to gather descriptions and reflections. They would identify conversants whose experiences mirrored the phenomenological question.

Van Manen (2007) offers a number of methods for collecting “data” from other people, including conversations, protocol writing, and observation. These methods are described below.

Conversations

Researchers engage in dialogue with conversants to gather personal stories. Van Manen (2007) suggests that conversations may be used as an avenue for collecting descriptions of personal experiences or to “develop a conversational relation with an...interviewee about lived experience” (p. 66). I use the term *conversation* in place of interview because the intent is not to pose and receive responses to a series of questions, but rather to engage in a back-and-forth dialogue that generates new and shared understanding. Gadamer (1975) offers:

To understand means to come to understanding with each other... Understanding is primarily agreement. Thus, people usually understand themselves immediately or they make themselves understood with a view reaching toward agreement...If two people understand each other independently on any topic, then this means that they understand each other not only in this or that respect, but in all essential things that unite human beings. (p. 180)

From this perspective, understanding does not occur in isolation. It is a verb, a process of bridging that happens when two or more people come together with the intent of broadening—and possibly transforming—their own perspectives.

While I find Gadamer's (1975) final assertion challenging—that if two people understand “each other, [they may understand each other] “in all essential things that unite human beings”—for the purpose of this research, I will take to heart the importance of co-creating understanding through conversation. Indeed, conversations are not simply occasions for researchers to collect “data.” In the case of my inquiry, they offer faculty and students an opportunity to bridge understanding. Gadamer (1975) suggests that for understanding to occur, the conversation creates an opening. The purpose is not to argue a point or uphold popular opinion. “What is said is continuously transformed into the uttermost possibilities of its rightness and truth, and overcomes all opposition that tries to limit its validity” (p. 361). Gadamer continues:

The maieutic productivity of the Socratic dialogue, the art of using words as a midwife, is certainly directed toward the people who are partners in the dialogue, but it is concerned merely with the opinions they express, the immanent logic of the subject matter that is unfolded in the dialogue. What emerges in its truth is the logos, which is neither mind nor yours and hence so far transcends the interlocutors' subjective opinions that even the person leading the conversation knows that he does not know. (p. 361)

The word *understand* comes from the Old English word *understandan*, meaning comprehend, grasp the idea of or, literally, to stand between (Etymonline, n.d.). Calling to mind, the image of the bridge—which stands between two distinct locations—one might draw parallels between the labor of building the bridge and engaging in conversation. Just as engineers would pour concrete to erect a steady base, the researcher (in collaboration with conversants) establishes standards for engaging in dialogue that assure the safety of the participants and the openness of the conversation. This is particularly important for my inquiry, as there is an inherent power differential between faculty and students.

Observations

The final method that van Manen (2007) offers for gathering experiences from other people is observations. During this process, the researcher immerses in the lifeworld of their

informants (p. 69). Rather than maintaining distance, they bridge the distance by joining the participants. Van Manen (2007) notes:

Close observation involves an attitude of assuming a relation that is as close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations. It is similar to the attitude of the author who is always on the look-out for stories to tell, incidents to remember. (p. 69)

For this inquiry, observations deepen my understanding of the phenomenon by providing a lived sense of the spatiality, temporality, and relationality of the classroom and other locations where learning occurs.

Mining Primary and Secondary Sources

Van Manen (2007) recommends turning to a number of other sources to learn about the lifeworld of the inquiry, including literature, biography, journals, art, and phenomenological documents (pp. 70-76). All of these genres provide access to rich descriptions of lived experience. This inquiry turns to a number of primary and secondary sources to enrich understanding of *bridging*.

Reflecting on Essential Themes

After gathering descriptions, the researcher engages in a process of reflection in order to understand the meaning of the phenomenon. Van Manen (2007) writes:

Ultimately, the project of phenomenological reflection and explication is to effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived. I want to grasp the meaning of teaching, of mothering or fathering, so that I can live my pedagogic life with children more fully. Therefore, when I reflect on the experience of teaching, I do not reflect on it as a professional philosopher, or as a phenomenologist or critical theorist. Rather, I reflect phenomenologically on experiences of teaching and parenting as a teacher or as a parent. In other words, I attempt to grasp the pedagogical essence of a certain experience. (p. 78)

Following van Manen's guidance, I will approach the text from the perspective of a teacher-learner who is oriented toward *bridging*. Doing so will allow me not only to understand the nature of bridging better but also how I can show up more fully in my pedagogical life.

Thematic Analysis

The researcher begins the interpretive process by combing the text for themes. Van Manen (2007) describes themes as “structures of experience” and uses “the feeling of abandonment” as an example of a theme that arises in a child’s experience (p. 79). For my inquiry, I will read transcripts, observation notes, writing protocols, and primary and secondary sources to identify common experience structures (themes).

Van Manen (2007) offers a few methods for isolating themes. The first, the wholistic approach, involves examining the text as a whole and identifying phrases that capture the significance of the text. The second approach, selective reading, involves reading the text carefully and marking phrases that seem to capture the essential qualities of the text. The third approach, detailed reading, calls for close reading of all sentences to determine the significance of each (p. 93). Combining the three approaches allows the researcher to pan in and out, simultaneously thinking about the big picture while accounting for details.

Finding Meaning

Once themes have been identified, the researcher uses the supporting text to open them up. Van Manen (2007) describes themes accordingly:

- (1) *Theme is the experience of focus, of meaning, of point.* As I read over an anecdote, I ask, what is its meaning, its point?
- (2) *Theme formulation is at best a simplification.* We come up with a theme formulation but immediately feel that it somehow falls short, that it is an inadequate summary of the notion.
- (3) *Themes are not objects one encounters at certain points or moments in a text.* A theme is not a thing; themes are intransitive.
- (4) *Theme is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand.* Theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience. (p. 87)

Themes might be thought of as tidal pools that form in rocky crevices along the seashore. Unique worlds form in each briny pocket. They are dynamic, living structures.

Tuning into the Larger Human Experience

Although each phenomenological question addresses a specific experience, there are a number of themes that are consistent across experiences, as they are aspects of the human condition. Van Manen (2007) refers to these themes as *existentials*. They include “lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality)” (p. 101).

Lived Space. Spatiality refers to the experience of space. If a person were to walk in a crowded bank lobby, for example, she would likely feel significantly different than she would if she were standing on a mountain peak. Standing in the bank lobby, she might feel as if space were closing in, a feeling that would, perhaps, make her want to conduct her business quickly and leave. In contrast, she might feel a sense of expansiveness atop the mountain and want to linger. The space in our homes elicits yet another sense (van Manen, 2007, p. 102).

Space plays a unique role in shaping learning experiences. The configuration of a classroom, for example, signals the sorts of movements, experiences and modes of relating for which the space is intended. The spacious, well-lit biology lab, with its round tables and rolling chairs, invites cooperation and easy movement, whereas the fixed desks in the cramped classroom across campus elicit the opposite response: learners are to be still and focused on the board at the front of the room. Unique to this time in history, social distancing restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic impact the felt sense of space and open a number of questions about the experience of bridging across physical space.

Lived Body. Corporeality refers to the human condition of embodiment. We live in our bodies and encounter others in their bodies. Our emotions are expressed in our bodies, and our experiences are manifest and processed in our bodies (van Manen, 2007, p. 103). Learning

spaces offer an array of possibilities for embodiment. Some instructors insist on stillness, requiring students to ignore or detach from the felt sense of their bodies. Other professors integrate movement and engagement into the learning experience. Moreover, embodiment depends on individuals' relationships to their own bodies, which may be impacted by culture, social conditioning, or trauma. The body plays an important role in self-reflection, as feelings present themselves as sensations in the body.

Lived Time. Temporality is how we experience time. It is not necessarily measured by the clock but rather our experience of how quickly or slowly time passes. Those of us who have waited anxiously for a test result that could determine the trajectory of our life know how time creeps along slowly and agonizingly. Similarly, most of us have experienced time pick up pace when we are in the presence of a cherished friend or absorbed in an activity that we love (van Manen, 2007, p. 104). Time in a learning space may take on a similar structure. An hour may feel like a decade, or time may pass in a flash. At the beginning of an academic year, time may seem to languish in front of us; whereas, at the end of the year, it may seem to speed up. Time for first-year students may feel slow and measured, as if they will be stuck in college forever, but by the time they reach their junior or senior year, time may feel as if it is throttling uncontrollably to the end.

Human Relation. Relationality is how we experience others in space. Physical contact and impressions shape how we connect with others (van Manen, 2007, p. 104). Relations are at the heart of my inquiry. Without them, bridging would not be possible. All four existentials are both distinguishable and impossible to tease apart, as they work together to shape our experience in the lifeworld (van Manen, 2007, p. 105).

Hermeneutic Phenomenological Writing

Phenomenological writing is not simply a process of documenting the research process, but rather the practice of opening and illuminating lifeworlds. Writing is a necessary aspect of the phenomenological process because it creates tension between experience and understanding (van Manen, 2007, p. 124). It is, in other words, a process of thinking.

Phenomenological writing relies on anecdotes to convey the structures of lived experience. When we write phenomenologically, we often connect with embodied senses to gather textual renderings that speak evocatively and poetically about human experience. We entertain questions such as Heidegger (1927/2013) did when he asked, “What is pregiven to the poet, and how is it given, so that it can then be regiven in the poem?” (p. 173). We are continually challenged to as Rilke (1989) described, sculpt language so it “burst[s] like a star” (p. 61).

Gathering Lived Experience: My Process

My inquiry focuses on bridging that unfolded in a single interdisciplinary learning community (Studio) during the fall of 2021. I selected a community aimed at exploring what it means to be an educated Black man and what it means to educate Black boys and men. The community brought together five courses, including Introduction to Education, Freshman Seminar, African American History (1865-present), Math, and Expository Writing. I opted to study this community because it presents a number of possibilities for bridging. Inherent in Scholars Studio’s structure is the bridging that occurs across disciplines, among faculty and students, across locations (through travel), and across experiences. Unique to this community is a cross-generational exploration of education.

Studio planning began in the summer of 2021 before the start of the semester. We gathered on campus to shape the experience and develop interdisciplinary assignments. For a few of the faculty, this was their first time back on campus since the pandemic shut down most

campus operations. In this space, faculty developed a launch (community introduction), interdisciplinary final project, linked discussions, and co-curricular activities. We also scheduled small group conversations that informed this research. I describe the learning community activities in more detail in Chapter Four.

Identifying Participants

Because I am concerned with understanding the experience of bridging—which is essentially about building connections—I brought together faculty and students in conversation with one another. I invited all members of the community to participate in this research at the beginning of the semester. All of the students enrolled in Scholars Studio agreed to participate; however, due to inconsistent attendance, which may be partially attributed to the continued impact of COVID-19, I did not have full participation. This research captures insights from three faculty members, seven students and two staff members.

Quantitative and other empirical/analytic researchers use the term *sample* to describe the group of subjects in a study. A sample is selected to represent the larger population in order to draw generalizations about the population. Phenomenology does not call for the use of samples because, unlike empirical/analytic methods, it does not result in generalizations. Instead, participants are selected based on their ability to provide insight into the lived experience of the identified phenomenon (van Manen, 2016, pp. 352-353). Van Manen notes that rather than identifying an appropriate sample, a phenomenological researcher asks, “How many examples of concrete experiential descriptions would be appropriate for this study in order to explore the phenomenological meaning of this or that phenomenon” (p. 353)? Accordingly, phenomenological studies might consist of as few as one participant or many more. Although larger numbers of participants may present more opportunities to gather rich descriptions, there

is a risk that higher numbers will generate unwieldy amounts of textual data, resulting in surface-level interpretations.

When I designed the study, I was cognizant of the fact that my study size was potentially large for a phenomenological inquiry. My decision to invite all of the participants in the selected Studio was based on my commitment to building an inclusive community. I did not want students or faculty to feel left out. In order to maintain my commitment to both the community and the research, I took steps to ensure that I had time to adequately tend to phenomenological writing and interpretation, including utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) transcription where appropriate.

Phenomenological Group Conversations

I used a variety of means to gather descriptions of lived experience, including group and individual conversations, and observations. Group conversations included a mix of both students and faculty. Group sizes were limited to 4-6 participants to ensure adequate time for sharing and engaging in conversations. Van Manen (2016) suggests that formal settings—in this case, the university classroom—are often not ideal locations for phenomenological conversations. He recommends selecting locations that are “conducive to thinking about [life] experiences,” such as coffee shops or other relaxed settings (p. 315). In this case, practicality and pandemic-related restrictions required us to meet in classrooms because they provided adequate space for social distancing. I took measures to make the experience feel more relaxed, including opening the conversations with an icebreaker.

Group conversations were scheduled around weeks six and twelve of the sixteen-week semester. During the first conversation, participants had been engaged in Scholars Studio for a little over a month. Students were primarily interested in discussing course-related matters, and

in particular, their experience connecting with Black history in each of their courses. The initial conversation ushered the participants into the conversational process. The students did not volunteer a lot of intimate details about their experiences at that point, but that was expected. We were still building trust with one another—a process complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the students felt socially awkward because they had been isolated from their peers for so long. To exacerbate that feeling, the university had not yet returned to offering in-person social events—which had provided avenues for students to connect with one another outside of class in the past. Further, there were a number of physical barriers in place, including social distancing and masking, which interfered with the intimacy of the experience. Moreover, the spaces where students would have congregated outside of class in the past were off limits or restricted. Students were encouraged to take their food from the dining hall in to-go boxes, and if they stayed, they sat at tables on which plastic barriers had been erected. Residence hall visitation was restricted and public spaces were off limits. The fact that we were able to build community and connection in Scholars Studio, despite these challenges, speaks to the power of the experience. Students and faculty allowed themselves to be more vulnerable during second group conversation. At that point, they had a rich set of experiences to draw on, including off-campus co-curricular activities.

Van Manen (2016) notes that group conversations or interviews are used to gather personal stories and anecdotes: “The phenomenological interview aims for pre-reflective experiential accounts—not cultural narrative, socio-psychological opinions, personal views, perceptions, perspectives, or interpretations” (p. 314). During formal conversations, I worked to draw out anecdotes or experiences by asking participants to think about particular experiences and describe them using concrete details. I used a conversation guide (See Appendix D), which

was not meant to serve as a list of questions that are checked off, but rather offered a systematic approach for helping participants recall experiences. Van Manen suggests that researchers ask follow-up questions to help participants. Sample follow-up questions included, “When did this happen? What were you doing? Who said what? And what did you say then? What happened next? How did it feel? What else do you remember about the event” (p. 316)? Participants were dissuaded from offering generalizations, interpretations, or analyses.

Engaging participants in group conversations was important for a number of reasons. From a practical standpoint, group conversations helped participants remember experiences more clearly; and, participants felt more comfortable engaging in the process because they were with their peers. From a philosophical standpoint, group conversations help bring phenomenology and practice together, providing an opportunity for students and faculty to listen to and understand one another better.

Despite the benefits of using group conversations to gather experiences, they present a few potential challenges. First, pre-reflectivity, which is at the foundation of hermeneutic-phenomenological method, is challenging. As discussed earlier, people with privileged positioning have the benefit of operating on a day-to-day basis in a pre-reflective state. As Ortega (2016) points out, people with “marginal” identities often experience seemingly “normal” activities meta-cognitively (e.g. eating cake with a fork when you’re accustomed to using a spoon). There are a number of reasons why participants in my study may not have had pre-reflective experiences of seemingly ordinary activities on account of nationality, gender identity, disability status, and first-generation college student status, among other factors.

To address this, I strived to maintain awareness that seemingly ordinary experiences may not feel ordinary to all people. I aimed to build in processes to continually orient myself to the

possibility that I do not see the full picture. I asked myself what I'm taking for granted, or I asked my participants what they feel people (generally) or I might not understand about their experience. Moreover, I was aware that during phenomenological conversations, researchers aim to avoid discussing participants' analyses or theories about experiences; however, if a person is not experiencing an event pre-reflectively they may be analyzing the experience in real time. In other words, their analysis might be intertwined in the actual experience. It was important to recognize that possibility so as not to shut down conversation. Further, as I discuss in the next section, hermeneutic interviews provided an opportunity to bridge understanding.

A second challenge that I tried to remain tuned into was the difference in power between faculty and students. Potential issues included students holding back during conversations for fear that their grades would be negatively impacted, faculty feeling uncomfortable sharing with students, or faculty feeling obligated to provide students with advice rather than listening. To ameliorate potential negative impacts of bringing faculty and students together in this manner, I worked with the participants to establish guidelines for the conversations. Part of my role as researcher was to ensure that the guidelines were adhered to so as to maintain safe and fruitful conversations. I also engaged in individual/homogenous group conversations (discussed in the next session) to provide space for faculty and students to share experiences that they may not have felt comfortable sharing in a group.

I understood that another significant challenge might have stemmed from my positionality. The community I am engaging with is aimed at developing Black, male educators. All of the students and faculty in the community were Black, and all but two students were men. I am neither Black, nor a man. I expected that some students may not have had a lot of interactions with White people and others might have been wary of me because of my

background. It was important for me to establish trust, which is foundational to Scholars Studio. To do that, I actively engaged in the community throughout the semester, which included traveling with the community to the boy's school in Washington, D.C. and actively participating in communal events—including the launch, circle and podcast—and attending a limited number of classes. I made the decision not to attend many classes because I did not want my presence to stifle conversation or create discomfort.

Moreover, I have dedicated well over a decade to learning about Black history, structural racism, White privilege, and listening to the experiences of Black colleagues and students. While I am sure that there are ways in which I trip over my privilege, I did not enter this research from a position of ignorance. I was intentional about listening, inviting conversation, and learning. I also recognized the importance of safe spaces, and ensured that I was not present during all of the discussions, so students who might not feel comfortable speaking frankly about race and gender-related issues in my presence could do so freely. Ultimately, I felt comfortable that I was able to carry out this research successfully.

Individual/Homogenous Group Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Conversations

I had planned to meet with all students and faculty individually at least once during the semester. Those plans were curtailed by the pandemic. Students were more disconnected than usual, and it was challenging to engage with them outside of class. As discussed earlier, physical restrictions on meeting spaces further complicated attempts to meet individually. My biggest challenge, however, was the spike in COVID-19 cases, which led to an early campus closure. Some of the individual interviews were scheduled for that time, and I had to cancel several meetings. I compromised by meeting with the faculty bi-weekly throughout the semester via Zoom, and meeting with a number of my conversants before the close of the semester in small

groups without faculty. These homogenous group conversations served two purposes: (1) to follow up on experiences discussed in the group interviews and/or dig into experiences that participants did not feel comfortable broaching during the group process and (2) to discuss interpretations. The former aspects of the conversation (following up and digging deeper) were phenomenological and aimed at gathering rich descriptions of lived experiences.

The latter (discussing interpretations) was a hermeneutic data-interpreting conversation. Researchers may use hermeneutic interviews to understand how others interpret descriptive narratives. Van Manen (2016) suggests that the “hermeneutic interview can be used as a follow-up from the phenomenological interview. However, it should not be assumed that those who have shared their lived experiences should have the expertise and experiences to interpret their own experiences” (p. 317). While I did not expect first-year undergraduate students, in particular, would be able to consistently generate doctoral-level interpretations of lived experience, I was certain that they would have important insights about their experiences. Further, my commitment to bridging and concern for producing accurate interpretations, justified engaging my participants in hermeneutic conversations.

Observations

Phenomenological observations may be more precisely called close observations because researchers situate themselves as close to the experience as possible while maintaining a “hermeneutic alertness” (van Manen, 2016, p. 318). This positioning, van Manen suggests, “is similar to the attitude of the fiction writer or novelist who is always on the lookout for stories to tell, incidents to remember” (p. 318). I engaged in close observations by participating in community-supported events, including the launch, circle, podcast, off-campus co-curricular

activities, and class presentations. During observations, I collected anecdotes, quotes, and descriptions that illuminated the experience of bridging in Scholars Studio.

Ethical Considerations

I took care to maintain high ethical standards throughout the research process. My research followed Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures, including inviting community members to participate in the study at the beginning of the semester, providing thorough details about the opportunity, storing data and recordings on servers that meet the university's security standards, and maintaining the anonymity of participants (See Appendices A-E for further details).

Heidegger in Third Space

Given the nature of my work, I cannot close this chapter without addressing Heidegger's problematic connection with Nazism. While he confessed to Hannah Arendt that affiliating with the Nazi party was a mistake, his journals, which are voluminous, and cover over forty years' worth of writing, reveal that his affiliation with the party was more than a cowardly attempt to maintain his professorship (Wolin, 2001; Faye, 2005/2009). He expressed repeated disdain for Jewish people and used his own philosophy to justify his intellectual position (Wolin, 2001).

I struggled for a long time to come to terms with my decision to pursue phenomenological research. I questioned how I could acknowledge the legacy of slavery and profound impact of racism in the United States while using a research method heavily dependent upon the philosophy of a man who affiliated with an equally vile institution.

On May 20th, 2017 when Richard Collins III, a student from my institution, was killed on The University of Maryland's campus by a professed Neo-Nazi, I nearly lost my will to continue pursuing hermeneutic phenomenology. Though I had never met Lieutenant Collins, his loss was deeply painful. His death was a brutal reminder of how Black lives are repeatedly assigned lesser

value. Of course, no one at my university needed to be reminded of this. It was in the news every day and the reality of so many in my community, including a colleague who was killed in police custody a few years before Collins' death.

Several years have passed since Collins lost his life, and I still feel unsettled when I use Heidegger's work. Particularly troubling is the fact that many of his ideas have the potential to be liberating. His work played a significant role in freeing western philosophy from objectifying human "subjects"—a positioning that has been used by countless regimes to justify human rights violations. At the same time, some scholars speculate that aspects of his philosophy were used to justify his political position (Faye, 2014). The dissonance is troubling and offers a mirror to our humanity.

This tension has helped me come to terms with using Heidegger's philosophy for the purpose of this dissertation. To cast out Heidegger's work while turning a blind eye on all the other intellectuals and institutions that have contributed to human rights abuses, racism, sexism, and xenophobia would certainly feed into contemporary *cancel culture*, but it would not free me from the West's troubling relationship with racism, colonialism, and slavery. Racism is embedded in the United States' foundation and has been perpetuated for hundreds of years through its institutions. Our founding fathers were slave holders and our most iconic monuments and institutions were built by enslaved Africans. While we give the occasional nod to this fact, there has been no systematic effort to heal the psychological and economic harm inflicted by slavery and successive waves of racism. Being honest about racism in the United States would require exposing many of our professed "heroes" and acknowledging that our intellectual, political, and economic powerhouses would not exist as we know them today without the exploitation of human beings.

The U.S. citizenry's reluctance to face the legacy of slavery may, in part, be due to the fact that we continue to orient ourselves in a system of binaries. We are either good or bad, black or white; there are no gradations in between. In this system, bad actors (like Heidegger) should be removed; the problem is that when a critical eye is cast on the United States, there are people and institutions who contributed to slavery and racism everywhere. Casting out certain individuals may give us the illusion that we are taking a stand for justice, but if by doing so, we ignore the network of actors and ideologies that contributed to injustice on the scale of chattel slavery, Nazism, or any of their successive manifestations, we have not advanced the cause.

Clearly, obscuring the truth has not worked. But, where does it leave us? Another option may be to opt out of the binary system entirely and refuse to engage in the endless back-and-forth between the *right* and *left*, for example. Post-colonial thinkers have offered schemas for this intellectual positioning. Homi Babha called it third space and Gloria Anzaldua referred to it as the "in between." Third space and in between spaces don't conform with binary positioning, and, therefore, don't participate in the familiar tug-of-war. A staircase provides an apt metaphor for a third space. The fifth step is above the fourth step but below the sixth step, and is technically above and not above and below and not below. It contains aspects of *above* and *below* without taking on all the characteristics of either. Because it is neither and both at the same time, it is impossible to rid the staircase of above or below, thus opening generative possibilities for what it is or what it might be. I attempt to create a third space in this dissertation. Bridges are third spaces because they refuse to conform to the binaries of east and west or above and below. Just as I conceptualize interactions in Scholars Studio as bridging, I attempt to create a bridge between phenomenological philosophy and post-colonial theories.

It's important for me to sit in the tension that Heidegger brings. It reminds me to resist intellectual or ethical laziness and continually observe my own assumptions and biases. Moreover, my discomfort with his work prompted me to consider the aspects of his thought that were shortsighted or incomplete. Inviting Ortega (2014) into the conversation helped me think more critically about pre-reflectivity, for example. Though I am using phenomenology as my research methodology, I do not consider myself a scholar of phenomenological philosophy. I use this methodology as a way to get close to the faculty and students' lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio, but I am not a trained philosopher and, therefore, I am not equipped to engage the material with the rigor of a scholar trained in the discipline. Recognizing these shortcomings, I strive to apply a fair and critical interpretation to the text and will seek out the insight of additional scholars when necessary. Throughout this research process, I continued to find generative possibilities inside and outside of phenomenology.

Now that I have turned to the phenomenological question that this research opens—*What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio?*—embarked on an existential investigation through the framework of play, and explored my philosophical grounding, I move to the study itself. The next chapter contextualizes the themes chapter, offering insight into the activities undertaken in Scholars Studio's Black Men in Education learning community, the place in which it is set, and the people with whom I engage.

CHAPTER FOUR: PLACE AND PEOPLE

In the first chapter, I turn to the phenomenon, opening the question, *What is the lived experience of bridging in Scholars Studio?* In the second chapter I conceptualize the bridge as a liminal space where new possibilities open through play. This chapter bridges the methods and themes chapter, orienting readers to Scholars Studio's Black Men in Education learning community. In the sections that follow, I provide details about the institution where Scholars Studio is housed, describe the activities and courses associated with the community, and introduce the participants. Together, these details contextualize the interpretive work that follows in Chapter Five.

Early In-Sight

In the early days of Scholars Studio, we struggled to describe our work. Learning communities weren't new features in the higher education landscape, and accordingly, there was already language at our disposal, but it did not adequately describe the terrain into which we were crossing; it failed to capture the essence of the experiences and relationships that gave the work meaning.

As we struggled to find language, we often described our work in terms that ran counter to prevailing trends in higher education, which, at the time, were focused on improving retention and closing the achievement gap. Although our work is considered a High Impact Practice, we understood that improving retention requires an institutional effort and cannot be addressed through a single program. Moreover, we suggested that a great deal of introspection is needed to address classroom challenges. The learning space isn't neutral, and students aren't vessels to be filled. Faculty members' attitudes, assumptions, and experiences shape the classroom in important ways, and it is up to us to be aware of who we are in that space. Likewise, our

curricula, pedagogies, and epistemologies aren't neutral, and it is important to be intentional and reflective about our choices.

These declarations challenged prevailing assumptions that students' struggles could be wholly attributed to insufficient preparation or low motivation. They also challenged some of the methods that had been instituted to improve course success rates, including the use of software packages designed to raise exam scores—a process that encouraged a narrow form of learning. Consequently, we experienced resistance every time we talked about the program. In one particularly poignant moment, we sponsored a lunch during Faculty Development Institute, which takes place prior to the start of the academic year. We had intended to share information about Scholars Studio, but it quickly became evident that most of the attendees were more interested in lunch than learning about our work. We talked about power in the classroom, and at one point, asked the faculty to jot down their thoughts on slips of paper about what it would mean to share power with students. Laughter arose from the audience, and one instructor wrote, “and let the inmates run the asylum?” The response foreshadowed the hill we were about to climb.

In retrospect, we had offered the faculty a vague picture of our vision, but we hadn't offered them a bridge. The images we conjured appeared fantastical, as if features of a mythical city they weren't certain they wanted to visit or that even existed if they were, indeed, curious. In a sense, we had failed to help our colleagues see themselves in the *place* we envisioned.

Over the past few decades, the probability of getting lost has significantly diminished thanks to modern technology. Today, geolocation and other advances allow us to identify precise locations on the planet. We always know where we are in relation to where we want to be and in relation to others. In fact, location can be pinpointed with such certainty that—unless we find

ourselves unprepared to navigate the terrain— we often take for granted the importance of knowing *place*. This is a relatively new phenomenon in human history. For millennia travelers relied on landmarks, the sun, stars, and other astronomical phenomena to approximate their location. Casey (2009) recounts the disorienting and terrifying consequence of not being grounded in place:

In 1707 a fleet of British ships under the direction of Admiral Cloudesley Shovel ran into heavy fog returning to England from Gibraltar. For eleven days the fleet drifted, increasingly uncertain as to where it was located. On the twelfth day the navigators thought the fleet was safely west of Brittany. But the same night the ships crashed into the Scilly Islands to the southwest of England. Two thousand men, including Admiral Shovel, were killed, and four ships were lost. These losses meant in effect that place had been lost, dissolved in a soup of space. (p. 3)

Not having a clear means to identify place was both dis-orienting and deadly. In a sense, during the early days of Scholars Studio, we had asked faculty to step off solid ground onto a rickety ship that we'd continue to construct at sea. Our vision challenged many of the assumptions at the foundation of their teaching practice. Further, it was evident that Scholars Studio would take a great deal of time and effort to cultivate—and with a 4-4 or greater teaching load along with other responsibilities, the faculty weren't keen on investing in this work.

After the luncheon, we continued to reach out to faculty individually. Those conversations were difficult and often made us feel as if we were wading upstream against a current. We pieced together Studios with the small numbers of faculty who were willing to partner with us, and, in order to build full Studios, we taught in them as well. Just as the process was beginning to feel unsustainable, the tenor of the conversations shifted. We no longer had to fiercely defend our work.

There were likely a number of reasons for this shift, but perhaps the most significant was having done the work. We were beginning to weave a narrative that offered both a description of

our work and a map to get to the place we were building. At the time, we didn't invest a lot of energy inquiring about the shift in receptiveness, but perhaps if we had, we might have asked, *How do we create a sense of place in a thing that is being built?*

It is a key question because Scholars Studio is built and rebuilt every semester. Even when we repeat a Studio, the next iteration unfolds differently. Answering this question surely involves understanding what it means to be *in place*. After the shipwreck referenced above, the British government called on scientists and inventors to develop a means for determining longitude to allow sailors to more accurately pinpoint their locations. The solution wouldn't come until much later when John Harrison's invention linked time and space by measuring nautical distance as minutes from a fixed location:

Harrison, an uneducated carpenter's son.. could not resist tinkering with clocks. Born in 1693, he had, by the age of twenty-seven constructed a gridiron pendulum that...could withstand extreme temperature changes. By 1735 he built his celebrated "No 1 chronometer," which proved to be amazingly accurate on a first sea trial to Lisbon.... Harrison built three more timepieces. The last of them, "No 4" was constructed in 1759 and tested in 1761 on a voyage to Jamaica by his son. On this two month passage, the new clock...was only 5 seconds slow... It required time to determine the exact location in space... The winning logic was this: when lost in space, turn to time. In other words, where one was became equivalent to when one was... The measure of space was taken by time. (Casey, 2009, pp. 5-6)

Indeed, time is an important aspect of developing an embodied sense of place. There is a significance to the time it took for us in Scholars Studio to find the language to reach our colleagues. During that time, we engaged in a great deal of exploratory and reflective work. We built processes and experimented. We learned what it means to work together and invite our students into the work. We embraced new ideas and abandoned ideas that didn't serve us. We imagined futures and completed the administrative and logistical tasks necessary to operate the program in real time. While we didn't share these insights during introductory meetings with

faculty, they created a shift within us. We were positioned to talk about our work more confidently and hone in on the aspects that were most important.

The time it took for us to find footing in Scholars Studio is echoed in all aspects of our work. The significance of the literal and figurative places that we visit is amplified by the time we take to dwell in those spaces. But, there is one caveat: time and place do not hold equal sway in contemporary society. Time has supplanted place. Casey (2009) notes:

[Our] lives are grasped and ordered in terms of time. Scheduled and overscheduled, we look to the clock or calendar for guidance and solace, even judgement! But such time-telling offers precious little guidance, no solace whatsoever, and predominately negative judgement (“it’s too late now”). (p. 7)

So too, we must grapple with the fact that time has been an essential mechanism of imperialism and colonialism. Centuries ago, the technology associated with *time* facilitated the safer transport of goods and people across the Atlantic, ushering in more efficiency in the extraction of resources and trade of enslaved Africans. Today, time dictates the rhythms of our everyday lives in, often, unnatural and unhealthy ways. We are beholden to fueling the economic engine and discouraged from tuning into our own natural rhythms. In so doing, we are pushing ourselves further and further from land and *place*.

Dwelling in *place* is an important aspect of Scholars Studio. Pedagogies that promote dwelling and deep thinking build *place* for the learner. They offer learners firm ground to stand on and connect them with the long and rich history of the metaphoric *land*. They offer students a means for connecting with their learning, thus providing experiences that are life affirming and deeply meaningful.

Education that promotes dwelling can be rich, but it may also be anxiety provoking. Many of us are wary of the clock and concerned about the consequences of failing to adhere to the rigid boundaries of our schedules. Inextricably linked to time is a sense of existential dread

because of “our conviction that time... is always running out or down. All time, it seems, is ‘closing time.’ No sooner have we settled in somewhere than we hear ‘Hurry up, please! It’s time!’” (Casey, 2009, p. 7). For some of us, the anecdote to the sense of these ever-slipping grains of sand is to pack as much into our lives as we can, which, ironically, equates to being in a constant state of *doing* without ever actually *being* in our lives. The same paradox plays out in the classroom when faculty are anxious about covering enough material or reaching the stated objectives.

When students (and new faculty) join us in Scholars Studio, the novelty of the experience often feels daunting, but the *bridge* provides a reassuring place to stand. As we work together to build the *place* that the bridge opens, we become *place* for one another. The key ingredient in this process is reclaiming time. It takes time to build place, to be a bridge for one another, to participate in the deep conversations and reflective practice that is required to build a foundation strong enough to stand on. Further, as Heidegger (2008) notes, “The bridge brings stream and bank and land into each other’s neighborhood. The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream” (p. 354). The bridge doesn’t simply bring us closer to one another; it also facilitates gathering. “The bridge does not first come to a locale to stand on it” Heidegger observes, “rather a locale comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge” (p. 356).

In the sections that follow, I contextualize the Black Men in Education community by describing what unfolded in the learning community and introducing the research participants, thereby orienting readers in the *place* of this work and providing context for the themes that open in Chapter Five.

The Place of Scholars Studio

Scholars Studio’s focus on educating Black men is fitting, given the university’s history. Founded in 1865 in Baltimore, Maryland, the university moved to its current location twenty-

five years later and was—in short order— designated a normal school. Within a few decades, the institution began conferring four-year degrees. During the Jim Crow era housed a demonstration school for Black children. There are alumni alive today who share memories of receiving an education from the demonstration school and then returning to the college to earn their teaching credentials. By the 1980s, the university had expanded its degree offerings and was designated a Comprehensive University.

Today the University offers 29 undergraduate degrees, 19 master's degrees, and two doctoral programs, one of which is housed in the College of Education. The institution is considered mid-sized with over 5,000 undergraduate students and more than 1,000 graduate students. Although the education program is no longer a main draw for prospective students, Dr. Carter's Center, which focuses on the mentoring of Black male students and teachers, and other efforts within the department are beginning to draw interest.

The university has undergone significant growth in the past decade with the construction of new buildings, an investment in entrepreneurship, and a number of significant community partnerships. Scholars Studio has historically had a complicated relationship with the university. On the one hand, we have been afforded a lot of freedom to give life to our vision. We have garnered a strong community of supporters over the years who have made substantial intellectual and creative contributions. And we have worked with hundreds, if not thousands, of brilliant students whose engagement and feedback has meaningfully shaped our work.

On the other hand, many of the structures within the university have created barriers. One of the biggest impediments is faculty availability. Tenure track faculty—who stand to gain the most in terms of developing community and receiving pedagogical support—not only carry a high teaching load but also have considerable service commitments. Senior faculty, likewise,

carry heavy teaching loads and are being asked to teach courses with increasing seat counts. The frenetic pace that many faculty maintain is antithetical to the intentional and reflective process that good teaching and deep learning require. In fact, if we are willing to accept that student success is dependent upon faculty success, in the absence of manageable workloads and adequately staffed academic departments, faculty will not be able to serve students optimally. The benefits of learning communities are indisputable, but they cannot be sustained without addressing issues related to the availability of fulltime faculty. That said, I don't wish to slip into cynicism. The challenges may be nudging us in a direction that will allow us to open the vision to a broader community.

The Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial presence throughout the semester. The university had shut down on-campus operations in March of 2020. They allowed limited numbers of freshmen to live in the residence halls during the fall of 2020 and although some courses were held in-person—and taught primarily by adjuncts—the majority were held online. Staff were summoned back in the summer of 2021 to prepare for a return to in-person instruction. Vaccinations were mandated, with a few exceptions, and everyone was required to wear masks. When the campus re-opened, classrooms were equipped with plastic barriers that separated lecturers from students. Similar barriers were erected at customer service kiosks and cash registers across campus. Plastic dividers were placed on tables in the dining hall to give a sense of safety. Add social distancing requirements to the mix, and there was a strong feeling of disconnectedness even when we were together. This was especially challenging in Scholars Studio, which relies on community and interpersonal contact. We tried to minimize the impact of the barriers when possible by scheduling events outdoors or in spacious rooms.

Participants experienced a lot of grief during this time. Many of the faculty and students had lost family or friends. The students had missed out on many of the rites of passage associated with the senior year of high school, including prom, senior trips, graduation, and graduation parties. They had been isolated from friends for long swaths of time, perhaps for the first time in their memory. They had attended classes online, but many of the students reported that they weren't really engaged. They passed their courses and graduated, but they didn't feel like they had learned much during that time.

It was clear to the faculty and staff in Scholars Studio that students were engaging differently than they had pre-pandemic. They contended with a great deal of malaise and disconnection. The idea that college is a scam was trending on social media and students across the university were running with this idea². When asked about the pandemic during the research conversations, students resoundingly said that it hadn't impacted them or that they didn't know what kind of impact it had had, but in informal spaces, they were more open about its effect. I suspect that at the time, they still hadn't fully processed their experiences. Given that the pandemic was still an active presence, everyone was trying to figure out how to live a somewhat-normal life.

Faculty experienced their own challenges. There was an omnipresent sense of worry about the prospects of Black men in America. There seemed to be no end to the stories of Black men killed at the hands of police. The faculty cared deeply about creating a space where Black

² I interviewed students outside of Scholars Studio about this trend. While they did not offer a consistent rationale, most were wary about going into debt and were unconvinced that college would adequately serve them in the future. Challenges that were experienced on campus due to administrative issues or pandemic-related policies magnified their concerns and were used to further justify this claim.

men feel empowered to cultivate their strengths and find their place in the world. They were discouraged by lower levels of engagement upon return from the pandemic. We had to remind one another that it would take time for everyone to gather their bearings and that much of the work that we do in Scholars Studio is planting seeds. We often don't see the full results of the impact until much later in a student's matriculation.

Contributing to the disengagement, the campus wasn't operating at full capacity. There were very few in-person activities held in the evenings, and a lot of students felt anxious about making new friends. They had been away from regular social interactions for so long that being in spaces with other people felt awkward. They often dealt with the awkwardness by retreating to social media or other applications on their phones. Regular testing was still required, and positive cases triggered mandatory isolation or quarantine. By the end of the semester, case counts had risen to a rate that justified shutting the campus down early.

The Black Men in Education Experience: The Bridge

In the sections that follow, I describe the Black Men in Education learning experience. I touch on the community's inquiry, course configuration, activities, and planning process.

The Black Men in Education Inquiry

The Black Men in Education community explored questions related to the education of Black men, including, *What is the experience of Black men in education? What foundations have already been established for the education of Black men? What does it take to educate Black men (well)? What are participants' visions for educating Black men?* And, specific to the participants' experience, *In what ways does the University where Scholars Studio is housed shape men? And—in the way that a Morehouse Man is defined by his intellect and success—How do the members of the Black Men in Education community envision men of this University to be defined?*

Courses and Integration

The cohort of fourteen students who participated in the Black Men in Education learning community all enrolled in five courses that had been reserved exclusively for Scholars Studio. Included was one section each of Introduction to Education (EDUC 101), Freshman Seminar (FRSE 101), Expository Writing (ENGL 101), College Algebra (MATH 125), and African American History Since 1865 (HIST 115). The Black Men in Education theme was explored through the lens of the Education, Freshman Seminar, and Writing courses. Sometimes conversations were carried across courses and explored through different disciplinary perspectives. Other times, skills from one course were used to deepen students' engagement in the scholarly process. For example, students may have learned active reading techniques in freshman seminar, applied those skills while reading a peer reviewed article in education, and then analyzed and wrote about the article in English.

Creating interdisciplinary learning experiences is complicated. It requires faculty who are accustomed to teaching independently, to dedicate considerable time to planning and follow-up activities. If anyone in the community drops the ball, it places undue burden on the rest of the faculty. This semester, the faculty worked together cohesively. They collaborated with one another to ensure that students had a rich experience, and they all participated in the co-curricular activities. Their presence was a reflection of the idea that propelled the community— that it's important for Black Boys and young Black men to have role models, mentors, and teachers who look like them. Their presence matters.

Further, many of the general education courses have common syllabi and offer faculty varying degrees of flexibility to adjust the curricula. Faculty often feel caught in the tension

between maintaining department expectations and modifying the syllabus to serve an interdisciplinary learning experience. Details about each course in the community follows.

Introduction to Education (EDUC 101)

The Education course was co-taught by Dr. Carter and Dr. King³. Dr. Carter was listed as the instructor of record. The course was scheduled to meet twice a week. They met in person on Tuesdays, and on Thursdays they connected with guest speakers via Zoom. The guests included Black men in education and related fields, including administrators, teachers, professors, school psychologists, and policy experts. Students discussed a series of peer reviewed essays on topics relevant to the education of Black boys and men. They also observed and led activities in a weekend program led by Dr. Carter for k-12 boys. Some sessions were held online and one session was held at a middle school in a nearby county.

Freshman Seminar (FRSE 101)

Freshman Seminar was taught by Professor Orion, an adjunct faculty member. Freshman Seminar is designed to assist students with their transition into college and covers topics ranging from financial aid to study skills. As a course that is taught by a high number of adjuncts, faculty are expected to work from a common syllabus. Course assignments and assessments are pre-loaded on Blackboard, the university's learning management system. To bring the curriculum to life, Professor Orion improvised, a phenomenon that is discussed more extensively in Chapter Five. He contextualized the curriculum with relevant cultural and historical references and brought his podcast equipment to class to provide opportunities for real world application. Many

³ I use pseudonyms for all of the participants.

of the in-class and podcast conversations helped students synthesize the freshman seminar, education, and the Black Men in Education inquiries.

Expository Writing (ENGL 101)

Expository Writing was taught by Professor Ahmed, a Writing Specialist in the Department of Language, Literacy, and Cultural Studies. Professor Ahmed incorporated texts to integrate Black history and education concepts into his course. His writing assignments helped students process the ideas explored in the Black Men in Education community.

Preparation for College Math (MATH 90) and College Algebra (MATH 125)

All students in the community enrolled in a college math course. Most students tested into a non-credit bearing developmental math (Math 90) course, which was designed to be completed within the first eight weeks of the semester. Upon successful completion of that course, they enrolled in a second eight-week math course. The second course was credit bearing. Students took the college-level math course that was required for their major. Most of the participants in the community enrolled in College Algebra, with the exception of the Science and Computer Technology majors, who were required to take pre-calculus. The math courses were highly prescriptive and relied entirely on a program called ALEKS, which is individualized and adaptive. The program tested students' knowledge about math and required them to complete online modules in the areas that they had not yet mastered. During the fall of 2021, formal instruction was not provided. Students worked at their own pace and faculty were available in the classroom to assist with problems when needed. The course structure precluded Scholars Studio's math instructor from adapting the curriculum to the Black Men in Education inquiry.

African American History Since 1865 (HIST 115)

The history instructor for this course was invited to participate in the planning of the community and follow up meetings. He did not respond to the invitations. Students took this course in a cohort, but it was not linked to the Black Men in Education inquiry.

The Planning Process

Planning in Scholars Studio usually begins with a 2-4 day retreat, followed up by several planning sessions. This year, a number of pandemic-related factors led to a delay in planning. We did not meet until the end of August when we gathered for an intensive on-campus planning session. Consequently, much of the follow-up planning occurred during the academic year. This was not an ideal situation; however, the pandemic added several obstacles. Had we had a solid plan at the beginning of the semester, we would have had to make adjustments anyway.

Co-Curricular Activities

In Scholars Studio, co-curricular activities generally take place outside of the classroom, are linked to an assignment, and contextualize the community inquiry. The students participated in five co-curricular activities. The final activity, a trip to see *Thoughts of a Colored Man* on Broadway in New York City, was canceled due to the steep rise in coronavirus infections.

Launch

The Launch serves as a metaphoric *crossing*. Ideally, it should attempt to stir students' curiosity by providing a taste of the inquiries and engagements about to unfold. This semester, the Launch was held on the patio of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Building to allow participants to engage comfortably without worrying about social distancing. The faculty facilitated a series of activities to prime students' thinking about what it means to be an educated Black man (or woman, as was the case for the two women in the community).

Ideally, courses are blocked, so all faculty in the community are available for the duration of the event. Blocking also provides flexibility so the launch can run for more than one period. The Black Men in Education Launch covered two class periods and concluded with a community lunch.

The Launch incorporated a number of elements consistent with Launches in Scholars Studio, including hands-on immersive engagement, an intentional plan to build community, a description of the community topic, an explanation about how each discipline advances the inquiry, and an explanation of the learning community's purpose. Specific to this Launch was a series of faculty-led activities. The first activity was a video challenge led by Dr. Carter, designed to help students think about grounding their education philosophy in Black history. The second activity, called Bodies of Writing, was led by Dr. Ahmed. Students traced their bodies on sheets of butcher paper and wrote affirmations inside the outline of their body. The process was designed to help students think about how words make people. The third activity—Play Your Bigger Game— was facilitated by Professor Orion. Students were invited to step into a box that represented where they currently stood. Options ranged from “comfort zone” where people reside when they are comfortable with their routines to “big gulp” where they are prepared to anxiously and breathlessly leap to the next space. The game is designed to help players assess where they are and recognize that the game of life is a series of strategic moves over which they have agency (Tamlyn, 2013). The last activity, Flight Paths, challenged students to construct planes that took a particular path as a reminder that they are the “pilot” of their lives.

Mentoring Program, Observation and Facilitation Opportunity

Students facilitated activities in-person and online for boys in fourth through twelfth grade who participated in a mentoring program for boys, held on Saturdays in a nearby county.

This experience gave students an opportunity to develop and carry out lesson plans using culturally relevant, boy-centered pedagogies.

Academy for Boys, Observation and Conversation with Founders

Black Men in Education participants visited a charter school in Washington, D.C., designed to serve boys in fourth through eighth grade. The school's founders sum up their mission as "well": the boys are well-read, well-traveled, well in mind and body, etc. Their pedagogy was developed after interviewing hundreds of boys and parents from the neighborhoods they serve about what helps them learn. It consists of twelve items that they call Boy Activated Ingredients.⁴ The school doesn't have metal detectors, security guards, or resource officers, and they don't use suspension as a disciplinary tool. They have psychologists on staff to support the students and another set to support the faculty and staff. The Black Men in Education students engaged in an extensive conversation with the founders and observed several classes.

Public Podcast

The faculty and students produced a podcast that was recorded before a live audience. Conducted as a series of panels, students, faculty, staff, and guests discussed aspects of their experiences. Topics included reflections on learning in Scholars Studio, the HBCU experience, balancing the roles of student and athletes, and more.

⁴ Boy Activated Ingredients include affirmation, autonomy, cause/contrast, competition/collaboration, edge, exemplars/structure, graphics, humor, movement, passion, novelty, and rigor

Bi-Weekly Faculty Meetings

Faculty met once every two weeks via Zoom to discuss progress, maintain cohesion across courses, and examine pedagogy. During this time, an academic counselor was present. She followed up with students who were struggling, not showing up for class, or required additional supports.

The Crossers

To capture bridging that occurs in the learning space, I engaged faculty, students and staff in conversations. I introduce the participants below.

Faculty

There were six faculty involved to varying degrees with the learning community. While Scholars Studio recruits faculty using different methods, depending on the nature of the community, one set of standards is held consistently across all learning communities: faculty demonstrate care for students and a willingness to meet them where they are; they express a willingness to learn and a commitment to growth; they must be willing to work with others and dedicate extra time to planning, participating in co-curricular activities, and attending meetings.

The Black Men in Education community started with Dr. Carter and Dr. King⁵, who taught the education course. Professor Orion was invited to join us because he has taught in several learning communities, and as a student, he was one of the founding members of Ignite, a campus-based men's organization. We had worked closely with the math instructor for over a decade and wanted to ensure that he taught the math course, even if it couldn't be integrated into the learning community. Dr. Carter recommended an English instructor. After introducing him to

⁵ I use pseudonyms for all research participants.

the community, we mutually decided it would not be a good fit, and we then extended an offer to Professor Ahmed, who previously worked in our office as a Writing Specialist. I refer to faculty by their formal names and students by their first names because that is how they are addressed in the learning space. The faculty who are represented in this research are introduced below.

Dr. Carter, Education 101

The Black Men in Education learning community was Dr. Carter's vision. He initiated a partnership with Scholars Studio to provide an in-depth, communal learning experience, specifically aimed at preparing Black men to serve as teachers and leaders in K-12 schools. During the semester, he expanded his vision to incorporate Black men who are interested in teaching outside of the K-12 system. Some of these areas include mentoring, supporting teaching or teachers through entrepreneurial endeavors, teaching at the college level, coaching athletes, or incorporating teaching into leadership. Dr. Carter envisions expanding the learning community to a four-semester experience.

Dr. Carter is a member of the graduate faculty and founded a center dedicated to supporting and researching Black male teachers, mentors, and students. He has a hybrid role at the university, serving as both a faculty member and Center administrator. He does not typically teach undergraduate courses but opted to teach Education 101 during the Black Men in Education community's inaugural semester to gain a better understanding of the integrated learning experience.

Dr. Carter holds a Ph.D. in Mathematics Education from Morgan State University, a Masters Degree in Middle/Secondary Instruction from Edinboro University, and a Bachelors Degree in Mathematics Education from Lincoln University. He is a prolific scholar with over

forty publications, including two books. He has also received over two million dollars in grant funding to support his work.

Dr. Carter grew up in a large family in South Carolina and Baltimore. His mother worked in the fast-food industry, and while he didn't consider himself a strong student in elementary or middle school, he committed himself to academics in high school once he figured out that postsecondary education is an avenue out of poverty. His mission is to ensure that other Black boys and men have access to the same opportunities he had. He currently lives in Maryland.

Within Scholars Studio, Dr. Carter offers a high degree of integrity and care. He is vocal about caring for the students beyond their success in his course. He encourages them to embrace their unique qualities. During faculty meetings, he serves as a compass to keep the group focused. Although he invites his colleagues to express themselves, he steers the group away from cynicism.

Professor Orion, Freshman Seminar 101

Professor Orion has been working with Scholars Studio since 2016. A graduate of the university, he was invited to teach Freshman Seminar the summer after he finished his Master's Degree at Towson University. Since that time, he has built several businesses, including a jewelry shop that specializes in custom grills and jewelry and a podcast network. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Africana Studies at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He continues to teach Freshman Seminar and Communications in Scholars Studio—leading communities in areas that range from hip hop to entrepreneurship, and now, Black men in education. In Scholars Studio, he is a flexible and innovative thinker. He works hard to give students access to hands-on, contextualized learning experiences.

Professor Orion grew up in Southeast D.C. and currently resides in Maryland. He has a bright spirit and strong vision. He is good at identifying opportunities and taking advantage of them. His students describe him as a deep thinker. He sets the mood in the classroom every day by playing music and leading meditation. His classes are energetic and dialogic. In his free time, he plays golf and travels. Cultivating his passions is an important aspect of his pedagogy, as they help him connect students with the world.

Dr. King, Education 101

Dr. King co-taught the education course with Dr. Carter. He is the Assistant Director of Dr. Carter's center and has had a long career in education as a coach, administrator, consultant, and educator. He has published scholarly articles and presented at conferences. He is particularly interested in strengths-based education models. He holds a Ph.D. in Workforce Education and Development from Pennsylvania State University. In Scholars Studio, he provides students guidance and counsel.

Outside of education, Dr. King is an entrepreneur with considerable experience in real estate and business development. His outside endeavors offer an important point of connection for students who are majoring in fields outside of education or who are interested in diversifying their income.

Students

Fourteen students enrolled in the Black Men in Education learning community. One student withdrew from the university approximately one month into the semester. All of the students signed an IRB [see Appendix B] agreeing to participate in the research conversations; however, some of them did not show up for the conversations or were reticent during our meetings. Seven students contributed substantially to the conversations.

Recruiting students to participate in Scholars Studio has historically been challenging. In the early days of Scholars Studio, we recruited students during New Student Orientation when they registered for fall courses. Now students are registered in a batch process through the Enrollment Management division. By the time we connect with incoming students, they have been assigned a schedule. They are often reluctant to change their schedules and feel skeptical about participating in an experience that is outside of the norm. Incidentally, most of our recruits come from Scholars Studio's sister program, Bulldog Scholars Academy, a six-week summer program for incoming freshmen. All but five of the students in Scholars Studio were recruited through Bulldog Scholars Academy. Of the students who did not enter through the academy, Dr. Carter recommended the opportunity to two of the students who planned to major in education. Another student enrolled in the community at the recommendation of his cousin who used to work in our office. And the final two students learned about the opportunity through our Academic Counselor. The students who participated in this study are introduced below.

Bowale

Bowale is a first-year Business student from Maryland and the youngest son of Nigerian immigrants. A signed musician with a local and international following, he began releasing tracks in high school. His family has supported his artistic pursuits; however, they place a high value on education and expect him to follow the lead of his siblings and cousins who successfully completed college. He recognizes that postsecondary education may help him navigate the business side of the music industry, but he doesn't have a lot of confidence in his academic ability. He's highly intelligent, yet struggled in high school due to his erratic work schedule.

Bowale is quiet and keeps to himself in class. When we travel in Scholars Studio, he hides under his hoodie to avoid being recognized. He connects with some of the faculty and staff in Scholars Studio and describes these relationships as “making everything a bit easier.” He explains, “I don't have any friends [at the university] outside of Scholars Studio, but I can say I don't know if I would have the drive to get up every day if I wasn't in Scholars Studio.” He feels his K-12 schooling focused too much on accountability and punishment. They didn't offer guidance or understanding. In Scholars Studio, “it's about you being a better person when you leave out of here.”

Issaiah

Like Bowale, Issaiah doesn't have any connections at the university outside of Scholars Studio. He is the oldest student in the learning community. After high school, he attended a community college in Washington, D.C. He failed his courses and withdrew from the institution. Returning to college marks a second chance for him. He is apprehensive because he's not confident that he will be successful. He started the academic year studying Elementary Education with his friend Lamonte, but Lamonte withdrew from the university a few weeks into the semester and returned to his home in Georgia. Issaiah's feelings of uncertainty mount after his friend leaves the institution. He commutes with an unreliable vehicle and often has trouble getting to campus. Issaiah is surprised to find community and connection in Scholars Studio. He shares:

I've never met professors or educators who take the time out...I feel like just the support y'all give is definitely a huge push. Because if I didn't get the support, I probably would have...just gave up already to be honest because it was real hard to keep coming back and forth to school. And then you all showed me, like, these are people who actually care who actually want me to succeed who actually would be needing to do I'm like, alright, well, if they'd doing that, there's no reason for me to give up on myself.

Issaiah values his professors' openness and transparency. It's helpful to know that they "came from tough places" and "we can all do it."

Darius

Darius is a first-year Psychology major from Maryland. He lives on campus and learned about Scholars Studio through his participation in Bulldog Scholars Academy. Entering the university during the summer through Bulldog Scholars Academy eased his transition into the fall semester, "I won't be nervous to ask anyone anything or speak because I already know you," he shares. "We're already friends and connecting." Darius is a member of the football team. His role on the team gives him a sense of belonging, but like many of the athletes that I have encountered, Darius received a lot of positive feedback and encouragement in high school for his role on the field, but he did not receive encouragement academically. Consequently, he struggles to identify as a scholar and feels unsure about his ability to succeed in college. He shares details about this struggle:

I feel like we're trying to [learn], we're trying to understand, but we just can't because we're not putting the effort in so once we don't put the effort in, we're scared, because we know we're not going to feel as though we're going to succeed. So then we stop coming to class. And doing everything else and then we start getting belittled. Then everything falls apart.

In this respect, he shares a lot of similarities with Bowale and Issaiah who both struggle to feel like confident learners. The open conversations in Scholars Studio help Darius feel a little less alone. While in Scholars Studio, he develops a relationship with one of the girls in the community.

Jasmine

Jasmine is a Business Administration major from Maryland. A licensed cosmetologist, she plans to use her degree to open a salon. Jasmine is one of two women in the class. She

learned about Scholars Studio inadvertently. “Me and Darla joined because we came to Professor Orion’s class by accident, she explains:

I felt like we both really gained something from Professor Orion. We felt like it was interesting, and we wanted to stay here. And not only that, but when I found out that it was a Black Men in Education program, I just wanted to gain a different perspective because I always see things from a female's point of view or something like that. I felt that it would be a different experience for me.

Jasmine feels connected in Scholars Studio in a way that she never experienced in high school.

At the start of her senior year, she was told that she probably wouldn’t graduate on time because she did not have the required number of credits. She took on a heavier course load and was able to graduate with her peers. She shares:

I’ve always been the observer in the classroom. And I never really spoke much or felt the need to say my opinion. But when I’m here, I feel like I can like speak on what I feel, and not just observe and also talk about my opinion. And it was like a little weird at first, I felt like the guys were dominating here. But then I realized that everybody was just like, on the same level, and we all definitely have some similar viewpoints. And I just like, I guess consider them brothers.

Jasmine remains vocal in class and expresses an appreciation for learning about African American history. She felt that she was done a disservice in high school because she only received a superficial education in Black history.

Brent

Brent is a first-year Business major from Maryland. He is quiet yet engaged. He connected with several of his classmates through Bulldog Scholars Academy in the summer of 2021. Although he is not interested in teaching, he chose to participate in Scholars Studio because he valued the community and engaged learning opportunities. Of his experience in Scholars Studio, he says, “it definitely helps us, like when we’re all working together. We get to see different points of view. We get the whole sense of something, as opposed to seeing pieces of something.” He lost a few family members during the pandemic, including the person he

considered his father figure. He valued receiving guidance from men this semester and feels very comfortable being open in the classroom. He shares:

I just feel like overall it's like a family. It's like each teacher... you don't have to talk to them every single day or have a one-on-one every single day. It's just the vibes in the classroom is just family-like. You can be open and you can say what you want, you know, without feeling judged or anything like that...So I mean, it's good vibes.

Brent is friends with Damien and Pierre and connects with Jasmine because she's a Business major.

Damien

Like Brent and Darius, Damien participated in Bulldog Scholars Academy and learned about Scholars Studio from the Academy's academic advisor. He is a first-year Computer Technology major. A few weeks into the fall semester, an activity in Scholars Studio called Play Your Bigger Game causes Damien to reflect on his engagement in college. He remarks:

I have so many goals that I don't put into action. But ever since that day, I felt like I wanted to be like a go getter, or whatever I said I wanted to do before I came to college, I want to I want to try I want to at least you know take a stab at it. And recently, I did join the Bowie State modeling team.

As a result, he was given an opportunity to walk in a show in Baltimore during the fall of 2021. He credits Scholars Studio with pushing him to step outside his comfort zone. Damien is from Maryland and lives in the residence halls on campus.

Pierre

Pierre is a Visual Communications/Digital Media major. He lost his mother at an early age and was raised by a strict father and stepmother. He spent his early years living in a predominantly Black county and attended predominately Black schools. He moved to a predominantly White county in middle school and attended predominantly White schools. He learned about Scholars Studio in Bulldog Scholars Academy where he connected with many of

his classmates. Pierre appreciates that Scholars Studio helps him make connections and explore subject matter deeply. He shares:

We pull one piece from a book or an article and then talk about, like what's really actually going on in the world and stuff like that. And then we just make those connections and then we just go from there. And then it ...it could be some of the smallest things, talking about food and it just leads to something else.

Pierre is an engaged student both inside and outside the classroom, and he lives in the residence halls on campus. He taught himself how to produce videos during the pandemic and has since established a Youtube channel, which offers podcasts, among other content. Pierre provides professional video services on campus and continues to brand his work.

Staff

Some of the staff from Engaged Learning and Student Support, the office that houses Scholars Studio participated in the research conversations. They are introduced below.

Ms. Ross

Ms. Ross is the Director of Engaged Learning and Student Support. Her work is transformative, in no small part, because she leads from the inside out, drawing on an abundant well of spirituality, creativity, and love. She is proud of her work with first-generation students—beginning with TRIO-Student Support Services and evolving to the suite of programs within Engaged Learning and Student Support (ELSS), including Scholars Studio, Bulldog Scholars Academy, The Faculty Think Tank, Operation Navigation, and Engage. Students feel valued in her presence because she recognizes their potential and creates space that engenders love and care. As a testament to the strength of her work and the quality of her relationships, many students remain connected to Ms. Ross and her office, citing participating in meaningful learning experiences and being affirmed of their self-worth and brilliance as highly impactful. Ms. Ross

thrives on helping young adults take steps toward creating lives that are good for them and their families, and she finds joy in celebrating their accomplishments and wins.

As a leader, she aims to recognize the possibilities in all people and situations. She is skilled at casting vision, and is particularly interested in working with people who find resonance in that vision. She holds a Master's degree in School Psychology from The University of Maryland, College Park and a Bachelor's degree in History/Politics from Drexel University. She recognizes that in order to be an effective education leader, she needs to engage in a continual process of learning and growth, and encourages her students and staff to do the same.

Tyrone

Tyrone provides operations support in Bulldog Scholars Academy and Operation Navigation, two programs that are closely associated with Scholars Studio. Having participated in Bulldog Scholars Academy and Scholars Studio and served as a mentor, senior mentor, and resident director in the Academy, he brings a range of perspectives and experiences about the process with him. Tyrone received his B.S. in Business Management. His education in business taught him how to effectively work in teams, set goals and help people realize their potential. As a student, he joined Omega Psi Phi fraternity and Men of Ignite. These organizations instilled in him the importance of community and giving back. Whether distributing resources to communities in need or holding space for Black men to express themselves, he has been struck by not only the power of giving, but the spark it ignites in others who are, in turn, inspired to give back.

Chapter Four offers insight into the Black Men in Education learning experience, providing institutional context, a glimpse into the Studio activities and structure, and an

introduction to the participants. In the next chapter, I open the themes that emerged from my research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CROSSINGS AND OPENINGS

The image of the world is half the world. (Jung, 2009/2012, p. 129)

What is a bridge? What does it mean to bridge? I am called back to these questions having spent a semester contemplating the metaphoric bridging in Scholars Studio. I am struck by the reality that the more I get to know bridging, the less I know about the phenomenon. This is not to say that my understanding vanishes as if I have placed all my insights in a leaky bucket, but rather, as Jung (2009/2012) points out, “The image of the world is half the world” (p. 129). When I look at something that appears whole and complete, I only see a portion of its structure. My imagination fills in the rest. In the beginning, I am happy to know the bridge as most of us know bridges—to experience traversing its length, to marvel at its silhouette along the horizon—but as more questions surface, I understand the limitations of my knowing. To truly *see* and *experience* the *whole* bridge—the full act of bridging—I must approach it differently.

In Chapter One, I explore the ways that bridging unfolds in Scholars Studio as connections are made across disciplines, between theory and praxis, across time and distance, to lived experience, and with one another. In Chapter Two, I conceptualize the bridge as a liminal space where new understandings and possibilities open through play. Together those chapters offer an introductory look at the phenomenon of bridging in Scholars Studio. *Bridging* is a useful starting point for thinking about the intentional act of building connections, but—as this chapter reveals—it does not completely capture the experience that unfolds in Scholars Studio. Bridging describes the path, but to understand the bridge completely one must understand its function and relationship with the land. Anzaldua (2015) writes:

Each reality is only a description, a system of perception and language. When you learn to access other “realities,” you undue one description or plane/level of reality and reconstruct another and others. You learn a new language and a new way of viewing the

world, and you bring this “magical” knowledge and apply it to the everyday world...You learn that the word’s former description and framework were inadequate; henceforth, you see the world with two sets of eyes, with dual vision. Our personality undergoes transformation in the quest to make yourself whole (or to use Jung’s term, to attain individuation). (pp. 45-46)

In this chapter, I am, as Anzaldua describes, writing *descriptions* that *access other realities*. The intentional act of bridging, that both faculty and students commit to, carry them over thresholds. The bridge gives them access to new land while also maintaining access to the land they know well. Crossers are free to travel between new territories and familiar terrain, opening new possibilities in each space with every passage.

I suspect that with each bridge, each crossing, and each Studio different realities emerge. Scholars Studio doesn’t script a well-defined end so much as it creates the conditions for *becoming* or *opening*. This chapter captures the openings that were created by a single Studio at a specific moment in time. It invites readers to *walk with* the Black Men in Education participants on their journey across the bridge. The crossing begins with a backward glance that telescopes between personal histories with schooling and ancestral histories. The journey is rife with *edges* that are just as precarious and anxiety-provoking as they are awe-inspiring. As the participants look back and face their edges, they find themselves on a journey toward wholeness. The end of the bridge—the final edge—opens to new terrain. The participants meet the possibilities of that space with creativity and improvisation. Thus begins the crossing.

Looking Back

It is 2021. The university has resumed in-person instruction. Campus leaders are celebrating the return to normalcy, but the half-filled parking lots and empty lounges betray their optimism. The campus is, indeed, livelier than it has been since the early days of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered the university. Nevertheless, the isolation brought on by the pandemic is still palpable. Masks obscure faces, desks stand as far apart as classrooms allow, and

plexiglass barriers shield desks and cash registers. The deep desire to connect with others is dampened by fears of infection from variants of a virus that has already claimed over four million lives worldwide.

Few emerged from the pandemic unaffected. Whether carrying grief, anger, loneliness, chronic illness, or newfound sources of worry, most people are—to varying degrees—changed. The grief is punctuated by a parallel narrative of Black people killed at the hands of police. George Floyd’s brutal killing dominated headlines. The footage of his death is so horrifying and raw and gut wrenchingly sad as he calls for his mother that it has sparked nationwide protests.

When I remember these times, I think about the image of the Golden Gate Bridge ensconced in fog. Observing the scene from a distance, the bridge and the water are indistinguishable, save for the tops of the towers and the suspension cables that arch downward into the brume. From the ground, travelers have a myopic view. The vertical suspensions and towers are a blur and beyond them the world is formless. With little sense of what’s in front or behind or how far they have traveled, drivers slow to a crawl. They rely on the lights of their fellow travelers to distinguish the road. In the heart pounding moments when the fog consumes the bridge, it’s helpful to understand that it will dissipate. Clarity will return.

The fog was thick during the fall of 2021. We responded by slowing down and lighting the way for one another. To do otherwise would have felt unsafe and utterly disorienting. Learning how to navigate the fog during times like these may inform how we respond next time the fog returns, as we know from history, it certainly will.

Searching for Roots

It is a peculiar time to have hope, and especially, to imagine a world that affirms and supports Black men. Nevertheless, Scholars Studio faculty continue to envision empowering and

affirmative spaces for Black boys and men. This *hope*, as Grande (2004) defines it, “is not the future-centered hope of the Western imagination, but rather, a hope that lives in contingency with the past—one that trusts the beliefs and understandings of [the] ancestors as well as the power of traditional knowledge” (p. 28). It is a hope that believes in the power of community and education, and one that seeks to dismantle the long history of what Carter G. Woodson termed *miseducation*. In his seminal book, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Woodson (2009) writes:

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his 'proper place' and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (p. 4)

Woodson believes that everyone in society “should be given unlimited opportunity to make the most of himself” (p. 3). He calls for “a new program of uplift,” based on understanding the lives of Black Americans “and what the environment requires... The mere imparting of information,” he argues, “is not education” (p. 3). An antidote to miseducation, Woodson asserts, is connecting with history. Though many of the Scholars Studio participants were raised in predominantly Black counties or cities, their schools did not center Black history. Pierre describes his education accordingly:

[In school] we didn't really talk about any Black figures other than the main ones in history. It's more Black figures than Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. But we just talked about the same people. You don't really talk about more things that happened in history. It's really not even in the history book. So, it's like I can't even have that conversation. They put that big picture [of Martin Luther King, Jr.] on half the page, [and write] two paragraphs.

Striking in Pierre's reflection is the idea that when the history of an entire group of people is absent from the curriculum, you “can't even have that conversation.” People who might shed light on the fuller humanity of the nation are missing from the discussion. The textbook authors have so little to say, in fact, that they fill most of the page with an image of Martin Luther King,

Jr. or Malcolm X in the way that a student who is trying to meet the page requirements of an assignment might increase the font size or stretch the margins. Adding too many details might complicate the historical narrative or open space for questions, or perhaps, as Pierre observes, the long history of *miseducation* in the United States leaves them with little to say about matters that fall outside state sanctioned curricula.

Shadows and Light

Damien observes that his school's curriculum was narrowly focused on the negative aspects of the Black experience, from slavery and lynching to Jim Crow. The curriculum didn't offer insights into the Black trailblazers, inventors, and leaders who shaped the United States:

In Scholars Studio the depth is different... We don't learn about African American history in depth [k-12] and you know, more so [we don't learn about] the positive side anyway. I feel like in school you kind of just learn repetition every year like it's just a repeat of what you learned previously, maybe a little bit something new but it's ... never like focused on positive.

Jasmine adds, "In [my] county you don't talk about [African American History]. It's really the basic stuff. So I'm coming here with open eyes. I like to come to class. It's crazy saying that out loud." A complex picture of what it means to be educated in a system that does not prioritize the study of African American history emerges. The Black history that is covered in school fails to present people in their full humanity. Damien describes the flat representation as lacking *depth*. It is as if he had been offered shadows and told they were *the* history of Black people in the United States, and every year during Black History Month, he is shown the same shadows.

It is not wrong to offer perspectives on the "shadows" in history. Educated people should understand all aspects of our nation's history, including its legacy of slavery and segregation, but they should also understand that Black people's contributions extend far beyond the struggle to end injustice. Shadows offer a flat representation of people who have many dimensions. It is

hard to see expression in shadows. It's difficult to connect with the depth of the human experience or discern uniqueness and power. Sometimes the shadows are exaggerated, as they would be in late afternoon sun with thin, long legs. Sometimes they are short, squat, and distorted. They reveal a lot about this country and the people who shaped it, but they do not show the full view. They show contrast, but they don't show color, and when the light passes over them, they retreat. There's much more to African American history than shadows. In fact, shadows couldn't exist without their referent, the body that cast them. It's important to have glimpses of the bodies, complex lives, and thoughts of the people who form the shadow. That said, embracing complexity doesn't negate the importance of the shadow. Shadows are part of the human experience. They join us each day as the sun makes its journey across the sky. To eliminate them would suggest that there was no mass, no body claiming space. It would be another form of objectification. The shadow is, Abram (2011) insists, "a bounded space and time wherein the mountain is free to spread out of itself, making itself felt in all its unadorned frankness" (p. 21). When education focuses on the fullness of people's lives—the shadows and the light and all the variants in between—it holds the depth and immensity of the mountain. In other words, for learning to be *deep*, it must capture complexity.

Buried Roots

In the absence of depth, students are left with a vacuous understanding of history and an incomplete understanding of themselves and the world. They are misinformed about events or people who shape history, and in turn, are not taught that systems are culturally constructed and value laden. The systemic absence of culturally grounded curricula also points toward the experience of invisibility. Stapleton (2016), who studies Black, deaf college students' experiences with the hidden curriculum, uses her findings to develop a counternarrative that

marginalizes White, hearing students.⁶ The narrative is presented as a script of a conversation that unfolds in a fictitious support group. VOice, a Latino, hearing student expresses his concern about his treatment by a teacher who is a member of the privileged group:

Yeah... I got an issue... I have a teacher who just ignores me half the time. I don't know if it's because I'm White or hearing or both, but I have to wave really big in the air for him to call on me. (p. 158)

One might ask what it means to be educated in a system that renders a swath of the population silent. What does it mean to dwell in a space where the inhabitants do not see you or do not have a shared language for your experiences? VOice experiences this phenomenon as invisibility. Schools create conditions for invisibility when they teach history through a narrow lens. Pierre observes:

You're learning from somebody else's culture. You're not even really learning from your own culture... Marcus Garvey⁷ said... something along the lines of, someone without their culture, or without the knowledge of their own culture is a tree without roots. So you're learning from somebody else's culture. Your tree is not really growing.

The tree offers an apt metaphor for curriculum oriented toward *thinking the world together*.

Trees make important ecological contributions, but without roots, they cannot grow or participate in the exchange of oxygen. Kimmerer (2013) suggests that the utility of roots extends far beyond

⁶Stapleton (2016) describes her process of summarizing her research findings accordingly:

The findings of this study were written as a composite counternarrative or a story that is a blend of marginalized people's lives, symbolism, and various data sources (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In collaboration with the participants, an inverted counternarrative was written and vetted by all the participants for accuracy. To invert the narrative means the composite was created to center, normalize, and privilege Bd/Deaf people and place hearing White people within the margins. The goal is never to privilege White and hearing perspectives, so the participants' voices are bracketed throughout the composite as a gentle reminder of the reality of the story being told. (p. 155)

⁷ This quote is often misattributed to Marcus Garvey. Historical records suggest that Charles C. Seifert (1938), with whom Garvey was in close contact, authored this quote in *The Negro's or Ethiopian's Contribution to Art*. The original text reads, "If the tree was cut off at the trunk and was transplanted into a new sphere, it might help us if we rediscover the trunk and follow the roots" (p. 13).

the basic survival functions of keeping trees upright or supplying them with nutrients. They connect with other trees, using fungi as bridges:

The mycorrhizal symbiosis enables the fungi to forage for mineral nutrients in the soil and deliver them to the tree in exchange for carbohydrates... These fungal networks appear to redistribute the wealth of carbohydrates from tree to tree. A kind of Robin Hood, they take from the rich and give to the poor so that all the trees arrive at the same carbon surplus at the same time. They weave a web of reciprocity, of giving and taking. In this way, the trees all act as one because the fungi have connected them. Through unity, survival. All flourishing is mutual. (p. 20)

Scientists think that this system of mutuality may explain why trees that grow not only within the same patch but across entire bioregions produce fruit at the same time, despite varying environmental conditions. The tree growing in the shade produces fruit at the same time as the tree growing under optimal conditions (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 20). Roots are nature's bridge. They facilitate the movement of nutrients and water from the earth to all the trees in the system. They sustain not only the individual tree, but entire swaths of trees, and by extension, all the animals, plants, and other organisms within the ecosystem. The metaphoric roots of the ancestors are, likewise, points of connection and sustenance for not only individuals, but also the entire community that benefits when individual members feel whole.

Without connection to their roots, students often receive subtle messages about their worth and potential. Their authenticity and uniqueness—which is a product of their rich culture and experiences—is not honored. Instead, unfamiliar ways of knowing and relating to the world are held up as ideal. Dea, a Black, hearing student experiences the disconnect as thus:

I didn't grow up signing, so when I do class presentations, my words don't always come out as clear. I have a hard time transferring my written thoughts into signed thoughts. I get up in front of people and I freeze. I get my grade back with comments, and I don't necessarily know how to fix it. I'm told to go to the Presentation Practice Center.... I love school, but I hate assignments. I just wish I could show the teacher what I know in a different way, like writing a paper or speaking my presentation with an interpreter. I'm not dumb, but my mind just works differently than Deaf students. (p. 158)

Dea is judged through the lens of someone who does not understand her experience or see her strengths. In this respect, she is not truly *seen*. These reflections highlight a bind insofar as the students struggle to be seen, but once the attention is focused on them, they find themselves in the position of navigating unfamiliar and unfriendly terrain. The experience of being assessed under these conditions might be akin to an athlete training for a marathon in the tropics and then testing their distance running ability with snowshoes in the Arctic. Although they may have the strength, cardiovascular capacity, and fortitude to run well, it's likely that their ability would not shine as they adjusted to the colder, dryer climate and cumbersome gear that's required to survive harsh conditions in the North. Advising the runner to train harder in the wake of a disappointing finish would miss the point entirely.

Tending the Circle

What would it mean to create an education experience that works for all students?

Professor Orion poses this question, acknowledging that faculty are typically tasked with figuring out what works best for most students. He explains:

If we miss out on 30-35% [of the students] that's just the game, and that's just how it is. You can't get everybody. Our challenge [in Scholars Studio] is, *no let's not even look at it as percentages, let's really look at it from a holistic point of view, like how can we tend to the circle and to make sure that all parts are at least being attended to?* I challenge myself to understand what works for my students... I have students who need to hear it from another student.

Circles offer a strong visual for holistic education. They are found in the arch of the bridge and completed by the reflection in the water. As they rise up, they must look back to be whole. And, just as they rely on the skillful hand of the builder and the strength of the stone that shapes them, to be complete, they must also surrender to the suppleness and unpredictability of the water beneath them. Circles are forward movement and reflection, strength and surrender.

Circles have played significant roles in indigenous thought-systems. They are associated with the movement of the sun and planets, as well as lunar, tidal, and other cycles. They also have archetypal significance as a symbol of gathering and wholeness. Levin (1985) offers:

The circle demonstrates the fact that processes of reflection, and enquiry in general, can have no absolute beginning. The circle reminds us therefore, that all our understandings are preceded by a field of pre-understandings whose origins will forever elude our grasp: the circle reminds us to listen to our sense of how things are for us...it reminds us to listen to our body of felt sense, as the surest route to a deeper, more articulate understanding. And the circle shows us that no matter how far we journey, we must always come back to ourselves. We may reach out, for example, to understand another culture, but we cannot, in the end, risk forgetting ourselves in the place of difference where we are standing. (pp. 163-164)

Levin (1985) suggests that although the circle is a *whole* it is *not totalizing* (p. 164). There is nothing in the center of the circle: “There is only absence...No origin. No goal... And yet, it is equally clear, equally legible from the comportment, that nothing is there to be grasped, nothing to be posited, nothing to be possessed, nothing reached” (p. 165). There are no binaries in the circle, no hierarchies, no subject-object relationships; the circle is a space of deepening and being that doesn’t require those who give it shape to reach a certain goal (p. 165).

Within a plane, all points in a circle are equidistant from the center. No points along the circumference bear more weight. Baskin (2007), a First Nations scholar, incorporates spirituality in her pedagogy. Sitting in circles communicates how to regard each person within the space.

She offers:

This is a living example of how “the strength of our diversity is that each of us brings some contribution to the table. When we begin to think in circles rather than in hierarchies...we all gain from the knowledge sharing” (Dei, 2002, p. 6). It is during these moments when I know I am living my spiritual name, which translates as something like “The Woman Who Passes On The Teachings.” (p. 198)

These are some of the reasons that we sit in circles in Scholars Studio. The circle is a democratizing shape. No one can hide in a circle and no single position is given greater importance.

What, then, does it mean to tend to the circle? I imagine all members of Scholars Studio positioned in a circle. Perhaps Pierre is standing too far from Professor Orion to be reached, but if Jasmine is beside Pierre, she can reach him. Sometimes we reach people through others. If we all stand in a circle, we are within reach of someone else. In this respect, we allow others in the community to be an extension of ourselves. In a circle, the power can be spread to generate different sources of energy. The circle teaches us to regard one another differently—not as subjects to be acted upon, but rather as beings with depth and value from whom we can all learn.

The Black Men in Education Studio instituted restorative circles in the fall of 2021. The transition back to in-person instruction had presented challenges. Student attendance and assignment submission rates were subpar, and by midterms, faculty were feeling discouraged. Rather than succumbing to cynicism, the faculty canceled class and called the students into the Library Special Collections Room. Here is a glimpse at the opening of the Circle process:

Chairs form a circle. Students enter the space in waves, filling the seats. When the last chair is occupied, the drumming begins—gently at first, skin to leather, *gu go do go do. Go do go do go. DO GO DO GO DO*. The breath meets the rhythm, *DO GO DO GO PA*. Inhale. Exhale. A beating heart. Breath. In. Out. Heartbeat. *DO GO PA*. Silence.

Stillness settles in. Dr. Carter moves to the center, grabbing a vessel to pour libations. He calls the names of ancestors and invites the students to do the same.

Margaret Walker. *Ashé* everyone repeats. Wisdom Carter. *Ashé*. Harriet Tubman. *Ashé*. Benny Pierce. *Ashé*. Walter Vernes. *Ashé*. Ella Carter. *Ashé*.

For a few moments, the room is still. Professor Ahmed breaks the silence with a gentle tap of his gong—he taps it twice more before dragging the mallet across the instrument. This is felt sound.

It meets the body in waves, resonating with the heart and breath, and grasping the attention of everyone within its reach. Damien recalls:

We were talking about it today, and I said that it was weird, but it was weird in a good way. Because it was like an out of body experience in a way. It's almost like my mind was somewhere else. But almost like it was peaceful. It was like, you were letting go. And it's like, I feel like at the same time what Professor Ahmed was doing, if he kept doing that, and I was in my bed I would have went to sleep, but I would have had a good dream. It was soothing and relaxing. It felt peaceful. It was like letting go, like you just went deep into your mind.

This is the first time that many of the students have participated in a mindful or contemplative practice outside of religious worship. They find it helpful and compelling yet struggle to articulate their feelings: it is a good *weird*. Some of the students' discomfort arises from the novelty of the experience and some of it to the vulnerability inherent in the process. After the drumming and gong meditation, space is held to acknowledge family and friends who were lost during the pandemic. Darius shares:

I feel like it was needed. I feel like everybody has their own baggage and things that they think about but don't bring to the surface. And I feel like little things like that are helpful because everybody's not gonna talk about their issues or their situations because they'd rather bury it, but when it's brought to the surface and you're not really forced to bring it up, but like, almost forced to think about it because when somebody says to think about something, even if you try not to think about it, you're gonna think about it. And it helps, you know, kind of like, be content with it.

Although students acknowledge that the Circle places them outside their comfort zones, and requires them to engage in unfamiliar ways, it is, ultimately meaningful. It creates a rupture that forces them to show up differently. In fact, despite the solemnity of the experience, it is a form of *play*. Boundaries are created through the structure of the circle, the ceremonial instruments, and facilitators who maintain the sanctity of the space. Creating a container gives participants permission to place aside self-consciousness and step fully into the practice. Many students experience the Circle as an opportunity to role play. Darius is not accustomed to sharing his

feelings. He oscillates between being “almost forced” and “not really forced” to share—landing, perhaps, on a middle ground where he feels a healthy pressure to step into the ceremonial role that the Circle requires. Students aren’t expected to continue using the practices introduced in the Circle, but for some, like a good game, it hooks them. Brent adds:

I feel like the meditation that we did on Tuesday should be continuous. That should be maybe even like daily check-ins... That will definitely be something that I will continue throughout my whole entire year just because of the foundation that we already built together, just to be continuous and to check in with each other... Even after the meditation and like we rose our head back up, everybody was sharing you know? We kind of had like that, like that family moment. So, definitely, I felt like that should be incorporated even if it's like, once every semester or just like a check-in. I feel like check-ins are important.

Circles are also a tool that can be used to affirm inter-generational solidarity. During a cross-generational conversation, Dr. Carter remarks:

I remember when you felt like your age and who you were had an advantage for you to connect with students. Now I'm looking at myself, like, I'm an old head trying to figure out what do I need to do to get this young brother to know that I'm committed to him and what he wants, but I'm gonna go about it differently because I ain't quite on your level. Like, I'm not... I don't understand how you do certain things in your generation.

There is a vulnerable quality to Dr. Carter’s statement as he shifts from second person to first person in reference to himself and third person to second person as he addresses the students—a grammatical movement from distance to intimacy.

Feelings of disconnection can be exacerbated in Scholars Studio where *walking with* students is central to the process, but what if the generational disconnection is, in fact, an opening to deeper, more meaningful engagement? As the generational divide between faculty and students widens, faculty may find it necessary to reconfigure relationships with their students. Early in their teaching career, referencing pop culture or social media trends may have signified relevance and offered points of connection, but with age and changing priorities, those

links become more tenuous. Faculty who sense they are slipping into a fog of irrelevance may find comfort and wisdom in observing the strength of intergenerational relationships. Though decades stand between grandparents and grandchildren, for example, they often develop meaningful connections—not as friends who have shared experiences and upbringings—but as kin bonded through love whose perspectives and presence help one another live more meaningful lives.

On the Way to Wisdom

Faculty who have awoken to the reality that they no longer connect in the ways that they used to, may welcome that as an opportunity to engage their students and their scholarship more deeply. Professor Orion offers:

So true [echoing Dr. Carter's observation about aging]. It used to be an advantage. Where I can just talk about some stuff. You know exactly what I'm talking about, like the cultural references. And, everybody knew what I was talking about. Now, I might say a name or somebody who was the hot stuff when I was your age. You know what I mean? Maybe one or two people in the room knows who I'm talking about. But what that did was for me was it taught me that I'm also a bridge you know, like, I also carry a responsibility of using what I have learned and experienced to bridge the things that they've learned and experienced.

The time that separates faculty from their students was also time that shaped them and, possibly, moved them toward self-actualization. It was time that imbued them with a sense of authority that doesn't stem from a need to control or manipulate other people's behaviors, but rather grows out of wisdom and heightened consciousness. The growth and insight that have shaped them become a bridge. Professor Orion has come to understand that one way of connecting with students is to introduce them to the narratives that excited him as a college student. He shares his favorites:

Toussant Louverture and Jean Jacques Desallines. They were two leaders in the Haitian Revolution. When we study their lives, they come from two totally different

backgrounds. One was the son of a warrior, and the other one was basically royalty from an African point of view. And to see how they collaborated for that movement was it was amazing to see manifest, and it was just it just a reminder that no matter what battle you fight as long as you fight for your own terms, you have a chance, no matter how great the opponent.

Dr. Carter offers:

Marcus Garvey led the largest Black movement for Black people around the globe. We all have similar issues, and we should all be working together for those issues. And I think that's why Marcus Garvey is so prominent to me. So like, some of you got the opportunity to prepare to teach for the Black male teacher scholars program that we do on Saturday. And one of the things that we're doing this Saturday is we're talking about legacy. And we all went around talking about our own types of legacies that we wanted to leave. you know, for me, I think, the legacy that I want to be left when someone thinks about me, one of them is that what do you do for Black people? And when folks think about me, I want them to be thinking that the thing that comes to mind is that he spent his life doing something meaningful for Black people like Marcus Garvey.

Professor Orion and Dr. Carter use narratives from Black history to frame their personal philosophies and in so doing present history not as a collection of inert artifacts but rather as something that lives through them and, in turn, creates pathways for transformation. A similar process was undertaken during the period of decolonization in Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere in Africa where “narratives of return” were used to “restore African dignity” and return traditional values to political structures (Robinson-Morris, 2019, p. 32). Striking in this example, is the power of the elders who held and passed on traditional knowledge in the face of systemic miseducation. Their memories bridged

Circles serve a similar purpose in the West. They fill the immediate needs of community building and restoration while offering participants the opportunity to experience the thought structures and modes of being that were passed on through their ancestors. Participants may feel the difference of an African-centered space—as drum beats fill the room and time unfolds intentionally. The felt sense may awaken something inside of them as it did for Damien: “I felt

like they cared about me. I wanted to do better” or with Orlando who felt free to “talk about everything I had inside.”

Translation

One must be wary of romanticizing histories and cultures when invoking indigenous traditions. Doing so risks slipping into oversimplification and cliches. The Circle in a Western education space, like Scholars Studio’s, can be considered an act of translation. Aoki (1995/2005) suggests:

What is needed...is a disruption, a displacement that relocates us away from the space of demographic plurality inscribed in diversity to a borderline space that permits “negotiations of cultural translation.” Such repositioning is a movement away from the imaginary of community as diversity to the imaginary of community as difference, to an enunciatory space of language in movement, a space of signifying activity, a space of interlanguage translation. (p. 308)

The “enunciatory space of difference” in Scholars Studio represents an assemblage of different cultures, histories, philosophies, disciplinary lineages, nationalities, generations, and languages. When the Circle process and the associated language is translated in this space, it is not possible to generate a precise equivalent of the referent, given differences in cultural and ontological structures. The resulting translation maintains aspects of both the original and translated text and is neither wholly one nor the other (Aoki, 1995/2005, p. 310). The third space that is created through this process allows participants to maintain their own unique identities and cultures as they draw on different systems of thought. This is a generative process that opens new possibilities. Professor Orion offers an example of how history is translated across generations:

I think the longer that a person is remembered, the more different outlooks on who they were as a person comes to fruition. People are using the life of Marcus Garvey now way differently than they used it in the 80s and 70s. Now, you see people really take the infrastructure and the ideologies of Garvey and use it to create corporations in the modern day, you know, like whereas before it was just a call to organize and unify and things like that.

Translated space holds potential for transformation, in part, because the ontological structures that form the referent disrupt taken-for-granted modes of operation. There is a risk of stripping language and practices of their power by decontextualizing them. In fact, the West's use of restorative justice circles can easily slip into this realm. In an introductory text on the use of restorative justice, Zehr (2014) writes, "Since the 1970s, a variety of programs and approaches have emerged in thousands of communities and many countries across the world" (p. 8), ignoring the fact that indigenous cultures across the globe have been practicing talking circles for millennia. The cultural and spiritual dimensions of the process communicate and carry the structures that disrupt normalized interactions, providing an embodied experience that helps practitioners assume a new way of being with the world. When facilitators fail to acknowledge the rich cultures and histories from whence the practices emerged, they assume an appropriative relationship with the process that, in turn, perpetuates the structures restorative justice is meant to resolve.

They also miss opportunities to form solidarities with the people who carry traditional knowledge and who are disproportionately impacted by mass incarceration. Judicial proceedings or school disciplinary processes that are carried out from an appropriative standpoint, may fail to yield the desired transformative effect, especially if there is no acknowledgment of how structural inequality creates both victims and perpetrators and that perpetrators are often enacting their own traumas and were, at one point, victims themselves. Without this acknowledgement, these cycles are likely to repeat (C. Adams, personal communication, 2019).

Desmond Tutu wrote, “Ubuntu⁸ is Africa’s gift to the world” (as cited in Robinson-Morris, 2019). Indeed, as the United States continues to grapple with systemic inequality and racism, environmental destruction, political divisions, and much more, students would benefit from an education that embraces African and African American narratives, histories, and wisdom. Curriculum that includes these perspectives not only offers a more accurate view of the world, but also provides tools for repairing harm and transforming communities.

One only needs to think about the purpose of bridges (or bridging) to understand that a bridge is not a discrete structure that exists independent of the environment. In fact, if observers were to climb into a helicopter waiting on the banks of San Francisco Bay and watch the Golden Gate Bridge shrink as the aircraft lifted, they might begin to wonder where the bridge begins and ends. Is it with the bridge’s visible structures? Does it begin at the outermost tip of the rocks that would have otherwise marked the edge of the land? Does it begin with the signs alerting drivers to the approach of the bridge? Is it a continuation of Highway 101, which stretches from Los Angeles, California to Tumwater, Washington with the help of the bridge? Did it begin in the imagination of the engineers and builders who first mapped out plans and laid concrete nearly a century ago?

Given the ambiguous nature of starting and ending points, it might be helpful to think about the location where objects come into presence as *edges*. Casey (2017) notes:

Edges have a curious way of always giving out, coming to naught, ending, or about to end. Consider how the edge of the table on which I am writing belongs securely to the

⁸Notions of Ubuntu are found all over the African continent, and while there is not a single agreed upon definition, *Ubuntu* is often described using the Zulu/Xhosa understanding of “humanness, personhood, or morality.” Robinson-Morris suggests (2019), “Given Ubuntu’s lack of true definition, Mbiti’s (1971) phrase: ‘I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am’ is often utilized as the closest English translation of the Afro-cultural significance of the term” (p. 24).

physical object of which it is the edge, being its edge and not the edge of anything else. Yet in this very capacity, it designates the exact place where the table itself is ending, coming to lack material presence. Past its edge, the table does not exist and is nowhere to be found. Is the table's edge something physical, thus thing-like, or is it nothing, or is it in an indeterminate middle state that signifies the process of becoming nothing? (p. xvii)

There is much to unpack here. Casey asks a number of questions about edges without offering definitive answers. His questions point to an important aspect of edges: they are at once locations of possibility and risk—openings and closings. The bridge simultaneously alters the edge of the rocks on San Francisco Bay and creates new edges as it stretches across the water. What once was the edge of the land is now an opening to more land and wider travel.

The opening creates new edges along the span of the bridge. Pedestrians may look over the edges of the railings and simultaneously feel overwhelmed by the danger below and a sense of wonder as two cityscapes open at an angle only accessible from the bridge. They may experience the paradox of uncertainty and awe—quivering fear along with the opening of possibilities. Here, they are confronted with the challenges of edges: not knowing if they are on solid ground or if the earth is about to break beneath them.

Learning on the Edge

Bridges are constructed at the edge of the land and create new edges as they stretch across the water. These edges are at once dangerous and breathtaking as they open new vistas. Metaphorically speaking, edges are defining spaces in a learning environment. They may signal transition as students move from high school to college or as they advance to different stages in their disciplinary studies. They may be decision-points when students make choices about their degree paths or the amount of effort they are willing to invest in themselves or their work. They may be spaces where they redefine themselves. Or they may be the specific edge that The Black Men in Education community addresses: the edge that forms at the intersection of race and gender. Professor Orion describes this edge:

It's a battle. It's a war outside. It might not be physical. It might be indirect, and it's institutional, but make no mistake about it, we are fighting every day to maintain our identity and do what we love at the same time. We've got to protect our identity and do what we love.

Casey (2017) asserts that life, itself, is an edge. Whether receiving news about a friend who was involved in an accident or looking on anxiously as an athlete performs a daring feat, we are often reminded of the fragility of our bodies. Nowhere are bodily edges more troublingly present than in war: "The ethical imperative not to kill other human beings is countermanded by the temptation on the part of the attacking forces to annihilate everyone in the path of a given military operation" (p. 343). Referencing Judith Butler, Casey explains that modern wars double down on destruction by erasing the faces of those who fell and stifling loved ones' ability to mourn (p. 343). "War enacts the edge of precarity itself—a precarious perimeter where the edge of life itself is at stake: life that is all too soon forgotten in the confusion and devastation wrought by war" (p. 343).

Beyond the obvious forces of "war"—violence meted out by police, healthcare disparities, or the criminal justice system, which has created what Michelle Alexander refers to as "The New Jim Crow," there exists an erasure of identity—what some have called *invisibility*. In Ralph Ellison's (2019) novel, *The Invisible Man*, the main character, who is known only as the Invisible Man, remarks:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me. (p. 3)

The Invisible Man is not regarded as fully human. Others see him through their own projections, and consequently, he exists in a world that feels unreal. At times, *Black Men in Education*

participants contend with being seen through the nearsighted gaze of others. Dr. King describes an interaction with a racist administrator:

Just recently I was at a school with a dean, and he provided this joke... I'm a Black man with a PhD. He provided a joke and used the word n***** in the joke and he thought it was funny. I just looked at him, and I said, "Really?" I said, No, I can't be here too much longer... Because someone polished me, taught me how to deal with that type of mentality, held me accountable, said *hey, here's how you work through that scenario and walk away with dignity and pride, saying I'm not who you think I am*. That's all part of who you are, what's going to be expected of you as a Black man. You're not always going to be in a comfortable scenario. Everything's not going to be warm and fuzzy.

In this situation, Dr. King is "seen" through the White gaze. To open the phenomenon, I turn to a story that Cornell West tells about being pulled over by the police on his way to work. When he was stopped, the officer said he was the "N***** we been looking for" (Yancy, 2020, para. 5).

West protests:

He told the police officer that he taught "philosophy and religion at Williams." The police officer replied, "And I'm the flying Nun." Within this context, West's racialized embodied "culpability" is deemed "self-evident." Furthermore, the first-person account that West provides to the white police officer—that he teaches philosophy and religion at Williams—is belied by the violence of the white police officer's white gaze, which, as stated, is part of a larger historical accretion of white semiotic, material, and institutional power and hegemony. As Fanon writes, "No exception was made for my refined manners, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of the quantum theory." (Yancy, 2020, para. 5)

For Dr. King and West, it didn't matter how "respectable" or accomplished they were. The racist White gaze could not perceive their humanness, let alone their accomplishments. The logic of the dean and police is so convoluted and detached from reality that it's beyond reason.

What does it mean to be invisible—to live at an edge so precarious that there is a risk of never being known? The faculty in the Black Men in Education community refuse to succumb to invisibility—not by convincing people who cannot see them that they have value but by affirming it for themselves and claiming space. One of the challenges inherent in addressing this *edge* is that the faculty are working within a system that has perpetuated the "war." As Dr. Carter

thinks about his pedagogy and scholarship, he also thinks about how to dismantle the structures that have harmed his community—the carnival tricks that were used to obscure reality. He explains:

I'm thinking about how do we destroy those things? Those things are what led to the deficit and the negative stuff that destroy our community. People used research to justify how they did our communities... They used all of the mechanisms that we are taught to use to destroy our community. There are a lot of layers to what we have to deal with. I think it goes back to the forces. There are so many forces, and I think we have to question everything that we were taught to use to improve our situation.

The faculty interpret education through a wide lens— observing the patterns and structures undergirding their experiences. Students take a closer view by naming the effects of being educated in a system that doesn't affirm their identity. Ranging from mental health and academic challenges to feeling like no one cares, the impact is undeniable. Bowale observes:

Sometimes I feel like some may not know how much brokenness you're dealing with on the first day of school, like sitting in a room full of kids. And I don't know if this is just me becoming more conscious about stuff, but mental health is so important.

Bowale's reflection brings to mind earlier discussions about curricula that “break down” knowledge into the basics. Jardine (2008) describes this process as “involv[ing] ideas of breaking things down, fragmentation, isolation, and the consequent dispensing, manipulation, and control of the simplest, most meaningful bits and pieces of the living inheritances that are entrusted to teachers and learners in schools” (p. xi). The decision to frame education in this way points to what schools regard as important and “what will count in the lives of students and teachers” (Jardine, 2008, p. xi). Wholeness and healing are the antithesis of this structure. It is no surprise that students come out feeling broken.

When students are viewed as broken, they are often seen as disposable or in need of repair, rather than worthy, self-determined human beings with limitless potential. The word “potential,” which speaks to an individual's capacity for growth, derives from the Latin *potentia*

and translates to “power, might, force” (Etymonline, n.d.). To recognize potential in a person is to see their power. Surveys, interviews, and personal communications gathered over the past decade in Scholars Studio have indicated that the students we serve often feel powerless and struggle with low levels of self-confidence. Feelings of confidence are rooted in power. In fact, the word confidence comes from the Latin word *confidentia*, meaning “firmly trusting, bold” (Etymonline, n.d.), qualities that are associated with *power*. Recognizing and affirming students’ power is a means of walking with them to help them find power in themselves.

Speaking for Lamonte, who left college a few weeks into the semester, Issaiah adds, “Lamonte is an intelligent person. He just doesn't have no one around him to tell him that he is.” Many of the students stress the importance of having someone who believes in their gifts. Bowale did not receive positive affirmations in high school and believed that meant he was incapable of academic success. He explains:

I never got a good grade on a writing assignment in my whole high school career. [Now I realize] all of the barriers and obstacles I have [in college] are just from the past... And some is more about determination... Everybody that's not here right now probably thought today was gonna be harder than it was. When you get in the room that's when you realize it's not as hard as it may be. But it's just getting that motivation to get through the door. And sometimes the demotivation is what has happened in the past, what's happening at home, and that's why I think it's so important for teachers to try to have a relationship or try to see what's going on because it's not always the kid isn't smart. It's not always the kid can't be attentive.

Students often realize that they experience setbacks because they aren't making the required investments in themselves or their education. Bowale recognizes that some of his struggles are related to his mindset. Darius adds:

I feel like we're trying to get it, we're trying to understand, but we just can't because we're not putting the effort in so once we don't put the effort in and we were scared, because we know we're going to feel as though we're not going to succeed. So then we stop coming to class. And doing everything else and then we start getting belittled. Then everything falls apart.

Darius suggests that he limits himself because he is afraid that he won't be successful.

Recognizing that he has not been putting adequate effort into his work, he doesn't want to face his professors and makes the decision to skip class, thus perpetuating the cycle. Whereas, Darius was afraid to have others see his shortcomings, Issaiah, who had previously attended another university, shares that no one at his first institution took an interest in him: "I truly can say that school did not... they just more so wanted my money. If I came to class, I came to class. If I didn't, I didn't." It was important for Issaiah to feel like he mattered.

Students often feel conflicted between transactional and transformational engagement. Many of them are accustomed to engaging transactionally insofar as they have learned to check boxes by completing and turning in assignments with little regard for quality. They have not yet developed a relationship with their work that lends itself to self-development, self-actualization or growth. In other words, they do not engage in their studies from a position of power. Rather, they complete tasks to satisfy other people's demands. Bowale struggles to find the balance between turning in work on time and engaging in his studies with a growth mindset:

When it's crunch time and every class has a final and an essay to do, I can't even think about how I'm a better person... I don't want to think about it. I just want to get this work in on time. That's where my stress sometimes comes from because I just need that time to think. Freedom is having time to think.

Bowale brings up interesting questions about time and workload. When faculty make decisions about what and how much to assign, they often have to strike a balance between depth and breadth. It's not a simple equation because students' time management skills determine their ability to make the balance. Bowale is in a unique position because he is a signed musician who is putting significant effort into performing and recording. He tends to the quality of his artform and feels a great deal of dissonance between the response he receives from his class work and his career.

Other students, including Jasmine, emphasize the importance of belonging. She explains, “At first I was like you’re going to be the outcasts [in Scholars Studio]. It’s just going to be me and her by ourselves because when boys are together it’s just boys, you know?” Jasmine ultimately found belonging in the community, but her anxieties about her place in the space made her hesitant to engage in the beginning.

In this section, I’ve highlighted edges that are perceived as negative, and which often serve as catalysts for change, but there are edges in Scholars Studio that present both students and faculty the opportunity to grow and transform. These edges are marked by vulnerability and discussed in the sections that follow. In the way that standing at the bridge’s edge may elicit a combination of excitement and fear, so do the edges in learning spaces.

Thinking the World Whole

Within the context of Scholars Studio, one might ask, what happens when Scholars Studio participants find themselves at an edge, whether grappling with miseducation, uncertainty, invisibility, or a feeling of irrelevance?

Fractals and the Art of Thinking the World Whole

Grande (2004) who is Native American and exploring questions about miseducation, visibility, and relevance shares a memory that shapes her thinking:

Weaving its way throughout this experience, like a small but earnest mountain stream, is the memory and soul of my grandmother. All that she and her ancient culture represent are, lovingly but relentlessly, embodied within me. Inside I feel her dark weathered skin, her waist-long, horse-tail-thick, salt-and-pepper braid, the fresh combed feel of hand-woven fabric, and think of how these textures resemble me. Through them I feel connected to the immense journey of all our souls as children of this earth. I remember and still sense her smell. I wonder, is it the collective scent of a lost time, a lost culture, a lost people, and, therefore, an aroma of death? Or is it a smell of becoming-ness, of the eternity of all beings and, therefore, the scent of life? This dual consciousness of ancient and modern, tradition and innovation has both plagued and enriched my existence. (p. 159)

The memories of her grandmother represent more than an individual, albeit meaningful, relationship. Like a fractal, they reflect the larger reality of her people and culture, bringing to bear the reality of what it means to be beautifully alive amidst loss. Brown (2017) notes, in fractals “There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale” (p. 40). By honoring her ancestors and culture, and tuning into the complexity and richness that emerge, Grande is laying a foundation for education that is transformational and empowering, which stands in sharp contrast with the miseducation she and so many others received.

As faculty help students identify miseducation, they reflect more deeply on their own miseducation and how it shows up in pedagogical practice. Some of the pedagogical edges that faculty navigate bring these responses to the surface. This semester, faculty are particularly challenged by higher-than-normal levels of post-pandemic disengagement. They are presented with the decision to respond by using punitive measures or taking a different path. Dr. Carter reflects:

Most of what people talk about Black boys and Black men is from a deficit perspective, something is wrong with them, and it's punitive. So for me, this community has allowed me to question my own punitive upbringing. I mean, I got whoopings coming up. And usually when somebody does something wrong, the first thing is, it should be a penalty, there should be something punitive. So like for me, I've been rethinking sort of like what Bowale was saying, like, I don't know what all of our students have been through, but I do know the conditions of education in general. And I noted, it hasn't been really good to Black children... And so, like for all of you, it has really allowed me to think through like, what does it take to reach a student if the signs aren't quite clear. Like, what do I have to do not to be punitive? What do I have to do to say that I've got your back?

Dr. Carter understands that highly punitive environments communicate that there is something inherently bad or problematic about the people who are subjected to the punishment. This perception has been linked to White supremacist thought, which considers Black bodies as

inherently dangerous and criminal. The questions Dr. Carter poses to the students at the end of the conversation reveal the nature of his struggle: he recognizes that disengagement is not merely a behavioral issue in need of correction. It is relational and indicates that something is interfering with the reciprocal nature of the relationship.

The misperception of Black criminality is often reified in schools. Visible elements—such as metal detectors and resource officers—and disciplinary measures, including disproportionate rates of suspensions and expulsions, maintain false narratives that were originally used to justify inhumane practices during chattel slavery. This is one way that dominant cultural narratives are maintained. Another approach is to manipulate narratives that challenge the status quo. Grande (2004) offers an example:

School never discussed the "philosophy" of my ancestors—that discourse was either ignored or left for history class; and, in school, history never lived. It was all talk of dead, albeit grand, civilizations and peoples. We studied relics, archives, maps, bones, and other miscellaneous vestiges of the past. Occasionally these remnants carried that same scent of my grandmother, and again I would wonder (in silence) how was it possible for something to be extinct, relegated to history, and yet be so alive, especially in me? (p. 159)

Grande's reflections open important questions about what it means to learn in an environment that is connected and alive. The bones and relics of her youth are inert in their display cases. Stripping them of meaning or gesture is a necessary step in fitting them within an American master narrative. *Indigenous people were here*, their placard acknowledges, *foraging for berries or hunting deer*—benign activities that don't call to question American values or systems.

In contrast, Simpson (2104) experiences a visceral reaction when she reads the story of Kwenzens, a Nishnaabeg girl, who spends her days learning about the world through nature, family, and community. She "is met with basic, core Nishnaabeg values—love, compassion and understanding. She centers her day around her own freedom and joy" (p. 6). Kwenzens' story

resonates deeply with Simpson. She describes Kwenzens' education, which takes place in the natural world where she learns from the animals and plants. She moves at the pace of her curiosity. Simpson explains:

Kwenzens already learned a tremendous amount ... driven by her own curiosity and her own personal desire to learn. She learned to trust herself, her family, and her community. She learned the sheer joy of discovery. To me, this is what coming into wisdom with a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabe epistemology looks like—it takes place in the context of family, community and relations. It lacks overt coercion and authority, values so normalized within mainstream pedagogy that they are rarely ever critiqued. (p. 7)

Kwenzen's education is one of wholeness, belonging, and abundance. It looks strikingly different from the education many of Scholars Studio's participants received, which might be described as orchestrated and controlled with palpable distance between student and teacher.

Bell hooks (2003) suggests that faculty distance themselves “as an unconscious means of maintaining class status. The denial of subjectivity communicates a refusal to listen to people with experiences outside the dominant narrative” (p. 128). A more generous interpretation might be that faculty are not accustomed to holding the paradox of their formal education with the lived experiences of their students or, in many cases, the lived experiences of their own lives. Hooks goes on to write that the distance allows faculty to dissociate: “Denying the emotional presence and wholeness of students may help professors who are unable to connect focus more on the task of sharing information, facts, data, their interpretations, with no regard for listening to and hearing from students” (p. 129). Faculty who are uncomfortable with their own vulnerability may struggle to hold space for students' vulnerabilities.

The Black Men in Education faculty were prepared to enter the unscripted and messy space of listening. They understood that creating connected experiences for students required them to be connected as well. Professor Orion explains:

When I walk into the classroom, I'm testing my experiences, and I'm learning from their experiences, too. Their experiences either verify or validate my experiences or their experiences challenge what I think I know. When I first started teaching, I felt a lot of pressure to be right. But then I learned that that was my ego. You know, and that was me being scared me being fearful, and in reality, that goes for everybody to get better. I want to leave here better. I want to leave here a better student and I want you guys to leave here better teachers. This is what we always talk about: transaction versus transformation, you know, and for something to be transformed, a little bit of the other person has to be invested into the counterpart.

Professor Orion describes a pedagogical journey toward wholeness. His early classroom experiences were driven by ego-based fear. Bernstein (2005) describes the ego accordingly:

[The ego is] the center of subjective being, the “I” of one’s self. This ego is the conscious part of our psychic make-up, the mental tool we use to adapt to our personal experiences and perception of reality, and to our identity with the cultural and social groups through which we build our civilization. Notwithstanding its one-sided dedication to consciousness and conscious process, it, the ego, is influenced by unconscious elements. (p. 15)

According to Bernstein, the unconscious elements are the repressed parts of the individual as well as the collective unconscious, which deals with the unconscious aspects of human experience, expressed in archetypes and instincts (p. 15). The Western ego prioritizes rational thought over intuition (Bernstein, 2005, p. 21), and taken to its extreme, craves power and materialism (p. 33). The word *ego* comes directly from the Latin language and means “I” (Etymonline, n.d.). Inherent to the ego is a need for individuation, which is ironically, mediated by values of the collective. As the ego seeks separation, it simultaneously seeks validation. In the classroom, that might present itself as faculty striving for students to give deference to their authority, needing to be viewed as brilliant or in control, establishing hierarchies that privilege small groups of people as a means of elevating their stature, or simply wanting to teach “correctly.”

Professor Orion’s pedagogical shift away from an ego-centered pedagogy aligns with the faculty’s mission to usurp structures that do not serve their community. As they embrace

Afrocentric ideas, such as *Ubuntu*, which speaks to the power of interconnectedness, there is a recognition that to teach one is to teach many, that teaching and learning are not separate functions, and that the whole is contained in the parts. Krog (2008) offers the following definition of wholeness in relation to Ubuntu:

Wholeness is...not a passive state of nirvana, but a process of becoming in which everybody and everything is moving towards its fullest self, building itself; one can only reach that fullest self though, through and with others which include ancestors and universe. (p. 354)

A pedagogy that embraces wholeness has fractal-like qualities insofar as transformation and growth that occur in a learning space are reflections of the elements contained therein. To grasp this phenomenon, it might be helpful to turn to a real-world application of fractals, as described by Dickau (2009):

[Richardson was tasked with the question,] ‘How long is the coast of Britain?’ [He] found that this number increased, as he used finer and more detailed maps. Noting that this relation also depended on the roughness of the terrain, he plotted this for various locations to yield a fractional exponent. Mandelbrot thought this result was especially significant, and suggested that it means the coastline actually has a fractional dimension (or fractal dimension) which varies with the character of the terrain under study, giving us a measure of its roughness. By regarding this idea of fractional dimension as a measuring tool for physical reality, as well as an attribute of certain mathematical objects and spaces, he began a revolution. (pp. 2103-2104)

It is remarkable that the coastline’s shape contains information about characteristics of the land itself. The two cannot be considered independently. This creates an interesting visual for conceptualizing teaching. Imagine what the phenomenon of *teaching* would look like if it were represented cartographically. What shapes or images come to mind? What do they represent? Now imagine carbon copy structures serving as the building blocks of the larger structure. What does it mean that the whole is found at the micro level, that the smallest parts are reflected in the whole? Viewing teaching from this perspective, it would seem impossible to break it down into decontextualized fragments. For any large vision to manifest in the learning space, it would have

to be practiced at a smaller scale (Brown, 2017, p. 18), but if what is being practiced on the smaller scale is a broken-down fragment of the vision, the whole vision cannot be achieved. Brown noticed this phenomenon while she was involved in political organizing. The people with whom she worked envisioned democratic action and just communities, but democracy and justice were impossible to achieve because community members weren't willing to communicate with one another or work toward mutually beneficial solutions (p. 40).

It should be noted that conceptualizing teaching-learning as a fractal does not imply that the goal of education is to produce carbon copies, but rather acknowledges that humans tend to organize their thoughts and practices in culturally-mediated structures. Most of the time, we don't give structures much thought, nor do we consider the values or philosophies undergirding them. Fractals offer a model for conceptualizing, studying, and reproducing them. Individual behaviors, decisions, interactions, relationships, thought patterns, etc. offer clues about the structures in which people operate. To transform realities, individuals need to transform structures. Fractals demonstrate that structural transformation begins at the micro-level and magnifies to scale. Individuals, for example, choose to actively build democratic spaces by listening to other perspectives, seeking common ground, etc. Others who choose to join them in the practice of democracy are not required to think homogenously. In fact, that is the antithesis of democracy, which is designed to hold space for diverse thought. Rather, to enact democracy, participants engage in behaviors and relationships that are democratic. Fractals are bridges insofar as they connect actions and thoughts to vision and goals.

Schools and post-secondary institutions are particularly powerful sites for structural reproduction and change. Foremost, to teach is not simply to dispatch a set of tools (e.g. behavior management, lesson planning) in the way that photography is not simply about knowing how to

use the camera. While anyone can take a picture, capturing powerful shots requires vision; an eye for composition, light, color and contrast; nuanced understanding of how the camera, lens, and light sources function; and connection with, reverence for, or curiosity about the subject matter. A photographer who is not willing to be surprised or learn something probably will not produce awe inspiring photos. Moreover, just as the photographer's inputs impact the outputs in photography, the outputs impact the photographer. I have been documenting Scholars Studio through photography for thirteen years and recall the first time I captured images in the classroom. Students were working in groups to complete a culminating project:

There was, to my surprise, order in the chatter, punctuated by the occasional burst of laughter. I couldn't distinguish individual conversations, but the collective roar of voices washed over me in waves, reminding me of the ocean—how the waves lift up and roll to the shore and pause as they stretch along the sand before retreating and coming back again and again, strong and changed each time. I made note of the classroom, unremarkable with its beige walls and small desks turned this way and that to face one another. The ceiling lights cast an unnatural blue hue and white boards claimed two of the walls. Despite the austere design, it contained so much beauty—Selena and her brightly colored sweater, Juan with his locs and serious expressions, Anna trying hard to hold back her laughter, Zach bursting with energy—fighting hard to sit still, giving up and circling his groupmates. *There it is*, I heard myself say. I lifted the camera in search of angles and expressions that said something about what it meant to be alive in that moment. Later, at my computer—the images on my screen—I couldn't believe what I saw: such vulnerability, tenderness, sacredness in an otherwise bleak space. *Is this what it means to learn... together... in community?* I asked myself. (personal reflection, 2009)

This experience changed the way I saw students and learning and marked the beginning of a new practice for seeing beyond the taken-for-granted. I had entered the experience, with a sense of awe and reverence and found it amplified in the photographs.

Professor Orion enters the learning space in a similar way, imbuing students with the wisdom of teachers, and expecting to learn from them in the way that they expect to learn from him. Anything that he practices in the learning space, any thought that he manifests, any way that he relates to others has the potential to be magnified in the students. He grows in that space

because his students make it necessary. Indeed, pedagogy has the power to manifest individual and collective visions. It begins with the small fractal elements that are, in turn, magnified to generate the whole. An example of this practice is found in Grande's (2004) *Red Pedagogy*, which uses indigenous philosophy, structures, and traditions as the fractal elements that constitute alive, whole, empowered, and sovereign people. She explains:

Red pedagogy is the manifestation of sovereignty, engaging the development of "community-based power" in the interest of "a responsible political, economic, and spiritual society"(Richardson and Villenas 2000, 272). Power in this context refers to the practice of "living out active presences and survivances rather than an illusory democracy"(Richardson and Villenas 2000, 273). As articulated by Vizenor, the notion of survivance signifies a state of being beyond "survival, endurance, or a mere response to colonization," toward "an active presence... and active repudiation of dominance, tragedy and victimry"(Vizenor 1998, 15). The survivance narratives of indigenous peoples are those that articulate the active recovery, reimagination, and reinvestment of indigenous ways of being. (p. 175)

This engagement draws from the wealth of its past—the rich traditions and long and complex histories—to create new realities that are not defined by or placed in relation to colonialism. It insists on the value of all involved in the process, from elders who carry the wisdom and memories of traditional knowledge and experience to the younger generations who interpret, enact, and carry forward new realities. This process could not happen without community and generational solidarity. There is a long history of community-based pedagogy in African and African American communities. Oduaran (2010) describes a precolonial pedagogy found throughout sub-Saharan Africa that relies on intergenerational solidarities:

In precolonial days, the informal learning systems and curricula relied extensively on the machinery of intergenerational relationships, as knowledge was freely shared between the young and the old during moonlight stories at the village square. The cultivation of inclusive societies was the duty of everyone, young and old, grandchildren and grandparents alike, and social frictions and tensions were rare. (pp. 199-200)

Generations later and a continent away, the value of community-oriented pedagogy was not lost on Black educators in the segregated South. Bell hooks (1994) offers her account of learning in an environment that was radically anti-colonial and steeped in love:

Almost all of our teachers at Booker T. Washington were black women. They were committed to nurturing intellect so that we could become scholars, thinkers, and cultural workers—black folks who used our “minds.” We learned early that devotion to learning, to a life of the mind, was a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization... Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission. (pp. 2-3)

Western society’s loss of generational solidarity often translates to generational mistrust, which has played out in public battles between Baby Boomers and Millennials with the older generation accusing the younger generation of being entitled and lazy, and the younger generation accusing the older generation of being out of touch. Generational differences are often the punchline of social media content, and faculty, exasperated when students don’t see the same value in higher education, often chock it up to generational deficiencies.

Connected

Recognizing that there are aspects of the younger generations that they do not understand, the faculty are intentional about remaining in touch with their own experiences. Dr. Carter shares his journey:

I wasn’t a good student in middle school. I went to like three different middle schools. I think I got put out of my seventh-grade year and in high school I made a commitment to change because then I realized I could see a future. Before my past behaviors...I couldn’t see no future, like no one on my mother’s side had anything past a high school diploma if they had that. And so, like I didn’t know what you could do with a college degree... It was a step, and I think that’s the part of the evolution that’s really sticking with me from the conversation before, like we evolve over time. But, what I realized in the process is we have to commit along the way. If we don’t commit along the way, we can’t materialize what we want. My mom did fast food most of my life, and I knew I did not want to live poor like we were. I knew I was poor. I couldn’t stand being on them dang food stamps going to the store. And wanting more, I would say it was my start doing something different, and it didn’t all happen in that time. It happened over years, but I

say that to say, like that wanting more is a starting point to something bigger as long as you keep committing yourself to the process.

His story signals that he not only understands challenges the students may have faced but also that negative experiences don't foreclose on future possibilities. This resonates with Issaiah, who is the oldest student in the community, having failed out of a community college previously.

Attending this university presents a new opportunity, but with it, he experiences a lot of anxiety and uncertainty. He isn't sure that he will finish his degree. He shares:

As far as just the way y'all are as teachers is definitely different, and I feel it's more impactful. I've never met professors or educators, I may say, who take the time out Y'all make sure y'all give us positive words: "We're trying to make it easy for you." And, I'm almost...I'm definitely getting into it. I'm still not where I know I can be as far as my attendance, my work ethic, on time... And, I feel just the support y'all give is definitely a huge push because if I didn't get the support, I probably would have done what Lamonte did and just gave up already to be honest because it was real hard to keep coming back and forth to school. And, then you all showed me, like, these are people who actually care, who actually want me to succeed, who actually would be needing me to do alright. Well, if they're going to do that, there's no reason for me to give up on myself.

Early in his response, Issaiah catches his uncertainty, "I'm almost..." he begins and then starts over, "I'm definitely getting into it." In just a few words he captures an aspect of his engagement that semester. He started his journey with his friend, Lamonte. When Lamonte left, Issaiah questioned his ability to finish college. He missed several classes and was surprised when his faculty noticed his absence. Issaiah's reflection recalls Professor Orion's earlier remark questioning the assumption that we should expect a percentage of students to fail. He asks, "How do we tend the circle?" Perhaps the answer resides in the question: we form the circle.

Conceptually, the circle differs from, say, a bell curve, which is often presented as a statistical explanation for the portions of students who do not successfully complete courses or degrees—and has, consequently, been misused by proponents of scientific racism. Functionally, the bell

curve serves to separate and classify—a phenomenon that may lead to fragmentation. Alexander (2005) writes:

Since colonization has produced fragmentation and dismemberment at both the material and psychic levels, the work of decolonization has to make room for the deep yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment. Anticolonial and Left liberation movements have not understood this sufficiently in their psychology of liberation and, as a result, we have not made ample political room for it. This yearning to belong is not to be confined only to membership or citizenship in community. (p. 281)

Alexander suggests that humans crave wholeness: “The source of that yearning is the deep knowing that we are in fact interdependent—neither separate nor autonomous” (p. 282). She continues, “We have a sacred connection to one another, and this is why enforced separations wreak havoc on our Souls” (p. 282). Alexander describes a sense of belonging that transcends “fitting in.” In fact, the word “fit” traces back to the mid 15th century and was defined as “suited to the circumstances, proper” (Etymonline, n.d.). Inherent in *fitting in* is the idea of conforming or adapting to serve a purpose external to oneself. This sort of “belonging” requires allegiance to ideas and goals that may not align with all members’ best interests.

A lot of students find that their membership within academic communities is contingent upon “fitting in.” Professor Orion is reminded of this phenomenon when he joins Scholars Studio on a visit to a boy’s school in Washington, D.C. He shares:

I remember one instance, like I was a troubled student, but my sister had got shot in both her legs. And then, like, the next week, I’m in school. I was just yelling. I would just yell like, “aaaahhhh.” I got in so much trouble to the point that they tried to prescribe me Prozac. I had to see...it wasn’t therapy like you guys were talking about. It was like, “What’s wrong with you so we can find you a drug.” They wanted to put me in special education and things like that. And I’m just looking at this type of environment, and this was like...

Dr. Carter adds, “What you should have had.”

Yeah.

“Somebody should have recognized that you were going through something.”

Professor Orion continues:

Or it should have just been OK. You know what I mean? A child screaming “aaaahhhh” is not a terrorist. There is clearly something going on. Just knowing that it’s not just about my sister. It’s about the fact that somebody’s brother shot somebody that day that probably went to my same school, and their brother is living with the fact that he just shot somebody on accident, but they were trying to shoot somebody else. Somebody else’s brother was running from somebody who was shooting at them. You get what I’m saying? All these people have parents. It’s a family thing. Just to see... and I remember this building, like my little cousins went to this building. It was like metal detectors at the front. It was triggering in a sense but on the same token, I just appreciate it a lot because you guys are going above and beyond, but I could see this done four levels lower, and it would be a great upgrade to what existed here before.

The school’s response to Professor Orion’s behaviors wasn’t anomalous. Other stories like his open in the conversation. What if his teachers and administrators had been able to look into his future—to see a scholar who pursues a PhD in Africology, a successful business owner, a professor, a world traveler, a caring and generous human who commits himself to the uplift of his people, and all the beauty that is yet to be written? What if they had been able to conceptualize his becoming as a fractal? What if they had seen his compassion and empathy, his deep concern for family and community, his brilliant ability to observe patterns and their consequences? What if they had held space for him, if they had allowed him to yell louder, to get it out, to release it, to give voice to the terror? What if they understood that seeing him and honoring him would be magnified in him, and by extension, everyone he encountered? What if they did that for each student?

I wish to pause here. As this chapter has come together, I have been in awe of how the themes open in spirals, forming ever widening movements that revisit ideas and build upon them. The structural elements held in the teachings of African and African American history and traditions are revived in discussions of fractals, which serve as a model for transformation in the

teaching-learning spaces. Here, again, we are brought back to the beginning of the chapter where students describe a sense of invisibility. In Professor Orion's story, he, too, was invisible. All that the school officials saw in him was his inability to *fit in*. This opens questions about who or what education is meant to serve. Who is seen? Who does it benefit? I will let these questions linger for a while. As they stew, I can't help but think it is no wonder that students come to us feeling disconnected and disillusioned.

Contrast the push to *fit in* with what might be described as *generative*, a reciprocal and generative process wherein the unique contributions of each member are essential for the community's health. This transformation occurs through a process of *becoming-with*, which Ortega (2016) describes accordingly:

Becoming-with amounts to becoming open to the interests of groups with whom I may not share identity markers; it means understanding these interests as being as important as my own interests... When I meet you, I don't become you by being assimilated by you, and you don't become me by becoming assimilated by me—the Hegelian move that is to blame for philosophy's fear of the power of the other, or rather a dread of otherness. I become-with you, and we remake each other. (p. 168)

Shared bodily experiences or “sensuous knowing” offers an avenue for developing felt-understanding and connection (Ortega, 2016, p. 168). Many of the experiences in Scholars Studio connect participants with *sensuous knowing*, from the Circle where they experience one another's presence as they sync the rhythms of the instruments with their breath to the boy's school in Washington, D.C. where they sit on child-sized benches or absorb the enthusiasm of children solving math problems. The felt experiences begin early in the semester when they meet on the patio of the Martin Luther King, Jr. building for the community *launch*. They participate in several hands-on activities, including one called *Bodies of Writing* where students are instructed to outline their bodies on large pieces of butcher paper, and write affirmations in the body. Pierre's work resonates deeply with Dr. Carter. He reflects:

With Pierre doing the hands up piece that was so significant for our current political climate—things that are really impacting Black people, especially during this COVID period. That is really, I guess, a spark, an urgency for justice. By just seeing that and knowing his size and knowing how he would be perceived. You know that just the hands up piece in that. That body piece was a big piece for me.

Pierre has drawn himself with his hands in the air. In the figure's head, he writes, *I am me, I am creative, I am strong, I am confident*. On each wrist, he repeats, *I am not a threat!* And in the right hand, he places the word *Power* and in the left hand, *Wisdom*. Recalling his inspiration, Pierre shares:

Yeah, so basically, in regards to police brutality, Black people are always seen to be at the root of being attacked by them. So it's like, I wanted to put in my, I wanted to put inside my body...I wrote my personalities, like I'm creative and all that stuff like that. And I wanted to show that inside I'm the same outside, so like I'm not a threat. Like if I'm around any type of police officer that they see me for who I am. And not just 6'4", 280.

Pierre's *Body of Writing* response elicits felt understanding in Dr. Carter. The scale of the image, along with the gesture of raised hands, aptly captures the *zeitgeist* of the moment. Both men understand the weight of the message. They don't have the privilege of moving through the world without thinking about how they are perceived. Yancy (2020) offers:

It is this privilege and power of seeing without being seen that bespeaks the structural hegemonic orders that position the white body as the bearer of the white gaze and the black body as the object of the white gaze, the seen, the looked at. The relationship between the bearer of the look (the white body) and the looked at (the black body) is governed by an antiblack white racism whose logics are also informed by the white racist imaginary within which the black body constitutes the inverse image of whiteness. Hence, the black body is deemed "dangerous," "defiled," "hypersexual," "evil," "uncivilized," "perverse," and "monstrous." (para. 3)

The Black Men in Education faculty lift the veil on systems that do not serve their community. As they prepare students to be educators, they are also exposing the mechanisms of miseducation and identifying entry points for creating whole, connected, human-centered, and affirming pedagogies. Dr. Carter offers:

I didn't push all of these Eurocentric pedagogy theories because we need something to counter that. That didn't work for us, so why are we going to keep teaching people to do the same thing? I know you all have something unique in you. It just needs to come out. That's how all of us get where we are with our own pedagogy right. We said, "Hey, why am I trying to be somebody else? I could just be myself," and it comes across. I just want to say that your uniqueness matters very much. In any space that you go into, your uniqueness matters, and it makes the experience what it is, and don't lose that. We've been told too much not to do that.

Dr. Carter captures the heart of the Black Men in Education community, which simultaneously directs the gaze backwards to draw wisdom from the ancestors and inward to appreciate the power, brilliance, and self-determination that each community member carries. The experience exposes the structures that shaped their education and offers insight into how to create learning experiences that affirm and empower Black men.

The Whole Edge: Entering Liberated Space

Edges have been important catalysts for change. As the participants continue their journey to the end of the bridge—its final edge—Casey (2017) offers these insights:

Take the horizon once again: this is both part of a larger landscape scene—though never the full extent of it—and yet somehow contains or reflects the whole scene, being the place where earth and sky merge and become one continuous phenomenon. The part here conveys the whole, or we can say conversely that the whole dwells in the part, without our being able to keep them strictly apart: they are inseparable even if still distinguishable. One envelops the other, or still more radically one is the other, albeit with subtle differences of structure as well as history. It is not just that the whole is in the part, but the whole has become the part. And the same holds for the part, which contains the whole, by condensation as it were—so much so that we can say that the part has become the whole. The dynamic is two-way for both pairs of terms. (p. 272)

Edges are marginal spaces. The word "margin" is often evoked to describe people who are situated outside the center of power (as in marginalized), but these border spaces are third spaces that create the conditions for transformational change. Just as individuals who stand at the edge of the bridge have a wider perspective than those who stand in the center, people who inhabit marginal or border spaces have the potential to see more fully and, therefore, facilitate truly

transformational change. Bell hooks (2000) explains that freedom struggles are often focused on seizing power from the center. She cautions that in order for real change to occur, “we must reject the notion that obtaining power in the existing social structure will necessarily advance [the] struggle to end...oppression” (p. 92). Gaining power within the existing system requires adopting its methods and goals, so while people who have traditionally been marginalized may achieve material power, they do so at the expense of perpetuating oppressive systems, which rely on exploiting others. Grabbing power in this way does not liberate. The key to liberation, hooks offers, is recognizing and harnessing individual, communal, and cultural power (p. 92).

The final section of this chapter represents a metaphoric departure from the bridge into new terrain. It bears witness to the participants’ power as they work experimentally and creatively to build new possibilities and practice freedom.

Improv

Free improvisation is not an action resulting from freedom; it is an action directed towards freedom (Williams, 1984, p. 32)

The COVID-19 pandemic opened a lot of important questions about the nature of teaching in Scholars Studio, including what does it mean to teach in community when it’s not possible to meet in-person? At the heart of this question is the presumption that physical presence is important for building community. I acknowledge that some would question the premise of this inquiry because—as the pandemic proved— communities can be formed virtually. In fact, prior to the launch, Dr. Carter made a similar argument. He changed his mind after the event—drawn in, perhaps, by the power of embodied relations.

New questions emerged once we returned to in-person instruction. They were, initially, hard to articulate because we did not have full grasp of what was unfolding. The university had called for a “return to normalcy,” but if it hadn’t been clear that campus life would not be normal

upon return, it became obvious shortly thereafter. Masks, social distancing, and testing were a way of life, as was quarantine and isolation when tests came back positive. Some of the questions that were opened included, What does teaching and learning look like post-pandemic? And, what are reasonable expectations for students and faculty?

Those questions were salient because they touched on deeper curricular issues that were present long before the pandemic. At our institution, a large portion of the general education courses are designed with a *technological rationality* that aims to yield specific objectives and products. As Aoki (1990/2005) describes, one of the problems with this orientation is that “a way to do, has become *the* way to do, indifferent to differences in the lived world of teachers and students” (p. 368). Curricula are constructed this way for several reasons, but the rationale at the discipline level is often that it ensures all students who take the class meet a certain threshold of understanding. But what happens when the curriculum is indifferent to the experiences of students and faculty or when it fails to take into account the living realities of the people it is supposed to reach? What happens when it does not leave room for inquiry or when it upholds oppressive structures? What happens when it is blind to cultural or learning differences, or it does not invite or honor a range of expressions? And, what if the curriculum is off-center, as is the case with curricula that are designed to help students pass exams rather than learn?

The theme of improvisation surfaced repeatedly throughout the semester and may provide the resolution the previous questions seek. Thinking about teaching and learning through the lens of improvisation offers educators a framework for balancing the tension between following the planned curriculum and responding to emerging challenges and opportunities. In this regard, improvisation serves as a bridge between the curriculum and the lived realities of

learners. Interestingly, the elements of improvisation in Scholars Studio roughly mirror those in jazz and other artforms. Fisher et al. (2021) describes the technical process as thus:

Generally, the melody both begins and ends a performance of a song and affords little improvisation at these times, so it is played similarly by all jazz musicians. After the first playing of the melody, the rhythm section (i.e., piano/guitar, bass, drums) repeats the harmony and rhythm that undergirds that melody. This harmonic and rhythmic structure provides a flexible basis for soloists to improvise new melodies. To accompany the soloist, the rhythm section may make certain harmonic and rhythmic adjustments. Soloists take turns improvising on this structure and then play the melody again to end the song. (para. 8)

To improvise well, jazz musicians dedicate exorbitant amounts of time to studying scores, performances and standards, and practicing scales and chords (para. 8). The music is living in them when they step onto the stage.

What does it mean to improvise in the pedagogical space? Aoki might say that it *inspirits* the curriculum. In his quest to understand how to break out of an *instrumentalized* curriculum, Aoki (1990/2005) met with jazz musician, Bobby Shew. He explained to Shew that education has become rigidly tied to lockstep methods, resulting in a deadened experience that cannot access lived possibilities, that indeed, “We might become forgetful of how instrumental language disengages us from our bodies, making of us disembodied, dehumanized beings” (p. 369). Aoki poses the question, “When does an instrument cease to be an instrument?”—positing that his answer may point to the way out (pp. 368-369). Shew responds by describing how he introduces new students to the trumpet. First, he makes them hold the instrument behind them and practice lip work and scatting. Only when he feels that the trumpet will be an extension of the body does he allow his students to play (p. 368). Shew states that *an instrument ceases to be an instrument*, “When music to be lived calls for transformation of instrument and music into that which is bodily lived” (Aoki, 1990/2005, p. 369).

Conceptualizing *curriculum as improvisation* helps teachers and learners dwell in the paradox of lived and planned curricula. When conditions are uncertain, as they have been for the past few years, it provides a framework for responding creatively to the disruptions that interfere with the plan. Fisher et al. (2021) writes:

Action in both jazz and organizations is informed by structures like strategic plans and formal operating procedures. Yet, action is also spontaneous, introducing new and unforeseen elements. The particular structures of jazz were promising because they not only prevented spontaneous action from devolving into chaos, but also seemed to enable collaborative, creative music with their flexibility. (para. 10)

Notably, the pandemic didn't simply force adjustments. It catalyzed introspection and change.

An example of improvisation in Scholars Studio was the use of restorative circles, described earlier. Issaiah reflects:

At our last meeting, when we had different spiritual [practices] included in the lesson, I guess y'all gave us a time to really think about school, really think about what you want to do. And I feel like that meeting, definitely showed me that school is more important than anything I'm doing on the outside. Anything I'm trying to, that's why ever since that day, I made it a must to try to get up here, no matter what, even if I've got to call a ride or something I'm gonna get up here. And before that day, I just like, *Well, maybe you know, they'll understand that I didn't come up there because I'm having issues.* Now it's like, *forget that. They're not the ones missing the knowledge. It's me.*

The Circle—as an act of improvisation—was also a declaration of Scholars Studio's values.

Driven by a sense of urgency, faculty often feel compelled to cover every topic in the syllabus.

When students struggle, a logical response is to press harder to ensure that they get what they “need.” Dedicating a day to non-academic pursuits may feel counterintuitive, but in the way that Bobby Shew doesn't allow his beginner trumpet students to play until they have established a bodily connection with the instrument and the music, it is important to help students establish embodied connection to themselves, their community, purpose, spirituality, longing, curiosity, or whatever drives them. Ms. Ross reflects:

Education requires a degree of flexibility. You've got to have a plan. But you have to know your mission and your goals and be flexible in order to meet those goals. So thinking about our session with you all last week. why did we do that? Why did we make that shift? Why did we throw in that improvisation, you know, because we have a goal as a faculty community that was bigger than just *let's get through the end of this semester. It's almost over. They get what they get*, you know. Our mission from the beginning is to inspire you all to be your best selves and to hold yourselves accountable to the quality of your work, to your showing up, being present, challenging yourself, taking the risk of putting your thoughts and ideas on paper, or expressing them out in the classroom, or whatever. So our bigger mission meant flex, like we had to shift and do something differently in order to accomplish our goal.

Connecting with students as whole, embodied people is utterly transformational. The inaugural Circle inspired us to integrate the process into Scholars Studio moving forward.

Listening, Hearing, Harkening, Being

The Black Men in Education participants were tuned into the heightened need to be responsive in the classroom. To understand when and how to respond, the participants engaged in a process of deep listening or what Heidegger describes as hearkening—a primordial form of listening that engages all the senses. During the semester, the faculty listened to students, students listened to younger children, and faculty and students developed a synergistic mode of listening with one another. To understand what deep listening opens in the pedagogical space, I bring musicians and philosophers into the conversation. Peplowski (1998) describes how listening is imperative for maintaining cohesion in a jazz ensemble, especially when musicians play together for the first time:

What's more important is that we've also learned how to *listen*. That's absolutely essential, because if the four of us climbed up on stage, and I counted off a song, and we all went off in our own direction, this would be musical anarchy. Listening is an important skill, because to pull a group together, every-one needs to comment musically on what they're hearing from the others. (p. 560)

Heidegger (2008) might push the phenomenon of listening further, rejecting the idea that it is simply a means to an end. Listening, and closely related phenomena, hearing and hearkening

are “Dasein’s existential ways of Being open as Being-with for Others” and connect us with our “ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (Chapter 34, para. 10). Listening and hearing open us up to being-with others and enable hearkening. The word “hearken” derives from the Old English *heorcnian*, meaning “to give ear, listen” and “hear with attention” (etymonline.com, n.d.). More primordial than hearing, hearkening is what we experience when we hear a chirping bird or squealing tires and perceive those sounds, not simply as noise, but as coming from identifiable *beings* or *things* in the world. Listening, hearing and hearkening are possible because we have pre-given understanding (Heidegger, 2008, para. 11). These ideas are helpful for thinking about improvisation because as Heidegger asserts, With “the call of conscience, *it* calls before *it* gives” (para. 12). In other words, using the example of jazz improvisation, artists hear the music as a *calling* before they generate it; alternatively, the music plays through them rather than they play the music. Generating music in this way opens artists to discovering *truths* through their work. Secondly, hearkening—which is not contingent upon having the ability to hear, as it can be accessed through the range of bodily senses— “represents the movement necessary to turn toward the ‘mystery’ of what is there, that is a prerequisite for the kind of improvisation we are talking about” (Peters, 2009, Chapter 4, para. 6). The jazz musician hears music into presence.

The conversational space in the classroom creates improvisational openings. Pierre describes hearkening as bodily sensing:

You have to be in the classes every single day to understand. It's just like, we kind of feed off each other's energy...It's kind of like what I wish school would have been like when I was in elementary to middle to high school. It's just like, the will to want to learn... like, you just need to continuously learn... We put a topic up, we just all started talking and we all have our point of views. Like it just everything just flows like nothing's forced. And the conversation just flows and then we hear other people's perspective, the perspective and then we just go from there. Do we all like, it's like, it's like if you have like a discussion post, but in person, so it's better because you hear everybody's, you hear the tone, how they feel about it. So it comes down to a person

Pierre recognizes the subtlety and nuance of the environment, describing it as something you have to experience consistently to appreciate. It sparks a desire to learn that is poetically captured by the idea that “A bird doesn’t sing because he has an answer. He sings because he has a song” (Augland, 1967, p. 15).

Scholars Studio courses create space for students to hear a call, so that they might bring their song into presence. Students often come to college in search of answers—Who am I? What *are my strengths? What is my purpose? To what do I want to dedicate my life?*—yet there are few spaces devoted to cultivating inner listening. The culture of the Academy is more outwardly focused. In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (2007) observes that academics are expected to maintain dual standards of civility and competition wherein quick-wittedness, sharp critiques, and retorts are valued signals of intellectual prowess. Compound that with the feeling that “we are supposed to advise, fix, and save” people, it becomes apparent that there is little room left for tuning into inner-guidance. Palmer (2007) explains:

Knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly in the shadows of my unexamined life, and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest level of embodied personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (Introduction, para. 6)

In the improvisational space of the classroom, making good pedagogical decisions depends just as much upon listening to oneself as it does listening to others.

Jasmine pays attention to her own emotional states, and in turn, she notices how the faculty respond to her and her classmates. She recognizes when they make adjustments to increase the energy or harness it, or when they tend to emotional distress or celebrate victories.

Jasmine learns implicitly how to teach by experiencing pedagogy while she is receiving explicit instruction in teaching. She explains:

When I was teaching the elementary group with my group, they were really hyper. So like we had to do activities and stuff like that to grab their attention. And I feel like maybe it's not exactly the same here, but I feel like the professors also do certain things to grasp our attention to help us participate. So it's like kind of the same experience except we were the ones teaching.

Jasmine and her peers observe that one of the children has significant influence over his peers. She recruits him to assist them with an activity, hoping it will redirect his focus. Making this shift allows the students to continue teaching their lesson. Jasmine's reflection highlights an important aspect of improvisation: it is not a free-for-all; rather, it occurs within a framework. Sometimes artists or pedagogues make improvisational decisions that bring them back in rhythm.

Rhythm, Syncopation, Magic

The faculty and students observed a rhythm in the classrooms of the boy's school in Washington, D.C. Professor Orion reflects:

Everyone teaches with a rhythm, and it's all about staying on beat. Everyone stays on. The disruptions disrupt the rhythm... I was most impressed by the North Star class because I remember those types of classrooms. I've been in those classrooms. I know those classrooms could be the day is over... but there was just an ability to let people be themselves. If I'm just going with something and I'm just dancing right now, let me dance. If I stop this dance, you might get something else. When I see this student go from that to like getting right back in there, getting right back on task: *I need the answers to the last question*. It's this idea of developmental discipline. That's a powerful sentiment. That's an innately African approach to the situation.

John Dewey (2005) describes rhythm as occurring when "each step forward is at the same time a summing up and a fulfillment of what precedes, and every consummation carries the expectation tensely forward" (p. 179). To unpack this thought, I picture students and teachers working together to solve complex math problems. When they reach a conclusion, they experience a sense of release or accomplishment. At that moment, there is also the expectation that there will

be new problems to investigate. If, during that process, the students are overcome with boredom because they are not challenged, or they become overwhelmed because they do not believe they have the capacity to solve the problem, the rhythm is lost. Brent witnesses peers in the boy's school helping their classmate stay on rhythm. He recalls, "There was somebody who was stuck on an answer, and [his peers] wiggled their fingers. It was almost like magic to help him come up with his answer... It's good to see children uplifting their fellow classmates."

The boy in the North Star class who breaks into a dance and then returns to his seat with renewed focus did not miss a beat either. The rhythm in the classroom offers him openings to step away from his work and express himself and then return without consequence. His dance, perhaps, resolves frustration, burns energy, embodies thoughts or channels emotions. Regardless of purpose, it does not stop the rhythm; instead, it allows it to continue. So often Black boys are punished or labeled as problematic when they express themselves physically, as this boy did. What would it mean for children and, in particular, Black boys—who are disproportionately punished for behaviors that are healthy and natural—to be given the grace to meet the rhythm in the manner that best suits them?

The beauty of rhythm is that it is accessible to everyone and a fundamental aspect of human development. Some researchers believe that it may even be a building block of language. Feilberg and Maul (2021) explain:

The development of language thus begins before birth. It begins with tone, tempo and dynamics, and for the fetus it is the music in the mother's voice that matters, not the semantic meaning of the words. Experiments have suggested that newly born babies can recognize fragments of nursery rhymes that their pregnant mothers read aloud to them during pregnancy (ibid.). Once the baby is born, the rhythmic interaction between mother and baby continues in the form of a synchronization of motricity, facial expressions and sounds. The newborn's motricity is implemented and synchronized with the adult's organized language acts. In Bjørkvold's (1992) view the mother tongue is imprinted into the infant's body as an interplay of sound, rhythm and movement. (pp. 12-13)

Rhythm is fundamentally the language of the body—from the heartbeat and breath to the rocking motions we use to calm ourselves. Brent observes teachers tuning into subtle rhythms in the classroom as they use their own bodies and calm presence to assure the students:

There was a kid who was upset, and there was a teacher's aide. And she went right over. It's almost like it was her calling. She went right over there to ask him about what was going on. He was upset, but she was so calm with him to the point that he couldn't be loud with her. He had no choice but to calm down on her level. I noticed that he did she did take him out of the class and he came back. I think he was still a little upset, but you could tell he kind of toned it down. Even the teacher—her movement was good. She was going around making sure everybody was on the same track.

Levin (1985) suggests that felt sense helps us understand the world by making it possible to find ourselves in the world. When we walk, for example, we are held by a rhythm. Though the expression of that rhythm is unique to each of us, it doesn't begin in the body. It originates in the earth:

It is the earth, always present as our grounding stride, which implicitly determines the measure that binds us. Since the earth is Being in its presencing as a primordial geology, our sensing of a rhythm in our stride is at the same time the receptivity of a guardian awareness to the ontological measure into which we find ourselves always bound. We move, each one of us, with his own distinctive stride. When we find our own true stride, the stride that uniquely fits our bodily being, we can begin to realize in its rhythm the individuating rhythm of our being. (p. 269)

Levin reminds us that following a rhythm doesn't require oneself to retreat into "anonymity," as Levinas who offers the following contends: "Rhythm," Levinas writes, "represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom because the subject is caught up and carried away by it" (Peters, 2009, Chapter 2, Competition section, para. 2). In contrast, Levin might say that when we embrace rhythm, we extend ourselves and connect to primordial wisdom. As our bodies contact the world, each of us moves as uniquely as our beings.

The students observe that tapping into their personal experiences and unique qualities is helpful for connecting with the children. Bowale recounts:

When Professor Ahmed first introduced [the writing activity], I see a lot of them were enthusiastic, maybe. But like when I went around, and I saw a kid [struggling to write] something, I was like, *Do you watch TV? You like anime?* And then we had a conversation about anime, and he's opening up to me about what he watches and stuff. And then I showed him my anime tattoo, and then the kid keeps coming up to me. And like, he wants to show me what he wrote.

To invite the boy into the rhythm of the assignment, Bowale uses his own experiences as a bridge. They find their stride together—the boy with an entry point into writing and Bowale with insight on how to reach students. They both emerge feeling more connected to one another. This connection is similar to the connection that's formed with the trees and their complex system of roots and fungal bridges, which extends their reach across an entire bioregion. By making the connection with the student and connecting him with the written word, he helps the boy build a bridge to other points of connection.

Jasmine and her teaching partners came to a similar conclusion. She recalls that the children were hesitant to answer questions: “We thought a better way to do that is to also incorporate your own experience, so they know it's OK to share. And then maybe you say something that they can relate to, like *oh, yeah, that same thing happened to me.*” Ms. Ross agrees with Bowale and Jasmine. She has observed educators attempt to develop connections by being entertaining:

I think something gets lost, where if the relationship that you build in a teaching space is contingent upon how much you entertain me, then people can sell out and not learn because now it's really just still about *that* person and what *they* do. But what I hear you all talking about is *connection*. The things that you were doing were tools that you were using or approaches you were taking in order to connect. And I think it's those connections that provide that pipeline to learning, like learning flows back and forth. Because there's a connection between the two, not just like, you know, like, you're funny today, but more like, I know something about you, and you know, something about me. So, you know, now there's kind of a connection.

The students discover that the call to improvise comes from a variety of places. They are able to respond to this call because they are in touch with themselves and have cultivated their own interests.

Taking Risks

Improvisation is risky. Teachers and artists, alike, recognize the threat of creating on the spot. A plan or score offers practitioners a map that guides them through the process. It has been thought out and tested, leaving less room for mistakes. Leaving that map behind requires the practitioner to be well practiced, willing to listen, able to respond to intuition, practiced at turning off the inner-critic, and ultimately, willing to fail. There is a great deal of accountability inherent to the process and no guarantees of success. Peplowski (1998) describes his experience:

You can listen to jazz your whole life, practice long hours at home, study it in college, but the only way to *really* learn is by doing it, by climbing up on the band-stand and failing and learning how to deal with your failures. You carry along all the scales and all the chords you learned, and then you take an intuitive leap into the music. Once you take that leap you forget all about those tools. You just sit back and let divine intuition take over. (p. 561)

One might assume that being willing to risk failure in the improvisational space requires the artist to let go of the fear of failing, but often, it is the risk *itself* that drives the performer. Rose (2017) suggests that improvisation is a learning process. Risk represents practitioners' willingness to open themselves to growth (p. 135). Students often recognize that they will never get to where they want to go unless they take risks. Damien reflects that this moment happened for him during the Scholars Studio launch. The activity that sparked change was called "Play Your Bigger Game," which invites players to step into a square that reflects their current position in life. He stepped in the "Hunger" box, which speaks to an individual's deep desire for something that they do not have (Tamlyn, 2013, Chapter 4, para. 2). He recalls:

Since that day that I stepped in the box hunger, it kind of stuck with me because I felt like I was not really playing *myself*. But you know, it was almost like, I have so many goals that I don't put into action. Ever since that day, I felt like I wanted to be like a go getter, or whatever I said I wanted to do before I came to college, I wanted to try. I wanted to at least, you know, take a stab at it. And recently, I did join the [university's] modeling team. And just by being a go getter, and even trying and seeing what I like, Saturday, I did get to walk in the show in Baltimore. So you know, just by being a go getter and stepping out of my comfort zone, I got to experience something new. I feel that I had to change.

There is often a point in people's lives when they realize that settling with the safe choices is more painful than risking failure. Rose (2017) tells the story of Robert Levin, a classically trained pianist who believes that improvisation is essential to his genre. Levin writes:

The most important thing is the willingness to take risks and the acknowledgement of doing so invests the artistic statement with a level of integrity, with a level of personality, a level of uniqueness that nothing else can do'...And, There is nothing more risky than improvisation, but there is nothing more devastating to music's dramatic and emotional message than avoidance of risk. (as cited in Rose, 2017, p. 135)

A similar dynamic plays out in the classroom. Students may be hesitant to speak up for fear of sounding unintelligent or being viewed as an imposter, and faculty may resist adjusting their plan for fear of looking incompetent.

Other times the engagement calls for individuals to step out of their comfort zones, as Dr Carter experienced during the weekend youth program. He reflects watching a chant that was posted on Twitter led by the Black Men in Education students. He observes that the children all seemed comfortable participating:

Bowale I saw you dancing in the video and Darius just kind of got all the group hyped up about it... I didn't see anyone in the video not doing it. I think the other collaborative piece for us was doing the happy Soul Train line. I don't know if you all know that was my first time, but I'm more introverted, and if I had the choice, I wouldn't have been dancing down the line. But to me, it's something that gets students excited. Even though we had some reluctant students, some still did do it... So I would have never been dancing, you don't usually see me dancing. That's not a thing. But I think it was just a way of getting students [to participate].

One of Scholars Studio's tenets is to never ask students to do something that we're not willing to do ourselves. Stepping into uncomfortable spaces is challenging because it reveals our vulnerabilities, but doing so helps us understand what it takes for students to step into uncomfortable learning spaces. Though risk taking is a powerful pedagogical tool, it's not easy, and many faculty and students shy away from the opportunity it presents. The resistance is understandable, but are there ways to make the experience more bearable? What do improvisers do to work through these challenges?

Mindfulness and Creative Flow

According to Fisher et al. (2021), jazz musicians intentionally cultivate a mindfulness practice to let go of self-consciousness and shut down the inner critic. He explains:

[The] linkage between self and music inhibits improvisers' ability to let go. Like Bob Brookmeyer's advice to the first author to "stop listening like your ears are on your head," expert jazz musicians often imagine that their sense of deliberate, conscious control is physically separate from the active, improvising self. As Fred Hersch put it, "it's like you've got this third ear that oversees the whole business—the craft part—and that's what tells you what to do when you solo" (Berliner, 1994, p. 207). This "third ear" approach allows jazz musicians to temporarily weaken the link between their identities and what they are doing in the moment. This separation between conscious control and the improvising self does not mean that intention is gone – it is still simultaneously present with intuitive action. However, jazz musicians work toward being able to keep the impulse toward control off to the side, as a listener, rather than as the primary driver of action. (para. 25)

Although the Black Men in Education participants didn't talk about using mindfulness practices, they did talk about cultivating mindsets that helped them stay focused in the present moment.

Darius describes being hesitant to connect with his classmates at the beginning of the semester.

I definitely would say, from my first day here, and then present day it's definitely a huge difference. And I think that is just time, and being open to meeting new people... I wasn't kind of timid to speak or anything, but now I definitely don't feel any resistance to speaking because I know everybody in here is on the same path, trying to get to the same place. We are trying to get our goals, so it's just like we all help each other... And then also, with a learning environment, everybody in here is trying to learn.... So just connecting with everybody in here and understanding each other and just pushing each

other, it definitely helps versus doing all by yourself and then being on the Zoom call. So I will feel connection is important thing.

Coming to these conclusions is not small feat. Students who were raised on social media have an exacerbated feeling of being on display. They are accustomed to being judged or measured against in the form of “likes.” Letting go of the need to present a curated image in front of the same people who wield the “like” button in other spaces requires a great deal of vulnerability. Darius lets go of self-consciousness by putting his relationship with the Black Men in Education participants in perspective. He realizes that there is no reason to feel like he doesn’t belong or have anything valuable to contribute because all his peers are in the same position.

Professor Orion shares a similar perspective. He gets caught in the need to continually improve and finds that doing so detracts from his ability to stay present. He shares:

A lot of times when we think about like, being bettered. We think about like, I don't know, adding to the fuel efficiency of our car. Like, yesterday, our car went 363 miles on a full on the full tank and getting better is the car going 380 miles on full tank, whereas Dr. Carter eloquently kind of shifted it to “best” being your best and your most efficient. I learned from you guys a lot. On the sense of I balance a lot of different things. You know, sometimes I get so caught up in just getting things done that I don't think about am I feeling anxious today? You know, I don't think of like, if I need a break. You know what I mean, like, I don't think about how my temperament can impact my interactions with other people.

Professor Orion uses a method similar to Darius’s to remind himself to stay grounded in the present. He reflects:

But then I see you guys being students. And again, I sat in your same seats not too long ago. So just thinking about what you guys are going through—COVID protocols and stuff like that. It’s just like, I know I wouldn't have been as successful as most of you guys in this same circumstance at 17 years old... So you guys very much do inspire me... to realize what things can make me most effective. I pride myself on being a better person every day. But I want to focus and be intentional about being my best self, my best conscious self every day, like if I can achieve being my best self every day, then that's, that's fine. And so the car... if my best self is only 250 miles today on this full tank today, then I'm going to make sure every 250 miles that I drive counts.

Now that our journey through the improvisational space in Scholars Studio's Black Men in Education community is coming to a close, I pause to cast a wider gaze and ask, What does improvisation open for teacher-learners? As we have explored, it helps balance tension between the planned and lived curricula, thus allowing a meaningful lived curriculum to emerge. The pandemic has made this all the more critical. Perhaps one of the most transformational qualities of improvisation is its insistence that we shut down the critics—if just momentarily—to inhabit a third space between the community with whom we make music and wisdom deep within ourselves. Improvisation pushes us to show up more fully for ourselves and others, as Peplowski (1998) describes:

Doing the minimum is impossible in a jazz group. If we did that, all we would do is play the melody and go home. Instead, when we make jazz music everybody does their job, but then builds out from that point and starts thinking independently. As I've said, the best music doesn't come from one person—the leader—standing up and dictating what everybody else should do. I lead by listening to the other musicians and reacting to them. They know they have the freedom within the structure that they are given in the songs and the chords. Within those structures they realize that they have the license to be very creative and to make me change my mind and go into different directions. (p. 560)

Herein lies the beauty of improvisation in Scholars Studio. The faculty don't dictate all the moves. They provide the structure, set a rhythm and give the students the freedom to find themselves in the music.

Coming and Going

The journey undertaken in this chapter ushered students, faculty, and reader across the bridge, and into new land. During these travels, we explored the importance of being in touch with African and African American history. This historical perspective provides a fuller view of American history. It connects students with their ancestors who shaped this country. And it introduces us to a philosophy of wholeness that is embodied symbolically and ceremonially—a philosophy that may provide insight on how to heal our fragmented society.

As we crossed the bridge, we considered the edges—the precarious ones that cause us to tremble and those that open new possibilities. These edges push us outside of our comfort zones in search of wholeness. We then explored the concept of fractals and how they teach us that what we do on the small scale is magnified on a larger scale. In order to manifest a vision, it must be practiced at the micro level. On our search for wholeness, we considered how to connect with one another across difference through inter-generational solidarity. Once we reached the end of the bridge—its final edge—we thought about how we might recast our relationship with margins. In dialogue with bell hooks, we considered how gaining power within the existing system requires us to adopt the methods and goals of the oppressor, thus perpetuating the system. Liberation comes, instead, from harnessing individual, communal, and cultural power. Our exploration of themes concludes as we stepped off the bridge into new terrain. Using the wisdom and experience that we already cultivated, we improvised to create new possibilities. On the final leg of our journey, Chapter Six, I explore what these themes offer as Scholars Studio continues to *become*.

CHAPTER SIX THE WHAT AND THE WONDER

Nothing is hidden. All we want to know is available in each moment. (Huber, 1990, p. 6)

As I've worked on the final chapters of this dissertation, I've taken a parallel journey with a second iteration of the Black Men in Education learning community. This time we explored the informal and formal spaces where men learn through an inquiry called *The Shop: Black Men in Education from Community to Classroom*. The timing of the two was impeccable, as the research and practice joined in a reciprocal relationship that deepened my understanding of *bridging* in Scholars Studio.

Other Bridges

One observation that stands out across the two communities is that *what* we bridge matters. To explain, I return to the metaphoric bridge. Imagine this bridge crosses a river. If I follow the main footpath onto the bridge, I will reach the landmass on the other side without much trouble. This bridge stands beside the ruins of another bridge that has been partially dismantled or left to decay. The other bridge used to carry pedestrians across the water until the new one was built. I might be tempted to take that bridge because I am accustomed to following the path it meets. When I step onto the planks that remain at the edge of the river and look out across a line of bare posts jutting from the water, I might forego the crossing, and if I take the chance, perhaps I abandon the mission when the water swells around my splintered perch, and the distance to the other side feels too far.

Moved to Wonder

At times, faculty members' conception of education, and particularly what it means to be a college professor, veer them toward the dilapidated bridge. This happens when expectations and reality are misaligned. For example, faculty often expect first-year students to be strong

readers and find that students struggle with text more than anticipated. Maintaining high standards is not unreasonable, but refusing to meet the students where they are on principle creates hardships for everyone.

Other times, faculty and students cross the bridge unhindered. Those moments are often brief, uncomplicated, and embodied. This semester, meaningful bridging occurred during easy conversations at a barber shop where we talked about the informal spaces that nurture and educate Black men. Those conversations flowed effortlessly as questions were passed back and forth, deepening and affirming the importance of the Shop as a space for community, mentoring, and safety in the lives of Black boys and men. My mind is also drawn to the memories of the faculty and students on the golf course as they played together, delighting when the ball lifted in an arc after a particularly well focused swing. And, I am especially drawn to the images I carry of the students and faculty during the debrief after they completed their culminating project, which involved creating and teaching a lesson at a school. I can't quite explain what it means to see students hold themselves differently after a powerful experience, but perhaps I can offer a few of the details that led to that moment:

We arrive at the school and students are assigned classrooms based on their lesson's target grade-level. The faculty and staff from Scholars Studio spread out to observe. I join Alana in the second-grade classroom. "Who wants to help me pass out papers?" She begins. Every hand shoots up. Barely able to contain their excitement, the children stand on the tips of their toes, leaning forward and waving their hands to catch her attention. Alana points to a boy and girl in the middle of the room who beam with the pure joy of being chosen. She takes a breath and smiles. In that moment, nervousness and hesitation drain from her body. She stands firmly and calmly, responding to the students' energy. (personal reflection, 2023)

Alana appears to gather her confidence when the students meet her with enthusiasm. Their response moves her. Levin (1985/2003) asks:

By what are we touched, by what moved? Touching presupposes our capacity to be correspondingly touched, and this primordial reciprocity calls into question our inveterate

tendency to polarize the tactile field into a subject and its object and lose touch with Being as a whole. (p. 129)

I wish to dwell here for a moment. While observing the lesson, audible laughter escaped my mouth. I use passive voice to describe this moment because it felt involuntary and spontaneous. I was shocked by the children's joy and enthusiasm. College freshmen, in contrast, are often afraid to be seen as interested or enthusiastic. Much of our work in Scholars Studio is directed toward reigniting the curiosity and joy that burns so brightly in younger students. As Alana continues her studies in education, she will be taught about objectives, standards, and assessment through which she will track her students' development of vocabulary, reading skills, etc. But what of their joy, and what of Alana's joy? When does learning cease to delight? Does strict adherence to the curriculum deemphasize the relationship between teacher and learner while elevating the importance of the object(ives) the curriculum aims to achieve? If this does, indeed, happen, what *moves* teacher and learner?

As Chapter Five reveals, improvisation creates a third space for listening and creatively responding in the Black Men in Education community. Teachers and students are moved by the beat and inspired to create melodies and harmonies together. What does it mean for Alana to see objectives, standards, assessments, and other elements of education as tools or instruments rather than *the* way? What will happen if she continues to be moved by the children? Levin (1985/2003) offers insight, reflecting on how tools mediate in the reciprocal relationship between cabinet maker and wood:

Touching a deep, and deeply hidden truth, the thoughtful maker of cabinets touches the wood he is using with fingers sensitive to the precise needs of the wood. He lets his fingers, and the work of his hands, be *attuned* by the wood. The wood *speaks* through its grain, and the hand is *moved* in response. He takes pride in his tools and handles them with a timeless care. As he planes the wood, he caresses the grain. In the flow of his movements we will observe poise and grace; and in his gentle touching and holding we may sense a visible tact.

In this depiction, the wood is not an object to be shaped; rather, it holds the wisdom of its becoming, and the cabinet maker—with experience and reverence—tunes into and follows the grains in each unique board. The reciprocal relationship between carpenter and wood is central, and the tool the carpenter uses to shape the wood, complements the dance rather than leads it.

Imagine an alternative possibility where the cabinet maker constructs products based on standard specifications. Knots and other aberrations in the wood—which contribute to the uniqueness and beauty of the cabinets in Levin’s depiction—are now considered defects that interfere with uniformity. Suddenly, the value of cabinet maker, wood, tool, and cabinet are diminished. The cabinet maker has moved from craftsman whose mode of being in the world is deep listening and reverence to technician who follows instructions to create products. The former is irreplaceable because his work becomes more refined and exquisite as his attunement with the wood deepens. He bears knowledge that is not found in an instruction manual and makes decisions based on his relationship with the wood and understanding of how it responds to his touch. The latter is not permitted to make decisions that produce unique outcomes. In fact, that is discouraged. He knows he can be replaced as quickly as another person can be taught to use his tools. Similarly, the wood is not valued for its uniqueness. In fact, the more uniform, the better, and if chemicals must be applied to saplings or genetic manipulation undertaken, so be it. The cabinet that emerges from this process is not unique, nor does it bear the wisdom of the cabinet maker. It is unremarkable and replaceable.

Moving Toward Becoming

Levin’s cabinets serve as a good metaphor for what happens when the curriculum is implemented in a technical manner—when the wholeness that comes from a deeply attuned relationship with teacher and learner is decentered by test preparation and inflexible objectives.

The technical approach causes us to lose sight of what it means to teach and learn as a whole, connected, living process. It doesn't honor difference, and it renders bridging unnecessary or extraneous.

The Scholars Studio faculty were tuned into the shortcomings of the technical curriculum and concerned that it had failed to adequately support the growth and identity development of their students. The curriculum's failure to connect Black students with their history and culture has been a longstanding concern that Carter G. Woodson (2009) wrote about nearly 100 years ago in his seminal work, *The Miseducation of the Negro*:

We must bear in mind that the Negro has never been educated. He has merely been informed about other things, which he has not been permitted to do. The Negroes have been shoved out of the regular schools through the rear door into the obscurity of the backyard and told to imitate others whom they see from afar. (p. 67)

Differentiating between education and indoctrination, Woodson disputes the idea that Black children could receive a strong education within an oppressive system. The curriculum that emerges in these spaces serves to perpetuate the master narrative, which rejects the notion that they are self-determined people with rich histories and cultures.

Understanding this, the Scholars Studio faculty were not content with simply meeting the goals stated in the department's common syllabi. Seeking to create a growth-oriented learning experience, they found themselves in resonance with Freire (1998) who felt that reducing education to a technical process diminishes its power. "If we have any serious regard for what it means to be human," Freire writes, "the teaching of contents cannot be separated from the moral formation of the learners" (p. 39). Moreover, "The condition of becoming is the condition of being... It is not possible to imagine the human condition disconnected from the ethical condition" (Freire, 1998, p. 39). Contextualizing Black history in each of the learning

community courses was one means for encouraging students to find their unique voices and identities.

The faculty were equipped to support students in a process of self-discovery because they had invested a great deal of time into their own intellectual and identity development. Like the deeply attuned cabinet maker, they could respond pedagogically with what is right and good. As Lynn (2006) notes in a study of Black male teachers from Los Angeles, “Black men teachers are able to use their own experiences with oppression to understand their students’ daily struggles with race and class expression” (p. 2518). The pedagogies of the teachers who he features in his study vary depending on their experiences and worldviews; whereas, one teacher values structure and discipline, another seeks to create liberatory space by encouraging students to use their own languages to negotiate understanding and power (p. 2518).

To understand why it’s so important for men to feel empowered to bring their identities into the teaching/learning space, it may be helpful to ask what happens when men are expected to conform to a single pedagogy? If, for example, the discipline-oriented perspective is valued, students may not be given the opportunity to examine power, or they may not find spaces where their language is affirmed. Boys who push boundaries or think outside the box may feel like they don’t belong in learning spaces, or that their creativity or free thinking is not valued. On the other hand, students who are never exposed to the highly structured, discipline-oriented teacher, may be at a disadvantage in situations where discipline is prudent. Boys who thrive in highly structured environments may feel lost or overwhelmed. When diverse perspectives and identities are affirmed, students learn that there is a spectrum of masculinity, there are different methods for negotiating the world, they belong, and in fact, their uniqueness is an asset. In Scholars Studio, the faculty draw upon their lived experiences to walk with students as they embrace joy

and claim space. The faculty members' commitment to helping students become more fully themselves marks a step toward transforming the technical curriculum. They understand that meaningful teaching/learning does more than simply impart knowledge. It is an ethical practice oriented toward supporting learners' *being-becoming*. Reclaiming the purpose of education by asking *what* it is (or could be), as the Scholars Studio faculty did, is a powerful first step toward transformation. In the next section, I explore what it means to ask that simple yet profound question in the teaching/learning space.

The What

Tuning into the *what* of a thing is foremost a question of method. I am, after all, called to ask the, ostensibly, simple question—*What is education?* Or, more specifically, *What does it mean to teach/learn/bridge in Scholars Studio?*—because hermeneutic phenomenology orients in that direction. Those questions have been calling me since my engagement with the Black Men in Education community commenced. The importance of the *what* question is magnified by the pattern of tension that the faculty experienced between the departments' prescriptive curriculum and the faculty members' notion of what it means to educate young, Black men. At the heart of the tension is the idea that the curriculum and its accompanying assessments are oriented toward “imitation” (as Woodson articulated it) rather than education or transformation.

As we look back to the themes from Chapter Five—which include the meaning of navigating edges, the transformative potential of embodied connection with history, thinking the world whole as an antidote to fragmentation and oppression, and improvisation as a means of creatively holding tension—it's helpful to understand that different communities would likely open a different set of themes. The one element that would likely remain consistent in an exploration of bridging in Scholars Studio is the *what* matters.

What do I mean? Often, we think we know *what* something is, yet we never experience it directly. An example of this is curricula that's oriented toward passing exams. This schema prepares students by presenting information and accompanying practice questions, providing quizzes to prepare for exams, and administering exams. Here, the exam, rather than learning, becomes the *what*. Students could, conceivably, pass the exam without learning anything that has meaning in their own lives, or they could become disinterested in the curriculum because it is disconnected from a whole, lived reality. The question that bridging opens is, *What* are we connecting? *What* is meaningful? The *what* question was central to the Black Men in Education community because the participants were, essentially, asking what it means to educate Black men: *What do Black men need to thrive? What does it mean for Black men to bring themselves wholly into the education space?*

In the sections that follow, I continue to open what it means to be connected with the *what*—a phenomenological question that seeks deeper understanding. I then open the inquiry wider, exploring the aspects of *the what* that capture imagination, spark curiosity, and elicit joy, which I'm calling *the wonder*. Together, *the what* and *the wonder* offer an opening for deepening our relationship with one another and the lived possibilities of education.

In Search of the Right Questions

I want to pause to acknowledge what it meant to undertake this research at the tail end of the pandemic. Whether it was serendipitous or merely circumstantial, I suspect that many of the insights that this inquiry opened would not have emerged had my timeline been different. The pandemic pushed a particular set of questions to the fore—some related to the rapid changes that most of us experienced beginning in 2020, such as, *What does education look like in the context of uncertainty?* Or maybe more to the point: *What does it mean to teach and learn when the*

future is unclear? These questions were important for The Black Men’s community because, although the Scholars Studio experience was rich, and by all accounts, meaningful, the students were more disengaged than past cohorts. Part of our work that semester was coming to terms with what it meant to be together after we had been apart for so long. That year, we sought to understand what had changed. The pre-pandemic questions— *How can we improve? How can we increase ...? How can we be more effective or efficient?*— felt insufficient or misguided. We were in new territory that called on us to rethink, re-envision, and reclaim education.

Off Course

The need to think about how we frame questions (inquiries) is easily lost when we take what we know for granted. I have worked in higher education for nearly two decades and rarely hear people question even the most mundane aspects of the experience. Why, for example, are midterms and final exams engrained in the process? Is this the best format for assessing student progress? Why do we maintain disciplinary divisions? Is this the best method for acquiring and producing knowledge? As I hear myself ask these questions, I question why I’m framing them in terms of “best?” Why this unit of comparison? Why the need for comparison? Are there questions that are more open, abundant and lifegiving? There are a million other questions where these begin, but it holds that we often think we know something because we’ve done it and repeated it, and maybe we’re even good at it. *It is the way it is*, and that’s what we know.

What’s Normal?

The pandemic presented hard questions. Despite the pain that this rupture caused, it seems to have opened possibilities insofar as it presented us with important questions about the *what? What is education? What is teaching? What is learning?* To open these questions, I return to the history of the university’s founding as a normal school, referenced in Chapter Four.

Normal Schools were institutions dedicated to teacher training. The term *normal* derives from the Latin word *normalis*, meaning “in conformity with, rule, normal” (Etymonline, n.d.). Normal schools were, quite literally, designed to inculcate trainees with the *norms* of teaching and the rules of social order that are often transmitted through the hidden curricula and classroom management processes.

While teacher preparation programs have evolved and there is considerable difference across programs, there is no doubt that certain norms continue to be passed along. Rector-Aranda (2016) discusses how Eurocentric values show up in school curricula and policies. One such example is the notion of rugged individualism that perpetuates the myth of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, thus placing the blame for low test scores and other perceived failures on students, families, communities, or individual schools rather than systems. She adds, “Quietness, orderliness and courteousness are the types of behavior especially valued in educational settings, and even radically enforced in the ‘totalizing environments’ of some privatized charter schools in minority communities” (p. 7). Students are taught that these behaviors are desirable, thus problematizing other modes of being.

Parallels can be drawn between social rules and laws insofar as the behaviors that are taught in school serve to uphold the State’s political, social, and economic systems. As Gordon (2021) points out, rules don’t serve all members of society equally. Evidence of this is found in the fact that members of minority groups are held accountable to rules at disproportionate rates. Black boys, for example, are subjected to harsher punishments than their White peers (Blake et al., 2016). Similarly, Black people are convicted of crimes and punished at disproportionate rates (Banks et al., 2006). Laws, and by extension, rules, in many schools, maintain the social order that, from this country’s founding, was inherently unequal, unjust, and violent—as exemplified

in the genocide of Native Americans, enslavement of African people and in some cases Native Americans, ethnocide in Indian boarding schools, Jim Crow, mass incarceration, and beyond.

As discussed in Chapter Five, a similar phenomenon impacted many of the Black Men in Education participants insofar as they did not feel supported by the systems in which they were educated. They received messages that their identities put them at odds with institutional rules or norms, thus resulting in a degree of invisibility. Further, as Dr. King points out, even when he follows all the rules, holds a Ph.D. and presents himself professionally, he is not immune to racist overtures.

In conversation with Fanon, Gordon (2021) writes that the oppressor rationalizes the exclusion of those who are oppressed on moral grounds. In other words, their exclusion is just, and by that reasoning, their mere presence is an act of violence. “The only just condition they would accept is the maintenance of the status quo or, worse, [their] annihilation” (p. 36). Gordon writes:

Thus, transformation, decolonization, is for such governors intrinsically unjust. A similar logic applies to social remedy such as affirmative action. If the dominant group’s advantages are just and systematically link to the disadvantages of other groups in that society, then the dominant group’s advantages are just. To transform that would therefore be unjust. (p. 36)

I wish to pause here to acknowledge that I scripted these thoughts before the Supreme Court’s recent decisions deeming affirmative action at Harvard University and the University of North Carolina unconstitutional. It’s anticipated that the ramifications of these rulings will be widespread. Just days after the decisions were announced, high school students are already scrambling to rethink their college application strategies. In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Aliya Crawley, a 17 year-old Black student from Detroit says, “I will likely have to limit myself to only applying to historically black colleges, rather than having the opportunity to get

accepted to Ivy Leagues” (Natanson, 2023). The Supreme Court’s decision may bolster HBCU enrollment rates; however, it will also almost certainly undo decades worth of progress in expanding access and opportunities to Black, Latinx, and other people.

Toward a Third-Space

In the wake of the most recent affirmative action decisions and the Supreme Court’s upending of other legal precedents, it is easy to succumb to feelings of hopelessness. Ironically, teaching is a profession of hope. It takes a great deal of hope to face students every day knowing that the future is uncertain. In the way that the farmer sows seeds each spring, teachers tend to the hearts and minds of their students with the knowledge that they may one day bloom. They continue to show up despite the possibility that harsh conditions will interfere hinder growth.

In a time when extreme right conservatives are taking draconian measures to legislate control over women’s bodies, the rights of transgender people, and the teaching of Critical Race Theory, people of different walks of life are claiming space and demanding that their voices be heard. As I write this, only a short time has passed since Black lawmakers Justin Jones and Justin Pearson rattled Tennessee’s racist political structure. They gained national recognition when, in the wake of a mass shooting, House Speaker Cameron Sexton blocked them from speaking about gun reform, and after a week of being silenced, they staged a protest along with White colleague, Gloria Johnson. The House voted to expel the Black lawmakers on the grounds of breaking decorum while the White lawmaker was allowed to remain (McGrady & Cochrane, 2023).

The blatant unfairness of this ruling catapulted the *Justins*—as they became known—to the national stage. To Gordon’s (2021) point, the unequal application of the decorum standard provided one more example of how rules are applied inconsistently to maintain the status quo. In the days after their expulsion, stories surfaced about the abusive and predatory behavior of some

of the lawmakers who voted to remove Pearson and Jones. *Decorum*, it seems, is code for Whiteness or, perhaps more accurately, maintaining the social structures of the privileged group.

Gordon (2021) suggests that to overcome this challenge, we need to expand our norms:

A way of thinking otherwise has been offered by the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu, who argued for the expansion of epistemic and normative life through appealing to our already-given capacity to communicate across different languages and learn new words, new concepts, and I here insist, develop new values. In other words, just as we could learn new ideas, we could also develop new norms. There is much evidence for this that in the varieties or ways we are relating to each other in sexual orientation and technologies of embodiment. (p. 49)

Gordon's observations open new questions: If instilling norms is in the DNA of education, how might we develop new norms that are inclusive of the spectrum of human experiences? The men in the Black Men in Education community were undertaking this project by unapologetically claiming space. Throughout the semester, they insisted on being themselves. Their clothing choices and communication styles reflected aspects of their unique personalities. Dr. Carter often wore daishikis in honor of his African heritage, and Professor Orion sported fashionable ensembles with custom jewelry.

They also wove African American English (AAE) into Standard English. The use of AAE in learning settings has long been a source of controversy; however, the faculty, in alignment with many linguists, consider it a site of power. Baker-Bell (2020) notes that AAE is not bad or grammatically incorrect English, as many believe. Rather, it reflects the history of African people in America. An actual language, AAE has grammatical roots in West African languages, and has been traced back to enslaved Africans (p. 3). Baker-Bell offers:

People's language experiences are not separate from their racial experiences. Indeed, the way a Black child's language is devalued in school reflects how Black lives are devalued in the world. Similarly, the way a white child's language is privileged and deemed the norm in schools is directly connected to the invisible ways that white culture is deemed normal, neutral, and superior in the world. (p. 2)

The *claiming* process that the faculty undertake through clothing, language, and other means, is not a form of “coloniality,” which seeks to bend logic and reason to the worldview of a single subjugating force. Rather, it’s an opening—a third space that is ripe with creativity and vision. The faculty position Afro-centric culture within erudite conversations, thereby disrupting binary logic that seeks to stereotype and position them within hierarchal relationships. The third-space that the faculty create is similar to the opening created by HBCUs. HBCUs were founded to serve Black people who were disenfranchised from White systems of education, but they welcomed all people, thus creating new ground for people of different backgrounds to come together and effect social change. Jones and Pearson, likewise, opened a third space. When Jones was reinstated, one of the Republican lawmakers asked if he would “act different.” Jones turned the question back on him, asking if he planned to do the same—in one breath highlighting the hypocrisy and signaling his refusal to feed into the hierarchal binary the lawmaker sought to maintain (Craig & Wax-Thibodeaux, 2023).

Uncovering Meaning: Getting to What’s Right and Good

While I was revisiting my observational notes during the interpretive phase of this research, I paid close attention to the faculty members’ deep commitment to the students, which was evident in the frequency of meetings convened to discuss progress; their willingness to reach out to students to offer assistance and support; the communication of care and love at every opportunity; the evidence of “walking with” students outside of class to ensure they were learning; and, their willingness to admit when they felt defeated. These gestures embodied *love*, *care*, *community*, and *vulnerability*. It would be challenging to understand what unfolded in Scholars Studio without recognizing these qualities as central to their work.

Moreover, the transcripts also revealed tension between the *what* and what is “supposed” to be. I don’t think it would be overly dramatic to characterize the unease this created among the faculty as grief or dismay. The faculty wanted to know that they were making an impact, but they weren’t sure how to get there because the old approaches seemed insufficient. The usual means for assessing progress did not adequately capture the positive aspects of what unfolded that semester.

The Heart of the Matter

The Black Men in Education community grappled with the question of *what* matters. They consistently asked, *Is meeting rigid learning goals of utmost importance as the syllabus suggests?* Or, phrased in another way, *How do we manage the tension between what the department has deemed most important and what we deem most important?* Students were less invested in learning in the fall of 2021 than they would typically be in Scholars Studio. This was a point of concern; however, there were a number of indications that pointed toward personal and intellectual growth, including developing in their self-understanding, connecting with the importance and power of Black history, feeling affirmed, and developing meaningful relationships. The tension that the faculty experienced, points toward a need to examine curricular goals and values in order to uncover the *what* of learning in Scholars Studio.

To elucidate why the *what* matters, it might be helpful to consider the workplace performance evaluation. If my work performance were evaluated based on the number of emails I generate, the speed at which I respond to chats on Teams, and the number of hours I spend in meetings—tasks that are required but not central to my job—I would either have to accept a poor performance review or abandon the most important aspects of my job to focus on the standards that the Human Resources Office values. In other words, rather than shedding light on my

contributions, these performance objectives would hinder my progress within the organization or distract me from doing the work central to my job. The outputs that the Human Resources Office values are easy to quantify, but they don't align with *what* is most meaningful about my work.

Identifying *what* is most important helps us remain oriented to our work.

Re-orienting

The technical curriculum veers into this territory. As an example, we recently contracted an organization to train student leaders in restorative justice—a process we use in the living-learning space in the summer. The experience was powerful. The students were ushered through the Circle process and introduced to the West African and Native American roots of the practice. They were taught about the values and principles of restorative justice and shown case studies from a variety of settings. Their responses to a couple application questions called into question their understanding of the process. After the second day of training, I had a conversation with the students about their perceptions of restorative justice. Some seemed to genuinely understand and appreciate the process; however, the majority interpreted the training through a punitive lens. I had not expected the leaders to undergo a full paradigm shift in two days. In fact, I understood that some might not accept the restorative justice philosophy at all, and others would not shift their mindset during the time we were together. I found it instructive that the students excelled at the assessments, which included Circle facilitation and the recall of principles. On the surface, they appeared to “get it,” but a lot more work would be required for them to be able to live out the principles. In other words, they had achieved mastery over a set of pre-determined objectives, but they had not internalized what they learned. They were not moved by it.

Recognizing Systems/Frameworks. As I reflect on this experience, I think about how Scholars Studio sharpened my thinking about curriculum, thereby leading to these insights. In

turn, I think about what meaning might be extended from these insights to the Black Men in Education community. My first observation is that many of the student leaders do not recognize that restorative justice and punitive justice use different frameworks or systems. Absent this understanding, they apply the practices from restorative justice to a punitive framework. For example, when thinking about how to establish a harmonious living environment within the residence hall suites, the leaders develop suite rules and then have a conversation with the students about how to abide by them.

The fact that the leaders take the time to have conversations with the students, indicates that they understand restorative justice requires open communication; however, restorative justice also calls for community involvement and consensus building. All residents in the suite should buy into the standards. Consensus building is time consuming and challenging. It requires that leaders relinquish a degree of control and trust their community, an orientation that might rub against deep-seated fears or trauma. Similarly, Scholars Studio operates within paradigms that are unfamiliar to many faculty and students. In Scholars Studio, we aim to use restorative versus punitive processes, emergent versus technical curricula, integrated versus atomized disciplines, communal vs. individualistic approaches, etc. As we support participants in making these shifts, it may be helpful to be explicit about the how the framework for each approach shifts mindset and practice.

Cultivating the Capacity for Restorative Practice. My second observation about the limitations of the technical curriculum relates to the leaders' capacity to engage in restorative practice. While I believe that all of them have the intellectual capacity to learn restorative justice, many of them have not developed the skills needed to carry out the process. One area that requires development is listening for understanding. Our leaders want to be helpful and,

oftentimes, rush to give advice instead of taking the time to listen. Similarly, they are often passionate about advocating for the students and may rush to their defense without seeking to understand the full picture. Orienting toward listening, asking open questions, suspending judgement, and seeking understanding is imperative for carrying out the practice. In this time of harsh political divisions, seeking understanding is a radical gesture. Likewise, In Scholars Studio, it's important to recognize that listening deeply and holding space for others is counter-cultural, and if we seek to orient toward one another in that way, we need to intentionally build that practice into the curriculum. In both Scholars Studio and the summer program, high stress situations may cause participants to revert back to old responses. It would be helpful to have an experienced practitioner embedded in the living-learning space to walk with them as they navigate the practice.

Engaging the Ethical and Psychological Dimensions of the Practice. During the training, I observed that the technical elements were tended to over the more subjective psychological or ethical elements. Perhaps if we had had more time, these conversations would have emerged. Nevertheless, ignoring them shuts down the conversation from the beginning. For example, some of the leaders were victims of violent crime. If they perceive restorative justice as a softer response or feel like their experiences are not honored, they may not be open to hearing how it could be used to repair harm.

Similarly, leaders with emotional triggers may need a therapeutic intervention before they feel safe or able to conduct a Circle effectively. Other leaders may benefit from emotional self-regulation techniques, such as breathing exercises or meditation in order to remain present and grounded. These ideas apply to Scholars Studio as well insofar as Scholars Studio often explores social justice issues. For many students, these issues are not abstractions. They tap into lived

realities. It's important to understand that while the inquiry may be compelling, it may also push them into emotionally vulnerable territory.

Pedagogical Tact

With these thoughts in mind, I return to van Manen's (2015) definition of pedagogy: "distinguishing what is good and right from what is bad or wrong in our ways of interacting with [students]" (p. 33). This definition is open and abundant; it acknowledges that there are many ways to be with students, and that pedagogy is about orienting to what is good or right in the moment, rather than what has been prescribed. Van Manen writes:

Teaching [is never a simple affair] that can be handled by means of rules and recipes. Situational predicaments that can be "solved" by techniques and procedures are not ethical predicaments. And so pedagogy is both the tactful ethical practice of our actions as well as the doubting, questioning and reflecting on our actions and practice. (p. 33)

Let's return to the predicament of the Black Men in Education faculty who struggled to balance what was right for students with their expectations for academic engagement. Interpreting this dilemma using van Manen's definition of pedagogy, I think about education as a practice of connecting and orienting. Applying this lens, I am attuned to the *what* of my discipline—what questions does it pose? What perspectives does it offer? What methods does it use? What openings does it create? What blind spots are present? Likewise, I tune into the *what* of my course—what insights does it open? What voices does it affirm? What connections does it make? What engagements does it encourage? I also consider my teaching philosophy, my students' needs, and the program's mission. I consider history along with the current circumstances. I think about the ethics of my choices, and even after all this careful consideration, I understand that I will worry about whether I made the right decisions. When I am clear about *what* is important, I can use that as my compass. This awareness may awaken me to the ways in which the prescription or map moves teacher and learner away from whole,

connected learning in the same way that the misaligned performance evaluation does in the earlier scenario.

Orienting to the *What*

Considering the importance of knowing the *what*, a logical question may be, What approaches are useful for gaining clear-sightedness? Following van Manen's lead, I propose an open approach that orients rather than prescribes. Robinson-Morris (2019) contributes to this conversation with a method he refers to as bricolage. A concept brought to light by Levi-Strauss, bricolage is the art of gathering an array of found objects and repurposing them for something new (p. 88). In art, bricolage may take the form of a collage or sculpture constructed with materials that were originally used for other purposes. Robinson-Morris contends that "methodological diversity yields new modes of thought and opens the cognitive space to think the once unthinkable, which has the potential to manifest new ontological perspectives" (p. 90). He continues:

Interdisciplinarity, then, becomes a most important aspect of bricolage. In fact, Kincheloe (2001), in agreement with (re)thinking as (non)method, argues that bricolage operates as a deep form of interdisciplinarity and states, "bricolage is unembarrassed in its effort to rupture particular ways of functioning in the established disciplines of research." (p. 90)

In his own research, Robinson-Morris bricolages hermeneutic phenomenology and narrative inquiry, among other methodologies, and in so doing, creates an improvisational space that ruptures old ways of thinking while developing creative possibilities.

The formal research methods that he uses, and I use here, have the potential to yield rich insights, but it's important to acknowledge that we cannot always be engaged in formal research. Sometimes workloads and time constraints preclude us from that level of engagement. The question arises, then, *How can professors remain oriented to the what when it's not possible to commit to formal research?* I propose that we use the concept of bricolage to think about

integrating practices into our pedagogies that expand our perspective and keep us oriented to the *what*. I understand bricolage as method that engages questions from different angles, and layers on itself to create a methodological third space. I am interested in this idea because when I think about getting to know the *what* of education, I recognize that it is not a single essentialized thing. In that regard, getting to know the *what* means opening possibilities. In the section that follows, I offer one method for exploring the *what: embodied insight*. I highlight this mode of inquiry because it reveals itself throughout my research and is accessible to faculty at any time. This represents one layer or texture in the bricolage among many possible layers.

Embodied Insight

In Chapter Five, I explore how the embodied practice of restorative circles helps practitioners enter new ontological realities. These insights have sparked my curiosity about the possibilities of using embodiment toward transformative change. I am also interested in continuing to explore the ways in which embodied engagement opens understanding. I focus on the latter in this section, as it offers a means for understanding the *what*.

Western thought has historically placed the mind and body in a hierarchical relationship. Levin (2003) observes that this tradition has

Vigorously fought to suppress the life and truth of the body, and, secondly, the mainstream of our tradition has steadfastly excluded ancient spiritual teachings—traditions of ancient universal wisdom—which speak in archetypal and mythopoetic language of the body’s deep ontological understanding of Being and of the ways to bring it forth. (pp. 4-5)

Children are socialized to detach from their bodies at an early age. They are taught to sit quietly at their desks and suppress natural urges to move. They are taught that movement distracts them from learning, and that the physicality of their body shares little relationship with the mind. As they age, they are taught to be ashamed of their bodies. They learn that some bodies are better or

more desirable than others, and they are bombarded with messages that push diet culture, unrealistic fitness standards, and cosmetic surgeries. Body standards are an ever-moving target, and young people are taught to believe that their bodies are problems to be solved. In this system, bodies are commodifiable objects subject to control and containment rather than sacred, life-giving, and wise.

Despite the shame and control that is often projected on the body, it's hard to escape the fact that they also hold a great deal of power and potential. The Bodies of Writing exercise described in Chapter Five marked a step toward reclaiming and affirming the power of the body. It acknowledged that our bodies are, after all, what connect us with the world and one another. They sense and respond and move mind-fully. They are sources of comfort and pain. They bear our grief and joy. It's not hard to see how a system of thought that severs the mind from the body also severs people from a sense of connection and relation—and how, in return, this might translate to systems of violence against the body and human spirit on the scale of slavery, colonialism, and mass incarceration.

Mind/Body Wisdom

What, then, would it mean to be intentional about reuniting the mind and body? Levin (2003) seeks to bring body and mind together in a movement from metaphysical to ontological thinking. He writes:

We must retrieve the ontological body. We must actually let go of our dualistic, propositional way of 'thinking.' Metaphysical thinking takes place only in the theoretical 'mind,' and is always an 'I think (=represent to myself) that...' Ontological thinking is radically different: it engages us in the opening wholeness of our being, and 'takes place' as much in the life of our feet and hands and eyes as it does in our head, our brains, or our 'mind.' (p. 56)

In my own life I have observed a remarkable difference between operating with a bifurcated mind-and-body and being present with my body. I spend a lot of time in the former state; however, one memory of embodied presence that stands out occurred when I attended a workshop in Tatamagouche, Nova Scotia, offered through Parker Palmer's Center for Courage and Renewal. Time was spent learning how to hold space for one another in an effort to access our innate wisdom or what Palmer refers to as the *inner teacher*. Participants presented situations with which they were struggling, and the rest of us were to ask open, non-leading questions while abstaining from offering advice. We were encouraged to hold the silence rather than fill the space with chatter when we weren't sure what to ask. Here is a brief recollection from that experience:

The first participant speaks. I listen. At first I'm overwhelmed with the need to say something and, even more, to find the right thing to say. I pause because anything that comes to mind feels like it stems from a need to be seen as competent or useful. I experience this as tension in my chest that borders on panic. I breathe into that sensation and feel my chest tighten again. This time I'm thinking about the person who just shared her story, and I'm afraid of what the silence may communicate. Maybe she thinks she's shocked us into silence or that we don't care. Maybe she feels vulnerable, and that's amplified in the silence. I breathe through the need to stave off her discomfort, and what's left is the memory of the sensation I felt while listening to her story. Her voice was steady at times and quivering at others. The unsteadiness registered as shakiness within my own body. This feels significant. I suspect that sharing made her feel vulnerable. I had intended to open with a question about the situation she presented, but instead, "How did it feel to share?" comes out. This question surprises both of us. Her eyes brim with tears. She is accustomed to presenting herself as confident but struggles to let herself be known. The dissonance between what other people see and who she is seems to be at the heart of her struggle. I would have never known this had I not listened with my body. (Personal reflection, 2022)

I was able to access this simple, yet necessary, question because I had silenced the need to have a response at hand, allowing my body, instead, to guide me. This was a revelatory moment because it demonstrated how often I respond to things other than the *what*. Too often I respond out of a need to have an answer or be helpful—both of which are rewarded in the academy,

where being quick-witted and prepared to give advice are highly valued. The insights from the retreat have served me in my work with faculty. Recently, while working with faculty to develop interdisciplinary assignments, one faculty member, Liv, expressed concern because she had been encouraged to connect theories from her discipline to the project. “Won’t it be too much to bring in a new set of theories on top of the existing theories that I’m teaching?” She asked. It was an “aha” moment for me because I had thought that we’d followed a process that would help faculty make connections between the assignment and their course; however, the department’s technical curriculum didn’t leave a lot of room for exploration and, due to these restrictions, Liv did not recognize the opportunities for integration. My initial inclination was to offer suggestions for how she might make connections, but as I was about to speak, sensed anxiety in my body and tied it to feeling anxious about needing to have the answer. I paused and asked her to describe one of the theories that she covered in class. I asked some follow-up questions, and I could feel the space opening up. A few moments into the conversation, she lit up. Not only did she see how to make connections but also the potential impact that doing so could have on students. I didn’t ask Liv about what she felt in her body during that conversation, but I wonder if she would have experienced the same sense of tightness and restriction I had if I had not given her the space to explore her own question. Likewise, I wonder if answering the questions gave her a sense of opening.

Abram (2010) suggests that inhabiting our bodies fully—though it may feel uncomfortable—teaches us how to deal with the fragility and vulnerability of living:

For too long we’ve closed ourselves to the participatory life of our senses, inured ourselves to the felt intelligence of our muscled flesh and its manifold solidarities. We’ve taken our primary truths from the technologies that hold the world at a distance. Such tools can be mighty and useful, and beneficial as well, as long as the insights that they yield are carried carefully back to the lived world, and placed in service to the more-than-human matrix of corporeal encounter and experience. But technology can also, and

easily, be used as a way to avoid direct encounter, as a shield—etched with lines of code or cryptic jargon—to ward off whatever frightens, as a synthetic heaven or haven in which to hide from the distressing ambiguity of the real. (pp. 7-8)

Abram (2010) contends that embracing vulnerability, rather than holding it at a distance through technology and other distractions, teaches us how to respond to uncertainty. He continues, “This animal body, for all its susceptibility and vertigo, remains the primary instrument of our knowing, as the capricious earth remains our primary cosmos” (p. 8).

In-Sight

Tuning into the wisdom of the body is not a rejection of the mind. Rather it conceptualizes the mind and body as an inseparable whole. Levin (1985/2003) calls for thinking *through* and *with* the body:

Thinking is not a question of ‘bracketing’ the body (Husserl’s *epochē*), but a question of integrating awareness, living well-focused ‘in the body.’ For once, we should listen in silence to our bodily felt experience. Thinking needs to learn by feeling, by just being with our bodily being. (p. 61)

Interestingly, the English language has a number of thought-related words and idioms that acknowledge the mind-body connection, including *vision*, *body of knowledge*, *flesh out*, and *re-search*, among others.

Let’s consider the word “vision,” for example. Often associated with leaders or thinkers who project clear images of the future, the word “vision” derives from the Latin word *videre*, meaning “to see.” Levin (1985/2003) suggests that vision is both an ability and a capacity insofar as people who are born sighted can *see*, but some people—as is evidenced by great art—have a heightened capacity for sight. Levin writes:

Vision invites development, invites cultivation. At birth, we are given a gift of nature and sent on our way. What we do with that gift, how we experience the potential-for-being inherent in that skill, is the question which defines our individual being (*Jemeinigkeit*). Since the skill is a gift and in truth a ‘dispensation’ of Being, the most appropriate way of realizing it will be through a responsiveness that deeply and fully *inhabits* our visionary

being and transforms every act of looking and seeing into a self-fulfilling gesture of rejoicing and thanksgiving. (p. 52)

I pause here to think about what it would mean for schools to cultivate embodied thought. What if students were encouraged to develop their capacity for sight? I imagine a new generation of students entering Scholars Studio who see clearly, possess an ability to penetrate obfuscations, view the world from different perspectives, recognize patterns, and have the capacity to project visions of hope. These possibilities alone would make a strong case for the arts in education, but I would argue that we shouldn't think about the discipline in compartmentalized terms. Our practice of atomizing disciplines is deeply enmeshed in fragmented thinking. This is why we are so deeply committed to bridging in Scholars Studio. Academic spaces would be richer if we cultivated a transdisciplinary capacity for clear sightedness and appreciation for beauty. I haven't even begun to dig into the possibilities inherent in cultivating the other senses—deep listening, the capacity to reach out or to be touched, etc.—but it follows that they, too, would bear a transformative effect.

Conceiving of a mind-body balance speaks to our capacity for humanity. By separating the mind and body, Western thinkers have historically justified ascribing lesser value to people whose work is centered in the body, but there are other ways in which this rupture objectifies people. Quashie (2012) suggests that in the public sphere, “Blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness” (Introduction, para. 6). What if we resisted the Western urge to split the mind and body, the interior and exterior? How would it change our interpretations? What possibilities would it open for our ability to see people in their full humanity, including their joy and aliveness?

Quashie (2021) himself, nearly a decade later, goes onto write that he placed too much weight on interiority—that, perhaps, it suggested that aliveness and becoming were not equally important. He reminds readers that “the interior is not unconnected to the world of things” and substitutes references to “interiority” with “aliveness” (p. 20). Doing so reconfigures the binaries of interior and exterior into a unified whole. In conversation with Audre Lorde, Quashie insists that “being” is more than just “doing.” It is also “how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (p. 20).

There are countless ways in which the *what* may be explored. To avoid objectifying or essentializing the *what*, it’s helpful to understand it as dynamic and complex. As I think about the *what* of Scholars Studio, words like *love*, *liberation*, *transformation*, *community*, and respect for *self-determination* come to mind. In the next section, I explore how understanding these concepts as essential aspects of our work translates in our inquiries and engagements—how we *wonder* them into being.

The Wonder

If the *what* get us closer to the meaning of a thing, the wonder taps into our joy, curiosity, and relationship to it. One of the changes that I made in my office in response to this research was to create an intentional ontological shift in the learning space that is grounded in the African principles, including *Ubuntu*, which speaks to the communal orientation of our work; *Sankofa*, which acknowledges the importance of being connected to history; and *sesa wo suban*, which focus on personal development. I specifically draw on African tenets because they are part of the ancestral history of our learners and conceptually, they orient toward wholeness—thinking that is needed in these times. Our work in relation to these principles is informed by my Ghanaian colleague whose ancestral home gave rise to two of the three concepts. Our thoughts about orienting our work to these principles is in its infancy.

In this section, I begin a process of wondering. The word “wonder” comes directly from the Old English *wundrian*, meaning to be astonished, admire, magnify (Etymonline, n.d.). During the process of wondering, I invite surprise, ask questions, look for connections, and follow rhizomic nodes as I think about how these concepts live in Scholars Studio. I focus my *wondering* on the Zulu concept, *Ubuntu*, which is the concept we have integrated most thoroughly at this time.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu comes from the Nguni language in South Africa and means “humanness” (Robinson-Morris, 2019, p. 20). The word does not have a firm definition and is conceived of differently in different settings. Robinson-Morris (2019) relates it to “Black Americans recognizing ‘soul’ in other Black Americans, it is deeply felt, marginally describable, and imperceptible to those in which it is not contained. *Ubuntu* is at once a philosophy and an embodied knowing” (p. 24). Robinson-Morris (2019) suggests that the word’s meaning is easily lost in translation. Linguistically, *Ubuntu* is composed of two unified ideas: *ubu*, which may be conceptualized as being-becoming and *ntu* which captures a single, fleeting moment or a point in time. *Ubu* is thought to be constantly moving in the direction of *ntu*. Together, the word contains aspects of what we know in the English language as verbs and nouns. Thus, it is most similar to a gerund. Translating *Ubuntu* into English is challenging because the word contains elements of the subject-verb-object syntactical structure. Whereas English would fragment the word, the Nguni language represents it as a unified whole (p. 38).

As I ponder the linguistic construction of *Ubuntu*, I am struck by a similarity that it shares with quantum mechanics. To open this thought, I turn to theoretical physicist and musician, Stephon Alexander's (2016) description of the quantum uncertainty principle:

Let's consider a traveling wave pulse, which only exists for a short duration of time, like a beat. I can localize where the pulse is, but its frequency is not well defined because a frequency requires many repeating cycles, and a pulse does not have enough width to define a definite frequency... The more you can know about the position, the less you can know about its frequency and vice versa... When scientists want to understand nature, they use instruments to probe and measure it. What the uncertainty principle tells us is that no matter how careful we are, no matter how precise our instrumentation, we can never pin down both the particle-like and the wave-like properties of a quantum entity. (pp. 165-166)

Ubuntu teaches us that humans are in a constant state of being-becoming (*ubu*)—a process that may be viewed as movement. *Ubuntu* is perceived in brief moments (*ntu*), like a beat; however, if one were to closely examine *ntu*, they'd miss *ubu*, the movement of being-becoming. The properties of both can't be precisely pinned down because *ubu-ntu* is a unified entity. *Ubu* and *ntu* each share qualities of the other, as do waves and particles.

What does this mean in the context of Scholars Studio? To enter that question, I return to Alexander who recognized the parallels between jazz and quantum mechanics after seeing musician, Mark Turner, in concert. Turner mentioned:

"When I'm in the middle of a solo, whenever I am most certain of the next note I have to play, the more possibilities open up for the notes that follow." The converse is that the more confused he was about the next note, the fewer possibilities opened up for him. (Alexander, 2016, p. 161)

Using Turner's reflection about improvisation to restate the uncertainty principle, Alexander (2016) writes, "The more certain the momentum of a particle, the more possibilities exist for it to be in a wide range of positions... Uncertainty is simply a reflection of a quantum particle having less restriction for a particular physical attribute" (p. 166).

Placing the uncertainty principle in conversation with *Ubuntu*, I picture someone who embodies *Ubuntu* as continually becoming or evolving in their humanness. Their being is not fixed, and importantly, the motion of being-becoming, opens an abundance of possibilities. The challenge is that the more certain one is in the movement of their becoming, the less possible it is to pinpoint what's happening. In other words, it is increasingly difficult to break *Ubuntu* down into components for study as we often do in the West. One might also say that *Ubuntu* cannot be essentialized.

These ideas bring me back to Scholars Studio's most recent trip to the boys' school in Washington, D.C. On this visit, the air was thick with excitement because the seventh-grade class was leaving the next day for a trip to London, Paris, and Barcelona. They would travel to Africa the next year as eighth graders. The school's founders had not planned to include overseas travel when they began developing the curricula, but they noticed that whenever they were in the company of highly educated Black men, the conversation turned to travel. They conducted research and found a correlation between having traveled overseas before graduating high school and earning a college degree. They speculated that travel opens boys' minds to the vast possibilities that their future holds. They aimed to create as rich an experience as possible—taking the boys to the Delta lounge at the airport, exposing them to good food, and letting them discover the cities' rich cultures. One of the boy's parents didn't want their son to travel because he had been misbehaving in the days leading up to the trip. The school's founders argued that that's exactly why he should go—to help him see the world, and perhaps, want more from life.

The school's founders value the boys' being-becoming and understand how subtle movements, such as indulging in the luxuries and experiencing different cultures, bring more possibilities into view. This is a fascinating perspective that I would like to pursue in Scholars

Studio. Student engagement across the university is comparatively low post-pandemic. I have been privy to many conversations about how to re-engage students, and I wonder if we're having the wrong conversations? I wonder if the push for a return to normalcy is, in fact, viewing students, faculty, and the curricula in fixed terms? Would it be better to focus on learners' being-becoming? I wonder how we might help one another think in less rigid terms? Instead of trying to figure out how to help students be more focused or engaged, why not support them in developing vision? What if we helped them break down the walls within which they define themselves? What if we offer them real world experiences of moving through uncertainty?

As we continue with Scholars Studio, we will consider how to secure funding to support travel to spaces that might open students' thinking about who they are and who they could be. We have already seen glimpses of the possibilities on trips to Harvard University to visit the Hip Hop Archive, Montreal to discuss alternative forms of incarceration, and beyond. These experiences helped students make useful connections to their coursework, but the journey was, perhaps, the most important aspect of the experience. Many of them had never flown in an airplane or crossed an international border. Experiencing flight and securing passports opened new possibilities.

Moreover, I wonder if, perhaps, the West's tendency to work from deficit models feeds into students' rigid conceptions of themselves? Students often enter the university with notions about their abilities based on bad experiences in school, low grades, or negative feedback. They say, *I'm not a math person, I'm not a reader, I'm not an athlete*, etc. Similarly, there are some faculty who think about students in the same rigid terms: *they aren't really good in math; I don't expect them to do well, etc.* Ubuntu helps shift this dynamic. Ubuntu, which is often translated as "I am because we are," values community and conceives people as interdependent. With Ubuntu,

Robinson-Morris (2019) writes, “One has an obligation to share their gifts, abilities, talents, and resources with others for the betterment of the whole. Sharing, for the benefit of community, eradicates deficit thinking. The community knows where one lacks another is strong” (p. 45). It shifts the conversation from deficits to strengths.

Ontological Challenges

The possibilities that Scholars Studio opens give me a great deal of hope, but there are realities of working within an institutional setting that temper my optimism. Simply put, carrying out the work in Scholars Studio is exhausting. I envision cultivating communities that value wellbeing, but if we view our work as magnified in fractal relationships, wellbeing is often elusive because the work stretches us so thin. We are expected to do more with less within a resource strapped environment, and when more resources are available, we are encouraged to scale up or add new programming rather than strengthen the existing infrastructure. As I pull back layers in search of the *what*, I see that I’m working within a system that does not share Scholars Studio’s values. This is not a rebuke of the institution or the system in which it operates but rather an acknowledgement that our goals are often misaligned. Making the program work is often akin to joining two mismatched puzzle pieces.

One of the challenges that we face in Scholars Studio is that realizing our vision requires radical structural change. This conversation is happening all over the country for a variety of reasons. After The College Board revised its AP Black Studies curriculum in response to outcries from conservatives in Florida, UCLA professor Robin DG Kelley talked with a National Public

Radio reporter about the situation. His essay, originally published in the *Boston Review*⁹, was removed from the curriculum, along with works by bell hooks and Angela Davis, among others. He stated that his biggest concern was not that his work was omitted but that The College Board had essentially stripped the curriculum of theory, reducing it from Black Studies to a “glorified eighth grade Black history course” (Fernandes, 2023).

Although the Black Men in Education students didn’t use this language, I can infer that the Black history taught in Scholars Studio was meaningful because it incorporated theory. The K-12 system’s presentation of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X as single exceptional figures frames them within the American master narrative of rugged individualism and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. These narratives suggest that exceptional individuals effect change. From this, one might extrapolate that the opposite holds true: ordinary people don’t have the power to impact change. An accurate view of history shows that the latter is false. While Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were phenomenal, visionary leaders, the Civil Rights movement would not have been possible had it not been for ordinary people.

Educating students about systems that perpetuate inequity and exposing them to models of communal empowerment orients them to the practical and theoretical dimensions of change and shows them that they have the power to make a difference. So, while attention is focused on states like Florida, which are banning books and restricting curricula, we should also be concerned when Blue states, like Maryland, include Black history but do so—according to our students’ reports— within the context of the American master narrative. This perspective is

⁹ Kelley, R.D.G. (2016). Black study, Black struggle. *Boston Review*. <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/robin-kelley-black-struggle-campus-protest/>

reinforced by corporations, like WalMart, that commodify Black history on Juneteenth or during Black History month (Adams, 2022; Davis, 2012, p. 136); thereby, presenting a message of love and acceptance while engaging in unsavory labor practices and investing in private prisons and other industries that disproportionately harm Black and Brown people.

Paradox

What role do universities play in dismantling these structures? Kelley (2023) argues that universities are enmeshed in “the structure of domination” (Fernandes, 2023). Investments in military, police, and corrections industries aside, there has been an incremental shift toward neoliberalism, a shift which directly impacts Scholars Studio. One marker of this shift is the steady rise of adjunct faculty across institutions since the 1970s (Danaei, 2019, p. 17). Scholar Studio is directly impacted by this problem. We struggle to recruit faculty because departments rely on high numbers of part-time employees to teach courses, leaving fulltime faculty to cover a wide range of responsibilities. Adjuncts—who are underpaid—are often unavailable to plan and connect with students. Further, curriculum development and course design are increasingly outsourced to textbook companies. As we saw in the example of how textbooks frame Black history in public schools, turning curriculum development over to corporations is especially problematic. Politics aside, pre-designed courses and assessments present challenges to developing integrated or interdisciplinary learning experiences, which is an essential part of our work.

It is hard to bring social justice to spaces that exploit labor, perpetuate hierarchies, and feed into systems that are designed to undermine the public good. Universities often make gestures toward equity that fall flat because they don’t fundamentally change the systems that create them. We are probably all familiar with the thirty-minute online sexual harassment

training module that comes across more as an effort to check boxes than shift toxic power differentials.

At the same time, universities can also be sites of liberation. I, for one, have transformed and grown within universities, as they have provided community, nurtured my thinking, and offered creative space for meaningful work. They have made it possible for me and my colleagues to live out visions of offering transformative learning. I know countless others who tell similar stories. Further, universities have made it possible for countless students to enter the middle class. Kelley (2016) said it well. Universities are not sites of revolution or radical change, but they have resources, and for those of us who are not independently wealthy, they provide opportunities to do the thinking and groundwork that change requires.

At times, thinking about the systems that have perpetuated structural inequality feels daunting, but I'd like to think that if humans created this problem, we can create another way. I suspect that it will be important to develop third spaces that are sites of rupture and disruption. Kelley insists, and I concur, that love should be the basis of our work. "If we don't have a study based on love," he said, "we will base our study on war" (Fernandes, 2023). I have observed deep love over the 15 years that I have done this work. This past semester, administrator, scholar, and policy expert, Dr. Alvin Thornton, met with our students to share his journey of becoming an educator. Educated in segregated schools in a small town in Alabama, he made his way, against improbable odds, to Morehouse, where he was offered guidance and support. What resonated most strongly in his story was the love that he received from community and family. This theme has presented itself throughout my years in Scholars Studio. Robinson-Morris (2019) suggests,

Love liberates beings-human in the present present and is an act of creation of the beings-human who are to be made manifest in the absent present-future, Onto-education calls us out of the depths of ourselves in love and sends us back to ourselves to love more deeply with the recognition that we are one-same. Love in the face of fear is courage.

Love creates a third space that connects us and makes the improbable possible. In the words of Audre Lorde (2000), “Love is a word another kind of opening” (p. 6).

Stepping off the Bridge: Endings and Openings

As I move forward with Scholars Studio, I am looking for openings. I believe that Scholars Studio does important work, but also recognize the need to shift due to issues with faculty availability.

New Directions

Thinking about the possible directions Scholars Studio could take, I’ve considered three options: (1) hiring faculty fellows to teach in Scholars Studio, (2) building an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary major, and (3) creating a national center.

Fellows

Working with a cadre of faculty fellows would solve the problem of faculty availability and provide an opportunity to expose new teachers to the Scholars Studio learning model. A possible entry point for developing a fellows program presented itself recently while talking with a colleague about bringing Scholars Studio to the university’s prison program, which is housed at a maximum-security men’s facility in Jessup, Maryland. I am moved by the potential of engaging in thought around liberation in spaces that aren’t free. I am hopeful that it might help us think about how to transform systems that are inequitable by design and continue our thinking about what it means to teach as a practice of freedom.

Transdisciplinary Major

A colleague who is interested in developing an interdisciplinary major approached me recently to help her think through the process. I offered the idea of equipping students to develop innovative solutions to address the complex problems of our time. Using a transdisciplinary

learning model, students would study the structures, contexts, and histories of issues that matter to them and seek to develop creative, just and sustainable solutions in collaboration with the communities they impact.

Potential concentrations might include, Social Ecology, which studies human interactions with the environment and considers how to apply ecology models to social structures; Designing Change, which uses creative approaches to transform realities; Contemplative Justice; and Social Entrepreneurship. Students would participate in Scholars Studio during their freshmen and sophomore years and participate in and design interdisciplinary inquiries during their junior and senior years. This structure would require considerably more funding, but it would give Scholars Studio a permanent home with dedicated fulltime faculty who would, ostensibly, be aligned with Scholars Studio's learning model.

National Center

Developing a national center dedicated to teaching for liberation and pedagogies of the third-space, would provide an opportunity to continue our work on a small scale while developing partnerships and solidarities with people outside the institution. Through the center, I would imagine developing action-based research projects, convening to create improvisational spaces, developing resources, and offering workshops and retreats.

My Own Bridges

As I think about how this research has impacted me personally, I struggle to distinguish it from all the other experiences in Scholars Studio. I have been doing this work for nearly 15 years and will tell anyone who asks that I received my best education in Scholars Studio. I mean no disrespect to the universities that conferred my degrees; rather, this is an acknowledgement that no amount of reading or theories could offer the perspectives or experiences I've received here.

Early in my Ph.D. program, I wrote a paper about the Supreme Court's *U.S. v. Fordice* ruling, which concluded in an 8-1 decision, that Mississippi had failed to adequately dismantle vestiges of *de jure* segregation. The ruling had a domino effect, placing all states with HBCUs in the receivership of the Department of Education (Jones, 1993). I recall stepping into a dark parking lot one night after researching the case. A portion of the campus had lost power. A regular occurrence at the time, this power failure came on the heels of a series of phone and internet outages. As I was learning about structural inequality from a theoretical and legal perspective, I was literally experiencing what it meant to have an unstable (infra)structure, which could be directly tied to funding and policy inequities. Over the years, I have been immersed in explorations of structural issues. In Scholars Studio's infancy, we studied issues related to mass incarceration. I learned about the issue's historical roots and all the mechanisms that are in place to maintain the system, but even more importantly, Scholars Studio humanized the experience by putting us in touch with incarcerated men and women at nearby maximum-security prisons and connecting us with people, including Michelle Alexander, who are actively working to dismantle the system.

Experiences like these have been important and eye-opening; however, I am most taken by the sense of community, love, and humanity that I've experienced through Scholars Studio. I have countless stories about the generosity of community members who have taken the time to introduce the students to historical locations in Maryland or the faculty who have dedicated considerable amounts of time to ensuring that the students will be successful. Every time we offer a new Studio, I learn something new about the specific inquiry, the art of teaching/learning, and what it means to be human.

I highlight some of my pedagogical insights in Chapters Five and Six; however, one of the thoughts that I'm awakening to is that transformation takes time. In education, we often frame our work in terms of semesters or academic years and track progress and production within those timeframes. There are times when I have witnessed mindset shifts that occur at a rapid pace, but usually they are slow and reflective of natural rhythms. The Black Men in Education community didn't offer any revelations about how to encourage students to perform better or get better grades, but it did offer insight into how we might embrace our uniqueness, support one another through challenging times, and move bravely and powerfully in the world.

APPENDIX A
IRB Application
Recruitment Letter

Learning Together: The Lived Experience of Bridging in Scholars Studio

My research will investigate the lived experience of participants in Scholars Studio's *Black Men in Education* learning community. Aimed at introducing Black men to the teaching profession, this community provides a cohort of first-year students an engaged, interdisciplinary learning experience. I will recruit members of that community to participate in my research through an in-person presentation and follow-up question-and-answer session. During that time, I will also provide them with a formal written invitation, included below.

Dear Scholars Studio Community Member,

During the fall of 2021, I will be researching the lived experience of participants in Scholars Studio's *Black Men in Education* learning community. I am particularly interested in learning about the experience of *bridging*, which is the word I use to describe the connections that are made in the learning community. These connections are made through relationships, across disciplines, etc. and have the potential to initiate transformative, purposeful learning. By partnering with me to complete this research, you will be contributing to our understanding of the teaching-learning experience in Scholars Studio, which may, in turn, inform future practice.

All participants of the *Black Men in Education* learning community who are 18 or older qualify to participate in this study. Participants who are under the age of 18 are invited to participate with the permission of their parents or guardians. A secure electronic form will be provided to scholars under the age of 18 for the convenient collection of signatures.

To participate, please fill out the accompanying documents or contact Lisa Nardi, doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland retentiontheories@gmail.com. This research is supervised by Francine Hultgren. You may contact her via email at fh@umd.edu with questions. This study will be conducted during the fall 2021 academic term. By participating in this research, you commit to two audio-recorded group interviews, approximately 90 minutes in length; and 1-2 audio-recorded individual interviews that will last approximately 45-90 minutes. I will also collect in-class observational data on a weekly basis and gather responses from two in-class assignments.

APPENDIX B

Consent Form



Institutional Review Board

1204 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-405-4212 • irb@umd.edu

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Project Title	Learning Together: The Lived Experience of Bridging in Scholars Studio
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted by Lisa Nardi . You are invited to participate in this research project because you are participating in Scholars Studio's "Black Men in Education" learning community. The purpose of this research project is to learn about the experience of "bridging," which is the term I use to describe the connections that are made in the learning community—through relationships, across disciplines, etc.—that have the potential to initiate transformative, purposeful learning. This research will contribute to the understanding of the teaching-learning experience in Scholars Studio, which may, in turn, inform future practice.
Procedures	This study will be conducted during the fall 2021 academic term. By participating in this research, you commit to two group interviews, approximately 90 minutes in length; and 1-2 individual interviews that will last approximately 45-90 minutes. The interviews will include questions about your experience in Scholars Studio. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded. I will also collect in-class observational data on a weekly basis and gather written responses from two in-class assignments.
Potential Risks and Discomforts	There is no to little risk involved from participating in this research study. You may feel uncomfortable sharing personal experiences during the interviews, but you may leave or stop the interview at any time.
Potential Benefits	There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include increased awareness of your experience in Scholars Studio. In the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the teaching-learning experience in Scholars Studio.

Confidentiality	Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data on a password protected computer that is only accessible by the PI. If a report or article is written about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator: Lisa Nardi University of Maryland Benjamin Building retentiontheories@gmail.com 301-860-3297
Participant Rights	If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678 For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/irb-research-participants This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your

	questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.	
Signature and Date	NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix C Conversation Guide

Hermeneutic phenomenology does not call for the use of a standard set of questions during interviews. Rather, the researcher uses a conversation guide, which provides structure and potential openings for conversations. Guiding questions include:

- What do you remember most clearly about the launch (the first time the entire community came together)?
- What memories from the classroom stand out most clearly?
- We have all had to work collaboratively with our peers Students: Tell me about your experience of working together to complete the project. Faculty: tell me about your experience working together to build the community. What sort of challenges did you experience working together? Describe your response to those challenges. What did your team do well? Describe those experiences.
- Think about the off-campus co-curricular activities. What experiences stand out most strongly in your memory?
- Think about a time during the semester when you sensed a shift (e.g. you saw something from a different perspective, you thought about something differently, something clicked, you understood what it was like to walk in someone else's shoes, etc.). Bring me back to that moment. Describe the experience.
- What have you learned about yourself this semester? Can you identify what brought you to that insight? If yes, please explain.
- What was it like getting to know one another? Can you share some examples?
- What have you learned from your community members (faculty, students, staff) that stands out most strongly? Take me back to those moments and describe the scene.
- Describe a time when you took a risk (e.g. tried something you were afraid to do or didn't feel confident doing; stood up for someone or something you believed in, etc.)?
- Students: What sort of connections have you made across disciplines (courses)? Think of one example and walk me through that experience.
- Faculty: What sort of insights have you gained from other disciplines in the community? Think of one example and walk me through that experience.

APPENDIX D

Application

INITIAL APPLICATION PART 2

1. Abstract:

This research uses hermeneutic phenomenology to study to the lived experience of “bridging” in Scholars Studio—an interdisciplinary learning community for first-year students at Bowie State University. “Bridging” refers to connections made (across disciplines, in relationship, etc.) that have the potential to lead to transformative, purposeful learning. This study uses van Manen’s human science methodology—in conversation with post-colonial and Latina feminist thought-- to explore the meaning of “bridging” in a manner that tends to the intersectionalities that my participants experience. The pedagogical engagement that I explore in this research is unique to Scholars Studio; therefore, prior research about this particular experience does not exist.

2. Subject Selection:

- a. **Recruitment:** My research will investigate the lived experience of participants in Scholars Studio’s “Bowie Man” learning community. Aimed at introducing Black men to the teaching profession, this community provides a cohort of first-year students an engaged, interdisciplinary learning experience. I will recruit members of that community to participate in my research through an in-person presentation and follow-up question-and-answer session. During that time, I will also provide them with a formal written invitation.
- b. **Eligibility Criteria:** All participants of the Bowie Man learning community—including students and faculty-- who are 18 or older qualify to participate in this study. Participants who are under the age of 18 are invited to participate with the permission of a parent or guardian.
- a. **Rationale:** I am only recruiting participants enrolled in Scholars Studio at Bowie State University because I am researching an experience that is unique to that program; therefore, only individuals who have participated in Scholars Studio will be able to share details about the experience.

I have narrowed the focus of my inquiry to “bridging” that will unfold in one interdisciplinary learning community (Studio) during the fall of 2021. I have selected a community aimed at introducing Black men to the field of education. I opted to study this community because it presents a number of possibilities for bridging. All participants recruited for this study will be simultaneously engaged in the selected community.

Further, I am inviting both faculty and students to participate in this study together

because I am concerned with understanding their experience of building connections together.

- c. Enrollment Numbers:** I will invite all faculty and students in the “Bowie Man” learning community to engage in my study. The maximum number of participants will be approximately 24.
- b. Rationale for Enrollment Numbers:** Phenomenological researchers do not seek to make generalizations. Accordingly, they do not rely on large samples that reflect the population. Instead, participant numbers are generally limited in order to facilitate a manageable interpretation process. Consistent with standard practice, I am limiting the number of participants in my study; however, I am inviting all members of the “Bowie Man” learning community to participate in the study in order to uphold our value of community and inclusion.

3. Procedures:

This study will be conducted during the fall 2021 academic term. Participants commit to two group interviews, approximately 90 minutes in length; and 1-2 individual interviews that will last approximately 45-90 minutes. The interviews will include questions about the Scholars Studio experience. With participants’ permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded. I will also collect in-class observational data on a weekly basis and gather written responses from two in-class assignments.

4. Risks:

There is no to little risk involved from participating in this research study. Participants may feel uncomfortable sharing personal experiences during the interviews, but they may leave or stop the interview at any time.

5. Benefits:

There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, possible benefits include increased awareness of experience in Scholars Studio. In the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the teaching-learning experience in Scholars Studio.

6. Confidentiality:

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data on a password protected computer that is only accessible by the PI.

If a report or article is written about this research project, participants’ identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Participants’ information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if they or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

7. Consent Process:

I will review the consent form in-person at the beginning of the fall 2021 semester. Community members who wish to voluntarily participate will be given an opportunity to ask questions and review the document before signing. Participants who are younger than 18 will be given a parental consent form. Signed consent forms will be stored on a secure server. I will assure potential participants that their decision to engage or opt out of the study will not impact their course grades, and I will remind participants at the start of each interview that their participation is voluntary, and they may choose to stop participating at any point.

8. Conflict of Interest:

There are no known conflicts of interest.

9. HIPAA Compliance:

N/A

10. Research Outside of the United States:

N/A

11. Research Involving Prisoners:

N/A

12. SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Your Initial Application must include a **completed Initial Application Part 1 (On-Line Document)**, the information required in items 1-11 above, and all relevant supporting documents including: consent forms, letters sent to recruit participants, questionnaires completed by participants, and any other material that will be presented, viewed or read to human subject participants.

The consent forms in your approved IRBNet PACKAGE must be used. When creating or editing your consent form, please provide the most recent IRBNet package number at the bottom, right corner of the consent form. This ensures you are using the most “up-to-date” version of the form.

To find your IRBNet package number, go to the MY PROJECTS tab and click on the title of your project. In the PROJECT OVERVIEW page, your IRBNet package number will be listed at the top, next to your project title.

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