Doing the Deep Work of Antiracist Pedagogy: Toward Self-Excavation for Equitable Classroom Teaching

Teacher educators of antiracist pedagogies must begin by asking ourselves the question: How do issues of race, class, religion, and sexual orientation live within us?

One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist.

—Ibram X. Kendi

We are at a time in the history of the United States when race, class, and culture weigh heavily upon us. We are still healing from the Trump presidency, during which the continuing disparities of inequity were glaringly spotlighted by the global pandemic of COVID-19.

The memory of George Floyd dying on video is horrendous, traumatizing, and brutal. Listening to Floyd tell the police that he could not breathe is a stark echo of Eric Garner's exact words six years earlier. And still the police are not listening. Hearing Floyd call for his mama with his last breaths tore at the hearts of (Black) mothers worldwide. What is this injustice that still haunts Black and Brown bodies across the globe?

All of this is backdropped by a global pandemic—the coronavirus—that is erasing clusters of people in nearly every country. At the time of this writing, nearly a year and a half since the advent of the pandemic, we are still locked in, shut down, and in isolation, frantically trying to save ourselves. Amid this health crisis, Black and Brown bodies, who are most vulnerable to the virus, continue to be persecuted and terrorized by their fellow humans.

At George Floyd's memorial—televised live in the United States—the Reverend Al Sharpton pled in his eulogy for law enforcement and government to "take their knee off our collective necks." What a palpable request. Long after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, racism remains as insidious than ever. It is capitalistic, sexist, gendered, and classist in ways that continue to frighten and overwhelm us. The structure of institutionalized racism and bigotry is alive and consistently unsettling the lives of people who have historically been discriminated against for generations.

All of this is foregrounded in the heart and minds of many scholars of color and has become pivotal to the scholar-activist lives they lead. This paper examines the lived experiences of two women of color, academics at the same institution who are both activist scholars. Through our work, we hope to impact how schools, teachers, and places of teaching and learning integrate professional development as a learning agent and tool to facilitate practices of antiracist pedagogies and understanding.

So where do we begin? We have to begin with ourselves. Always. Lyiscott (2019) uses a story from the *Harry Potter* series to help us consider this important work. She shares about the part where Harry encounters the Mirror of Erised—a magical mirror that reflects our deepest desires—and asks, "Do we have the ability to stand before a mirror

of truth? What hopes, pains, and deep desperate desires can we find there?" In the *Harry Potter* series, the mirror reveals the truth of the things and situations we long for. In Harry's case, he sees a life with his parents, who died shortly after he was born. He dreams and hopes for a reality far removed from the one he lives.

It is critical to bear in mind that we cannot engage with our students around these issues when we have not engaged with our own selves. We have to know who we are and where we stand in order to have genuine and meaningful conversations with ourselves and others.

So, what do we envision for ourselves and for others? Lyiscott adds that "the question is a paradigm shift for many of us who are used to approaching social justice work in ways that are strangely divorced from personal wellness work" (p. 13). Many times, our current paradigms for social justice work happen without paying close attention to the realities of our own mental health, family dysfunctions, emotional triggers, and psychological traumas—all the heavy lifting we do just to keep ourselves together. Lyiscott emphasizes that, before we can look at the sociopolitical struggles of racism and white privilege, we first must enter into conversation with ourselves. These pivotal internal conversations refer to the work Sealey-Ruiz (2018, 2020) has termed "the Archaeology of Self,™" a process of excavating our personal histories to activate our own racial consciousness as a precursor to theorizing about what an antiracist pedagogy means to each of us.

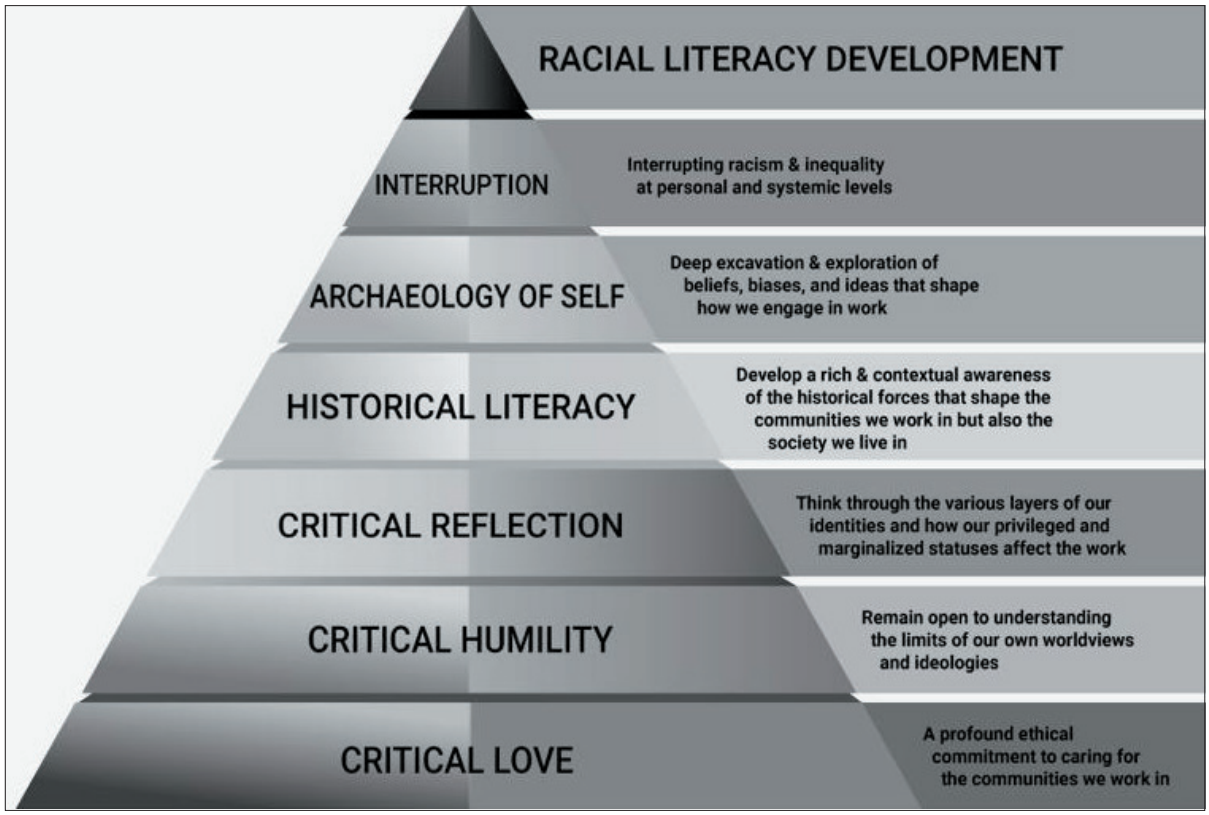
Mentor (2019) reminds us that "[t]he fact that our students are bombarded with images and incidents on social and mainstream media means that they have access to, may be victims of, and, sometimes, are complicit in racial discrimination." As a result, it becomes all the more important that teachers and teacher educators are ready to engage with our students. It is critical to bear in mind that we cannot engage with our students around these issues when we have not engaged with our own selves. We have to know who we are and where we stand in order to have genuine and meaningful conversations with ourselves and others.

Racial Literacy Development and Archaeological Digging

The Archaeology of Self™ is one of six components in Sealey-Ruiz's Racial Literacy Development model (see Figure 1). The six components of racial literacy development seek to prepare and support educators in their journey to becoming racially literate and eventually taking action to interrupt racism when they see it happening in their lives, in schools, and in classrooms. The steps of Sealey-Ruiz's model are *critical love*, *critical humility*, *critical reflection*, *historical literacy*, *Archaeology of Self*™, and *interruption*. Racial literacy in teacher education promotes deep self-examination and requires actions that can lead to sustainable social justice and educational equity for all students, and Black students in particular. Without it, teachers, teacher educators, and their students will continue to find themselves powerless in systems based on race. Research has revealed that conversations about race, when done effectively, provide education professionals with the confidence they need to alter their pedagogy in more culturally responsive and culturally sustaining ways. They become skillful at engaging their students in essential conversations that relate to their learning and social development.

Self-work in racial literacy development is important. Without it, teachers cannot engage in and sustain deep conversations about race to explore how it impacts their teaching and what they need to change about their practice. While self-archaeology of this kind must be done individually, it is also co-constructed and requires accountability from others. Particular areas of learning about race and racism need to be probed individually; however, teachers must eventually understand how the changes they are experiencing impact others. Moving toward an antiracist mindset (the ultimate goal of self-archaeology involving race) takes consistent practice—practice through different approaches of going deep within the self. The co-created archaeological dig has the potential to generate conditions

Figure 1. Racial Literacy Development model.

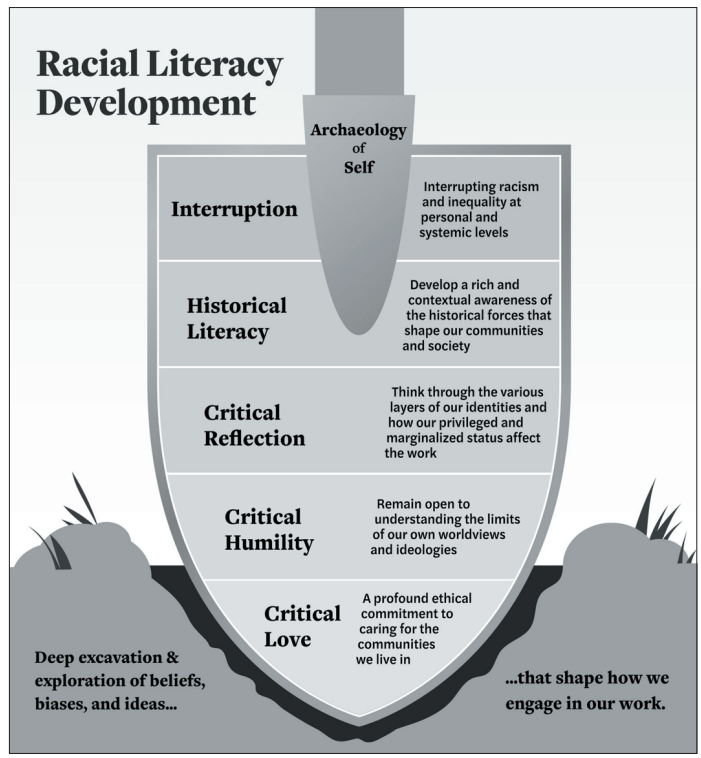


for expanded learning and growth. Literacy educator B. Mooney reflects on the power of the Archaeology of Self™ in this insightful quote:

> Engaging in Archaeology of the Self™ is a process that requires us to be gentle and delicate with ourselves as we dig through our histories, much like professional archaeologists use tools in order to excavate delicate historical artifacts with care. Being gentle with oneself does not mean we turn away from hard truths, misbeliefs, biases, trauma, or pain, but instead look deeply within from a place of radical self-love. The process also requires a keen eye for detail, complexity, nuance, contradiction, and truths while examining our beliefs, attitudes, and understandings. And while self-archaeology is very much about making meaning from the past, including our personal and collective histories, it is also very much concerned with our ability to be fully present in this moment and with sustaining futures that are full of possibility, hope, and joy.

Dr. Angel Acosta, the designer of Sealey-Ruiz's Racial Literacy Development model, has reconceptualized the image to illuminate the metaphor of self-archaeology in Figure 2. This new image is being debuted in this issue of *Language Arts*.

Figure 2. Reconceptualized design of Racial Literacy Development model emphasizing "Archaeology of Self™"



Archaeology of Self™ is a process by which teachers and teacher educators surface deep-seated beliefs and racial trauma—personally experienced or inflicted on others—as well as deeply held biases and stereotypical notions about how certain children learn, and how certain communities came to be.

Like B. Mooney, those who engage with Archaeology of the Self in literacy classrooms and professional development (as we encourage those with whom we work to do) find that this approach requires *letting go* of lifelong ideas and beliefs and *letting in* new understanding to make way for new beliefs that engage the full humanity of others. Archaeology of Self™ is a process by which teachers and teacher educators surface deep-seated beliefs and racial trauma—personally experienced or inflicted on others—as well as deeply held biases and stereotypical notions about how certain children learn, and how certain communities came to be. As a metaphor, Archaeology of Self™ allows teachers to think about the work they can do daily to transform themselves, their classrooms, and, potentially, the lives of their literacy students.

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Professional Development Practices

In our professional development for teachers—both in-service and preservice—we believe that the interrogation of self is pivotal in the work centered on antiracism. For the most part, the professional development sessions start with introductions by the facilitators who share the story of how they entered this work. Often the general introductions ask the participants to share something of themselves—not too revealing but warming them up to the idea of sharing and thinking about who they are and how they navigate their lives. The facilitators model for the participants what it means to hold up a mirror to themselves, or to dig up the parts of themselves that need to be uncovered. Goals for participants of a professional development session or series of sessions may include the following:

- Create a safe, affirming and generative space for dialogue.
- Develop personal racial literacy.
- Encourage and develop self-love, self-empathy, and self-care.
- Establish ways to hold space for people with conflicting cultural, racial, gender, and social identities.
- Grow in their own self-understanding around issues of race, class, gender, and identity.
- Interrogate their own biases.

Many of the main elements of the professional development session(s) involve written reflections and paired and whole-group share-outs as people become increasingly comfortable. To prepare for the session(s), participants engage a selection of assigned readings on their own. One reading that could be included is Peggy McIntosh's (1995) valuable work on unpacking the invisible knapsack of white privilege. Other work that participants may also do on their own could include taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which measures the strength of associations between concepts (e.g., Black people, gay people) and evaluations (e.g., good, bad) or stereotypes (e.g., athletic, clumsy).

The uncovering of self accompanies the sharing of our own deep experiences and personal thoughts, which, of course, begs an expectation of openness and vulnerability from the participants. In these sessions, when someone has been brave enough to speak out and share, that *letting go* and *letting in* invariably holds space for others to join and be a part of the vulnerable space that is created. Also very useful at times are the videos made or curated by the facilitators beforehand so that participants may watch them in asynchronous sessions. These visual materials encourage participants to do the deep work of self-reflection at their own pace, often

using the process of journaling or answering question prompts.

We believe that a teacher education program fostering racial literacy must provide spaces for teachers to talk about their fears and uncertainties. Schools of education can embrace the following tenets as they move their students toward deep self-reflection, an equity mindset, and development of racial literacy. In particular, teacher education programs must encourage both preservice and in-service educators to do the following:

- Engage the reading of critical texts (e.g., writings about race, racism, diversity) across the curriculum as a method of acquiring language to discuss, problematize, and refute racial stereotypes and racist hierarchical systems in society and in their schools (e.g., the school-to-prison pipeline).
- Understand that before becoming culturally competent and culturally responsive teachers, they must engage in self-examination around notions of race, Black children, and other children of color.
- Recognize the need for and accept the task of holding students accountable for practicing racial literacy in their teacher education classrooms and in the classrooms where they will observe and teach.
- Discuss and critique personal experiences with race and racism.
- Take action against racist or discriminatory practices that cause negative outcomes for their Black students and other students of color in the schools where they will ultimately teach.

Analysis and Reflection

A deep dive of self-excavation will only succeed if people open up to the process. But we can't always predict how people will respond to the dive. Many share and are verbal, but others don't, and because this is such a private journey, we cannot always assess where people are in their process if they do not share out.

Invariably within the racial literacy development journey, the topic of colorblindness surfaces. Co-author Marcelle was born in Apartheid South Africa and was not prepared for the very clear lines of racial discrimination in the United States when she emigrated in 2005. She quickly realized that though the laws around racial discrimination and segregation may have been erased from the law books, a definitive and effective system of racial disparity was to her—from her lived experience—very apparent in the educational spaces she navigated in New York City. Money and real estate (ownership of property) were used as ways to delineate groups and keep Black and Brown children out of schools in higher-resourced, economically advantaged neighborhoods. When people in the United States say they do not see race or are "colorblind," Marcelle asks them if they do not see her. "I would argue that when we say that we are racially colorblind, we render Black and Brown bodies invisible and we render their experiences, lives, and traumas moot and mute," she has said. "We silence whole truths and whitewash a very real and painful history of people across the U.S.A." (Edweek.org, 2019).

The danger of silencing whole groups of peoples is real and needs not be imagined. This is why we stand so strongly against a shallow understanding of racial work. We must move beyond the "just let's all be kind to each other" rhetoric. It is, after all, quite clear that someone can be a very kind *and* racist person at the same time.

Moving Forward/Recommendations

In returning to our driving question—"What makes antiracist training effective and what makes an educator an antiracist practitioner?"—we have to think deeply about what our own excavation of self allows. How might the way practitioners are guided through the process be useful to the way they teach or how they approach their teaching in the classrooms and institutions they navigate? Here are some questions for self-reflection to guide us through this practice of self-excavation:

- Who is included and excluded, due to systems set up in our society, at our school and in my classroom?
- Who talks, who listens, and who gains from the communities I am a part of?

- Who is served by the way we test and assess knowledge at my school and in my classroom?
- How can I take action to be socially just and equitable at my school and in my classroom?

Not being able to do this work in person will always be a challenge. There is a level of personalization one simply cannot achieve online. We always are challenged by the lack of reading body language in these spaces, which can be limiting and restrictive in an online setting.

It is important to remember that we cannot become instantaneous interrupters. The work is deep. It starts with loving ourselves and others critically and unconditionally.

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Call for Nominations: NCTE Children's Book Awards

Nominations are requested from publishers and NCTE members for the following NCTE Children's Book Awards:

- The NCTE **Charlotte Huck Award® for Outstanding Fiction for Children** was established in 2014 to promote and recognize excellence in the writing of fiction for children. This award recognizes fiction that has the potential to transform children's lives by inviting compassion, imagination, and wonder. Submission information can be found on the NCTE webpage at https://ncte.org/awards/ncte-childrens-book-awards/charlotte-huck-award/.
- The NCTE **Orbis Pictus Award®** was established in 1989 to promote and recognize excellence in the writing of nonfiction for children. Orbis Pictus commemorates the work of Johannes Amos Comenius, *Orbis Pictus—The World in Pictures* (1658), considered to be the first book actually planned for children. Submission information can be found on the NCTE webpage at https://ncte.org/awards/orbis-pictus-award-nonfiction-for-children/.
- The NCTE **Notable Children's Poetry and Verse Novels** list has been presented annually since 2011 to celebrate excellence in children's poetry books. This list includes all forms of poetry, including individual poetry, anthologies, narratives, biographical poems, and verse novels. Submission information and criteria can be found on the NCTE webpage at https://ncte.org/awards/excellence-in-poetry-for-children-living-american-poet/.

Nominations are due by **October 15, 2021**.