

**"A Connected Idea of the Lesson": Black Women's Construction of the Pedagogical Edifice  
After Reconstruction (1873-1913)**

**By**

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**Thesis**

**Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Vanderbilt University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**in**

**English**

**Dec. 12, 2020**

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It was an early fall afternoon in 1873, and August was close enough that the Mississippi sun still set the ground shimmering like rolling waves. It was only seven years earlier that the War had ended, and signs of violence were still visible. Other than these mementos, though, not much was visibly different here than it had been before the fighting started. The work carried on much the same, by much the same people who had done it here before. But the commotion coming from one of the dwellings where, until a few years before, many of those on the plantation had lived as slaves, betrayed the presence of something new.

There, standing on a ladder, dress hitched almost to her knee, was the new schoolteacher, working with an unobtrusive deliberation in an ensemble that made no allowances to the midday heat. Deliberately, she daubed a muddy solution against the walls of the small shed, where it began to dry almost immediately. She proceeded quietly, despite the presence of two others, young men of about fourteen who worked with the same care as their adult companion. Every few minutes, the teacher reached out to give them an affirming smile, or a gentle reprimand on how they could better apply their efforts. To pass the time, the students began to call to each other with gentle derision, pointing out their own prowess at the other's expense. Their teacher mainly bore this banter in silence, though she would occasionally settle a dispute with a quiet, firm interjection. They proceeded in such a comfortable rhythm for many hours. As the sun finally began to disperse, and the first cool breezes called out from behind the darkening magnolia trees, the three paused to consider what they had constructed.

Where once had stood the dilapidated remains of a shed now stood a schoolhouse, though it did not resemble what Hallie Brown, the woman working that hot day, pictured when she heard the word. It lacked the quaint red clapboard she recalled from her time as a girl living in Pennsylvania and Ohio. What marked it as a school was less its outward appearance than

something about the alchemy of its construction, some magic in the cotton seed that the three of them had rubbed into the hot, wet earth, then applied with care to its ramshackle walls. Working together with her students, benefiting from their strength and sharing hers in turn, Hallie Brown had turned the architecture of slavery in Yazoo, Mississippi into a space for what bell hooks one hundred and twenty years later would call “the practice of freedom” (hooks 1994). Some time later, after bidding her students a warm good night, Hallie Brown rushed home. She was flooded with ideas for her lessons the next day.

Hallie Q. Brown is just one in a storied tradition of African-American women educators who have helped to construct America’s pedagogical edifice. In this paper, I detail the erection of the intellectual infrastructure of what contemporary theorists call “culturally relevant teaching,” (CRT), “culturally relevant pedagogy,” or simply “African-American pedagogy,” (King 1993) by Brown and other African-American women educators through the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. CRT, a term coined by educational researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings, refers to an egalitarian, Afrocentric pedagogy that privileges the development of affective bonds within a mutually-interdependent community of learners (Ladson-Billings 1990). Culturally relevant pedagogy is explicitly geared towards creating a more equitable and just society by using culture, literature, and rhetorical practices relevant to minoritized students to help them to achieve academic success, cultural competence, and political agency. It is contrasted with “assimilationist” teaching, wherein the instructor attempts to coerce minoritized students into internalizing the values, histories, and communicative modes that accord with hegemonic white norms (Ladson-Billings 1990). While CRT has been understood to have roots in the practices and pedagogies of Black teachers before desegregation (Ladson-Billings 1994), no one has yet

elaborated on the way in which the writings of the first generation of Black teachers—women working from New York to Mississippi in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—might be relevant to the practice or historiography of this “African-American pedagogy.” It is this crucial lineage that my account seeks to explore.

Like educational theory more generally, the historiography of African-American education has privileged men’s voices. This is both problematic and inaccurate. Though W.E.B. du Bois will appear here in terms of his work as a sociologist, I intentionally refrain from framing these women’s work within the debate between du Bois and Booker T. Washington, as Faye Emily Spencer Maor does in her otherwise helpful study *Lifting Word by Word*. The preponderant ignorance of Black women’s contributions to educational theory is largely due to the fact that Black women’s voices were, for over a century, systematically excluded from academic studies of pedagogical best practices. Many of the texts I will review here, which contain largely unmined gems of insight for successfully educating minoritized students, are not written to or by academics. Instead, they are memoirs, novels, and anthologies left behind by working teachers who also served as activists, educators, and oral historians.

Through a closer examination of the stories left by such women, we will recognize that the history of African-American education as recorded by teachers “in the field” *is* the history of radical pedagogy in the United States. Reading a diverse sample of the writings of these pioneering educators—most critically, Hallie Q. Brown, Kate Drumgoold, Frances Harper, Ida B. Wells, and Fanny Jackson Coppin—allows us the most comprehensive picture possible of the why and how of culturally relevant teaching, as well as the factors that stood in the way of doing it well. Despite a wide variety in their respective student populations, relative ages, and geographic locations within the United States, points of convergence (and debate) recur

throughout these texts, which, as we shall see, are almost always explicitly or implicitly in conversation with those that come before. It is only by reading these women's writings as a dialogue—by challenging ourselves to find what Coppin calls “the connected idea of the lesson”—that we can access the wisdom within them.

Recovering the legacy of these pioneering women is of vital importance today, when educational access is nearly as precarious as it was during “the nadir.” Though illiteracy is no longer as high as at 80%, as it was in 1870, comprehensive studies of American adults at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century showed that a majority of African-Americans still are rated as “Basic” or “Below Basic” in document and prose literacy (du Bois 1911, NCES 2006).

Recovering the methodologies that were successful for these earliest teachers will enable educators to better serve Black students, who are still vulnerable to many of the same modes of violence we see depicted in these texts. The critical tension that emerges in 19<sup>th</sup> century writings by Black women teachers is the same dialectic that Ladson-Billings and others recognized in their scholarship at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: teaching praxis that normalizes the reproduction of majoritarian violence versus teaching praxis that uses minoritized narratives and practices to trouble that reproduction. As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most African-American students, who continue to be predominantly working class, are overseen by White, upper-class administrators and policy makers (and, increasingly, middle-class White teachers) for whom there continues to be a strong incentive to encourage an assimilationist approach (Irvine 1988). Better understanding how successful teachers have navigated this tension during some of the most challenging days for Black education can help contemporary educators of all races to resist the pull toward an assimilationist approach in our own classrooms.

It is important to note before proceeding that I am not a Black educator and I do not identify as a woman. My abiding interest in this topic has been inspired by the outsized impact that Black women teachers and writers have had on my own research and teaching praxis. In classes and conversation with extraordinary Black women educators, I have been compelled to wonder if there is a common set of values or practices that informs the commonalities I have noticed in these educators' successful pedagogy. As a scholar and teacher who identifies as male and White, it is inevitable that there are aspects of these teachers' praxis that I may not be able to understand or articulate, and I humbly welcome any corrections or interventions that may further this critically important line of scholarship. I would encourage all stakeholders in these knotty questions—administrators, parents, other teachers, and, most important by far, our students—to “tell and tell and tell their story,” as the poet Thanha Lai so movingly puts it, as it is those qualitative studies of our experiences in the classroom that provide the most valuable insights into what works and what needs to be changed in our educational system (Lai 2011). Only by joining together in the dialogue with the astounding Black women teachers who laid the groundwork for critical pedagogy can teachers develop the technologies that will enable minoritized students to thrive within a system never designed to encourage their success.

One of the first interlocutors shaping educational theory during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Hallie Q. Brown, whose erection of a small schoolhouse on a former plantation in Yazoo City, Mississippi must be seen as one of the inciting incidents in the history of African-American pedagogy. In addition to being a teacher and author, Brown was an acclaimed elocutionist whose *Bits and Odds: A Choice Selection of Recitations for School, Lyceum, and Parlor Entertainments* (1880) was read to rapturous audiences across the nation throughout the 1880s. Born in 1850, Brown received a B.S. from Wilberforce College in 1873. Afterward, she worked on rural

schools throughout the American South, including two housed on former plantations. Her biographer Faustin Delaney paints her as determined and indefatigable in the face of structural obstacles to her teaching:

Her plantation school had no windows, but it was well ventilated; too much so in fact, for...the rain beat in fiercely. Not being successful in getting the authorities to fix the building—shed, we should have said—she secured the willing service of two of her larger boys. She mounted one mule, and the two boys another, and thus they rode to the gin mill. They got cotton seed, returned, mixed it with earth, which formed a plastic mortar, and with her own hands she pasted up the chinks, and ever after smiled at the unavailable attacks of wind and weather. (Haley 581)

Delaney's message here is clear: "the authorities" were and are ambivalent at best about the project of educating Black Americans. Teachers who wish to do so, like Hallie Brown, must saddle up their own mules and, with their students as partners, construct the literal and figurative edifice of their educations themselves.

Brown's resume clearly indicates that she was well acquainted with the risks of being a Black educator, and that she believed enough in the possibility of that project to work in difficult or even dangerous circumstances. Though she established a successful school in Yazoo City, Mississippi, "[o]n account of the unsettled state of affairs in 1874-5, she was compelled to return North" (Brown 5). Brown taught in Dayton, Ohio, for four years afterward, until poor health forced her to retire from classroom teaching. Though she left the role of classroom teacher, Brown was by no means done with her career as an educator. In addition to overseeing a night school for adults in South Carolina and serving as dean of Women at Tuskegee Institute, Brown wrote *Bits and Odds*, which was meant explicitly to be used in the classroom.

In *Bits and Odds*, Brown puts forward a resource for Black teachers to teach elocution, an important subject in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century United States. Brown recognized the ability to speak compellingly as a shibboleth for entrance into the American body politic. *Bits and Odds* is her



attempt to provide a textbook for teaching students this code for civic participation. The pieces in *Bits and Odds* are intentionally selected to produce what James Scott calls a “hidden transcript,” an alternative history encoded in writing or performance that destabilizes dominant narratives or hegemonic fictions of racial superiority (Scott 1990). As Susan Kates notes, the stories Brown selects as exercises are very different than those in similar resources available to educators at that time written by White authors, as much in their valorization of African-American Vernacular English (as in “Uncle Daniel” and “The Apples”) as in their alternative perspectives on African-American history (notable in “The Black Regiment” and “How He Saved St. Michaels”) (Kates 1997 61-62). Theorists of culturally relevant education have demonstrated that texts featuring characters who look, speak, and struggle in ways similar to their readers improve student retention and have a positive impact on student engagement. Such texts are beneficial for all learners—across almost every age level and subject category—but their most dramatic positive impact is on the success of Black students (Ladson-Billings 1990, 1992a, 1992b; Style 1996, Laughter and Aronson 2015). Stories like Brown’s, scholars now recognize, function as “mirrors” that allow students to recognize and define themselves as cultural beings, making possible the kind of self-efficacy prized by so many of the authors cited here.

An exemplary piece of culturally relevant curricula in *Bits and Odds* is the poem “The Dying Bondman” by Frances E.W. Harper. The poem proves important both because it shows the mutual influence of African-American women writers and teachers of the time and because it so clearly articulates the essence of Brown’s pedagogical program. “The Dying Bondman” tells the story of a slave who stays alive, in agony, until his master will put in writing that he is free:

Eagerly he grasped the writing/“I am *free!*” at last he said./Backward fell upon the pillow./He was free among the dead. (23)

Harper's poem painfully articulates the power of the written word. It figures the acquisition of literacy—"grasping the writing"—as not just an economic or civic good, but a psychic and spiritual one. If the Bondman could write himself, or had access to the tools to do so, he would not have to beg for this last measure of dignity and prolong his suffering. In providing this collection, Brown hopes to provide a means for students to "grasp the writing" themselves, and in so doing to become more free.

Brown would continue to provide resources for educators throughout her writerly career. In 1926, Brown published *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*, a selected history of African-American women. The forward to *Homespun Heroines* is written by Josephine Turpin Washington, an educator and author who is cited as an influence by Wells in *Crusade for Justice* (as is Brown herself).<sup>1</sup> Brown's book inscribes Harper and Coppin, among others, as role models. Washington introduces Brown's project as didactic:

The youth of today and of other days will come under this influence. They will not relieve those lives. That cannot be: conditions change; human beings differ; deeds cannot be duplicated. But the spirit of the noble dead may be enkindled in the hearts of those who live after. (v)

Brown herself adds:

One chief object of these introductory sentences is to secure for this book the interest of our youth, that they may have instructive light on the struggles endured and the obstacles overcome by our pioneer women. (vii)

By constructing curricula for history and elocution that can be used in schools to provide a hidden transcript that counteracts patriarchal, White supremacist histories, Brown helps to provide resources for teachers to build up an edifice of resistance, and to tell a more accurate and progressive version of the American narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> An expanded version of this paper would do well to attend to Washington's own *Collected Essays*.

The potential of the classroom to work as a site of political resilience that Brown envisions is realized nearly two decades later in Kate Drumgoold's autobiography *A Slave Girl's Story* (1898). As Heidye Ozkan argues, Drumgoold's *Story* is meant to highlight the way that print literacy allows her to successfully navigate space and to realize herself more fully. "Writing her life changes Drumgoold's status from passive to active and from an object to a subject," she writes (122). *A Slave Girl's Story* affirms that education is a radically transformative process, one that carries the possibility for achieving greater democratic agency and spiritual freedom.

Toward the end of her memoir, Drumgoold presents us with a long series of "sketches" of the teachers in her life who influenced her, a gesture Coppin will repeat in her own memoir (see Drumgoold, Kindle Locations 700; Coppin Kindle Location 2217) and that Ladson-Billings will herself recreate in *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children* (Ladson-Billings 1994). This litany continues for roughly one-tenth of Drumgoold's text (in Coppin's memoir, these tributes take up over a quarter of the text). Drumgoold deliberately makes space in her own story to acknowledge the work of others in order to highlight the communitarian nature of her understanding of education. This ethos of connectivity and community pervades almost all of the writings by Black women educators from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

Following these profiles, Drumgoold affords us a brief description of her own ongoing work as a teacher. She writes:

When I had finished my public school I taught a pay school for the Summer and had a large number of scholars, and they progressed well. It would be all of a joy to the whole world to have seen how well all of the girls, boys, young men and young ladies did in all of the schools where I have had the pleasure of teaching. I have never taught in any school with any other teacher or teachers, and I was so much more blessed, for all teachers have a way of their own. The new teacher always makes so much change in a school and in the pupils, I found that to do good work in school I should stay long in one

place, that I might bring the scholar near to me. Sometimes I have had it rough, but in it all I can see the hand of God leading me to do all that I could to help forward the great cause of education in those parts where there was so much need. (Kindle Locations 799-806)

From this short description, there is much to be gleaned about Drumgoold's pedagogy. For one thing, teaching alone is typically thought of as disadvantageous. Indeed, du Bois characterizes it as a deliberate disadvantage foisted upon Black schoolteachers in his study *The Common School and the Negro American* (1911). Here, however, Drumgoold figures this disadvantage as a site of productivity. Though going it alone has no doubt caused Drumgoold to "have it rough," as the final sentence admits, being by herself forced her to "bring the scholar near to me." This poetic description echoes the pattern we see in Drumgoold's account of her own teachers and foreshadows the current focus in culturally relevant teaching on utilizing affective relationships to holistically understand students' needs (Milner 2014). It also indicates Drumgoold's ability, as Ozkan notes, to use the written word to reimagine or refigure her experiences, figuring a negative as a positive, and thus implicitly indicating the power and necessity of literacy as a tool of self-realization (Ozkan 2019).

Despite her universally positive assessment of the potentialities of education, Drumgoold's memoir also gives us reason to doubt the sunny portrait she puts forward. She writes, for example, that she teaches at one point in "a pay school for the Summer and had a large number of scholars, and they progressed well. Some of them would go without food all day to study extra lessons" (Kindle Location 800). How sustainable can an educational program be, no matter how dedicated and caring the teacher, if students have to consistently choose between food and schooling? du Bois demonstrates in *The Common School* that Black Americans had to pay to support better-funded White schools *and* pay more to keep Black schools open (du Bois

120). Can education be effective as a mode of combatting racial injustice when Blacks are asked to pay a greater share of their wages for an education that was often of lower quality? These inequities are often a factor in constraining teachers from pushing back against the boundaries of assimilationist pedagogy. It becomes harder for young people to exercise independent thinking and metacognition if they are deprived of basic resources like food, to say nothing of clothes, school supplies, or transportation.

Despite her near-impossible circumstances, however, Drumgoold's prowess as a teacher is indisputable. We see the best proof in the *New York Times* article "Teacher Left, Pupils Strike" (1909). Drumgoold, who continued to teach after the publication of her autobiography, was transferred to another primary school. As a result, according to the *Times*, her students "declare that they won't attend school till Miss Drumgoold is restored to them." The article goes on to say,

The strike has been on since Monday, and only parental escort to and from school has kept a few of the scholars in their seats. The rest gather outside the school and do picket duty, trying to persuade their more timid classmates to join them. Petitions have been drawn up and signed and sent to Principal George O. Tappan and to other prominent men of the neighborhood, whose influence, the children think, might bring Miss Drumgoold back. Principal Tappan says that Miss Drumgoold was transferred by order of the School Board, and that he would like to have her back just as much as the children.

That students who had not yet finished grammar school could organize a coherent strike, complete with petitions and picket lines, bespeaks a teacher who has cultivated authentic and meaningful affective relationships. What's more, Drumgoold's students' strike is perhaps the ultimate endorsement of the ability of schools to foster a critical engagement with democracy. Through her close personal ties to her "scholars," Drumgoold is able to help her students realize their voices through social protest.

The possibilities for culturally relevant education that Drumgoold identifies, enabled by the ethic of “bringing the scholar near,” are similarly characterized in the novel *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* by Frances E. W. Harper (1892). Thought until 1982 to be the first novel published by an African-American author, *Iola Leroy* contains some of the earliest depictions of Black teachers and students in American fiction. Like *Bits and Odds*, it is written explicitly as a didactic text. Similar to *A Slave Girl's Story*, Harper's novel is an idealistic portrait of the capacities of teaching to transform society for the better that the reader is meant to internalize and imitate.

*Iola Leroy* tells the story of the title character's journey to find her place in the work of reconstruction in post-Civil War America. Even before her schoolhouse is introduced, learning and literacy are valorized as both pleasurable and politically productive—no matter the context in which they are received. Robert, one of the novel's protagonists, reflects that “Mrs. Johnson had taught him to read on the same principle she would have taught a pet animal amusing tricks. She had never imagined the time would come when he would use the machinery she had put in his hands to help overthrow the institution to which she was so ardently attached” (Harper 16). There is an assertion here that, contrary to the dictum, the “machinery” of literacy can be used to destroy racial oppression—first, at the beginning of the novel, to combat slavery, and later on to fight the new regime of White supremacy out of which slavery evolved. Robert singles out the novel as a particularly dangerous form: “My ole Miss used to have a lot of books. She would let me read any one of them except a novel. She wanted to take care of my soul, but she wasn't taking care of her own” (Harper 46). Though the reason she gives is moral—she's concerned for “my soul”—there is no doubt a political valence to this selective censorship. Harper envisions

the novel as a place to stage an alternative that is dangerous to the state (meaning both “the state” and “the state of things”), which is precisely what she does in *Iola Leroy*.

Robert soon becomes, in turn, our first model teacher: “Kind and devoted to the company he drilled, he soon won the respect of his superior officers and the love of his comrades” (Harper 46). To be “kind and devoted” echoes the mandate of “bringing the scholar near” that we see in Drumgoold’s work. The men who are valorized in this novel, like Robert and Tom, are presented as feminine and nurturing, while still conforming to traditional notions of male heroism in battle.

Similar to Drumgoold’s *Story*, *Iola Leroy* functions both as an act of teaching and an invocation to teach others. As Ozkan notes, William Still’s introduction figures the novel as object to be taught, as “an interesting, moral story-book, full of practical lessons,” without which classroom teachers “will not be content” (Harper 3). When Robert meets with other officers later in the text, Captain Sybil tells him, “I hope that the time will come when some faithful historian will chronicle all the deeds of daring and service these people have performed during this struggle, and give them due credit therefor.” “I think,” he adds, “that if the public schools had been common through the South this war would never have occurred” (Harper 130-131). As du Bois argues in *The Common School*, public schools became ubiquitous as a result of the Civil War as a kind of automatic reaction to emancipation. As he puts it, “fugitives poured into the lines and gradually were used as laborers and helpers. Immediately teaching began and gradually schools sprang up” (du Bois 17). It was “Negro voters of reconstruction,” however, who “instituted a public school system in a region where public schools had been unknown” (du Bois 22 quoting Tourgee). Harper argues that schooling is so powerful it could have averted armed conflict on an enormous scale. Only universal education, she maintains, can lead to a

future where political conflict can be solved peacefully—that is, a time when the American democratic project can be perfected.

We see Harper’s sense of possibility most clearly when Iola begins her career in the classroom. “How would you like to teach?” asks Doctor Gresham, Iola’s White suitor. “Schools are being opened all around us. Numbers of excellent and superior women are coming from the North to engage as teachers of the freed people. Would you be willing to take a school among these people?” (Harper 145) Despite the fact that teachers often taught alone—that is, as the only teacher at their school—teaching is figured as collaborative work, done in conjunction with an unseen network of “excellent and superior” women all on the same mission. Immediately after she accepts the position, Captain Sybil’s hope is validated, as the narrator tells us “Very soon Iola realized that while she was heartily appreciated by the freedmen, she was an object of suspicion and dislike to their former owners.” We learn:

The North had conquered by the supremacy of the sword, and the South had bowed to the inevitable. But here was a new army that had come with an invasion of ideas, that had come to supplant ignorance with knowledge, and it was natural that its members should be unwelcome to those who had made it a crime to teach their slaves to read the name of the ever blessed Christ. But Iola had found her work, and freedmen their friend. (145-146)

Literacy, suppressed during slavery precisely because of its political valences, carries an incredible allure to Iola’s students and an immediately-apprehended threat to those in power. In the chapter “Illiteracy,” du Bois’ report takes care to list in great detail many of the various laws preventing enslaved people to read and write, noting that the “law was carefully enforced” (du Bois 15). Like *Iola Leroy*, du Bois’ report argues that literacy is essential to democratic participation.

Iola’s “pupils came from miles around, ready and anxious to get some ‘book larnin’” (Harper 146). Her success in reaching her students is figured to be a result of Iola’s positive



qualities as a pedagogue. For example, we are told that, “When Iola opened her school she took pains to get acquainted with the parents of the children, and she gained their confidence and cooperation” (Harper 146). This piece of instruction foreshadows the emphasis on differentiation—tailoring instruction to the needs of each student—that is a large part of the contemporary discourse surrounding culturally relevant praxis (Ladson-Billings 1990). It is Iola’s kindness that allows her the trust and cooperation of the parents with whom she works. This reminder from Harper (also a teacher) to her peers to be kind to their students and to be intentional when disciplining them anticipates Black feminist pedagogy of the twentieth century.

The climax of Iola’s time as a teacher comes when “[o]ne day a gentlemen came to the school and wished to address the children” (Harper 146). The “gentlemen,” who represents the White southern patriarchal system of power, “essayed to talk to [Iola’s students] on the achievements of the White race.” Her students, however, are well trained. With one voice, they frustrate their allegorical inquisitor at every turn. When he asks how the White race has been able to effect such miracles as “building steamboats and carrying on business,” the students answer, “‘They’ve got money’ . . . ‘But how did they get it?’ ‘They took it from us,’ chimed the youngsters. Iola smiled, and the gentlemen was nonplussed” (Harper 147). This triumph, however, is relatively short lived. In the very next paragraph, Iola’s school is set on fire by “the cruel work of an incendiary torch,” more evidence that education is rightly recognized as dangerous by the ruling class. Yet her students are undaunted, joining together to encourage the adult onlookers. The attempted censorship of the Black classroom is figured by Harper as already too late: her students will continue to resiliently speak back to those in power, despite violence which may be effected against them.

It is important to keep in mind, however, Harper's text is a novel. After the arson at the schoolhouse, we never return to those schoolchildren, and Iola continues on to her next uplifting adventure. The painful process of rebuilding from the fire, of living through the future acts of violence that will inevitably come in reprisal, does not fit into Harper's narrative. In reality, the structural impediments that Black women teachers faced—metaphorized here as a consuming blaze—often rendered attempts to seriously engage with the radical possibilities of education nearly impossible. To this point, it is important to consider less optimistic visions of the practice and possibilities of teaching from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as those depicted in the autobiography of the real-life inspiration for Harper's protagonist, Ida B. Wells.

As Gabrielle Foreman and Carole Lynn Stewart have noted, Harper's *Iola Leroy* took as its namesake and inspiration the pseudonymous "Iola," a pen-name used by Wells at the beginning of her writerly career (Foreman 1997, Stewart 2019). Wells wrote a column for the Memphis church periodical *The Living Way* as "Iola" beginning in 1887, giving instruction to parents on how to educate their children (Wells xviii). Wells, like her fictional namesake, was a teacher, orator, author, and public intellectual of the time, whose pen name was an open secret. Similar to Harper, Wells figures the acquisition of literacy as of fundamental importance to the struggle for Black liberation in the United States (Wells 21). Like the books I have discussed by Brown, Drumgoold, and Harper, Wells' autobiography *Crusade for Justice* (1970) reminds us over and over again of the power of the printed word.

Wells' career as a professional author, sparked by her experience at *The Living Way*, came about as a direct result of teaching for seven years in the Shelby County school system. Wells writes, "In Memphis, after becoming a teacher, I joined a lyceum composed mainly of teachers of the public schools. We met every Friday afternoon in the Vance Street Christian

Church...It was a breath of life for me, for this program was like the Friday afternoon oratoricals in school” (Wells 23). Though she receives her first opportunity as a professional writer as a result of her membership in this community of Black educators, however, Wells comes away from her teaching experience frustrated and cynical about the capacity of teachers to effect change. Contrasting her experiences as a teacher with those of the fictional Iola whom Harper renders provides a powerful, sobering reminder of the gaps between the real and idealized lives of Black female teachers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the scope of the violence real teachers had to navigate.

In her memoir, Wells’ frustration with teaching as a profession is linked to the structural conditions she works within. Left with the care of her siblings at age sixteen after her parents’ deaths, Wells’ first job is in the Shelby County school system, serving students in rural West Tennessee. Teaching is what Wells turns to out of necessity to care for her family. She writes, “Two of [my father’s friends]... advised me to apply for a country school. I took the examination for a country schoolteacher and had my dresses lengthened, and I got a school six miles out in the country. I was to be paid the munificent sum of twenty-five dollars a month” (Wells 16-17). Wells’ introduction of her career in teaching already figures the profession as deeply problematic. First, Wells reminds us that teaching is a kind of glorified domestic service, a recourse Black women had to turn in order to provide for families under assault in the aftermath of slavery. “I never cared for teaching,” Wells tells the reader later on. “...There seemed nothing else to do except menial work, and I could not have made a living at that” (Wells 31). Furthermore, the reference to having her dresses lengthened implies a kind of moralizing, patriarchal surveillance under which female teachers are scrutinized. Wells, “too young to have been out in company except at children’s parties,” figures herself a model of Victorian

propriety—so what does it say that even she isn't prim enough for a career as a teacher in Shelby County? Finally, with characteristic withering sarcasm, Wells recalls her “munificent” salary of twenty-five dollars per month, which would have been slightly less than the average salary earned by a laborer in Tennessee in 1880 (History of Wages, 274). Wells’ “munificent” salary would have been barely enough to support herself, much less the family for which she was now responsible.

Wells’ implication that Black women teachers did not earn enough to get by is borne out by the data du Bois presents in *The Common School*. In Tennessee at the time, salaries for teachers varied according to both race and gender. For example, Black teachers in Giles County in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century could earn up to \$30 a month, while White teachers, whose salaries started at \$30, could earn up to \$112.50. In Hamilton County, Black male teachers earned an average of \$68.53, while Black female teachers earned an average of \$44.21. Similar figures are shown for in every state in du Bois’ report (du Bois 93). Today too, Black teachers and women teachers earn less, on average, than white, male public school teachers (NCES 1996; Iasevoll 2018; Hegewisch and Williams-Baron 2018). These stark differentials in compensation have been identified by scholars as one of the many “opportunity gaps” that inhibit the success of students in predominantly Black schools (Milner 2014).

For these lower salaries, Black teachers are asked to work with more students of a wider range of needs and abilities than their White counterparts (NCES 1996). These needs are consistently intensified by the violent effects of White supremacy. Even if not subject to direct attack, as in Harper’s novel, Wells’ account shows the way that Black educational spaces are vulnerable to structural violence that makes CRT almost impossible. Wells finds during her experience teaching in Visalia, California that disinvestment in the infrastructure of Black

schools effectively negated her effectivity as an educator: “This school was a makeshift one-room building,” she writes. “...[Black families in Visalia] had been given the second-rate facilities that are usual in such cases. All the White, Indian, and half-breed Mexican and Indian children went to school in a commodious building up on the hill, and I was helping to perpetuate this odious state of things by staying and teaching at this school. I spent an unhappy day as these thoughts kept occurring to me. But again I determined to make the best of a situation I could not help” (Wells 25-26). Wells performs the tension at play in her prose, deliberating whether working in substandard schools is itself a capitulation to structural racism or whether any educational space, no matter how compromised, can be a valid site of knowledge production. Though she leans towards the latter, the question is very much still an open one.

Without additional expenditures, schools—both today and in Wells’ time—are hard pressed to provide for the basic needs of student, much less combatting the conditions of systemic racism outside of the classroom that negatively impacts Black students and their teachers. It is these effects of White supremacy on Wells’ life beyond school that contribute in large part to her assessment of her own ineffectuality as a teacher. “I spent Saturday and Sunday washing and ironing and cooking for the children and went back to my country school on Sunday afternoon,” she writes. “The country folks were kind and sympathetic, and almost every week they gave me eggs and butter to take home to the children” (Wells 17-18). The multitude of responsibilities she bears, which the polysyndeton in Wells’ first sentence emphasizes, are too numerous for any sixteen-year-old to carry all of them out effectively—much less a sixteen-year-old who is asked to teach to the class size and complex student need described above. Though the kindness of the families Wells works with points toward the kind of communitarian spirit we see in Harper and Drumgoold’s texts, it is not enough to sustain Wells, at least not to the point

where she can plan and execute effective lesson plans. The violence of the world beyond the classroom, *Crusade for Justice* powerfully reminds us, inevitably effects the work being done within it. The case in point comes when Wells is finally able to get an appointment at a school closer to home, which would pay a greater salary and would necessitate a shorter commute, but she is literally prevented from reaching her destination because she is thrown bodily from the train she is taking to get there (Wells 18).

In addition to structural racism, however, a nuanced reading of Wells must account for the role that the specificities of her persona had an effect on her level of relative success in the classroom:

Although I had a reputation in school for thoroughness and discipline in the primary grades, I was never promoted above the fourth grade in all my years as a teacher. The confinement and monotony of the primary work began to grow distasteful. The correspondence I had built up in newspaper work gave me an outlet through which to express the real 'me' and I enjoyed my work to the utmost. (31)

This anecdote perfectly dramatizes the way in which both her circumstances and her persona contributed to frustration with teaching. Wells highlights the limited opportunities for advancement for Black women. She reminds us that teaching can be repetitive and keeping one's position can require suppressing of certain elements of one's self. At the same time, Wells' choice of "discipline and thoroughness" to characterize her teaching praxis stands in opposition to the ethic of "bringing the scholar near" in Harper and Drumgoold, where discipline can never exist without kindness. It aligns with the persona that Wells creates throughout her autobiography, presenting herself as authoritative, stoic, and perennially "going it alone." Taking into account what we know about Wells' persona allows us additional insight into why Wells characterizes the classroom so differently than a teacher like Drumgoold. Nevertheless, it should

be obvious to any reader of *Crusade for Justice* that the primary obstacles to Wells' success were structural, not temperamental.

It is in response to these problems that Frances Coppin writes her own autobiography-cum-textbook, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching* (1913). Coppin was so important an educator that even the cynical Wells writes that a highlight of her first trip North was that she "sat at the feet of Fannie Jackson Coppin" and "went to her famous school for a visit" (Wells 41). In light of overwhelming institutional opposition to teaching "as the practice of freedom," Coppin and her fellow teachers created a thriving educational environment at the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia.

*Reminiscences of School Life* begins the story of Coppin's education with her family history. She frames her own schooling as the result of generations of Black women's collective effort to persevere despite immense psychological and sexual violence. The story begins with her grandmother, Mammy:

Mammy had six children, three boys and three girls. One of these, Lucy, was my mother. Another one of them, Sarah, was purchased by my grandfather, who first saved money and bought himself, then four of his children. Sarah went to work at six dollars a month, saved one hundred and twenty-five dollars, and bought little Frances, having taken a great liking to her, for on account of my birth, my grandfather refused to buy my mother; and so I was left a slave in the District of Columbia, where I was born.

In my childhood, I had two severe burnings. I understand that at my christening the old folks gave a large party, and I was tied in a chair and placed near the stove. At night, when they took off my stocking, the whole skin from the side of the leg next the stove peeled off. (9-10)

For Coppin, the very fact of birth becomes a trauma inflicted on her mother. Her move from the consequences of her grandfather's reaction to her birth to her "severe burnings" points to a

relatedness: the burnings are made to reflect the torture inflicted on her and her mother by the family patriarch. The “old folks”’ cruel confinement of Coppin—tying her to the hot stove—serves as a mirror for her grandfather’s unexplained censure, depriving her of a self, her very skin.

But it is the women in her extended family community who help Coppin to recuperate her ego, to sew herself back together. Coppin writes of her grandmother:

Mammy used to make a long prayer every night before going to bed; but not one word of all she said do I remember except the one word "offspring." She would ask God to bless her offspring. This word remained with me, for, I wondered what offspring meant. (9)

Coppin uses her family story to figure education, similarly to Harper and Drumgoold, as a fundamentally affective endeavor. It is her hunger to discover what she must have sensed but could not articulate—her grandmother’s love—that sends her on a quest to master language. This explains her claims later on in the text that she never had any direct encouragement to get an education, but somehow knew it was a necessary piece of her being (Coppin 17). Coppin’s desire to gain mastery over the written word, and to spread that knowledge to others, is framed as a quest to confirm that she is cared for. From the start, for Coppin, love is bound up with literacy.

It is an aunt of Coppin’s who later helps her to attend Oberlin, so that she could have “the same course of study as at Harvard” (Coppin 11). There, Coppin fulfills her grandmother’s prayer by continuing to manifest her own blessing and master an ever-widening vocabulary. At Oberlin, Coppin encounters both racialized and gendered discrimination. Nevertheless, she completes the “gentleman’s course,” including its teaching requirements, despite the faculty’s ambivalence about her ability to do so. “I never rose to recite in my classes at Oberlin but I felt that I had the honor of the whole African race upon my shoulders,” Coppin writes (15). This



sensation, still familiar to many students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), harkens back to Hallie Brown's claim that elocution—the ability to read persuasively aloud, to perform one's ability to speak and understand—is the shibboleth for entrance into American public sphere. Despite her trepidation, Coppin succeeds: “Fortunately for my training at the normal school, and my own dear love of teaching, tho there was a little surprise on the face of some when they came into the class, and saw the teacher, there were no signs of rebellion” (Coppin 12). In her first characterization of her own teaching, Coppin describes her relationship to the vocation as one of love. Teaching, from this first instance, extends to others the redemptive love Coppin was shown by her grandmother.

Like Drumgoold and Harper, Coppin's *Reminiscences* uses anecdote and narrative to limn her vision of pedagogy. But Coppin goes above and beyond these other authors, constructing the theoretical equivalent of the pedagogical edifice that Brown constructed by hand at her plantation school. While Chapters One, Twelve (“My Visit to England”), and Thirteen (“My visit to South Africa”) are narrative, the majority of the text is designed to be a practical manual for Black teachers. It is this teaching manual which provides the first practical guidelines for executing a curriculum that “brings the scholar near” (Drumgoold 1898) in order to provide a culturally relevant education.

Coppin begins these chapters by discussing the importance of elementary education in particular:

My deep interest centers in elementary education for several reasons; first, because it is at this period of the child's life that habits are formed and tastes cultivated which may guide him in the pursuit of knowledge and happiness in after life, and which by the alchemy of experience are to change the elements of what he has learned into wisdom for his highest happiness. All higher learning is but a combination of a few simple elements, and when these are well taught, it clears away the difficulty of future acquisitions, and nature can spread her beauty before eyes that can see and teach the marvelous precision of her laws, to ears that can hear. (39)

The goal, Coppin says, is to give the student the habit of lifetime inquiry so that they can one day act as their own teachers. Her mission is to “lift education out of the slough of the passive voice,” (Coppin 39) or what hooks (after her own teacher, Paolo Freire) will call the “banking method,” which asks students to regurgitate information without a critical consciousness that asks why learn it (hooks 1994). “I am always sorry to hear that such and such a person is going to school to be educated,” Coppin writes. “This is a great mistake. If the person is to get the benefit of what we call education, he must educate himself, under the direct instruction of the teacher” (Coppin 44). Education for Coppin is geared towards independence and metacognition, both of which should be modeled for students from a young age.

Best practice in the classroom, Coppin tells us, means delegating to students as much control as possible. To address the wide range of needs in the population she serves, Coppin designs a set of projects for each subject that can easily be differentiated based on student ability. Despite the need for discipline, “the teacher should by no means take up a position as if watching the pupils” (Coppin 47). Correction should take the form of patient redirection, as sustainable classroom management is ultimately the product of trust and partnership. Rather than reverting to corporal punishment or labeling students “dumb,” Coppin calls for the teacher to examine her own praxis and the child holistically: “Are the lessons too hard? or are they too long? Is the child well?” (Coppin 51) Students misbehave, Coppin claims, when their needs are not being met. It is this nuanced understanding of discipline that does not appear in Wells’ account and may help explain the varying degrees of success each teacher encountered.

Most important to Coppin is imparting what she calls “a connected idea of the lesson,” without which student interest will wither and the educational project cannot succeed (Coppin

68). Coppin means that students should at all times understand how their activity fits into the broader goals of their education: increasing their democratic agency. With this phrase, Coppin brilliantly anticipates two of the most important aspects of progressive educational theory today—backwards design and spiraled curriculum<sup>2</sup>—and contextualizes these techniques as tools that encourage student independence and critical consciousness. An emphasis on connectivity is the binding tie between the successes described by Brown, Drumgoold, Harper, and Coppin. African American pedagogy, they argue, must be a collaborative praxis, one in which students are thought of as partners, not disciplinary charges. In order to achieve a modicum of success in quasi-impossible conditions, teachers must engage in a connected dialogue through their writing, even when, like Drumgoold or Iola, they were forced to work alone.

The project Coppin describes is necessarily unfinished.<sup>3</sup> The name of her own text, *Hints on Teaching*, tells us from the first that she does not have all of the answers the reader needs. If, however, we, like her students, are willing to accept our responsibility of being our own teachers, Coppin's *Hints* can serve as a critical departure point in our educational trajectory. The text, like all of those addressed here, is far from perfect. Coppin spends a good deal of time, for example, describing how to correctly teach the history of Christopher Columbus. Her chapter on South Africa is paternalistic and chauvinist. What Coppin's *Hints* does, however, is provide the tools that were necessary to gradually shift the problematic paradigms of thought she herself is heir to.

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<sup>2</sup> Backwards design is a term for deliberately developing each aspect of curriculum and assessment based on curricular goals; spiraled curriculum means that core areas of content—for example, American history or punctuation—is repeated, with increasing complexity, throughout a student's education. For more on both terms, see the germinal *Understanding By Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.

<sup>3</sup> This is true of my own project as well. A more complete version should include Washington's and other educators' works as well. In addition, this text does not take up other variables that influence the success or failure of the teachers here, such as regional geography. It is some consolation, however, to remember that none of the texts I examine here are "finished" either; thus, the necessity of taking them together. By placing this essay alongside the work of other contemporary scholars like Moar and Ozkan, along with other scholars still to come, readers can gain a fuller a sense of the genius and foresight of black women teachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

If we read Coppin's work alongside Brown's, Wells', Drumgoold's, and Harper's, and others of their contemporary's, we are able to unpack and contextualize the patriarchal, white supremacist fallacies still circulating in her text.

Like each of the texts I have examined here, *Hints on Teaching* provides a model of how to work within a broken system as well as an argument for the necessity of fixing it. Like Ladson-Billings (1990, 1994) and bell hooks (1994) a century later, the educators in this survey argue that teachers must make themselves vulnerable to students, that they must improvise and adapt, and that they must teach alternative histories to help students to speak with one voice against unjust authority. As Wells (1970) and Milner (2014) reminds us, however, if they are not given enough support, an adequate place to teach, or enough resources to care for themselves and their students, it may all be for naught. But as Black women educators have demonstrated for a century and a half, there is no alternative but to continue the work of teaching and writing as best as possible. By foregrounding the contributions of Black women teachers in the interdisciplinary study of pedagogical history and theory, all educators can better chart a path towards education as freedom's practice.

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