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# Stories of Social Justice Educators and Raising Children in the Face of Injustice


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## **Stories of Social Justice Educators and Raising Children in the Face of Injustice**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines life stories of the authors, who are parents and social justice scholars and educators from different races and backgrounds. The authors consider the emotional process of personally and collectively coping with and navigating parenting and sharing critical truths with their children in the current social, political, and cultural environment and in light of recent assaults on communities of color. They employ life history methodology to explicitly continue a critical conversation that was started by Matias and Montoya (2015) about Critical Race Parenting, and they encourage other scholars, particularly those who are parents, to think about, and articulate, their different emotions and experiences as they engage in critical race conversations about racial injustice and racist ideology, and as they more generally navigate schooling and life with their own children.

### **Introduction**

You understand that there is no real distance between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me. (Coates, 2015, pp. 24–25)

In the groundbreaking literary masterpiece *Between the World and Me* (2015), author Ta-Nehisi Coates addressed his then-15-year-old son through a letter. In the letter, Coates told a part of his life story to his son about growing up in Baltimore, Maryland. Coates spoke of his frustrations with the school system and how he conceived of schools as concealing truths. He argued that schools were implicit in the perpetuation of counterproductive educational practices that negatively impacted Black and Brown communities while explicitly claiming the opposite. Coates (2015) argued that educators and their institutions' intentions were secondary: "It does not matter that the 'intentions' of individual educators were noble... a great number of educators spoke of 'personal responsibility' in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility" (p. 33). In the letter to his son, Coates (2015) conjured Derrick Bell's (2005) *permanence of racism* theory

and the dangers of believing in the American Dream (Alexander, 2015); that is, a Dream stimulated by Hollywood, gilded by novels and stories of adventure at the expense of the Black body because, according to Coates, the destruction of the Black body is an American tradition—a heritage—a by-product and undercurrent of the American Dream (Alexander, 2015; Coates, 2015).

In this study, we build from Coates' (2015) premise of parents trying to enlighten and help our children navigate America's school system. Many of us as parents are terrified for our children, and we struggle with how to discuss harsh realities that our children will face once they leave our homes and enter into school. This inquiry addresses these socio-political and socio-cultural phenomena through the authors, and we are also parents. We are social justice educators and academics within the field of education. As such, we are perhaps more sensitive and aware of the policies, the practices, and the legacy of inequity and injustice within the American school tradition. Our time is spent researching, writing, and publishing articles and chapters and reading books. We also spend or have spent significant time in schools, as educators, researchers, and parents, learning about and understanding educational policy, schooling, and school culture. We spend countless hours talking with other colleagues and peers about these topics. We present our findings and listen to our peers' and colleagues' findings at conferences. Therefore, sensitivity is heightened for those of us so inclined and indoctrinated as social justice educators and academics within the field of education. In this article, we share our stories and challenges related to speaking with our own children about racism and assaults on communities of color. In the final section, we express our hope that shared dialogue such as this might continue. We suggest that conversations like these could also help to impact how parents and educators interact with children as we all grow in our collective understanding.

### **The Assaults on Communities of Color**

This study also builds off of a collection of essays by leading and emerging academics in the field of race studies. The volume of short essays is entitled, *The Assault on Communities of Color: Exploring the Realities of Race-Based Violence* (Fasching-Varner & Hartlep, 2015). The editors of this volume contend that the days of lynching Blacks and explicit racism have been exchanged for a pernicious, modern, implicit racism just as violent and strong as its predecessor, which, due to its implicit nature, is more difficult to untangle. In 2012, a neighborhood watchman, George Zimmerman, gained notoriety for shooting and killing unarmed Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman was found not guilty at trial. From 2012-2016, a string of high profile encounters between police officers and Black males occurred. Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Freddie Grey, along with Alton Sterling,

Philando Castile, and too many others have garnered national and even international outcry due to a pattern of Black males being killed during police encounters. And, as in the Zimmerman case, the families of these victims watched their loved one's accusers return to their family and their lives. These cases, although different in many respects, share a common theme—they each sparked outrage in Black and Brown communities and decries of injustice. As tragic as these events were, they are only a fraction of the assaults on communities of color (Fasching-Varner & Hartlep, 2015).

The standout chapter in this volume as it pertains to this study is Chapter 13, entitled *When Michael's Death Means our Own Children's Death* (2015), by Professor Cheryl E. Matias, PhD in Education, who focuses on race and ethnic studies, and PhD student Roberto Montoya. Both are or were associated with the University of Colorado, Denver, in the Urban Community Teacher Education Program. Their chapter opens with common sensibilities similar to ours:

For many advocates of racial justice, being well-adjusted to injustice is hyper-compounded when we decide to add children to our families; we must decide how to communicate such lasting and persistent atrocities to our children... for many parents of color, it is a painful onslaught upon the soul and psyche to negotiate and articulate to our children how and why the historic and systemic elimination of young people of color in the United States is not only tolerated but also rationalized. (Matias & Montoya, 2015, p. 79)

### **Critical Race Parenting**

Matias and Montoya's (2015) chapter focuses on the life stories of the authors and their racialized experiences having to navigate poverty, criminalized neighborhoods, and failing school systems as minoritized students of color. They also share stories of their journeys as a professor and a doctoral student, respectively, in education and the obstacles that so many scholars and students of color have lamented. It is with these conditions, and with these experiences, that these educators, now parents, have to wrestle in relation to how they inform their children of the world they have inherited as they navigate the school system (Matias & Montoya, 2015). The authors used Critical Race Theory's (CRT) tenet of counter-story. From this tenet of CRT, the authors introduced a perspective that they called Critical Race Parenting (CRP) (Matias, 2016; Matias & Montoya, 2015).

### **Stories with Life History**

In this article, we use elements of Matias' and Montoya's (2015) premise, including their life stories, as part of a larger life history project. Life history methodology's uniqueness compared to other methods that use stories, such as counter-stories and oral histories, is life history's engagement with stories that seek to capture *how individuals cope*. It links these actions (coping) and personal experiences with theoretical perspectives. Life history is also distinguished by a framework of time (Gramling & Carr, 2004), and our time frame spans the years of 2012-2016. Our project builds off of the premise of Matias and Montoya (2015) by adding additional life stories of parents who are educators as well, and, as such, are also sensitive to the inequities inherent in our educational system. Furthermore, as parents and educators, we are sensitive to the dangers that Black and Brown students face in society as well as in their schools.

We are, in authoring this inquiry, two social justice educators and parents from different races and backgrounds. James is an African American male and father and Amanda is a White female and mother. James and Amanda are academics in the field of educational leadership. Our aim is to begin bringing together experiences as educators and as parents of different races and ethnicities in order to analyze the following questions. How do we view this phenomenon—the assaults on communities of color—and its effects on our school-aged children, similarly and differently? How do we communicate with our children about this phenomenon, given the knowledge and insights that we carry as social justice/critical educators? We aim to continue a critical conversation that was started by Matias and Montoya (2015) in order to encourage other scholars, particularly those who are parents, to think about and articulate how we take part in conversations about racial injustice with our own children. Also, how can these articulations be made as part of the broader research agenda within educational research? This study has implications for future engagement with other students, professors, and practitioners in education, specifically, with regards to how social justice educators across a multitude of races and ethnicities can combat the assaults on communities of color—and the effects on their school children. We aim to encourage a space for educators to talk about how we communicate with one another as well as with children about this phenomenon, given the knowledge and insights that are carried as social justice/critical educators.

### **Methodology**

The participants in this study are social justice educators and parents whose life stories comprise a life history. The life history/life story dichotomy is significant and intentional. Life stories are a component of life history. Life history is the methodology, while stories are components of the methodology which are

used as “data.” Life stories, in this way, are similar to biographies, narratives, or oral histories, but those do not necessarily compose a life history. Life history is holistic and, to reiterate, seeks to *understand the ways people cope* (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Gramling & Carr, 2004). This life history project seeks to establish how social justice educators cope with raising children in the current school, social, and political climate. The life stories that we tell in this article are guided by a broader question: How do critical educators and social justice scholars articulate to their children and cope with the phenomena as posed in the assaults on communities of color? Further, how do we, or can they, as parents, help children to also cope? We are specifically concerned with the realities plaguing Black and Brown students in schools, such as the overrepresentation of students of color who are placed in special education, suspended, and expelled from school, and with those who are being guided toward the school-to-prison pipeline (Gregory, 1997; T. Howard, 2015; T. C. Howard, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Nolan, 2011). We are disturbed by police shootings of Black men, as well as misconduct against women and other communities of color, and by violence and aggression in general. These life stories will be used to add richness and to comprise a life history that considers how scholars and educators within the field of education raise and educate their children in a tumultuous time.

Again, the time frame used in this life history study is between the years of 2012-2016. These years are significant, as they are the last four years of President Obama’s presidency in what some erroneously called the post-racial era (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Fasching-Varner & Hartlep, 2015). In the year 2012, young Black teenager Trayvon Martin was killed. Many Black Americans embraced Trayvon as their relative, and many White Americans embraced young Trayvon similarly. After his untimely and senseless death, Trayvon became a cultural phenomenon as people gathered to protest the justification of his killing on the basis of his “suspicious” appearance. At rallies across the country, protestors dressed in hoodies like Trayvon was dressed the night he was killed. They stood in unity and said, “I am Trayvon Martin.” Many Americans were saddened by the public display of injustice when Trayvon’s killer, George Zimmerman, was allowed to walk free. A string of similar and more egregious deaths, with similar results, were to follow.

Many of us as educators were captivated by these events as they unfolded, primarily because Trayvon was still in high school, and we were similarly shocked by the killing of Michael Brown, which caused an even louder outcry that led to further unrest and riots. Brown had just graduated from high school two months prior to his death. As critical educational scholars and social justice advocates, life stories, which consist of conversations with our children around these phenomena,

can provide a significant amount of insights and some tools to consider for communicating with our school children.

### **Life History Methodology**

The connections between a life story that is told as lived *reality* and written accounts of life history research are, in essence, philosophical concerns regarding the relationship between epistemology and methodology—what knowledge is considered to be and the means by which it is obtained as recognized and related to *truth* (Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

**The goal of life history.** Life historians seek to ask questions that get to narrations such as who, what, or why are you? Why/how do you believe, and make sense of the world and the things that happen in the world? Why has your life taken the course it has and where is it likely to go? What resources do you use in constructing your life's story and why (Goodson & Sikes, 2001)? Without clear focus on the intersection of life in relation to history, social science, education, feminist, and minority perspectives, life stories and life history research methods are trivial pursuits (Dhunpath, 2000). The life history methodology is an appropriate technique when the research problem is an epistemological one or, in other words, when it is an investigation into the *ways* in which individuals account for their actions (Jones, 1983).

**Being explicit.** Life history methodology is a technique that “explicitly recognizes the collusion of the researcher in the research process and allows the researcher access to the processes involved in meaning construction” (Jones, 1983, p. 152). This approach recognizes and brings to the center that each person, including *objective* researchers who study phenomena from a distance, carries with her or him implicit theories that she or he uses as a lens to assess the actions of others. Social life is extremely complex and statistical attempts as explanations have limitations. As Clough (1992) argued, all factual representations of reality, including statistical ones, are narrative constructs (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). As a critique of objective research methods and the ability of a researcher to be uninfluenced by perspectives and theories that they bring into a study, life history embraces the fact that “researchers bring implicit or explicit theories to the research situation” (Jones, 1983, p. 152). As a result, life history methodology and the life historian are in an open confrontation between the theory in the real world and the theory present in the researcher's head (Jones, 1983).

## Life Stories and Life History

There is a growing body of interdisciplinary literature—psychology, philosophy, and the natural sciences—acknowledging the value of narratives (Dhunpath, 2000; McAdams, 2008). Northwestern University’s Foley Center for the Study of Lives, a research project that is housed within the School of Education and Social Policy, is centered on life stories and life history methodology. Dan McAdams, professor and former chair of the Department of Psychology at Northwestern University, developed the research program for the Foley Center, which brings together perspectives from personality psychology, life-course developmental research, qualitative sociology, biography, life story, and cultural studies (McAdams, 2008).

As another example, in 1983, interdisciplinary feminist scholars from anthropology, history, German, linguistics, and literary criticism, in affiliation with the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Feminist Studies, founded the Personal Narratives Group (King, 1991; Personal Narratives Group, 1989). The Personal Narratives Group (1989) engaged in a collective endeavor to explore women’s personal narratives, reflections, and intellectual histories that went into the creation of feminist theory (Dhunpath, 2000).

**Life stories and life history as creating identity.** According to Goodson and Sikes (2001), when people tell their life stories as informants in life history research, they become socially organized biographical objects. They are telling their stories in a certain way for a certain purpose. Those who tell life stories are guided by their environments, which help to construct the identity that they wish to re-present (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). This happens in all social situations, not just in the context of research. As such, “life history research provides [*opportunity*] to tell your life story, to craft a narrative that links together events, experiences, and perceptions, [*and it*] is the explicit opportunity to create an identity” (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 41).

**Life stories and life history as pedagogy.** Some scholars advocate for life history as a pedagogical tool—a cathartic and liberating, as well as powerful, research tool (Dhunpath, 2000). Life histories provide us with real stories of real people, struggling through real problems and other situations. They offer liberation from indifferent approaches to research that is generated by samples and faceless subjects. Our human fallibility and vulnerabilities constantly surface and re-surface. More importantly, we are reminded that teaching, learning, and improving the human condition should be the primary endeavors of academics and researchers (Dhunpath, 2000; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).



**Life stories as data.** Other methodologies employ the use of life stories to collect data, such as in feminist, Latin@ critical race theory (LatCrit) and critical race theories (CRT). In CRT and LatCrit, counter-storytelling is a key tenet used as data (Delgado, 2012; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009). In Solorzano and Bernal's (2001) examination and inquiry into Chican@ student resistance movements, the authors examined two events in Chican@ student history—the 1968 East Los Angeles school walkouts and the 1993 UCLA student strike demanding Chican@ curriculum studies (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Central to the authors' data collection are life stories that CRT and LatCrit methodologies call counter-stories.

Making individuals and researchers more consciously aware of the social and ideological references that they use to view a situation enables them to modify, reject, or solidify their tentative views of the world (Dhunpath, 2000). Thus, this life history inquiry provides two stories of social justice educators. These stories are intended to consider how social justice educators and parents cope in the current environment as laid out in the assaults on communities of color.

### Life Stories

#### James:

I grew up in the northeast just outside of New York City, just under an hour drive north, in southern Connecticut. As a product of an urban school district, low expectations were the standard and academic success and college preparation was the exception. Except and unless you were one of those chosen for my high school's *gifted* program: the gifted program was an in-school tracking program that prepared specific students for college access. Selection into our school's gifted program was a mystery to many of us students. I was not among the chosen few deemed *gifted*. Nonetheless, I was able to navigate this system and eventually make my way into a doctoral program in education administration K-12 at Michigan State University in 2013.

In July 2013, Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted, and August of 2013, I relocated to Michigan to begin the education administration PhD program. I remember intensely watching the Trayvon case as it unfolded. As reluctant as I am in general when it comes to America's judicial system, I thought that my inclination and sensibilities would not apply in this case. The whole world was watching, and it was apparent that the young Trayvon was unjustly murdered. Trayvon, a teenager in his own neighborhood, walking home from a store after purchasing snacks, was

stopped and harassed by a complete stranger and an adult with a gun who would ultimately take the teenager's life. I remember crying at the thought of this happening to my child. And I remember the heartbreak to find out that this murderer would walk out of court and to his home and sleep in his bed after the verdict was read.

Upon moving to Michigan for graduate school Trayvon was foremost in my mind. As the father of three Brown boys of school age, I was indeed concerned about where they would go to school and what to expect in this new region that was foreign to us. It was August 2013, just one month prior to the acquittal of George Zimmerman when we arrived in Michigan, and the following year, August 2014, we would see the Michael Brown case and the riots unfold as a result of his murder.

Once classes and my work as a graduate assistant had started, I reached out to the few African American educators in our department at MSU that had children in the local school system. They all shared similar anxieties: stories and concerns that they had for their kids. This was an unusual introduction to these educators for me. What was on display in my initial encounter with these educators, and due to my inquiring into their children's school life during this pivotal epoch, was vulnerability and humanity. What I later came to know was that these individuals were pillars of strength in the university and widely respected, but my introduction to them revealed something quite different. They all wrestled with the idea of sending their kids to schools with predominately African American students because of the perceived, cultural relevance and camaraderie that they valued and that predominately African American schools, they believed, had offered. Juxtaposed with sending their kids to predominately White schools where their African American children would be minorities and where cultural camaraderie with a more broad Black culture would be jeopardized. I perceived an evident distress and stress from African American PhDs in the field of education during our discussions; especially given the timing. The pros and cons of these options and choosing which schools to choose came down to academics: I was told in each instance that the trade-off of sending their children to predominantly White Schools was primarily for academic success and that, culturally, their kids could potentially lack a wider Black experience in the process. And, likewise, the camaraderie with other Blacks in predominantly Black schools meant lower academic rigor seemed a near certainty; at least where we were in East Lansing.

In the three years that my children had been in the public, high SES predominantly White school district in East Lansing, I have had no shortage of frustrating experiences. As of 2016 my 11 year old, and the oldest of the three, was in sixth grade. My three sons were born in Egypt. Prior to coming here he spent

preschool-third grade in a top private school system in Egypt and had a clearly different and a much more positive schooling experience. While in Egypt my son was always at the top of his class and we saw so much promise with him early on and the teachers raved about him. We never had a problem with him learning, in fact he was eager to learn. But that changed once we arrived in East Lansing. My son was assigned White male teachers, for the first time in his life, in fourth, and fifth grades and there were clearly problems and disconnects between what these teachers thought of my son and what I, as his parent and an educator, knew of him. I was constantly at the school, emailing his teachers and the principal trying to understand the *problems* that they were having with him. I was always told that he would not sit still, and that he liked to socialize too much. I was always telling these teachers about how bright my son was and I would always get surprised looks as if they thought otherwise. In sixth grade we faced a similar problem: he had three primary teachers, two White males and a Latina. Again the White males raised the same concerns about my son. He was too social and would not sit still and recommended he be placed in the front of the class for the purpose of surveillance; his fourth and fifth grade teachers also did similarly. On the contrary, the Latina teacher had a much different perception of my child; her concerns were much more mild and she often complemented and recognized his potential much more often than his other two sixth grade teachers.

It is a constant battle for me to get my son, who is extremely bright, to re-focus on school. I probe and probe but he does not have the concepts and experiences enough to articulate what is happening. When I ask, he just stares at me and cries. It is our goal in this study to provide insight into what is happening in our schools, and to take a hard look at ourselves as educators, especially the critical and social justice advocates of education, and ask ourselves, “What are we doing and what more can we do?”

**Amanda:**

I am sitting down to tell a portion of my own life story and it is the week of the tragic shooting deaths of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and five Dallas police officers. I am writing because I had the opportunity to meet James after we both sat in the audience of the 2016 AERA symposium called *Assaults on Communities of Color: Transacademic Exploration of the Realities of Race-Based Violence*, and we talked for over an hour about what we had heard and how we were feeling. Specifically, we are both parents and had been deeply affected by Dr. Cheryl Matias and Roberto Montoya as they emotionally described their own strong feelings about raising children with a critical understanding of race-based violence. James, a Black father, and I, a white mother, talked about our young children, and our adoration

for them was clear. Our reaction to the symposium was emotional, and our attempt to take part in the important conversation about Critical Race Parenting that Matias and Montoya (2016) so beautifully and powerfully started is here.

I am a white mother whose ancestors, a few generations back, moved to the United States and eventually worked in the West Virginia steel mills. I grew up just outside of Youngstown, Ohio, and I am the daughter of a social worker and public school librarian (after my earliest school years). I moved when I graduated from high school, first for university and eventually, after several moves and experiences travelling within the United States, to New York City, where I was a Special Education teacher. I moved to England when I met the man who would soon become my husband, who is British and white, and our two children were born in England. At the time of this writing, we live in Arizona, where he teaches and I am a doctoral candidate at Arizona State University.

Having lived in many places, made good friends, and learned new things, becoming a parent to our much-loved girl and boy has been the best and most humbling experience, and continues to be every day. Like many parents, I make decisions and wonder if they are the right decisions. I am protective of my children's six- and four-year old developing minds and, amongst other things, I monitor their exposure to violence—on TV, in images, and over the radio. Of course, I am aware of their ages and am tempted to protect them from seeing or knowing hate, and I want to fiercely protect their beautiful view of the world. Still, I am not blind about my responsibility. I want them to know that I am their anti-racist white parent, as is their father. I want them to understand the world around them. I want them to love and to know love. And, in developmentally appropriate ways, I know that they must know what is real in order to do so.

Diamond Reynolds's four-year old daughter saw Philando Castile dying in the front seat of the car after he had been shot. Quinietta McMillon's fifteen-year old son watched the news and social media, where he saw his father, Alton Sterling, dying after he had been shot. A parent cannot watch Quinietta McMillon's son's grief as he cried beside her at a press conference without her or his heart breaking for him and his mother. Nor can a parent hear Diamond Reynolds's daughter comforting her mother without becoming deeply affected by her young voice. I constantly re-evaluate how I will have, and have begun in some ways, the necessary critical conversations about issues of violence, racism, fear, and hate with my children. Especially recently, I talked to my children about the language that was used (and that my children already know in their hearts not to use), and the statements that were made by our President-elect throughout the presidential debates. As only one example, I turned the TV off during a debate when I did not

want my daughter and son to hear discussions about Donald Trump making disrespectful statements about women and Mexicans. Still, they will know about this one day and I would like them to talk about it with me rather than to learn it from those who support his statements. So, I try to find developmentally appropriate ways to talk about history as it relates to women and Black and Brown individuals. Still, I have not worried about violence in nearly the same way that many Black and Brown parents do.

We talk about race, religion, and ethnicity in our home, and I see turning points in my children's development that are making these conversations easier. We talked openly about Thanksgiving when my daughter came home from school with a crafted headband and a black and white ditto-sheet picture of a Native American child and a pilgrim child holding hands and smiling pasted to the front. Our children suddenly knew that they would not learn all about history in school. When my son asked why people would want to take someone else's home and land, I probably did not adequately explain it to his satisfaction. But, I trust that he was thoughtful about it, he knows that I will always try to learn and talk about things that I do not understand either, and that we can and will continue to freely discuss this as a family.

Sometimes my son pretends he is shooting an imaginary gun. He has seen soldiers with guns at a war memorial (real) and he has passed by video games with guns (not real). He has been to a store at Christmas time where a children's unloaded BB gun was set out for children to try on pretend deer targets (real). He knows that I do not like guns. I cannot pretend that they do not exist and pretending will not do us any good. For example, in the city where we live in Arizona, we recently stood in line at a sandwich shop behind a man who was openly carrying a gun in a holster on his waist. Had my children gotten any closer they would have bumped into it. They asked why he had a gun, and I summoned up my best response about him likely wanting to carry it for his protection. The looks on their young faces seemed to ask, "Why the need for protection when he is buying a sandwich?" I wondered, too. A very young child told us that his dad had just bought him a gun. I do not know if it was true but his dad smiled when we spoke about it. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2016) insightfully spoke on NPR on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in relation to the tragic shooting deaths and he reminded listeners that we live in a democracy that made this society possible, where people walk around with guns. There is nothing to pretend about our current society, which is full of guns that kill. I will continue trying to learn how to best talk to my children about violence.

In all, I will continue to try to make wise decisions and will continue to talk with my children. I will continue to protect them fiercely, although imperfectly. We

will stand alongside the fight for justice. I will learn from and aspire toward those who speak much better than me, like Dr. Lori Latrice Martin, who was on the panel in the symposium that I described at the beginning of this piece. An attendee directed the discussion about race-based violence toward Christianity. Dr. Martin spoke in response with incredible power, wisdom, patience, and love and said, (and I share this with the best of my memory and understanding, hoping to re-present her position with at least a touch of the precision with which she said it), that a Christian lens, indeed, understands and sees that the fierce fight against race-based violence and for justice for Black and Brown Americans is real and should not be ignored or side-tracked.

As for my husband and me, we will surely make some mistakes as parents. Our children will know, though, that we deeply care. In terms of engaging in critical conversations and living life with our children, we will listen to others who know more and/or first-hand about racial injustice. We will pray, and we will be careful to not speak for others' experiences. We will love. We will see and not be fragile in conversations. As a mother, I will aim to always love my children in a way that they will know that they are loved in every aspect of their being, and I will teach them to be strong, to also love, and to set their faces toward justice. In her keynote presentation (2015) at AERA, Gloria Ladson-Billings declared, 'Justice... just, justice!' I am so grateful for her and many others, and we will listen and stand in unity. That much I do know.

### **The Twenty-Four Hour Day (James):**

On Tuesday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, I was in Egypt trying to get some much-needed rejuvenation before returning back to writing my dissertation and my last year in graduate school. In the midst of my taking in the awesomeness of the ancient city of Cairo, while scrolling through social media, I stumbled across a video. The video depicted the shooting death of Alton Sterling by Baton Rouge, LA policemen. I was stunned at what I saw on the video, and I began dissecting the video for understanding. I quickly, like so many others across the globe, became outraged. I remember thinking, "Another Black man shot by police unjustly." This sentiment quickly spread across social media like a firestorm. I spent all day with kindred spirits on social media venting and admittedly feeling helpless, particularly because I was way over in Egypt. Before I began to settle down for the night (there is a six-hour time difference) I kissed and hugged my beautiful, lively Brown sons a little more emphatic and tighter than usual. Just as I was about to shut down my computer I caught wind of a live Facebook post. This post was dramatic and everyone watching seemed unsure of what was occurring.

In the live post there was a, relatively, poised African American young woman speaking candidly about what she had just witnessed. The young lady, Diamond Reynolds, was reporting that her and her boyfriend were just pulled over by the cops and the officer opened fire into the car striking and killing her boyfriend Philando Castile. Diamond Reynolds' four-year old daughter was in the back seat of the car at the time of the shooting and witnessed the event and later it was learned was consoling her mom after the shooting. In the video Castile leaned to the side in the car as his white shirt turned red with blood. While watching the video it was unclear if Castile was dead but I sensed he was. My mind raced back to what had happened earlier in the day in Louisiana and I am thinking, "There's no way that this happened two days in a row." Yes. This happened two days in a row. The police in Minnesota, just as had happened the day before in Louisiana, shot and killed a Black man for no apparent reason. Outrage ensued.

On July 22, I received an email from an MSU parents' listserv, wherein events and other opportunities are posted to inform MSU students and educators who are parents about local affairs in the area. This email's subject heading was "Healthy communication with children after traumatic events." The body of the email began:

**Tips for talking with kids about current events.** Kids pick up on everything around them. During traumatic nation-wide events, kids often tune into the emotions associated with how the adults in their lives and the media they consume are responding – our reactions, commentary on the radio and images on TV, the internet and social media sites. During tragic events, kids can be scared about who to trust, where they are safe, or what might happen to loved ones. How can we talk about these topics honestly, while also being reassuring? Here are some tips, summarized from the Center for Parenting Education...

The email then began to list several broad bullet points as advice for parents such as, love, nurture, and teach your children. I was still in Cairo at the time. However, upon reading the email I was certain that the pretext for this email was due to the backlash of the police shootings and the subsequent protests.

An African dad responded to the email chain saying how his kids, who are friends of my children, were having discussions about these police killings of Black men and the protests that followed amongst themselves during summer camp. This dad appeared appreciative of the advice in the email. However, what struck me was not what was in the email but what was missing. What was missing from the email

was any specific mention of the incidents that sparked the need for the email. No mention of race, police violence or unjust state killings by police of Black males that go unpunished and that continue to occur. All of which send signals of the insignificance of Black life. Not mentioning these issues in the email was not disheartening but perhaps unfortunately expected.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This paper's premise, as laid out in the assaults on communities color, seeks to center stories of social justice educators. We have connected our lives as parents to our work as educators. Our aim was to explicitly and critically consider how we take part, or do not take part, in conversations about racial injustice with our own children. We would like to hear from other students, professors, and practitioners so that we can engage in shared dialogue, as parents from diverse racial backgrounds and cultures. The goal of engagement and dialogue is to learn from each other and to share our different experiences of living parent lives that intentionally include critical race conversations. It is a privilege, and very fruitful, to have an opportunity to raise a family within an academic or otherwise educator-oriented setting, where important conversations around race, gender, religion, and sexuality are encouraged. Regarding the assaults on communities of color that have taken place recently, James pointed out the critical importance of speaking about, and not leaving out, what is too often missing—that is, the deeply emotional and humanizing real stories, the naming and speaking truth about what is happening across Black and Brown American communities. And, since the election of Donald Trump, the urgent need for *effective* dialogue is even more pronounced.

In the email chain (listserv) discussed in the previous section, the author was vague and general in aim and intent. It was as though the shootings of Alton Sterling in Louisiana and Philando Castile in Minnesota were not the impetus for these emails. The (White) fragility in approach toward initiating conversations with children around the current outrage in Black communities regarding the latest killings of Black men by police officers was not only inappropriate but also ineffective. For context, I (James) understood that the email was sparked by conversations of concerned children of MSU faculty and graduate students at summer camp. The young camp workers, mainly high school and undergraduate students, were overwhelmed with the discussions amongst the children and questions directed toward them as they searched for answers. The student workers contacted their supervisors about their concerns and about their inability to engage with the students, thus prompting the email.



To combat White fragility, White scholars and allies should seek to make headway by learning of the pathologies within White society (Applebaum, 2016; Du Bois, 1920; Gillborn, 2005; Leonardo, 2002; Picower, 2009). Focusing on pathologies of others, which has too often been done, can lead to the false impression that there exist no pathologies within White society. Such a notion reaffirms White supremacy, even if the intentions are the opposite. The listserv email chain, which was prompted by the killings of Sterling and Castile, was rife with the kinds of discourses and practices encouraged by White fragility.

The innocence in our children and their optimistic naivety makes it difficult to talk with them about such harsh topics. As parents and nurturers, as well as educators, we would like to preserve our children from anything that will shatter their purity. But, as was the case at the camp (in relation to the killings in Louisiana and Minnesota, where politics and the populace are arguably very different), curious children became concerned with what they saw on social media and started to engage in conversations around police brutality with no guidance. To not address the concerns of these children directly is a mistake. One approach in talking with children about state violence is to really listen to them carefully, and to ask questions to better understand what the issues are that concern them. This tactic can prevent introducing new ideas into their heads or complicating and exacerbating matters. After understanding what it is that concerns them, some questions might include: What did you think of the video that everyone is talking about? What do you think went wrong? How do you think this could have been prevented? How do you feel about what happened? These are just some examples of how effective dialogue with our children can begin.

We also feel, as we have shared through our personal stories, that life history methodology provides a useful tool for opening up and then helping to facilitate conversations both at home and in classrooms. Life history methodology gives us the mandate to make the voices of those most impacted by assaults on communities of color the focal point of our inquiry. Through the richness of a collective of stories, a life history approach is an extremely effective tool. Furthermore, Matias and Montoya's (2015) Critical Race Parenting (CRP) perspective importantly challenges watered-down social justice and multicultural discourses that have been shaped by fragile attempts to address assaults on communities of color such as racism and the indifference to state violence as a consequence of racism. Rather, our interpretation of a CRP (Matias & Montoya, 2015) perspective, inspired by Matias and Montoya (2015) and coupled with our usage of life history methodology, allows us to hone in on potentially fragile and uncomfortable discourses and press upon how we, as educators and parents, can collectively move forward in shared

dialogue with each other and with our school-aged children.

Lastly, we believe that social justice educators and scholars of Black and Brown communities with real connections to these communities can carry the mantle in expanding the discourse around assaults on communities of color and having discussions with all children. White allies in this work should be sensitive to what Black and Brown scholars and parents learn and bring back from their communities. For future research, we would like to interview a collective of Black and Brown scholars, whose work is respected by the communities they serve and which reflects community-engaged scholarship and interactions. We would like to hear their stories, in their own words, related to what they think about the assaults on communities of color as laid out in this inquiry. Furthermore, we would like to use data to expand on this study, in order to learn new ways and gather insights into how these assaults are impacting the thoughts of Black and Brown scholars working in these communities. We would like a broader study that could provide us with a range of ideas for talking with children, with the intention of being useful in research and training for urban education teachers and for use in discussions about urban school policy and leadership reform.

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