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Melding Critical Literacy and Christianity: A Three-Layered Response to the Murder of George Floyd

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on this article.

Melding Critical Literacy and Christianity: A Three-Layered Response to the Murder of George Floyd

On May 25, 2020, Christian Cooper, a Black man and avid birdwatcher, politely asked Amy Cooper, a White woman, to place her dog on a leash while they walked through an area of Central Park protected for its wildlife (Nir, 2020). Taking offense at Christian Cooper's asking her to follow the park's posted rules, Amy Cooper began calling the police, exclaiming, "I'm going to tell them there's an African-American man threatening my life" (Nir, 2020, para. 5). Amy Cooper knowingly made false claims as she unabashedly threatened Christian Cooper with physical violence at the hands of police (Nir, 2020). Feeling his life threatened, Christian Cooper wisely recorded the incident on his cell phone, which quickly went viral (Nir, 2020).

The same day, approximately 1200 miles away, bystanders recorded another viral video depicting another Black man, George Floyd, suffering the very physical violence at the hands of police with which Amy Cooper had threatened Christian Cooper. Minneapolis police officers had been called to a local bodega after the clerk suspected that Floyd used a counterfeit \$20 bill (BBC News, 2020). Due to the COVID-19-related shutdown, Floyd found himself unemployed (BBC News, 2020). The arrest culminated in Floyd laying on the street, with officer Derek Chauvin's knee on his neck for almost 9 minutes (BBC News, 2020). Despite repeatedly telling the four police officers that he could not breathe—more than 20

times, according to the officers' bodycam footage—Chauvin did not relent (BBC News, 2020). Floyd was pronounced dead an hour later (BBC News, 2020).

As both incidents came to light in the national media, I felt appalled at the gross dehumanization of people of color and Black men, in particular, within the United States. I felt even more disgusted with the response that I observed from those who professed Christianity. In this critical autoethnography, I write of my own response to and reflection on George Floyd's senseless murder at the hands of police. I write from the perspective of a mother to a young son, a follower of Christ, and an academic.

Review of Literature

The response to George Floyd's murder and reaction to the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests that I observed of so-called Christians is reflective of Christian nationalism and White supremacy within the American church. Central to these ideologies is the privileging of the perspective of White, Protestant, heterosexual males. Perspectives outside of this limited purview are treated as "Other."

According to Davis and Perry (2020), *Christian nationalism* is "an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity and American civic life" (p. 1). Baker et al. (2020) classified Christian nationalism as a "cultural framework" inherent with "assumptions about race, nativism, and a hierarchical ordering of

society that benefits those who have historically held the levers of power—white, straight, native-born, Protestant men” (p. 275). Unsurprisingly, Whites who subscribe to Christian nationalism are more likely to hold prejudicial views against people of color, immigrants, and other religions (Davis & Perry, 2020).

A 2019 national survey cited by Luo (2020) found that approximately two-thirds of White Christians identified the murders of Black men by police as “isolated incidents” (para. 2) rather than revelatory of systematic oppression. Moreover, 60% of White Christians disagreed that the social mobility of Black Americans is hindered by the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination (Luo, 2020). Whereas others, myself included, see the Black Lives Matter movement as advocating for human rights, Gjeltén (2020) wrote that “conservative evangelicals today...see advocating for Black Lives Matter or immigrant rights as political activities” (para. 42).

The American church has long been imbued with White supremacy. Pastor and theologian, James Henley Thornwell, for example, “regularly defended slavery and promoted white supremacy from his pulpit” (Gjeltén, 2020, para. 15). Thus, Frederick Douglass (1845) critiqued the hypocrisy of the American church,

The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. The slave auctioneers’ bell and the church-going bell chime

in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master (p. 119).

Douglass beseeches the reader to question, how can the same Christians who proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ perpetuate the horrors of slavery? Indeed, Stankorb (2020) argued that churches that have adopted the entanglement of patriotism and faith indicative of Christian nationalism often do so at the expense of the Gospel.

Theoretical Framework

“He is a human being!” comes an anguished plea from someone in a desperate attempt to engage the officers’ reason or compassion or oaths of office. But in that moment, those officers are beyond the reach of humanity. Not Floyd’s, but their own (O’Neal, 2020, para. 5).

O’Neal’s (2020) statement resonates with the writings of Paulo Freire, whom many consider to be the father of critical literacy. According to Freire (2014), the dehumanization of the oppressed is easily recognizable. In the murder of George Floyd, we observed that the four Minneapolis police officers dehumanized him to the point of death. We readily identify that Amy Cooper too has dehumanized Christian Cooper as she blatantly threatened police violence against him. Yet Freire (2014) and O’Neal (2020) remind us that oppressors are also dehumanized albeit through the very violence and marginalization that they inflict upon others. Thus, Freire (2014) argued that it is not enough to simply unveil oppression. Rather, after engaging in *praxis*—a process of reflection and action—we work to transform reality by enacting a pedagogy of liberation for all, including the oppressor (Freire,

2014). Informed by Marx, critical literacy seeks to raise the individual's consciousness of the oppressive ideologies that permeate society prior to enacting resistance to these ideologies (Yoon & Sharif, 2015).

In addition to issues related to power, critical literacy involves the study of identity. According to Gee (1999), each person has several *situated identities*, which Gee conceived of as different positions in different settings (e.g., wife and mother at home; assistant professor at work; worshipper at church). Moje et al. (2009) argued that identity is a social construct influenced by one's membership in various groups. Thus, differences amongst individuals are notable because of their respective social identities, which are informed by the ideologies of that group (Moje et al., 2009). For example, the social identity of being a Christian for some White believers is imbued with the aforementioned ideologies of Christian nationalism and White supremacy.

Fittingly, critical literacy is the theoretical lens through which I write and interpret my critical autoethnography. After sharing my three-layered response to the murder of George Floyd, I also recommend the integration of critical literacy into all levels of education so as to not only unveil oppression and dehumanization but also seek to transform our society at large.

Methods

Boylorn and Orbe (2016) defined *autoethnography* as “cultural analysis through personal narrative” (p. 17). According to Chang (2008), the autoethnographer “search[es] for [an] understanding of others (culture/society) through self...us[ing] their personal experiences as primary data” (p. 49). A subset of autoethnography, critical autoethnography entails the researcher using his or her personal experience to “analyze and critique injustice” (Marx et al., 2017, p. 1). This paper is a critical autoethnography in which I analyze my personal response to racial injustice within the United States as evoked by the murder of George Floyd by officers within the Minneapolis Police Department.

In conducting this critical autoethnography, I adopted the approach of a layered account (Ellis et al., 2011). In a layered account, the autoethnographer combines his or her personal experience with data and relevant literature to engage in a process of introspection (Ellis et al., 2011). News articles from various sources served as my sources of data. These news articles not only report on the murder of George Floyd but also Christian nationalism and White supremacy within Christianity, both of which have come to the forefront in response to the societal unrest that stemmed from Floyd’s murder. Moreover, these news articles enhance the credibility of my layered account.

In keeping with the layered account approach, I integrate vignettes (Ellis et al., 2011) of my personal thoughts, responses, and reflections as I recollect them and as refreshed through analyzing data sources. The two research questions that guided my critical autoethnography are as follows: *How does a mother, Christian, and academic respond to the murder of George Floyd? How can I help to facilitate change?* Below I present my three-layered response to the murder of George Floyd before discussing the implications that his murder has for educators and Christians.

A three-layered response to the murder of George Floyd

My response to the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department is informed by the intersection (Crenshaw, 1991) of my situated identities (Gee, 1999). I am a Christian, wife, mother, Latina, and academic. Initially, I reacted to George Floyd's murder as a (Christian) mother. The ensuing conversation around the marginalization and oppression of people of color in the United States then evoked a predominantly Christian response. Finally, I reacted as an academic. The three vignettes below reflect each layer of my response.

First layer: A mother's response

Growing up, my mother and I always watched the nightly news while she prepared dinner and as we ate. This is a practice that I have adopted for my own family of procreation. One evening, in late May of 2020, I braced myself as David Muir provided the content warning that preceded the video of George Floyd's

murder captured by a bystander. As I watched, I felt disturbed, horrified, and overcome with emotion. Meanwhile, my 11-month-old son whined nearby for my attention.

My husband and I endured two pregnancy losses prior to having our son. I experienced firsthand the pain and heartache of having those two precious lives taken from me through no fault of my own. Psalm 139:13-14 states, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 406). Each life, no matter how short or how long, is a gift from God, and each person has a God-given purpose. Yet, here I watched as life was publicly drained from the son of another mother. I cried knowing that George Floyd cried out for his mother’s comfort in his final moments although she preceded him in death two years earlier (O’Neal, 2020). In that moment, I cherished the physical embrace that I shared with my son.

The relationship between a mother and her child(ren) is an intimate one, stewarded by God. Mothers are the first source of breath, sustenance, love, safety, and security for their children. As a mother, I found it heartbreaking to hear George Floyd’s calls for his mother’s comfort with his dying breaths. At this stage in his life, my son is largely unaware of the turmoil unfolding within the United States. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, I have gone to great lengths to shield my son

from the virus, but Floyd's murder at the hands of civil servants whose duty is to protect citizens reminds me that I cannot shield my son from racism, hatred, violence, and the sinful world in which we live.

Second layer: A Christian's response

In the days and weeks that followed, I grew disgusted at the conversation I observed on social media from people who claimed to follow Christ. Some of my self-proclaimed "Christian" friends made disparaging remarks about George Floyd's murder and the ensuing Black Lives Matter protests. There was the familiar chorus of statements such "All lives matter," or "Blue lives matter." My social media feeds showed posts that tried to justify Floyd's murder by disparaging his character or pointing to his "noncompliance" with the officers who killed him.

Genesis 1:27 states, "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 1). I wondered, *how could these "Christians" not view George Floyd as a bearer of Christ's image? Aren't we all sinners in need of grace? Were they unfamiliar with Jesus' interactions with the woman caught in adultery as told in John 8?*

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to [Jesus,] 'Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?'...[Jesus] stood up and said to them, 'Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.'...But when they heard it, they went away one by

one...Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus stood up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you;' (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 701).

In Luke 23, did Jesus not also forgive the criminal condemned to crucifixion alongside him? “[The criminal] said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’” (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 693). But then, I remembered my previous experiences at different evangelical churches within central Texas.

In 2016, the previous presidential election year, my husband and I found ourselves searching for a new church home. At the church we visited during the Fourth of July weekend, only patriotic songs were played—not one hymn or contemporary worship song. The pastor of another church we visited vocalized from the pulpit his disdain for undocumented immigrants because they “did not follow the law.” The Sunday prior to the presidential election, the lead pastor of the church we began attending recommended that we consider abortion, “traditional marriage,” (Smith, 2016, para. 29) and religious freedom when casting our votes for one of the “two very flawed, immoral candidates” (Smith, 2016, para. 28). Many congregants of color—ourselves included—easily identified this sermon as a poorly veiled endorsement of one presidential candidate. Together, these experiences and the messages that seemingly inundated my social media timelines

reeked of Christian nationalism (Davis & Perry, 2020) as opposed to Christ's own teachings.

Third layer: An academic's response

I longed to take part in the Black Lives Matter marches and protests against police brutality that occurred across the U.S. Unable to join the marches, I wondered, *How can I contribute to the cause of advocating for Black lives and resisting systemic oppression?* I am a teacher educator, already committed to advancing social justice within education. The murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery amongst others have revealed the continued propagation of people of color, particularly Black men and women, as "Other." Their murders reinvigorated my commitment to striving for a more socially just world through education, which is also informed by my Christian faith.

My work ethic is rooted in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men..." (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 773). As such, I see my commitment to social justice as an extension of my Christian duty outlined in Isaiah 1:17, "learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 441). As a teacher educator, my students are pre-service (future) or in-service (current) teachers. Thus, although not all of my students subscribe to my belief system, it is imperative that together

we work towards an educational system that humanizes instead of dehumanizes and that celebrates difference as opposed to marginalizing other image bearers as “Other.” To educate our children to respect and celebrate not only their own situated identities but also those to which they do not ascribe, is to work towards a future society in which oppression, marginalization, and dehumanization are seen as abnormal.

Implications

Dr. Esau McCaulley (2020) evoked Psalm 137 in the opinion essay that he penned for *The New York Times*. Psalm 137 is one of indignation towards Babylon, an oppressor who inflicted immeasurable suffering on the Israelites. Here, the psalmist imagines the Babylonians suffering the very same torment that they perpetrated against the Israelites. McCaulley (2020), a Black man and an assistant professor of religion, described Psalm 137 as “trauma literature, the rage of those who lived” (para. 8). In his essay, McCaulley (2020) implored the reader to consider, “what kind of song would the families of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Eric Garner be tempted to write after watching the video of their deaths?” (para. 8). In this way, McCaulley (2020) drew a similarity between the protests that followed George Floyd’s murder and Biblical responses to oppression. Through his essay McCaulley (2020) reminded the reader that yes, oppression is lamented throughout the Bible, but the Bible is also filled with the hopeful anticipation of

restoration. McCaulley (2020) fittingly ended his article on a hopeful note, one looking forward to justice and reconciliation as he stated, “Christians contend for justice because we care about Black lives, families, and communities” (para. 15). Like McCaulley, I am hopeful that support for the Black Lives Matter movement will be garnered throughout the Christian community. I am hopeful for reconciliation within the American church so that it is no longer divided into racial/ethnic silos but instead reflects the recognition that each person bears the image of God and, as such, the church combats oppression against fellow image bearers.

Christian education

Given the prevalence of Christian nationalism and White supremacy within the American church, however, I feel that we face an uphill battle in convincing our Christian brethren who subscribe to these hateful ideologies of the importance of Black lives. Thus, we must seek to enact a pedagogy of liberation (Freire, 2014) for these oppressors. To start, I suggest applying critical literacy in our readings of the Bible, including in Christian education classes.

First and foremost, these Christian education classes must be led by Christians committed to advancing social justice. Through a combination of close reading (i.e., multiple readings of a text to facilitate analysis and deepen comprehension) and discussion, critical literacy can be employed while studying

Scripture. For example, facilitators can lead their fellow believers through a close reading of Psalm 103. The first reading is for aesthetic purposes. Afterwards, attendees can contemplate a question such as, *what in the psalm resonated with you?* After reading the psalm a second time, attendees may consider, *how does this psalm speak of God's character? How is mankind characterized in this psalm?* This will reveal the unmerited grace that God bestows upon his followers who are also sinners in need of mercy. Facilitators can direct attendees to highlight words or phrases that point to both God's character and the character of man during the third reading of Psalm 103. Regarding God's character, words such as "holy," "merciful," "gracious," and "compassion" are particularly noteworthy whereas words such as "iniquity," "disease," and "sin" are associated with mankind (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 390). Finally, facilitators can engage attendees in a discussion that bridges Psalm 103 to Biblical and contemporary iterations of oppression.

Through discussion, facilitators can lead their Christian brothers and sisters through praxis (Freire, 2014) by engaging them first in reflection. Facilitators will lead attendees to recall the oppression and dehumanization of the enslaved Hebrew people by the Egyptians and later, the Babylonians. Together, facilitators and attendees can recite Psalm 103:6, "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed" (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 390). Attendees can reflect on a question such as, *in Psalm 103, how does God respond*

to the cries of His people when they are oppressed? McCaulley (2020) suggested that we remember that Christ, too, suffered physical death via state-sanctioned violence through His crucifixion. Asking a question such as, *why do we feel righteous anger at Christ's crucifixion?* can encourage such reflection. But reflection is not enough—the second half of praxis is action. Again, facilitators can ask, *what actions does God encourage His people to take regarding the oppressed? Where do you see oppression in our current society? What actionable steps can we take to transform our society into one that is more just?* Together, they can serve the marginalized in their community whether that's serving as a respite center for asylum seekers, serving meals to the homeless, or providing refuge to peaceful protestors.

Pre-K to 12 education

Beyond seeking to transform society through our faith, we can also do so through education. In this way, we can reach those who subscribe to different faith systems or are irreligious. In elementary classrooms, critical literacy can be applied through a six-step process recommended by Vasquez (2017) for reading, discussing, and responding to children's literature. The six-step process begins with a read aloud of the book. During this time, students are encouraged to make connections and ask questions about the book. The second and third steps involve students convening in a small group to discuss and complete a response sheet with

prompts such as, *what is important to remember about this book? What surprised you about this book? What questions do you have? Name a possible writing topic from your own life that relates to the book* (Vasquez, 2017, p. 33). In the fourth step, the whole class reconvenes to further discuss noteworthy responses and/or prompts that generated quite a bit of discussion in the small group setting. For the fifth step, students choose one illustration from the book that best represents their critical conversations. Finally, each student journals his or her personal response to the prompts and book.

For elementary students, this six-step approach (Vasquez, 2017) can be applied to picture books depicting oppression through segregation. *Freedom summer* by Deborah Wiles (2005) features two best friends—one White and one Black—whose friendship is limited by Jim Crow laws in the American South. Carole Boston Weatherford wrote of four Black college students protesting segregation in *Freedom on the menu: The Greensboro sit-ins* (2007). *Separate is never equal: Sylvia Mendez & her family's fight for desegregation* authored by Duncan Tonatiuh (2014) tells of school segregation from a Latinx perspective. To enhance the discussion of school segregation, students can listen to news stories via the website Listenwise.com such as “George Wallace at the school door” (Listenwise.com, n.d.), “Racial integration in Little Rock decades later” (Listenwise.com, 2014, January 22), or “Boston still feeling impact of segregated schools 40 years later” (Listenwise.com, 2014, July 2). The six-step process

(Vasquez, 2017) could be modified and applied to these audio news stories. Teachers can then implore their students to consider how they might feel being excluded from attending a school because of their race and/or ethnicity. In turn, this can raise a conversation on the marginalization of people of color within the U.S. based on race and/or ethnicity.

Secondary students can read and discuss young adult literature from a critical literacy perspective while participating in literature circles. A literature circle is a small, text-based discussion group. Typically, teachers offer a limited selection of literature from which students can choose. To facilitate critical conversations about the recurring issue of police brutality, a teacher might offer the following options: *All American boys* (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015), *The hate u give* (Thomas, 2017), *Jazz owls: A novel of the Zoot Suit Riots* (Engle, 2018), or *Barely missing everything* (Mendez, 2019). In preparation for their participation in literature circles, students can complete a prep sheet with prompts such as, *how does this text selection connect to real life experiences (not necessarily your own)? Whose positions, voices, and/or interests are missing from this text? Who is in a position of power within this text? How is that power used? What effect does that power have on others within this text? How does this text challenge or reify stereotypes, if any, and/or issues of representation?* Reading any of these suggested texts will spark discourse about the consequences of police violence not only on the individual and his or her family but also on the community and our society at

large. Since praxis requires more than reflection, students can then brainstorm actionable steps (e.g., student-led protests; writing letters to elected officials) that they can take to resist police violence. Students can then partake in these actions in seeking to transform society.

Teacher education

U.S. schools are becoming increasingly diverse, reflective of our larger multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial society. Therefore, it is imperative that pre-service teachers are prepared to address the very real issues of oppression and marginalization that affect their future students such as racism, colorism, gender discrimination, sexual identity discrimination, etc. In their literacy methods courses, therefore, pre-service teachers must learn about critical literacy and become familiar with multicultural children's and young adult literature.

Pre-service teachers must be given the freedom to apply critical literacy strategies such as the six-step process (Vasquez, 2017) or critical literacy-centered literature circles during their student teaching experiences. Moreover, pre-service teachers must be encouraged to identify social justice issues that they observe in the schools in which they observe and/or student teach and be supported in taking action to remediate these inequities (e.g., collecting new or gently used books for classroom libraries, hosting food drive to support backpack food programs, speaking at school board meetings against inequitable school punishments).

Personal implications

In terms of my own praxis, I will continue to integrate critical literacy within my teacher education courses. As a scholar, I will continue to engage in and disseminate research oriented towards social justice. As a Christian, I am now inspired to approach my church's leadership about having a Christian education class in which critical literacy is applied to Scripture. As a mother, I will teach my son to celebrate his own unique situated identities (e.g., Latinx, cisgender male, Christian) as well as respect those to which he does not ascribe. This will be rooted in the second greatest commandment given to us by Christ in Mark 12:31, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 665).

Conclusion

Critical literacy theorists such as Freire implore us to not only uncover oppression within society but also transform society through praxis—a process of reflection and action. Similarly, according to Proverbs 31:8-9, a Christian is not to idly watch oppression but instead, "Open your mouth for the mute, for rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, 2011, p. 429). As contemporary Christians, it is imperative that we point our Christian brothers and sisters to Biblical teachings related to advocating for the oppressed, to view people

of all colors as image bearers of God, and to modeling the love of Christ—not hatred rooted in unbiblical ideologies—to others.

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