

KENDRED SPIRITS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT
OF COMPOSING CLOSENESS
BETWEEN BARS

by

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A DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to share an ongoing story of reflection, Love, and growth as acts of creative resistance. Since 2013, my life has been animated by Love for secondary students whose stories continue to shape every aspect of my own.

As the pages of this study illustrate, my Spirit has borne witness to the life and literacies of one particular student, Kentrelle Ty'Carter Washington,¹ whose soul—whose story—I consider permanently fused with mine. Though Kentrelle and I are separated by systems and circumstances that would have his story—his humanity, his body, his spirit—and our access to one another erased, our ongoing relationship allows us to resist this erasure as we share, analyze, and expand our own and one another's embodied literacies through writing.

Together, our humanity—both Kentrelle's and mine—becomes more urgent.

Together, we compose closeness.

Together, we write ourselves into one another's worlds.

Together, we resist.

With/in a critical autoethnographic ontomethodology, the author uses bricolage and storytelling to illustrate and analyze how her relationship with a former student has expanded both of their racial, relational, and reflexive literacies. In other words, this is the ongoing story of the author's expanding conceptualization of literacies as she and a former student have learned to compose closeness between bars.

¹ All names in this manuscript, other than the author's and her committee chair's, are pseudonyms.

DEDICATION

To Ken, to Raeli & Rye, to all the young people I love with every atom of my becoming,

*I cannot tell you
what will happen
but I can tell you
it will be different
when the Light pours in.*

-Morgan Harper Nichols

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Two years ago, when you saw me slipping, you required no explanations. You didn't dwell on the defeated debris I had become. You didn't ask me where my muchness had gone.

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Is it possible that we might write your spirit toward theirs? Is it possible that we might write in a way that frees your body-mind for good? Might we write in a way that undoes all the things we've always thought we knew? In a way that somehow compels others to reimagine how we *all* exist together in this world? Can we write our spirits toward theirs? Can we write in some way that might set *all* our spirits free?

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“...for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”
-Acts 4:20

PREFACE

Since I first became a teacher, my life has been animated by Love² for students whose stories continue to shape every aspect of my own. I can't recall a single day since leaving the classroom when, at least for a moment, I haven't found myself lingering in the afterglow of those years my students and I spent together—learning, growing, laughing, Loving. I feel at home when these memories wash over me. Even so, less hospitable memories also ebb and flow—of the harder days, the answers I couldn't quite find, the times my best intentions came up short, the cultural mismatches³ I couldn't navigate by heart. Wading into these stories, I still worry, *what might I have missed? What plot details did I mis-read?*

But then I remind myself...

I am still learning how to read, still finding new ways to read and compose the world.

Writing: How I'm Learning to Read

Since the day I made the hardest decision of my life—the decision to leave the middle-school classroom—I've turned to writing as a way to interrogate and expand how I read the world and how the world reads me. I've written to understand, to cope, to hope, to imagine, to exist, to resist. I've written to steady the part of my heart that still longs to be with my students on a daily basis. I've written to understand why and how I've had certain encounters, felt pulled

² Throughout this manuscript, I use capital letters to discreetly denote where words/signifiers carry a deeper meaning, usually tied to my personal faith. For instance, when I capitalize “Love” here, the capitalization indicates that my understanding of Love is based on a Biblical understanding of “love,” which I have both personally encountered and strive to embody/demonstrate toward others.

³ Douglas, P., Lewis, Douglas, A., Scott, & Garrison-Wade (2008) use the term “cultural mismatches” to describe the interactions between white teachers and students who have different cultural values, expectations, and backgrounds (see p. 52).

in particular directions, seen certain things, not seen others. I've written to try and make my world better, to find healing, to relate, to remember. I've written to re-imagine what/how/to whom/when I have to say about the intersecting lives of Black boys⁴ and white women in education.⁵

Through all of this writing and remembering, I've found that the work my soul must have⁶ is to unapologetically tell my story,—to write through the things my body knows, toward the things I want to know, and of the things my Spirit testifies.

Moreover, using critical autoethnography as its canvas, my Spirit bears witness to the life and literacies of one particular student, Kentrelle Ty'Carter Washington, whose spirit I consider permanently fused with mine. As I write and analyze our ongoing story, I blend embodied encounters, theory, philosophy, and the wisdom of great storytellers before me to give an account of how knowing Kentrelle has impacted the literacy educator and human I'm becoming today.

My story—the one that cannot be disentangled from Kentrelle's—is the one I know best. Despite physical, systemic, social, phenotypical, and historical separation(s), *our* story illustrates

⁴ Understanding the fraught history of the word “boy” in relation to Black men in America, I intentionally use the word here and throughout this work to emphasize that Kentrelle was a *child* when this event occurred. Society adultifies Black children in unjust, unfair ways, and the ramifications of this fear and hyper-suspicion become obvious throughout Kentrelle's story.

⁵ With Moore et al. (2018), I “use the terms Black and White because these are salient racial categories today and have been throughout history....they have significant consequences and ramifications for the lives of people who are labeled Black or White and who have family and ancestors who were labeled Black or White” (p. 9). Additionally, following Johnson et al., (2017), I intentionally capitalize “Black” as just one small way to demonstrate love and respect for Black people. In this way, I aesthetically recognize “Black” as representative of culture and a shared, complex history rather than as an adjective exclusively describing skin color. Likewise, I intentionally leave “white” uncapitalized in order to refuse this written trace of white supremacy that has been intentionally carried out by hate groups throughout history. For me, it's a move of humility. In direct quotes like the one above, however, I retain original authors' capitalization choices.

⁶ Paraphrased mantra of Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon

possibilities for body-minds⁷ like Kentrelle's and my own to grow together with/in expanded conceptualizations of literacies and love.

As we story our lives together, Kentrelle and I interrogate the ordinary, invite interruption, and imagine creative ways forward, toward an antiracist, less separate, more creative future where *all* body-minds are free. What and how we find out about the world and about ourselves isn't always easy, isn't always comfortable, but in Kentrelle's words:

“We got this.”

⁷ Clare (2017) and other critical disability scholars use this term to signify the inseparability of the body and mind, to refute Cartesian dualisms, to level language and matter rather than privileging the discursive over the material or the material over the discursive.

My Final Apology: An Overture to an Unapologetic Project.⁸

This is not a political Facebook status.

This is not a blog for everyone—who wants to be woke but finds (y)ourself white—to share with the 🏳️ emoji and the #BLM hashtag.

This isn't an autobiography recounting every event in my life—every perfect birthday, every title or position I won or lost, every earth-quaking church camp I attended, every boy I ever kissed or wanted to kiss, every measure of trauma my body's ever known, or every dumb thing I ever did and narrowly survived. It isn't for "I-told-you-so"s or for "look-at-everything-I-know."

It's not even necessarily *just about...me*.

This isn't a field guide for every white teacher to print, annotate, and imitate on their way to "wokeness."⁹ I'm still on my way.

This isn't a cathartic attempt to transgress my white guilt.

I won't apologize ad infinitum, though some would prefer it that way.

I'm white.

I have to stop apologizing at some point if I'm going to do this work.

So I'm sorry. Please hear me.

I am *truly* sorry for the ways my privilege has injured Others, both when I realize(d) it and when I didn't; for the times I've instinctually locked my car doors when a Black man walked by in a parking lot; for the years and years I spent in honors and AP classes never noticing the present absence of my Black classmates after the bells rang; for not listening to incredible and not-so-incredible professors who told me it would be like this one day; for all the things I've taken for granted like being able to open a bank account or take out a loan without harassment or suspicion, like sitting in my car in an empty parking lot at night without drawing police attention, like flesh-colored *Band-Aids* that actually blend with my flesh, like being pulled over—in any state, on any road, for any reason—without fearing for my life, like *Disney* princesses and cartoon characters who look like the face in my mirror; for claiming ignorance and innocence because it seemed the most tenable route; for dressing in a fantasy "sexy Indian" costume for cowboys v. Indians day during homecoming week; for not recognizing how effed up that whole situation was in the first place; for dressing up like a rapper on hip-hop day in high school—grill, do-rag and all; for wearing that same costume to a church Halloween party; for white-savoring and judging in the name of religion; for forgetting my Savior isn't white; for blaring hip-hop music with my windows down, without any respect or understanding of its historical tapestry or

⁸ Personal Journal Entry, February 3, 2020-Mini Memoir Assignment from CSE 470-Teaching Writing course

⁹ Mason (2018) defines "woke" as a term that refers to no longer being naive of social injustices. He writes, "Woke is a term commonly used by those in the black community as a term for being socially aware of issues that have systemic impact. This social awareness doesn't come from just watching the news or reading history through a traditional lens. Being woke has to do with seeing all of the issues and being able to connect cultural, socio-economic, philosophical, historical, and ethical dots. A similar term is conscious" (p. 25)

its pioneers; for saying the “N” word a lot when I was in middle school because Ashley and I thought we were cute calling each other that; for wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt in sixth-grade because it’s what the popular [white] kids wore; for choosing to be colorblind and believing it benevolent; for being complicit in oppressive cycles; for teaching literature with mostly white characters; for rigidly enforcing only “Standard” English grammar on literary analyses—what a presumptuous standard; for whitesplaining; for talking over Other voices; for arrogance; for appropriation; for complicity; for violence; for apathy; for so many things.

I know that I’ll continue to recognize—and not recognize—countless things I should and will be sorry for.

I’m sorry in retrospect and in advance.

I’m sorry. I’m *so so* sorry.

I said it.

I’ll try not to say it again. But *please* know my guilt is ever-present and heavy; and I still feel guilty when I don’t or didn’t feel guilty enough.

But the guilt cannot consume me.

This isn’t *The Blind Side*, *Freedom Writers*, *Just Mercy*, or even *TKaM*.

I don’t know how it will end.

This isn’t a love story.

It’s a story about Love.

This isn’t a biography of a Black boy I knew.

It’s an autoethnography of *learning with* a young Black man I *see*.

It’s written between iron bars and patrol cars,
between the cell block and the city,
between lock-up and locked out,
between the “free world” and “up in here,”
between the classroom and the cell,
between the basketball court and the court of law,
between a Black student and his white teacher:
Between Kentrelle Ty’Carter Washington and Briana Gilbert Kidd.

This is my story.

This is his story.

This is history.

This is not His story.¹⁰

¹⁰ Black feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter (2003) theorizes “Man” as a racialized and gendered genre of being human aligned with idealist perceptions of Western, European maleness and the hegemonic structures that accompany this way of being; thus, for Wynter, “Man” refers not only to phenotypical features, but more broadly to sets of policies that produce capitalism and a hierarchical, raced and gendered “global order of words and things” (Wynter, 2015, p. 30). Wynter’s (2003) shorthand “Man” with the capital “M” represents these qualifiers. Spector & Kidd (forthcoming) summarize, “In ‘Man,’ a variety of historically-situated, sociopolitical

This is *our* story.

This dissertation is my greatest attempt yet to stop apologizing.

discourses and encounters come together” and produce material systemic power entanglements. My capitalization of “H” in “His” link this pronoun to Wynter’s “Man” to indicate that Kentrelle and I are writing from, with/in, and against the confines and hegemonic systems of Human Man.

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

6th Period: The First Time I got Close

“You think you’re the painter, but you’re the canvas.”
-John Green¹¹

Two: the number of times in my adult life that I vividly recall the paintbrush dropping. August 17, 2013 was the first time it fell.

On my first day of teaching, at Valleybend Middle School,¹² I was sure that I was the painter. I sashayed right into my first very own, excessively decorated English classroom. With my professional paintbrush in hand and my palette neatly poured with coordinated procedures and expectations, I prepared to paint the canvases of my students’ minds with all things English language arts (ELA) and enthusiasm. And this plan worked favorably for the first three class periods of the day. I swept through the room in my serious black suit and heels and commanded full control of the “honors” students sitting before me. Years of schooling in similar settings, admiring the seamless instruction of teachers who looked and performed very much like me, had prepared me for this day, and by the time the second-to-last class of the day rolled around,¹³ I was really settling into my instructional artistry, and the picture was coming together just as I had always dreamed.

¹¹ John Green, *Turtles All the Way Down*, 2017, p. 2

¹² A pseudonym for the public middle school in the Deep South where I taught from years 2013-2016

¹³ For the purposes of narrative flow and understanding, I have modified the actual order of classes that day.

Brush-Drop One

Without skipping a beat, I started to call roll just like I had done four times already that day. I read aloud the alphabetically listed names starting with

“Christopher Adams?”¹⁵

“Here. I go by Chris.”

I glanced up to the first seat on row one to see who had responded. *Chris*, I scribbled down. *Noted* .

“Aniyah Brooks?”

“Here.”

I looked up again to match a face to the voice. But this time as I scanned the group of students before me, something brought me pause.

What I noticed would eventually change the rest of my life and ultimately lead me to write this dissertation today: ***Almost all of the students in my “regular” English 7 class were Black or brown.***

...

I didn't yet have the words to express this impasse, this stuckness, this shookness, but one thing I know for sure is that

this was the day I realized I was WHITE.

In other words, despite my most calculated brush strokes or refined techniques,

¹⁴ I would like to pay homage to Kiese Laymon, whose artful use of the “until...” contradiction productively jarred me all throughout *Heavy*.

¹⁵ All student names are pseudonyms.

approximately six hours after I waltzed into the classroom,

the paintbrush slipped from my hand.

It slipped, and as it plummeted, color splattered all over the freshly-waxed floor that, until that moment, had felt stable. Before this tableau of still, quiet, collectively darker bodies in rows before me, for the first time ever it struck me as luridly, abruptly, shamefully conceivable that Black bodies are not treated the same as white ones.

Despite the post-racial and neoliberal crossfire I felt in my body, I could not convince myself that these racial, socio-economic divisions were coincidental. But I wanted to. I wanted to give in to the discourses and literacies my body knew. I wanted to believe that I didn't see color...that I shouldn't see color. But the longer I stood there puzzling, paint all over the place, the more vibrant the colors around me became: that day, I would begin to realize these particular Black and brown bodies had been tracked together and pushed away from the majority of their white, "Academic Scholar"¹⁶ peers.

On that day, I would begin to see that my whiteness had given me the luxury of *not seeing* these realities until that day, of not understanding my body as *raced* for the previous twenty-one years. And now that I had begun to see it, now that my paintbrush and palette had fallen, there was no way I would ever be able to *un-see*. I would never be able to understand myself as "neutral" again. I knew from that day forward that *I* was the one whose world would be painted, and I spent the next three years as painter *and* canvas.

¹⁶ The Academic Scholars Program was a system-wide program for middle schoolers that promised "a strengthened, more rigorous program for our high-achieving students will be implemented at the middle school level. This program will provide a framework of learning which encourages students to become creative, critical, & reflective thinkers as well as problem solvers." (cannot cite for protection of identities)

Losing the Paintbrush, Losing My Self, Losing Touch

During my second year of teaching, a professor named Dr. Davis¹⁷ from my Master's program took particular interest in me as I opened up in a Masters course about my first-day experience. We began dialogging regularly about all the things I was learning to see, and before long, she and I were co-sponsoring a progressive, student-led race relations club at Valleybend, "producing data," and talking about a Ph.D. program. This went on throughout my third year of teaching, and we continued to grow closer and dream of a more just world and more life-affirming classrooms. Not only was I flattered that someone believed me intelligent enough to pursue a terminal degree, but I was also still determined to gain a better grasp of the systems and structures that had made my overdue, first-day/first-year epiphanies possible. So, with stars *and* tears in my eyes, a graduate assistantship on the table, and countless students' stories engraved on my heart, I eventually made the hardest decision of my life: I left the middle-school classroom and started my formal journey toward becoming Dr. Kidd.

Even before my first actual graduate course, I began to devour article after article, book after book, interview after interview that might offer insight into the systems of oppression, racism, discipline, tracking, separation, and privilege that had facilitated my first brush-drop experience. I remember spending countless hours each week on Dr. Davis's office couch dissecting this theory or that philosophy, still searching for words and ways to make sense of my uncanny, first-day impasse.

...

As my studies progressed, I began to imagine the kind of scholar I could become; I would pen raw, affectionate, cautionary letters to my loved ones as Baldwin and Coates had done; like

¹⁷ A pseudonym

Alice Walker, I would poetically reconstruct and deconstruct scenes and traditions of my childhood. I dreamed of using beautiful, enchanting language to make the ordinary glow like Kathleen Stewart and Jane Bennett; of “writing fire” like Audre Lorde. I wanted to engineer intellect and linguistic invention that tiptoed between brilliance and insanity like Deleuze, Haraway, and Carroll; to deconstruct corrupt power regimes the way Michel Foucault and Michelle Alexander did. I dreamed of winning awards and recognition like my advisor. I dreamed of all the academic things and imitated all the scholarly people. But somewhere amid all my devouring and dreaming and desiring,

I got lost.

My drive to impress my professors and master academia had stuffed and sewn me into a successful puppet, a marionette hung on philosophical and theoretical strings. I was so easily manipulated but so entirely unaware. Little by little, I had learned to shush and eventually mute the layers of my self that made me *me*. I suppressed my Spirit into static to put my subjectivities under erasure. And although I learned to play this part convincingly, it never felt completely right.

In retrospect, the *root* problem was this: I had lost touch with my first Loves. I had become *distant* from my students, from the Foundation that had propelled me to become Dr. Kidd in the first place. Soon I found myself staring at a canvas I couldn’t interpret—its composition was abstract, and its mood no longer moved me. Instead of painting to interrogate the things my body knew, I had unwittingly passed the paintbrush to another artist who neither knew my students nor valued my design. But I would study in her studio for years as I desperately tried to reclaim the brush and draw meaning from her abstractions.

Then, with no warning at all, the brush fell again.

Brush-Drop Two: Big Ken

July 18, 2017: I was pulling into my parents' driveway (we lived in their backyard at the time) after a kickboxing session, when a former colleague texted me the link to a local news story. The headline was something about arrests made for the murder of a "young mother." Before I could even click the link, my colleague added, "The poor girl's body was beaten and shot and found on the side of a dirt road." I was so confused. I wondered if I knew the victim since I, too, was a young mother.

Nevertheless, I turned off my car, sent my daughter (Raeli) inside with her Bops (my dad), and grabbed all the mess from the backseat. I casually tapped the link and headed toward the house, wondering if maybe my colleague had just sent me this article because I was also a "young mother," or if maybe she knew the victim and wanted support or something? Not super interested, I walked in the back foyer door, dropped my keys on the green entryway table, and placed my styrofoam to-go box beside the keys. I was just about to set down the rest of the car clutter when the story and video footage finally popped up on my screen. I immediately recognized a Valleybend-blue Dri-fit shirt in the photograph, so I grabbed my phone and squinted for more details. The young man in the still frame of the video clip had his head down, so I pinched the screen to zoom in and pressed *play*.

I scrolled down while the video buffered and a dog food ad played. Toward the middle of a paragraph, the words "**Kentrelle Ty'Carter Washington, (16)**" lunged toward me from the digital page. All other words on the page blurred around that name. I read his name several times: *Kentrelle Ty'Carter Washington, Kentrelle Ty'Carter Washington, Kentrelle Ty'Carter Washington, "Here."* I heard his response as if I were calling roll. Then I did the math for when I'd taught him, as if to mathematically convince myself this couldn't *possibly* be the same "Big

Ken” I knew from seventh-grade. When the video *finally* played, I knew with certainty that the shackled ankles and hands being led toward the police car were, in fact, Big Ken’s.¹⁸

As if in slow motion, the diaper bag, jacket, and purse slid down my forearms; my heavy backpack broke away from my shoulders and eased down my arms. As it dropped, I slumped with it, down
down
down into a rigid heap on the terracotta-tiled floor. The paintbrush dropped with me, and paint splattered all around, red and warm like blood.

...

I sat there for what felt like hours, completely clueless as to how or what to do next.¹⁹

Scrolling through my Facebook feed, which by that point was abuzz with shared articles, tributes to *and* condemnations of Ken, I found his mugshot.

Or maybe it was his mugshot that found me.

When I tapped the photo, Kentrelle’s eyes brought all the memories from years ago—the plummeting brush, the paint splatter, the collaborative compositions from my classroom—surging into my body-mind. In that moment, I remembered *Big Ken*—I remembered his eyes.

Murderous eyes should seem hollow and sullen. But Kentrelle’s eyes, both in that

¹⁸ Rather than introduce Ken as the young boy he was when I first met him, I intentionally begin with this profile of Ken to reflect how society often gives Black boys a once-over and writes them off as delinquents, always-already void of any childhood innocence. Familiar with this adultification, Coates (2015) wrote, “The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls” (p. 25). Framing Ken this way is my stylistic attempt to demonstrate the theoretical concept of *proximity*. As I write Ken/share Ken’s writing of himself, it is my hope that readers are pulled closer to him as they recognize a kindred bond between his humanity and their own. In this process, Ken becomes an infinitely more complex character, *lightyears beyond* a news story and a mugshot, as he becomes harder and harder to forget.

¹⁹ To be clear, the purpose of this work is not to argue for or against Kentrelle’s innocence, guilt, or alleged involvement in any capacity concerning his criminal case. Rather, this work will illustrate Kentrelle’s humanity, my humanity, and how shared humanity can be magnified through the power of proximity.

mugshot and in my memories, were just the opposite—they were pensive and imploring, serious yet soft. When his hickory-brown, Snuffleupagus-lashed eyes fixed on mine, he could undo me...like he was searching for something at the soul-level and at once inviting me to search that deeply with/in him—or maybe with/in myself, too. And when our gaze would break, I'd catch myself, for the briefest moment, in curious reverie. What was I trying to find? What did he want me to find? *What might I have missed?* Kentrelle's stare whispered that he knew more about the world than most seventh-graders did. His eyes hinted that he might have tangled with life in ways even adults couldn't fully understand. As I studied his mugshot that afternoon, Ken's eyes undid me again as he invited me, once more, to try and understand—as he invited me to get close.

I don't remember much else from that day, but writing myself back into those moments reconjures the weight that somehow heaved my body toward the floor. Whatever gripped me that day as I looked into Kentrelle's eyes has held onto me ever since. Something in my Spirit reached back toward him, and it hasn't stopped reaching yet.

...

On July 19, 2017, I reached out to Kentrelle's mom, Wanda,²⁰ on Facebook to ask if he could have visitors. I had never had a student—or anyone I knew, for that matter—go to jail, and something inside me told me I needed to do *something*. The teachers on TV and in the movies always did. Wanda told me Kentrelle was only allowed four people on his list, and at that point they were immediate family and one lifelong friend. I was disappointed,²¹ but she offered to give Ken my number, so I shrugged and acquiesced.

²⁰ A pseudonym

²¹ But, then again, what made me think Ken would randomly want to talk to me, his seventh-grade English teacher? Did I feel entitled? Did I pity him?

...

On July 26, 2017, Kentrelle called me for the first time, but I had no idea how to work the *Securus* phone system. I panicked, pressed the wrong buttons, and lost my chance.

On July 27, 2017, Kentrelle called back several times in a row to give me more than one chance to figure out the phone robot. I finally heard, “Your payment has been approved. Thank you for using *Securus*. You may start your conversation now.” The static and background voices—occasional shouts of guards and echoes of deep-voiced men—were overwhelming. I thought I’d never be able to carry on a conversation this way. And I still had no idea what I was going to say. But when Kentrelle’s still-familiar voice sliced the static, “Hello?” my focus was singular. From that point forward, we talked on the phone at least once a week, but probably three or four times on average. I struggled for months to master the conversation style: to wait enough milliseconds before and after each utterance because of the delay; to figure out how to fill the silences; to figure out how to stop trying to fill the silences; to cram in everything I wanted to say before the robot interrupted: “You have one minute left.”

...

On October 25, 2017, Kentrelle’s mom Facebook messaged me to let me know Ken had added me to his visitation list. Inmates at Southern County Jail are only allowed one visitor per week, and I would finally get to be one of them. From that point forward, I began visiting Kentrelle at least once every two weeks, sometimes once every week if his mom couldn’t make it due to work or other responsibilities. As a full-time student/graduate assistant, my schedule was flexible and made visitation appointments easy.

The first time I went for visitation, I expected it to be like the movies: I would sit at a metal table in a sterile white or grey room, Kentrelle would come in wearing cuffs on his wrists

and maybe ankles, too, and we would sit across from one another and talk as a guard watched from the corner and pretended not to listen. But like a hummingbird smacking into glass, I skipped into the claustrophobic visitation room where I immediately knew this would be nothing like the movie in my head. For the forty-five minutes allotted, I would only see Ken's face on a decade-old, pixelated computer monitor, mounted haphazardly behind a filthy piece of thick plexiglass. I couldn't see his actual body or look directly into those familiar eyes. Had there been any physical reason for alarm—which I worried, given that he was the youngest inmate at Southern County Jail at that time—I wouldn't have been able to tell for the unfocused camera. Despite this blurry separation, I could still see Ken's smile. That detail was undeniable. I thought I even glimpsed the double-dimple on his right cheek.

Seeing Ken was like easing into an icy pool on a hot day: at once refreshing but sharp and jarring nonetheless. My body couldn't get settled in this space.

Once the initial disappointment of the non-Hollywood setup wore off and I got used to the visitation procedures, I *wanted* to be grateful, and I *wanted* to be sunshine for Kentrelle, so I played it up. But deep down I was just plain furious. I despised the ancient computer monitor and the cameras that switched on when I exhumed the filthy phone from its grimy hook. Given the dank state of the “free-world” side of the phone, I could only imagine the conditions on the other side of the camera (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Clorox Wipe from Visitation Carrel



Through more reading and thinking, I would eventually understand this no-contact tactic as just one more degree of separation, one less degree of humanity between incarcerated individuals and their loved ones. *At least this is temporary for Ken*, I told myself. But I was so naive. Andbutso, I wrote through it.

Personal Journal Entry: “Never a Child.”

I wanted to touch you—to put my hand on your shoulder and encourage you, to squeeze your hand as I prayed for you—your hand, your knuckles, your hug.
I thought only the glass would separate us as we handled the grimy phones and locked eyes for the first time in months...had it been years?

You didn't look like the seventh-grade you. Except you did.
Your smile. Your dark hair. Your amber, clay-on-a-riverbank complexion.
Your eyes still twinkled, still tried to communicate with me.
But what did I expect? Just because the paper *alleged* that you had killed someone, did I expect your eyes to have grown cold, your hair to be falling out in patches, your muscles to be bulkier?

Ken, you *were* just a child.
You are just a child.
But you were never a child.

I expected so much of you.
I pushed, you pushed.
I knew so little of you.
I performed. You performed.

What happened to you, Ken? What was always already happening to you that I never could see?

Why was I shocked when I saw your face, your hands, your limbs constrained and contorted under the complete penal control of the large white officers who escorted you out of the sheriff's office that day?

My body didn't know how to see someone I love in chains. It had never had to.

Where are you?

What is it like in there?

I only see through the murky glass: the trash, the peeling paint, the grown men surrounding you, sometimes making hand gestures; their beards, tattoos, orange jumpsuits—all the same.

You all look the same.

Except you don't.

You were just a child.

You *are* just a child.

But you were *never* a child.

And what do we do next? What do we talk about here, now, this digitally mediated communication system adding just one more degree of separation between our bodies—yours caged, mine free. Yours inscribed with *guilty* throughout history, mine with *mother, sweet, gentle, kind, innocent*. Except when I'm not.

Seeing you like this, here, now, makes me not only any of those things.

Yes, I am mother. My children are free.

I don't want to be sweet. I'm mad as hell that they didn't even give you a bed sheet.

Monsters! Yet that's what they'll convince you and others that *you* are.

Yes, I try to be gentle, but I am not in the mood to be gentle. Nothing about metal cuffs, rusted iron bars, or the place you call "lock-up" is gentle.

Yes, I believe kindness is a potent form of magic. But kindness doesn't live here, now, in this place. Is kindness just a grand act of charity, a useless fantasy when things have ended up—were always going to end up—like this?

No. Innocent? I am not. And why is it often assumed that I am? That my melanin—not as concentrated as yours, not associated with the stereotypes of every other person who looks like me—this makes me *innocent*?

I am angry. I am furious. I am disgusted.

I am small. I am drowning.

And still, I am here, now, talking about *me*. It's always been about me.

I want to talk about you.

I want to listen.

I've talked for years and years. I've said enough and never enough.

I'm ready to listen.

Teach me.

Erase me though.

You.
Here for you.

-Mrs. Kidd

...

Despite my frustration and powerlessness with/in Ken's isolation, I continued to pursue my degree and told myself I would eventually make more money, eventually find better resources, and eventually discover the answers I needed to help change Ken's circumstances. In the meantime, I just needed to do what I could for him: I needed to be present.

Meanwhile...(see footnovel before moving forward)²²

²² An unobvious, multi-part explanation of this recurring stylistic move:

- 1.) I borrow the term/concept of "meanwhile" from the work of Guyotte et al., 2019.
- 2.) While it might seem that the "meanwhiles" throughout this manuscript detract and/or distract from the narrative, I argue that the opposite is true. Layered like patchwork throughout the main plot of this narrative, these vignettes add richness to the intersecting subplots of mine and Kentrelle's lives. For example, this first *meanwhile* addresses the simultaneity of my becoming mother and becoming scholar, but never quite becoming *enough*, especially for my then-advisor, Dr. Davis. The meanwhiles illustrate the never-separate nature of knowing/doing/becoming. While I was trying everything I knew to get close to Kentrelle, I was also trying everything I knew to impress and become like Dr. Davis, my [former] academic advisor and mentor. At the time, I couldn't see how these personal and academic domains of my life were affecting each other, yet as the data will demonstrate, the toxic relationship with my "teacher" would drastically inform the ethics and power dynamics of my relationship with Kentrelle and my role as *his* "teacher"...which ultimately impacted/impacts the literacy educator I am becoming today.
- 3.) Other "meanwhiles" reveal times when it was most tempting to imagine my body-mind in a separate *here*. My wrestling with this separation is a testament to the ease with which free-worlders [a term Kentrelle and I develop throughout our story] often push the incarcerated out-of-sight, out-of-mind. However, the data make clear that since Kentrelle's arrest, my *here* has never been entirely separable from his *there*. While his body might be out-of-sight, and his actual state-of-mind not always at the forefront of my own, Kentrelle's spirit is constantly reaching toward mine and mine toward his, drawing us back to the t/here space where our spirits run together, undeterred by steel bars or corrupt regimes of power.

Just before I started my PhD program, in May 2016 I had my first child, Raeli. I told myself for the first two years of her life—also my first years of doc. school—that the sleepless nights, warped schedules, and feelings of inadequacy/lack of mother-daughter bonding were the temporary price for building a better future for her. Nights I spent in isolation, writing and reading as she slept, I longed to be near her. I felt distant from her like I felt distant from Kentrelle. My tired body told me I could never be enough—never enough for Raeli, never enough for Kentrelle, never enough for my husband, never enough for Dr. Davis, never enough of a scholar. Never enough *period*.

As time went on and I grew closer to Kentrelle, I began to see him like one of my children. I felt a maternal bond with him, but, more than anything, this maternal feeling made me ever-aware of the sting of separation Kentrelle's mom had to have felt since her son was taken from her. So while I felt distant from Raeli on long nights of schoolwork, I knew I could never imagine the distance Wanda must have felt. Wanda was/is always on my mind.

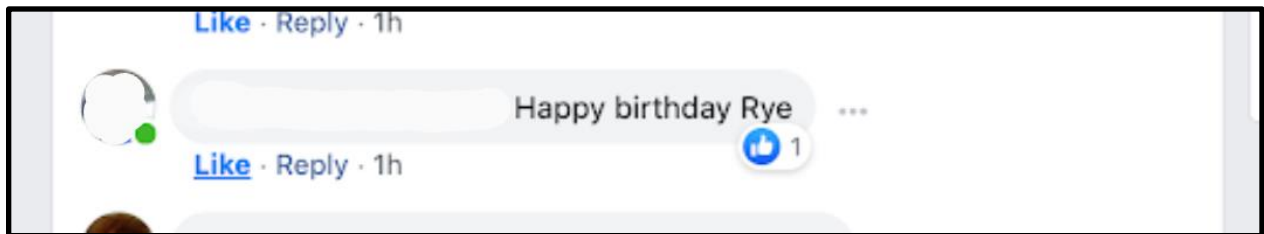
From 2017 to 2019, both my vitae and my family continued to grow. Robbie and I had our second child, Rye, in January 2019. The first time I held him, I felt the immediate bond of mother and son, a bond that I hadn't initially felt with Raeli because of postpartum depression mingled with overwhelming school-related anxiety. I remember thinking as I first held Rye, on January 9, 2019, about Wanda and whether or not she ever dreamed that her days of holding her baby boy would end sixteen short years from the first time she cradled him in her arms. My emotions ranged from gratitude that I had a healthy baby boy, to anxiety about the man he would become and how he would use his privilege, to disgust and guilt over the ease with which I knew I could raise my white son, as opposed to mothers I had met and read about over the past several

years who would raise Black and brown sons in this country. Some days I wished I could just silence the critical voices in my mind and keep my readings and the news and my empathy separate from the *mother* compartments of my brain. But I couldn't. I knew deep down that ignorance wasn't an option if I were to live as and raise my children to be humans who seek justice and love mercy—if I were to be the human my scholarship insisted I should be. With the rigid realization that neither maternity leave nor compartmentalization of my convictions was an option, I jumped back into academia two weeks after I had Rye. Thankfully, in that final course of my program, I would find reprieve in the act of critical, analytic, personal writing, which I would use for years to come.

Meanwhile...

Figure 2

Facebook Post from Ken's Mom



1.9.2020, Personal Journal Entry: “Happy Birthday”

Ken,

Your sweet mama just commented on my Facebook birthday post to Rye, whose first birthday is today, and I was immediately drawn to my journal to work through it and talk with you about it. Her comment, verbatim, was simply “Happy birthday Rye.” So why does this make me so emotional? There is so much I want to read into this, so many fights I want to start with so many unnamable, invisible enemies.

If I could respond candidly to her right now, these are some of the feelings I'd spill:

Mrs. Wanda,

On Ken's first birthday, when he was tearing up his smash cake, did you ever imagine there would be a day...or thousands of days...when you wouldn't be able to love

on him—birthdays when you wouldn't be allowed to serve him cake or watch him blow out candles with that big, gummy smile? Did you imagine his body would be stolen from you and caged like it is today?

Ken turned 19 last month. Rye is 1 today. I cannot imagine or conjure or manufacture or dream the feelings you have experienced since your baby was taken from you.

I can't rationalize or generalize or sympathize or authentically/wholly empathize with this situation. And it all started with that one, kind comment. You wished my son a happy birthday.

-Briana

There aren't any more words inside me for this, Ken. But there is a song. Three songs, actually. One for each year you've spent away from those who wish to sing it to you the most:

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Kentrelle. Happy birthday to you."

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Kentrelle. Happy birthday to you."

"Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Kentrelle. Happy birthday to you."

Now I have to—*get to*—go sing it to my own baby boy...at least while he's still here for me to hold.

As I wrote these journal entries, I was working through feelings of empathy, anger, and pity. I knew that no matter what, I would never embody the feelings of mothers of Black children in America. I also knew that Kentrelle and his mother share an extremely tight bond with which I would never want to interfere, so I needed to constantly remind myself that there was no *lack* of a maternal presence in Ken's life that I was somehow supposed to fill, as Ken once wrote to me:

Me and my mom has a bond like we're friends. We sit around and jank each other, my friends, and people on the internet. Me and Ma Dukes turnt. I'll jump fresh, pull up on Ma Dukes, and she'll say, "You ain't fresh with your ugly self," and get to laughing.

I'll tell my mom, "I know I be fresh, stop hating!"
Ma Dukes say, "Boy whatever."
We have the best mother and son relationship ever.

Wanda is Ken’s best friend. She is his one and only mother. But still I wrestle with these facts, especially when Kentrelle openly refers to me as “like [his] second mama.”

Nevertheless, that Wanda took the time to reach out and tell my baby—who she has never met—happy birthday, while her baby boy had missed his last three birthdays with her, broke me. And while I knew/know that pity does nothing beneficial for anyone, I still battle these inclinations in my body toward pity because, as Tarc²³ wrote, “By encountering others in other worlds, we look into their eyes and are affected/implicated.”²⁴ And since the day I looked into Ken’s eyes in that mugshot and remembered his imploring stare from my seventh-grade classroom, I have been allowed to encounter some part of Mrs. Wanda’s world through him. When I look into her eyes or into his, I am affected. I am implicated. The work now is to feel *with* Wanda, not to feel *pity for* her.

Getting Free Before Getting Close

By mid-spring 2019, I had been in the doctoral program at The University for almost three years, for the most part of which the idea of an actual dissertation seemed far beyond the here+now. I was happy to be writing, presenting, and publishing with my former advisor (Dr. Davis), and everything felt fine.

Until it didn’t.

Spring 2019 of my graduate program would mark an essential season of coming together and breaking apart. During the final course of my program, as I read about dis/ability, mass incarceration, and historical separation qua in/competence, I sensed in my body-mind a struggle

²³ (2006, p. 302)

²⁴ (p. 302)

between harmony and rupture—adhesion and collision. As I continued to read, write, reflect, and visit Kentrelle, gravity gradually shifted. I couldn't quite name it yet, but this shift was the personal, Spiritual, scholarly, social, and professional parts of my life nebulously pulling me toward something(s) new—something more *me*, yet simultaneously collaborative. But before I could give in to this pull, other forces in my galaxy would have to fall out of orbit so that what was most important could get close.

...

On March 27, 2019, I went to visit Ken just like I had for years before. Our visit was ordinary, just small talk and awkward attempts to make each other laugh from opposite sides of the foggy digital screen. But about halfway through our 45-minute visit, the tone shifted as I told him how haunted I was by an article²⁵ I'd read that morning for my dis/ability studies class. The article had included the actual transcript of the 9-1-1 call from the night of Trayvon Martin's murder. Our conversation rapidly moved from Trayvon's murder to Black lives and racism in the South, to Kentrelle's chances of getting out, then to how the System works against him as a young Black man with (or without) a juvenile record. I told Kentrelle this too-common set of circumstances has a name, the "school-to-prison pipeline."²⁶ We talked about how the pipeline begins for many Black youth—like Kentrelle and Trayvon Martin—long before age sixteen, when they are sorted into "special education" classes, sent out of classrooms, suspended, and expelled at much higher rates than their white peers. This pipeline concept resonated with

²⁵ (Collins, 2016)

²⁶ Explaining this term, Adams and Erelles (2016) wrote, "We use the term *school-to-prison pipeline* to highlight a complex network of relations that naturalize the movement of youth of color (many with identified or unidentified disabilities) from our schools and communities into underemployment or unemployment, short-term detention, and ultimately long-term (or even lifelong) incarceration (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Meiners, 2007; Wald & Losen, 2003). Such practices of pathologization, racialization, and criminalization deployed in educational contexts are social processes, not entities inherent in specific bodies" (p. 133).

Kentrelle, and he casually mentioned his time at Honeysuckle²⁷ Education Center, a regional school for students with special needs, which caught my attention because one, he had never mentioned this before, and two, Kentrelle didn't have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Behavior Plan when he was in my seventh-grade class, so I couldn't imagine why he had gone to Honeysuckle.

“*What?* When'd you get sent to Honeysuckle and why?” I asked him.

He clicked his tongue and shook his head, “When I was nine I had took a little bb gun to school because this old dude in my neighborhood was bullyin' me, you know what I'm sayin'? I was scared, and I was gonna protect myself, you feel me? And Dr. Payton²⁸ had found out, and he had sent me to Honeysuckle for six months. So on my record it say I brought a gun to school.”

As he talked, every synapse in my brain started throwing sparks. I probably seemed possessed to Kentrelle, but there was a pyro show in my body-mind as two years of visiting Kentrelle and three years of studying injustice started linking up. Before our screens cut off, I told Kentrelle that when he gets out one day, we should author a book together about his school/life/jail/freedom experiences.²⁹

He said, “That's what's goin' on. I've already been writing some poems in here since I started this little time. I most definitely need to read them to you.” And my heart leapt.

...

It was during that visit that it finally occurred to me how profoundly our relationship had fused flesh with the black-and-white words I had been consuming all along, and how our

²⁷ A pseudonym

²⁸ A pseudonym

²⁹ This dissertation was originally conceived as a first-draft of our co-authored book, but red tape from IRB and other institutional-level obstacles have [unintentionally?] perpetuated the silencing and erasure of Kentrelle's story in the name of “protecting him.” But that's a whole other dissertation...

relationship could—*must*—become something more, something more visible to other educators and students, something that might somehow bring other white people like me *close*. After we said goodbye, I walked outside the jail and sat in the parking lot for a long while until I finally worked up the nerve to send the following texts to Dr. Davis:

Text 1, March 27, 2019, 1:57 PM:

I bet you were afraid I would eventually ask this, so here it comes: What if I did my dissertation research in some way with Kentrelle?

...

I am just amazed at how exactly his story—the more he shares with me about his past and educational/home experiences each time I visit—aligns with all the literature about push-out,³⁰ tracking,³¹ school-to-prison pipeline,³² punitive discipline,³³ the Black body as a threat,³⁴ etc., etc.

And I don't mean a story to defend his alleged in/actions or anything but rather to show how all of that cannot be separated from the larger systems of oppression, poverty, racism, etc.

I want to write a book with him. Seriously...I told him today that when he gets out, he and I will write a book together, and I meant it.

...

But what are your initial thoughts about this?

Dr. Davis read the text but didn't immediately respond. I kept going:

Text 2, March 27, 2019:

I want to do this... to tell/let him tell his story and the stories of so many incarcerated Black youth in the South... to show how systems at large—including EDUCATION—are widely implicated in his/others' situations. I think it could be transformational for other white teachers like me who otherwise find it easy to look past Kentrelle or past the systems created to erase him.³⁵

...

³⁰ (Morris, 2016)

³¹ (Castro Atwater, 2018; Daily, 2020; Dolmage, 2017; Erevelles, 2014; Jones & Woglom, 2014; Kirkland, 2013; Love, 2019; Woodson, 1933/2015)

³² “The ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ is the term commonly used to describe the alarming number of black and brown children who are funneled directly and indirectly from our schools into our prison industrial complex, contributing to devastating levels of mass incarceration that lead to one in three black men and one in six Latino men going to prison in their lifetimes, in addition to increased levels of incarceration for women of color” (Oluo, 2018, p. 125)

³³ (Simmons, 2015)

³⁴ (Baldwin, 1963; Coates, 2015; Jones, 2013; Laymon, 2018; Ohito, 2017)

³⁵ (Personal communication, March 28, 2019)

As evident in the text messages' descriptions of what I thought my work might look like, I didn't yet grasp the role *literacy* would play in this work. In fact, I didn't even realize how powerful this work could be. In retrospect, I confess that most of my blindness was due to my preoccupation with impressing Dr. Davis. I craved her approval, and my research trajectory depended almost entirely upon her affirmation of my ideas. The ways she would respond and the toxic turn our relationship would take over the coming months would nearly end not just my time in the doctoral program, but even my life because of the deep depression, hurt, and confusion I would sink into.³⁶ Thankfully, *writing*—in my personal journal, in my prayer journal, and on postcards to Kentrelle—would save my life.

Moreover, even though I couldn't label my methods at that time, I was *writing* through tensions and entanglements to make sense of all that my body-mind was feeling. It was refreshing to write through my ideas in text messages that day, so I started typing reflections into a digital journal on my phone and writing short narratives about my emerging relationship with Kentrelle *and* about my spiraling relationship with Dr. Davis. From this practice, I began to [re]discover the power of writing. I talked candidly with Kentrelle about the possibility of eventually co-producing some sort of publishable text, and I encouraged him to start writing as often as he could as a way to cope with some of the experiences and questions we often talked through together. He wrote. I wrote. We wrote.

³⁶ As the researcher, I understand that I have the power to selectively layer the stories that paint Kentrelle and me in particular ways. In order to avoid misleading, misrepresenting, manipulating, or harming Kentrelle, I bear in body-mind and revisit my journal entries with Dr. Davis to learn from my own experiences with/in an imbalanced teacher-student relationship. Conscious of these scars, I take intentional, vulnerable, transparent measures to avoid slipping into those patterns. After all, we know that trauma lives in the body (Dutro, 2017). While I understand that this story is not exclusively mine to tell, I also realize that I could never tell it without Kentrelle; therefore, I strive to write from a place of Love and gratitude.

*Postcard to Kentrelle.*³⁷

Ken!

Big Question: *Will you **PLEASE** start keeping a journal for me? **PLEASE**? I think if you do, you might soon find it's for YOU, too! Just pretend we're back at Valleybend again and each week you have to turn in a journal entry. Then, whenever you feel like it, send a couple pages to me. You know I don't want to write alone. (*Just let me know when you need more money for stamps, paper, and envelopes!)

I just want you to **write your life**—your daily experiences, thoughts, feelings, questions, stories—even if they sometimes seem boring or pointless. See, there's **nothing** boring or pointless about your life, even if it is confined to a cage right now. That's what they want you to think. They want you to believe your life is boring and pointless. That makes it so much easier for them to take it from you.

Ken, listen to me: **You've gotta write to make your life and your humanity exist** beyond that cell, beyond A6, beyond that day room, beyond those raggedy, bootleg bathrooms, beyond those fences, beyond those walls.

If you don't, they will deceive you. They won't have to take your life from you because you'll willingly give it to them. Their system and your silence will erase you, Ken. **YOU MUST NOT BE ERASED.**

You have to write your protest. You have to write your world. Write your way back into existence.

Will you write to let me in and write to let your humanity out?

I love you very much, and I believe we can do this work!

Eagerly,

Mrs. Kidd :)

Letter from Kentrelle.

Mrs. Kidd,

I've started on my journal! I am so happy to start working on this book with you. It's going to be so wonderful! I wish you could've seen the smile on my face when you said we was writing a book. I couldn't stop smiling. I was extremely happy! Now all we have to do is get you in here to see me face-to-face so we can strive and get to writing more from eachother's³⁸ perspective. Got to get in contact with my lawyer to do that though. Ugh...I wish they would hurry up! But until then, **we got this!**

I ♥ you!

♥ -Ken-

But over and over again, when I presented ideas for formalizing our writing/relationship,

I hit walls as [white] scholars continually expressed concern that I might harm or exploit

³⁷ I hand-wrote this particular postcard multicolored like this to 1. Keep Ken's attention, 2. Make this postcard stand out among others I had sent, and 3. Make the tiny handwriting more distinct between breaths/paragraphs.

³⁸ Throughout this manuscript, I follow Ken's creative lead and combine "eachother" as a semantic sign of solidarity and togetherness.

Kentrelle, that I might center myself too much in my work, that I was too enthusiastic to be introspective, that I needed to focus on the “scholarly” task of the dissertation and *then* I could get to the dreams and creativity and personal parts of the production *after* that. In fact, I had one white male professor who, upon hearing my research idea in class, went so far as to purchase me a copy of *Philosophy for Dummies* as a starting point for my project instead of engaging with the “more complex concepts” we discussed in class or the “high theory” I had mentioned tying into my eventual study. Again, I faded into confusion, lostness, loneliness. Again, I was depressed, discouraged, and distant from my first Loves. I could picture the work I wanted to produce, but the inhibitions of my advisor and other skeptical [white] people³⁹ in my life had reduced the image’s opacity to almost invisible. Half of my heart was beating in Southern County Jail, just six minutes down the road from the inhospitable ivory towers that held no space for my and Ken’s collaboration. But six minutes felt like six eternities, and I was defeated.

Until I wasn’t.

“Manifesto”: Reclaiming the Paintbrush

On Monday, July 15, 2019 as I prepared to take my doctoral comprehensive exam, I met with Dr. Latrise Johnson. I entered her office on the brink of an anxiety attack because of the exam. I did not acknowledge that I had never had test anxiety before. I could not yet acknowledge that my anxiety was actually due to the pressure I put on myself to please Dr. Davis and due to the hazing I was going through. I had no idea that I had no idea who I was anymore.

Dr. Johnson patiently listened to everything I said and everything I did not say. When I

³⁹ It should be noted that my University is a PWI, so hitting walls with white scholars does not necessarily imply that *all* white academics were/would have been opposed to my work. Rather, I was around *very few* scholars or classmates of Color to share and discuss my ideas with because...Deep South, PWI, privilege, inequity, etc.

finally took a breath, she suggested I consider critical autoethnography.⁴⁰ I felt a familiar flicker in my body-mind, so I left Dr. Johnson's office, sat in the corridor of the education building, and fanned that flame into a reflective journal entry that I decided to share with my committee members via email. A small portion of the journal entry sums up the email's content:

Selection from "Manifesto" Email.

I don't want to be the stereotypical white savior/ally, but I'm nothing if not passionate, even angry right now and eager for change. I want to approach this with humility and eagerness to listen. I can't speak for anyone else, certainly not for any person of color, certainly not for Kentrelle as I had originally conceived of this project. But I can speak my own truth. I can share the things to which I have borne witness.

For the next two hours after I pressed *send*, I psychotically refreshed my inbox and hoped for a reply from any of my committee members. Around 2:00 PM, Dr. Davis would send the following response:

Hey Briana,
My key concern is this: don't drag Kentrelle out in order to write about yourself. Writing about your white supremacist, Christian, cishetero patriarchal upbringing and life is fine. Just don't parade Ken out as spectacle to talk about yourself and issues of white supremacy.
Rock on,
PD

But fortunately I wouldn't see her response until *after* it was too late, until after I'd caught a glimpse of myself through the looking glass and seen that things with/in me were not as they should be.

Neither of the other recipients responded via email, but Dr. Johnson and I continued our conversation later that afternoon. I knocked on the glazed glass door and heard her get up to let me in. She smiled like she always does, finished what she was doing, gently closed her laptop,

⁴⁰ See Appendix A for an in-depth review of methodological literature and discussion of this method.

slid it aside, clasped her fingers together on the desk separating us, looked me square in the eye, then sliced the nervous silence with these words:

“That manifesto, in my mind, *is your work*,” she said to me.

She just called my email a manifesto, I thought, as I waited for the massive “*but*” and the ensuing letdown I’d come to expect from my superiors when my sparkly ideas and passions leaked out around them.

But there was no letdown.

As we continued to talk specifics of my project for almost an hour, not once did Dr. Johnson make me feel rushed or like she had other things to do. I honestly didn’t know how to be still and sit with this type of affirmation. I wanted to let down my guard, to slow my brain down, but I couldn’t. I was habitually formulating counter-arguments to defend my ideas so that I would be ready when she challenged me. But she didn’t. I wanted to thank her and smile and express my excitement and gratitude, but then something strange happened. Toward the end of our conversation, without warning, I felt familiar, intense water walls pushing against my eyelids, threatening to leak hot tears down my cheeks.

Suddenly, I was the nineteen-year-old undergraduate me, sitting in this same Dr. Johnson’s Diversity in Education course, openly skeptical of any such things as “racism,” “oppression,” or “discrimination.” I was the nineteen-year-old me who had insensitively refused to acknowledge any of the -isms she had taught us about that semester. I was the nineteen-year-old me in her class submitting my final paper about the “neglect” of “gifted students like me” when teachers focus all their time and energy on students who everybody says are oppressed or left behind. I was the nineteen-year-old me who needed to be *thumped* by the [then] twenty-seven-year-old me who really, really wished I had listened and believed the things Dr. Johnson

told nineteen-year-old me all those years ago. I snapped back to twenty-seven-year-old me and felt so ashamed. I was about to break.

“Why do I get emotional every time I talk to you? Ugh. I’m so sorry. It’s just because I feel guilty. I’m so sorry.” I said, determined not to cry.

Unwavering in her affirmation Dr. Johnson spoke life: “But don’t. *Don’t*. Be *unapologetic*... Be undeniable... Your scholarship, your intellectualism, your \$h!t that you’ve read... all of this will be undeniable, and there’s nothing to apologize for. You can’t help the body that you were born in. Can you do some *great* \$h!t in it? Yes. Do it. But stop apologizing.”

Before I walked out of her office that day, she gave me the permission I needed to pursue the work my soul loved. She affirmed, “It’s okay that this work means something to you. Stop worrying, stop apologizing, do the work you wanna do. Do the work that feels good to you.” She said, “You have got to stop being sorry in this world. You have such a powerful voice, and you have gone through such a transformation, you need to own that \$h!t. And it needs to empower you. You’re a white woman. You did not ask to be. Use what you know, how you feel, who you are, to feel empowered every day that you walk around.”

“I’m telling you. I always *was* that person until this program, and then all the sudden I’m just...”

“That’s just because you’ve changed and morphed, and you’ve become something different, but you’ve become something better,” she told me.

“I hope so...” I said, then saw her narrow her eyes and tilt her head at me; “Okay. I *know* so. You’re right.”

“Mhmm.” She winked. “You really have. A conscious white girl??” We both laughed, and I’m certain I walked out a couple inches taller than I’d walked in.

...

Before this program, I had always had a strongly rooted personal constitution. I knew who I was and what I believed. But within the first three years of my studies, I found myself questioning parts of my identity that I thought I would *never* doubt and (ir)rationalizing convictions upon which I *never* thought I would waver, all because I had been told over and over again that “If you leave this [program, class, moment, school, project] unchanged, real learning will not have taken place.” And I had all but come to believe all the lies about myself. But on that day in July, it took me *one hour* with a student-loving, self-writing,⁴¹ others-empowering Black scholar to get *free*.

For years I had listened to white scholars tell me this type of work—a young, [“too”] energetic white woman working with a close-to-her-age, male student of color—wasn’t possible; that it would require endless, lofty theoretical support; that so much of who I was would have to be erased if I were to be taken seriously; that I was too enthusiastic and not critical enough—a cheerleader, not a researcher; that my stories and experiences weren’t enough; that I was a white savior in denial. And this is precisely what critical pedagogy should be working *against*--telling students they must change who they are in order to qualify as smart, as “Academic Scholars,” as “woke,” as [fill in the blank].

Although Dr. Johnson had been on my committee all along, I had been afraid to approach her with my work because of the young, very *un*-woke undergraduate me she had formerly known. Recalling that version of myself, in addition to the possibility that Dr. Davis, a *white* scholar, could be right about me being the white-savior, white supremacist type, convinced me that Dr. Johnson, a *Black* scholar, would certainly see right through me. In other words, I was

⁴¹ Johnson, L. P. (2017)

afraid to talk to my Black professor, afraid to tap into her scholarly wisdom and lived experiences, about my love for Kentrelle and the work my soul longed for but couldn't yet grasp. I was afraid to claim the experiences I *knew* had changed me since Dr. Johnson and I first met. I was afraid to share what my body knew. I was silencing my Spirit. I was afraid to get close.

But that day, Dr. Johnson helped me embrace the truth I'd felt but been denied all along—the truth that I *have* changed. I have changed in the way that I am now radically and colossally more *open* to other ways of knowing and becoming with/in the world. This has come, is still coming, and should always be coming through increasingly critical self-awareness and intentional vulnerability. I can now be critical about ways I have unjustly or injuriously read and composed others. I can now critique systems of oppression and injustice and acknowledge my part in those systems. In front of *anybody*, I can and do and will continue to admit, “I have privilege,” “I *do* see color,” “I *don't* know it all,” “I *will* listen,” “My story matters,” “My white words have power,” “I *am* part of the problem,” “I *am* part of the solution.” I couldn't and wouldn't do these things before. So that *is* learning. That *is* growth. And I'm nowhere near finished learning and growing.

...

That July day, with Dr. Johnson's guidance, I picked back up the paint brush. She wrapped her hand around mine, made sure I truly had a grip on the tool this time, and she reminded me how to (re)discover the artist within: through *writing* the self.⁴² As I began to [re]imagine a picture that I loved, I felt my dream of collaboratively producing art *with* Kentrelle drawing closer and closer. This compositional *closeness* would become the basis of my entire study, and *critical autoethnography* would become the tool I use to write myself [back] in/to the

⁴² L. P. Johnson (2017)

world.

...

In the following sections, I trace my theoretical underpinnings, render my research questions, and outline my ontomethodological moves and methods as I continue to paint the story of how *proximity* has changed everything.

Meanwhile...

It has taken a lot of work to remember who I am—a lot of reflection and even more *writing*. As I worked through the trauma of my relationship with Dr. Davis, I turned to autoethnographic writing to make sense of my feelings, to vent, and eventually to forgive.

February 10, 2020: Forgiveness Poem.⁴³

Whether your intentions were pure or not,
I forgive you.

I'll never be able to accept that you knew what you were doing year after year, semester after semester, meeting after meeting, collaboration after collaboration.

I'll never believe that you brought me here as data.

I forgive you because I finally remember

I am more than data.

I forgive you for dredging the deepest, most personal, most painful information out of me so that you could “research” my side of things.

I forgive you for not disclosing *your* important personal side of certain things until the end.

I forgive you because I finally remembered

I am more than research.

My convictions—my side of things—are more than data.

In my forgiveness, I have to let you go.

I have to let go of the memories of months we spent writing together,

⁴³ I have chosen to vulnerably include this forgiveness poem 1.) to demonstrate my use of personal writing as a method of meaning-making and growth; 2.) to signify the closing of a chapter and the last space I'll concede to a season that, yes, hurt me, but ultimately also hurt Kentrelle by keeping my spirit distracted, distant, and afraid to unapologetically reach toward his; 3.) to bring personal closure after I have added, deleted, added, deleted, and now added and can't delete again; and, 4.) because I want them to know they're forgiven.

of miles and miles driving to conferences together.
I have to let go of what I *thought* it meant to be a scholar, of how I *thought* it should feel to be a friend.
I have to let go of inside jokes and nicknames—of being “Skygirl” or “Anna.”
“Tree Lady” will always be part of my roots, but I have to cut off old branches to produce new fruit.

When I sit under a tree, I’ll probably always think of you. I’ll think of children’s books, of mycelium, of church font, of “Freedom Song.”
But then I’ll stand up and walk away from the shade of that tree.
I’ll walk into the warmth of the sun and into all the vibrant, tie-dye, wonderful things.
That’s who I am.
I am tie-dye girl, not skygirl.

I forgive you because what I actually need to do is thank you:
Thank you for teaching me to be shrewd as a snake, innocent as a dove.⁴⁴
Thank you for making me a stronger me as I forced myself to rely on a smaller you.
Thank you for making me a more ethical, more compassionate teacher to Ken as you engraved in me the hurt of the alternative.
Thank you for making me a roguer writer, sharper scholar, a stronger believer, a woker white girl.
Thank you for showing me there are more than 21 ways of looking at a Blackbird.

With no bitterness, regret, or enmity in my heart,
I forgive you
because I am *not* you, even though I tried so hard to be.
I forgive you
because I have been Forgiven.
I forgive you
because I have to get free so that I can get close.

⁴⁴ Matthew 10:16, English Standard Version

CHAPTER 2: PAINTING COMPOSITIONAL CLOSENESS: RESEARCH QUESTIONS, THEORETICAL CONCEPTS, AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS ONTOMETHODOLOGY

- 74: The number of letters Kentrelle has written to me
- 53: The number of postcards I've mailed to Kentrelle
- 52: The number of transcribed 15-minute phone calls between Kentrelle and me
- 259: The number of digital journal entries I've written "to" Kentrelle⁴⁵
- 6: The number of returned postcards it took before Kentrelle received my first one
- 45: The number of words in the *SCJ Inmate Handbook*⁴⁶ about education
- 1: The number of books Kentrelle is allowed to have in his cell

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to share Kentrelle's and my ongoing story of reflection, Love, and growth as acts of creative resistance. Though systems and circumstances would have Kentrelle's story—his humanity, his body, his spirit—and our access to one another erased, we resist this erasure as we share, analyze, and expand our own and one another's embodied literacies through writing. With/in a critical autoethnographic ontomethodology,⁴⁷ I illustrate and

⁴⁵ Chapter 4 will explain the meaning of these quotation marks as a specific point of my analysis/findings.

⁴⁶ Citation removed for protection of identities

⁴⁷ To articulate the inseparability of knowing, being, and doing—the simultaneous, embodied performance of critical introspection and writing, what Bochner and Ellis (2017) refer to as “living an autoethnographic life,” (p. 118), Yagelski (2011) calls “writing as a way of being,” and L. P. Johnson (2017) calls “writing the self”—I use the term *ontomethodology*. In other words, autoethnography is both a way of being and a performative method of qualitative research: an ontology+a methodology=ontomethodology. Thus, as we write, autoethnographers enact ontomethodological performances that eliminate any distinction between living life and

doing research. This orientation facilitates a shift from writing toward a product, to focussing primarily on the embodied processes of composing, about which Yagelski (2011) explained, “Writing is an act of becoming more fully present in the world at the moment of writing” (p. 116). (See Appendix A for full literature review of autoethnography and Appendix B for a detailed explanation of data collection and data analysis for this study.)

analyze how my conceptualization of literacies has expanded as Kentrelle and I have learned to compose closeness between bars.

Research Questions

1. What literacies in/of my body inform how I read other bodies?
2. How does *proximity* affect literacy education?
3. What literacies in/of Kentrelle's body demonstrate his abundance, and how can these literacies expand *my* capacity for Love and effectiveness in the classroom and in the world?

The Problem

As I witnessed during the years I taught at a public middle-school in the Deep South, studies have shown that Black male students disproportionately accrue disciplinary records that too often lead to the accumulation of criminal records, land them in juvenile courts then adult jails and prisons, and ultimately ban them from society at large. This cycle catalyzes a new racial undercaste in the United States, effectively yet invisibly producing what Michelle Alexander⁴⁸ calls the “New Jim Crow.” When citizens [Kentrelle, for example] are separated from mainstream society—whether pushed into lower-level courses throughout schooling, dis/placed into alternative school or jail under zero-tolerance policies, relegated to unsatisfactory living conditions in rural or run-down geographic locations, or sentenced to long prison stints—they are rendered invisible to the common populace and left socially and politically dead.⁴⁹ As a literacy educator, I am implicated in these cycles. As a child from a white, upper-middle class background in the still significantly segregated Deep South, I had no idea these cycles were churning around me. I had no idea, that is, until I got close. And now I realize that my students, my peers, my colleagues, my church, my children, my family, my community—they will never

⁴⁸ (2012)

⁴⁹ (Agamben, 1999; Weheliye, 2014)

know either unless they, too, are compelled to *get close*.

Autoethnographic Writing: An Ontomethodology for Getting Close

Today I follow the trails these scholars blazed for me as I bear witness to Kentrelle's literacies and lived experiences and as I critically interrogate my own ways of moving through the world. The processes and products of this work bring visibility to Kentrelle's situation, make our shared humanity more urgent (Stevenson, 2014), amplify Ken's voice and experiences, and operate as a form of creative resistance against systemic racism and erasure as we subversively cultivate and share literacies in putative, surveilled, off-limits spaces.

As transformative praxis, autoethnography crosses borders and accomplishes multiple life-affirming goals at once. In its fusion of scholarship, creativity, and social justice, autoethnography qualifies as *interventionist* work (Denzin, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2020) that seeks to give voice to otherwise silenced selves and Others; as *compassionate research* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; hooks, 2003) that “involves working with lay people” and recognizes the researcher's story as “secondary to the story of participants” (p. 183); and as *creative scholarship* (Pelias, 2019) carried out by artists who

call upon their literary skills to evoke the emotional and intellectual complexity of their subjects; who deploy their vulnerable, relational, and reflexive selves to expose and change problematic cultural practices; and who engage their embodied ideological and ethical sensibilities as researchers and cultural members to guide their scholarship. (p. 1)

To carry out this work, I lean on the wisdom of scholars such as Du Bois (1903/1994), Laymon (2018), Johnson and Johnson (2020), Asim (2019), Jones and Woglom (2016), Boylorn (2013; 2016a; 2016b; 2017), Coates (2015), Woodson (1933/2015), Walker (1973), and Morrison (1987) who have employed affective, artful methods to harness the power of personal

writing as a way to communicate the ways their bodies have understood and mis/understood. Exploring these questions artful methods through becoming-with Kentrelle is the work my soul must have. This inward←→outward reflection and transformation is the goal of this writing+relating project.

Making the Problem Personal: My [Mis]Understanding of Literacy

The first several iterations of this study aimed to connect my relationship with Kentrelle to a serial list of large, systemically racist cycles that plague education and incarceration in the United States, like those I summarized above and detail in Appendix D.⁵⁰ I grounded my argument in history, starting with the trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans and moving through the *13th Amendment*, Jim Crow Segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, then tied it all into Michelle Alexander’s *New Jim Crow* to discuss mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline.⁵¹ And while it should never be overlooked nor could it be overemphasized that each of these chapters of racial terror haunts our historical present and that these statistics reflect actual lives, I have also come to realize—through writing and critical reflection—that my work as a literacy educator, an advocate, friend, scholar, and learner is not to harangue historical events, nor is it to tirelessly research and report dubious statistics that might inadvertently paint Kentrelle and me into binaries that “drag him out to talk about myself.” Indeed, my job is not to be the cultivator, holder, and deliverer of “literacy” at all. But this was precisely the picture I had in mind when I thought *I* was the teacher and Ken was the student.

In a jail where literacy—as I understood it—wasn’t welcomed, all I could see was the injustice of imprisoning a teenager and leaving him without access to literacy education—or,

⁵⁰ See Appendix D for detailed statistics and a literature review of issues related to the Prison-Industrial Complex.

⁵¹ See Appendix C for a full historical and geopolitical contextualization of this study.

more bluntly, dooming him to *illiteracy*. Consequently, I made it my personal mission to *bring* Kentrelle literacy instruction, to give him a voice so that he could shout back at the world poised to silence him. But this deficit perspective of literacy (and of Kentrelle, in a way)—which I call “literacy A”—echoes historical linguistic violence⁵² whereby hegemonic labels of “literate” or “illiterate,” “competent” or “incompetent” have been weaponized to sort and marginalize entire communities.⁵³ Literacy A echoes the crusade mentality of white supremacists throughout history who set out to save, domesticate, and educate “savages” upon whose backs they would violently build their personal wealth. And while I probably never would have labeled myself this way, I couldn’t quite grasp why Kentrelle didn’t jump at the opportunities I was hustling so hard to bring him. This was the mood of my reflective journal entries when I tried to push literacy A on Kentrelle:

May 22, 2019, Personal Journal Entry

You’ve got me worried today, Ken. The sound of your voice is different. You seem more distant, distracted even. What’s going on?

I read you the quote from Baldwin, but it was like it meant nothing. I asked if you could write about quotes I send you and tell me how you feel/what you think they mean, but you said, “Nope.” Then you said you were just kidding. But were you?

What will we do?

On the bright side, I was glad you remembered the names of the books I sent you on that other postcard. That’s awesome. Hopefully the librarian can find you one.

-Mrs. Kidd

When he didn’t seem eager or receptive to my genre of literacy instruction, I was confused and disappointed. However, when I slowed down and began to critically analyze my conversations

⁵² Discrimination qua isolable “literacy” has historically served to separate and exclude. Dolmage (2017) reminds us, “In the South, literacy tests to determine who could vote were almost comedically difficult...” and were intentionally “designed to disenfranchise African Americans” (p. 101). And though we don’t have actual literacy tests for voting rights anymore, Dolmage goes on to argue that in a more modern context, (il)literacy is “now directly affiliated with immigrants, with young mothers, with inmates, with indigenous peoples, with the jobless, with those on welfare.” Through this biased deficit perspective, an assumed lack of access to literacy—in its most narrowly defined sense—still operates as a sorting and labeling mechanism.

⁵³ (See Du Bois, 1903/1994; Kirkland, 2013; Woodson, 1933/2015; Zembylas, 2017)

and correspondences with Kentrelle, I saw—again, as through the looking glass—that things with/in me weren't as they should be. In fact, I had it backwards. As I got into the literature and reflected on my own literacy autobiography, I began to suspect that my body-mind had always-already been conditioned to have it backwards—to read myself as a literate painter, foregrounded against Black and brown students as illiterate or blank canvases. When I thought about how much *I* had learned *from* Kentrelle, it was clear that he is anything but voiceless, illiterate, or empty. My entire epistemology shifted as I realized, once again, that Kentrelle and I were *both* acquiring and sharing new literacies; that we are *both* painters *and* canvases. But this required/s a critical shift in how I understand *literacies*.

Pursuing Change: Bodies as the Canvas of Literacies

Today, I understand the body as the canvas upon/through which literacies are relationally performed. Thus, in this work, critical literacies are “embodied performance[s] that [are] always and already occurring”⁵⁴ as Kentrelle and I move through the world—using the “lingo,” inventing, writing, singing, working out, sharing, visiting, resisting, etc.—in ways that “bel[ie], subvert, and expose social norms and power imbalances.”⁵⁵

Jones⁵⁶ theorized embodied literacies in two ways: 1. how we engage literacies to make sense *of* bodies, and 2. how embodied literacies are performed and experienced *as* bodies. She asked,

How is it that we encounter bodies and believe we already know something about them?

What literacies provide us with such confidence and simultaneously such limited and partial perceptions of bodies in moment-to-moment interactions...And *what if we take*

⁵⁴ (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012, p. 36)

⁵⁵ (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012, pp. 35-36)

⁵⁶ (2013)

hold of those literacies that thrust us into a space of already-knowing and cultivate different literacies of tuning into our sense-making, restraining it, denying it, recognizing its partiality and contradictions?⁵⁷

So, with these questions and my initial framing of literacy in mind, I wondered, *how is it that these crusade literacies had permeated my body-mind?* And I puzzled, *how could/can a shift have occurred in spite of my trained intuitions?* The literature suggests several insights that I think with as I write through these questions. First, bodies acquire literacies through the social, political, and geographical echoes of the historical present.⁵⁸ Second, literacies are written *into* and *onto* bodies through stereotypes, tropes, and media productions, especially as they concern relationships between white women/Black boys.⁵⁹ Third, literacies are acquired through hegemonic cycles of discipline and punishment.⁶⁰ And, finally, literacies are absorbed and carried out through traditional schooling practices that never had the souls of Black boys in mind from the start.⁶¹

Furthermore, as I've taught and learned with Black students, reflected on my own educational experiences, and grown closer to Kentrelle, it has become clear to me that Black bodies in America are often poised to perform literacies foreign to my white, female body. This is extremely important to remember as I consider the ways Kentrelle and I read and are read by

⁵⁷ (p. 526, emphasis mine)

⁵⁸ See (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Du Bois, 1903/1994; Jones & Woglom, 2015; Kendi, 2016, 2019; Laymon, 2018; Ohito, 2017; Rankine, 2014; Reynolds & Kendi, 2020; Spillers, 1987; Stevenson, 2014; Thiel, 2014; Weheliye, 2014; Woodsen, 1933/2015)

⁵⁹ See (Adichie, 2009; Christensen, 2000b; Cole, 2012; Hackman, 2018; Kunjufu, 2018; Moore, Michael, & Penick-Parks, 2018; Spillers, 1987)

⁶⁰ See (Alexander, 2012; Crain, 2017; Dailey, 2020; A. Davis, 2003; F. Davis, 2014; Dolmage, 2017; Erevelles, 2014; Foucault, 1977; Morris, 2016; Simmons, 2015; Sousanis, 2015)

⁶¹ See (Baker-Bell, 2018; Baldwin, 1963; Castro Atwater, 2008; Coates, 2014; Dailey, 2020; F. Davis, 2014; Douglas et al., 2008; L. L. Johnson, 2018; Kenyatta, 2012; Kirkland, 2013; Love, 2019; Salazar, 2013; Woodsen, 1933/2015)

the world. As I consider Ken’s body—male, Black, incarcerated in the Deep South—I think with scholars and activists who describe the policing and brutalization of Black bodies in America. Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote, “In America, the injury is not being born with darker skin, with fuller lips, with a broader nose, but in everything that happens after,”⁶² because what happens after is the gradual destruction of the Black body. “Racism,” wrote Coates, “is a visceral experience that...dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.”⁶³ Keenly aware of this dehumanization/disembodiment that allows Black bodies to be “erased by the guns...raped, beaten, jailed,” Coates warned his son that as a young Black man, he controls nothing, not even the fate of his own body. He cited the murder of 12-year-old Tamir Rice as evidence that “the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body.”⁶⁴ And though my understanding of these realities is always only approximate, closeness to Kentrelle’s incarcerated body-mind makes the threat of mortality qua melanin more palpable:

April 24, 2019a: Personal Journal Entry

Ken,

I’m listening to a book by Kiese Laymon called *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, and just like most everything I read these days, it feels like it’s written about you, or at least it makes more sense to me when I think about it with you...it makes the words feel closer to home.

Here’s how I feel your present-absence tonight:

You were 16 when they took your body, and by that age you had already outlived Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Tamir Rice, Jordan Edwards, Andy Lopez, Emmett Till, and so many others. But is it accurate to say that you’ve *outlived* them? Are you *alive* in there, Ken?

What does that even mean—to *be alive*? Is it different for you than for me?

You are 18 now. This means you’ve outlived Travon Martin, outlived Michael Brown, outlived so many others.

You’ll turn 19 this year.

My audiobook just said, “Nineteen-year-old Black boys can’t be perfect in America.”⁶⁵

So what do we do with that?

⁶² (Coates, 2015, p. 120)

⁶³ (Coates, 2015, p. 10)

⁶⁴ (Coates, 2015, p. 62, p. 9)

⁶⁵ (Laymon, 2013, p. 131)

Ken, you were born on parole.⁶⁶ Did you know this? I was born and have lived free. But there's a difference in *thriving* and *surviving*. The more we share our stories, the more obvious this becomes.

-Mrs. Kidd

To be sure, this framing is not to cast the Black body as an object of pity or contempt in my white mind, but to demonstrate the importance of understanding literacies as embodied. Put another way, because, as Coates wrote, “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage,”⁶⁷ to ignore this reality would be negligent in the theorizing of bodies as the canvas of literacies. Rather, I add this wisdom to the literacies in/of my white body to produce a richer conceptualization of literacies altogether. Citing Kirkland,⁶⁸ Lamar Johnson wrote, “Black literacies move beyond the traditional understanding of texts...and may include tattoos, poems, novellas, graphic novels, technology/social media sites, oral histories/storytelling, body movements/dance, music, and prose.”⁶⁹ Kirkland described literacies “as an artifact of humanity,” and “as record of mind, heart, and soul interacting with and within society.”⁷⁰

Meanwhile...

⁶⁶ (Laymon, 2013)

⁶⁷ (Coates, 2015, p. 103)

⁶⁸ (2013)

⁶⁹ (Johnson, 2018, p. 109)

⁷⁰ (Kirkland, 2013, p. 8)

February 27, 2020: Blackout Poem from Interview with (head) Southern County Sheriff

Figure 3

Blackout Poem from Interview with Sheriff

What is [redacted] justice?
Is there any possible [redacted] ?
[redacted] can [redacted] Alabama [redacted]
[redacted] bind some [redacted]
students before [redacted] obtaining a [redacted] education
[redacted] ?
We do [redacted] .

One of the more successful ones [redacted] started to try to get [redacted] better [redacted]
[redacted] he [redacted] tried [redacted] but [redacted] ran into [redacted] issues through [redacted]
[redacted] everything [redacted] necessary to graduate: [redacted]
the whole thing [redacted] is [redacted] cumbersome. [redacted]
[redacted]

What [redacted] education do [redacted] inmates [redacted] arrested during their high
school years [redacted] access [redacted] ? [redacted]
[redacted]
it's minimal [redacted]
[redacted]
because of what can be done with [redacted] books [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted]

We have to limit; [redacted] certain things they can [redacted] and can't have. [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] a number of [redacted]
[redacted] inmates [redacted] receive literature from [redacted] outside the
jail [redacted]
We don't let them get them: [redacted]
[redacted]
[redacted] you gotta be careful about how you give them access so that you
don't create a bigger problem [redacted]

Affect

Further, to locate and analyze how Kentrelle and I have carried out interactions “with and within society,” or how we perform the literacies in and of our bodies—I have written through times when our *shared* humanity was most *felt*. When I first started visiting Kentrelle and when I

wrote through our relationship, I often *felt* something that somehow exceeded words. For example, on a fall Thursday morning, I sat in the SCJ parking lot and composed the following reflective journal entry:

September 22, 2019, 9:51 AM: Reflective Memo, from SCJ Parking Lot, Post-Visitation

We cried today.

Your nose got red, my voice trembled.

You begged me, “Please don’t cry, Mrs. Kidd. Please.”

Oh no.

Then we looked at each other, through multiple layers of glass, dull pixels, silver phone cords.

And we cried.

I miss you.

I miss you so much, I said.

“I miss you, too. Bad.”

I’m so proud of you, Ken. I’m so proud of you for staying strong and holding onto Hope.

It’s not over. You can do this.

“You right. [nod, nod]. You right.”

I love you so very much, Ken.

“I love you, too, Mrs. Kidd. I love you, too.”

My chest is heavy. I feel like I can’t breathe. I don’t want to pull out of this parking lot. Don’t want to go pick up my prescription. Don’t want to go drink my pre-workout or work out at all. Don’t want to smile and be cheerful and bubbly. Don’t want to be *free* today.

How can I be free when you are so...not?

My body doesn’t know words violent enough to process this evil.⁷¹

Why the actual fuck do we put humans—beautiful, breathing, hopeful, bright-eyed human beings—in cages?

Your body is locked inside an actual brick, concrete, metal, barbed-wire, guarded C A G E, Ken. You are in a cage.

You are in a cage.

You are in a cage.

Who ever thought this was OKAY????????????!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I still can’t breathe.

⁷¹ I’ve verbalized *maybe* 10 “curse words” in my life because cursing was never part of my or my family’s vernacular. Yet writing into moments that are unnatural to my body-mind often required words that were just as unnatural for me because my native words just weren’t powerful enough to convey these new emotions and encounters.

Something happened today. I don't know what it was, but when you lifted your bare hands—walnut-on-top, sienna-on-palms—parallel in front of the camera, about 6-7 inches apart to approximate the size of the window in the lockup cell, I felt your humanity. I felt my humanity. I looked at your hands, looked at my hands, looked back at your hands, asked you to show me again. Your flesh, your fingers, your nails, your arms. They're trapped. Your real actual body is trapped. How can you survive? How can you smile? How can you hope?

You told me, "My mind ain't right. I'm used to doing time. I did 18 months in 2012. But I can't do anything in here. That's why I call you every day. And when you don't answer—[when I'm with my 3-year-old daughter, feeding my 7-month-old son, trying to be present with my husband and children, doing schoolwork, driving down the road, exercising, sleeping, shopping, or or or or or or or or]—I be like, man, lock-up callin' me again."

"Sometimes it feel like I threw my life away. Sometimes I be losing hope in here. It's all a waiting process. I ain't like everybody else. I got a life out there," you said. *Is it death in there?* I wonder.

When I prayed today, with 5 minutes left, you automatically lifted your hand to the camera. I placed mine there, too. I didn't pray things I thought you wanted to hear. I prayed and begged. I prayed with Hope. And somehow I felt our hands touch, even through all the layers of separation. And that was when I cried.

We cried today.
Your nose got red. You fought to hold it in. I fought, too.
But then we cried.
Today, we cried.

...

When I first wrote through encounters like this one, I didn't have the words to describe the things my body knew. Now, however, as I reflect on the data and put these encounters into conversation with the literature I've read throughout my program, I understand that ineffable "something" I was experiencing through a phenomenon known as *affect*.

Nothing about our visitation that morning was out-of-the-ordinary. I had visited Ken plenty of times before. However, Stewart described *affect* as "...the varied, surging capacities"

that give “the ordinary the charge of an unfolding.”⁷² Behind the back of my consciousness, *affect* surged through those ordinary, uncanny moments of visitation. *Affect* shifted something in my body without asking permission from my mind. Kentrelle’s hands did not ask permission or give me warning, but when he lifted them, something in my body-mind lurched.

Rankine wrote, “Certain moments send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs,”⁷³ and these moments, according to Stewart, “will shift people’s life trajectories in some small way.”⁷⁴ When I slow down and interrogate *why* Ken’s hands on the screen undid my emotional armor and *how* his actual entrapment suddenly became more real, I can call into question the otherwise taken-for-granted—like walking outside the SCJ doors and breathing fresh air, like the expectation that my privileged, middle-class, white, female body will likely never—was always-already unlikely to ever—be on the other side of that screen—and change my next steps in material ways, just like Kentrelle’s hands did that day.⁷⁵ When this happens, my perceptions—what I thought I knew, what was once ordinary—shift, and so can my “perceived capacity to act”⁷⁶ on what my body [thought it] knew.

As I write, like I did in my car that day, and as I am doing now, I follow the affective swells of my spirit to investigate and redirect embodied literacies. When I recognize how literacies in and of my body have conditioned me to read the world in particular ways, then, where necessary, I can redirect my trajectory toward becoming different, beyond, more than before.

⁷² (Stewart, 2007, p. 2, p. 19)

⁷³ (Rankine, 2014, p. 41)

⁷⁴ (Stewart, 2007, p. 12)

⁷⁵ (Stewart, 2007)

⁷⁶ (Boulton-Funke, 2014, p. 7)

In summary, *closeness* to Ken has taught me that literacies--much fuller, livelier, and more potent than I had realized--can be felt and studied through *affect*. As I write through the affective residues of our shared moments and of my everyday encounters, I move toward Kentrelle and invite him to move toward me; this is how we compose closeness; this is how we creatively resist.

Meanwhile...

Last September I wrote to Kentrelle specifically about literacies:

September 8, 2020: Postcard to Kentrelle

Hey, Ken!

So I'm sitting here working on our paper, and it just occurred to me that even though we talk about "literacy" a lot, I don't think I've ever actually asked you to nail down a definition of it or to write about it, and I obviously want to know how YOU think about this concept since it's pretty important to our story. So here are some questions to maybe think with and write to me about when you get a minute. I know you'll have super insightful stuff to say. You always do that: I'll spend 5ever and a zillion words trying to explain something, then you'll just pop off the most practical, genius way to understand that same thing. You schmell me? Haha. I love you very much, and I'm eager to hear from you.

1. What is **LITERACY**?
2. What does it mean to be **LITERATE**?
3. What are some ways you are **LITERATE**?

Here's what I mean: If you think about you and me, for example, we both know that I have a lot more access to "literacy" materials out here in the free world. We both know that I read a ton of books and write a lot of papers and stuff. Like, I've been in college for about 100 years now. BUT...does this necessarily mean that I'm "more literate" than you? Does it mean I have more literacies than you do, that I know and can do more things than you?

Even though I'm out here studying in the traditional "literacy" field, what are some things you know/do/understand/perform/feel/say/witness that I probably wouldn't have the slightest clue about? In other words, what are some specific examples of literacies you perform in there/in general? What are some of the things your body-mind knows? The way I started thinking about this was with the recipes you sent me for duwops and super-duper duwops, the t-shirt do-rags you make, the fishing line thing from cell-to-cell, water bags for working out, etc.

Finally, *Are there certain literacies that Black males perform that white females generally don't or vice-versa? What can white teachers like me, Mrs. Mollis, Mr. Bartlow, Coach Z., etc., etc. do to understand your unique literacies better and respect them more in the classroom and the streets?

That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to help white folks do better. I'm trying to help us love, respect, and understand *more* and *better*. I'm starting with me.
-Mrs. Kidd

And, as I predicted it would be, Ken's response was insightful and lovely. He wrote,

September 14, 2020: Letter from Kentrelle.

Literacy

Several ways I show literacy are cooking a pack of noodles from scorching hot shower water and making burritos with items I buy off commissary. Having to shower in black mold everyday without catching a sickness is a literacy. Does it mean I'm literate that

I've learned to stretch \$80 a week on commissary and canteen? Reading books and writing are some ways of being literate. But am I illiterate if I don't like reading books when I have access to do so? There's this other word or "slang" I say and everyone around me started saying: "Out the gate," meaning what the other person is saying is true. Sometimes I just say it to be funny. Is having the lingo like that "literacy"? These are some of my ways of showing literacy. I am literate!

In his letter, Kentrelle described literacies he has learned since going to jail, and he questioned some of the ways literacy has traditionally been described, like as strictly reading and writing. Later he would recognize and teach me even more literacies he already embodied and others he was experimenting with as means of survival. None of these literacies, however, were accessible to me until I got close. In the following chapter, I develop the key concept for getting close and for thinking through these literacies: proximity.

CHAPTER 3: PROXIMITY: THE POTENTIAL AND THE PARADOX

Sometime in April 2019, I remember driving down the road, almost home, as I listened to Bryan Stevenson’s audiobook, *Just Mercy*. I was halfway paying attention when I heard the words: “Proximity to the condemned and incarcerated made both our humanity more urgent.”⁷⁷ I scrambled for my phone, paused the audiobook, pulled my car over, and rewound the clip to hear that statement again. And again. And again.

Proximity to the condemned and incarcerated made both our humanity more urgent... ◀

Proximity to the condemned and incarcerated... ◀

Proximity... ||

That spring day, as I heard Stevenson share his lived experience, I finally found the concept I had needed on August 17, 2013 when I realized I was white and the direction I had needed on July 18, 2017 when I read about Ken’s arrest: *Proximity*.

Stevenson went on to share the wisdom passed down from his grandmother: “You can’t understand the most important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.”⁷⁸ Through her wise counsel, I understood *why* it had taken me until I was *in* a “regular” classroom to see the realities of tracking and sorting on the educational opportunities of Black, brown, and differently-abled students. It happened when I *got close*. Likewise, I realized that *getting close* to Kentrelle since his arrest had hewn flesh and a heartbeat to the theories and texts from my doctoral courses. I realized that having some of the actual grime and filth of Southern County

Jail on *my own* hands as I exhumed the phone and sat on the metal, bolted-down stool during visitations had made the difference in my [limited] understanding of the jail’s conditions

⁷⁷ (Stevenson, 2014, p. 12)

⁷⁸ (Stevenson, 2014, p. 14)

and in my fury over Kentrelle's body being contained there. *Proximity* to Ken was making his experiences/circumstances come alive in my mind, and *proximity* was recalling all the events and encounters throughout my own life that had contributed to *and* kept me hidden/immune from the structures that held Ken's body-mind in that place. In my car that day, I began to understand how both the problems and potentiality surrounding my brush-drop experiences could be summed up in Stevenson's grandmother's call to *get close*, in Stevenson's concept of *proximity*.

When I got home that day, I started journaling through this concept. I wanted to tell everybody. But first, I wanted to tell Ken about it. Ironically, *proximity* also prevented that, so I wrote instead:

April 30, 2019, Personal Journal Entry/Postcard: "They Know"

....I can't get this idea of *proximity* out of my head.

I'm thinking, though I've read very little theory about it yet, that *proximity* is like closeness. And they know that, Ken. The guards, the bars, the barbed wire, the bricks, the screen where your face pops up, the ticking clock during our visits and calls, the State, the nation, the system, the Man: they all know that *proximity* matters. They know that to take you, your body, your energy and warmth and liveliness away from us out *here* and contain it, hide it in *there*, it makes a difference. They know *proximity*, Ken. They know it, and they fear it.

Proximity and all the questions it forced me to confront wouldn't leave me alone. *Proximity*—whatever it was—wouldn't let me sleep. I got back up and started writing again:

Personal Journal Entry, May 1, 2019, 1:21 AM: "The There←→Here Space"

Ken,

It's 1:00 AM, and I can't stop thinking about you, and I'm mostly thinking about how to think about you.

This letter and these journalings do not tell a love story. It's not like that, and I want to make that clear, especially as I recall times my affection/compassion toward others has been/could have been twisted and misread.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ [transplanted here from main text for length and focus but still originally sent to Kentrelle] I'll never forget the time my parents told me the dangers of staying after school to teach Tyreke to read. I cried and was so furious that they would even suggest that anyone could ever see my work with Tyreke as inappropriate. But, deep down, I knew they were right. And you already know about what happened next: that following summer, Tyreke got my cell number and texted that he saw me as a girlfriend.

Rather, this is a story of Love—Love that is somehow so intricately entangled with proximity—

with closeness and distance, space and separation. Far. Near. There. Here.

The there-here space.

No. The *there*←→*here* continuum.

I like the thought of that. And also I hate it.

Is that where I am when I'm writing to you?

And *why* am I writing to you if you might never be able to read it?

Am I even writing *to you*, or is this all actually *about me* and really *to me*?

Proximity is productive. They know this.

Proximity is productive. But what does it produce?

Proximity is what got you where you are today: Proximity to the crime. Proximity to the victims. Proximity to trauma, violence, poverty. Proximity to the wrong people at the wrong time. But might this same proximity somehow get you free?

And how has proximity produced who and where and how *I* am today?

I wonder what proximity means to you? Like proximity in the raw before I say any more about how I'm thinking with it. This will be your next/first postcard inquiry: This proximity idea...talk to me about it.

I had no idea my attention was leading Ty to think we could be anything more than teacher and student or that my affection for him came from a romantic place.

It broke my heart to acknowledge the reality of my parents' cautions.

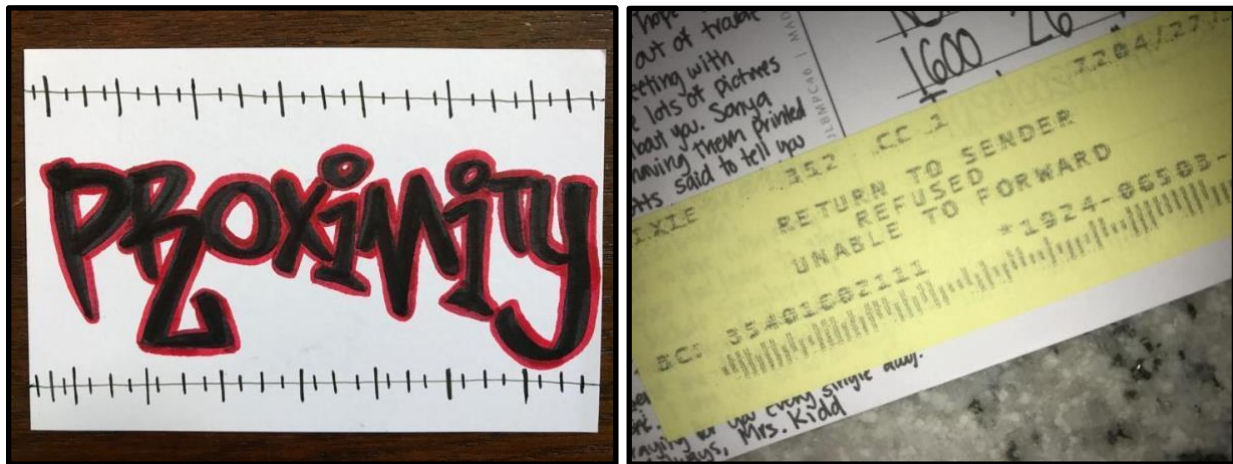
And I don't ever want this to happen with you, Ken. I'm your friend, your former-teacher, your ally, and part of your support system.

You are special to me, and I love our friendship. But I hope I've always been clear for all of our sake that my *Love* for you is a familial type love. My care for and compassion toward you are platonic and always will be.

I appreciate so much that you have always respected and reciprocated this.

Figure 4

First of many returned postcards



Note: Even after discussing mail restrictions with an SCJ representative, I would send several iterations of this postcard and have them returned before Kentrelle actually received a copy.

Kentrelle and I began to grapple with [and against] *proximity* over the next couple months. We would come to understand proximity as both a weapon of erasure *and* as a counter weapon we could use for resistance, as the following data illustrate.

May 7, 2019: Selections from Transcribed Phone Conversation with Kentrelle

- K:** I been thinkin' about that word you wrote.
- B:** Yeah?
- K:** I been thinkin' about that *proximity* word. I read it—
- B:** Okay, so tell me about it.
- K:** —like, I'm lost, but I'm not lost at the same time.
I was like, I don't know, like, it say, it say *nearness and place. Occurrence and relation and closeness.*
And you ask me how I feel about that, but I don't know what you mean by that.
- B:** Okay, so let me tell you how I'm thinking about it.
You know that book I've told you about by Bryan Stevenson?
- K:** Yeah
- B:** Alright, so it's his word—he didn't come up with the word, but he uses that term to talk about his work.
And he says, he talks about how the wisdom of Black grandmothers is something that's

really important in Black culture.

He says that his grandmother told him, “Bryan, you can’t learn anything until you get close to it. You gotta get in there, son. Get close.”

So, he says that when he became a lawyer and was working with inmates on death row, he said, *proximity* to those inmates made *them* seem more human *and me* seem more human.

So the closer he got to them when he would actually go for visitations and be face-to-face with them, the more real it seemed that they were actual humans and they were really going to die if he didn’t do something about it.

And so basically he’s just saying that *by getting close to people, they seem more real*.

K: Okay. Okay. I most definitely understand that. That’s what’s goin’ on.

However, while *increased* proximity—which Kentrelle and I accomplish as we write ourselves toward one another’s worlds—works *for us* as a method of resisting the system, *decreased* proximity—that is, exorbitantly priced and constantly surveilled phone calls, limited and surveilled written correspondences, restricted and digitally mediated visits—works *against us* as a weapon of separation, invisibility, and erasure. We discussed this flipside as our phone conversation continued:

B: Right? And, but, *also* for me the inverse seems to be true—that if you keep people *away* or at a distance for long enough, they seem less real.

So, like, you know the first time I came to see you, I was so mad because I didn’t know it was going to be on a screen. I thought I was going to get to see *you*—like your actual person through the glass. And that made me furious because it was like they just casually added another level of separation, and there was nothing I could do about it.

If you had been closer, if we would have been face-to-face, our *proximity* would have been closer. And it would have felt more real, you know? If that makes sense.

K: Yes ma’am.

B: And so I almost feel like by them putting you there in that cage, basically, and separating you from the rest of what you’ve been taught is the “free world,” they increase this distance, and it’s kind of like it makes you and everybody else there kind of...disappear.

It’s like that ‘out-of-sight, out-of-mind’ thing that people say.

But, see, that’s a problem for me. Because when I go see you, or when I talk to you or when I see pictures of you, it makes me—it reminds me over and over again that you’re a real human. Like...a real, alive, breathing, thinking, existing, feeling, desiring human. And you’re trapped. Your actual body is trapped.

But, Ken, regardless of what you’ve *allegedly* done. You’re still a human, a *full* human,

and you still deserve to be treated like a human.

And so I feel like people—like the system *uses* proximity. They know what it does, so they're afraid of it.

They're afraid to let the “free-world” get close to inmates. They're afraid to let inmates get close to those they love because they're afraid that people on the outside will realize what's going on on the inside.

K: True.

B: And I don't know. I might be wrong about that because *you*'re the only expert of your experiences. I don't know what it's like at all to be in your position. I just...I'm just telling you, Ken, every time I come see you, the more and more I realize people *need* to be close to others in your position so that they understand you're still there;
you're still *breathin'* 24/7;
you're still *alive*, and that matters.

K: True, true—

K: —Ion get too close to people though. The only people I'm really close to, for real, is you, my mama, my brother Shon, and my dad for real. And my sister. And my little girl, but she can't come up here and see me. She's not eighteen. But that's like the only five, six people I'm really close to for real. I can't get too close to everybody for real.

K: So in that case right there, I mean me and you close. You know what I'm sayin'?

B: Yeah.

K: But with anybody else, I don't know, I can't, I can't...[*trails off*]

B: Do you think that *physical* closeness matters, too? Like I think about how long it's been since you've been able to hug your mama.

K: True.

B: I don't know if y'all are huggy people in the first place, but you haven't physically been able to touch anybody you really care about or you love in a long time. And I assume that might do something to you—that might affect you in some way? What about your best friend, Mae?

K: Nah, I mean, I'm a touchy person, but it's just like ion, ion know. But, yes ma'am. Mae do come to visit me.

B: Do you think it would make a difference if you were sitting at a table right in front of Mae compared to sitting there looking at the computer screen?

K: Yes ma'am, well, *YEAH!* [*Kentrelle chuckles*]

B: Yeah? How so?

- K:** I mean because I hadn't seen Mae for like 2, 3 years before I came to jail. So me seeing her like face-to-face besides in the courtroom—that would mean I could, I could hug her again.
I could hug her, you feel me? And I could display my feelings.
Just like, if my mom was up here and we ain't behind the screen, I could just show my feelings to my mom and I could hug her or whatever.
Ion know, Ion know—
- B:** Right. I understand what you're saying.
- K:** But I was thinkin' about that word all night last night. I was like, what do you mean by that? *But I understand now.*

May 7, 2019, Reflective Journal Entry/Postcard to Ken: "Prox-uh-mitty"

Ken,

We *finally* got to talk today. It was almost impossible to hear you.

Also FINALLY: you told me you got my postcard.

The one you got was the "Proximity" one. You said it like "Prox-uh-mitty," and I was secretly chuckling—not *at* you—or maybe it was. You most definitely would have laughed at me, too.

You said you had been thinking about that word all night, but you didn't really know what I meant by it. So we talked all about it. About physical touch, about distance, about visitations, about how *they know* what proximity does.

We talked about out-of-sight, out-of-mind.

Well, really *I* talked, you responded: "True. True."

You always say that.

You said you're still gonna write me a letter about what prox-uh-mitty means to you.

Good. I love your writing.

-Mrs. Kidd

And when Kentrelle says he's going to write, he always does. Over a week later, I received his letter:

May 8, 2019, Letter from Kentrelle

Proximity-nearness in place, time, order, occurrence, or relation, closeness

What I think about this word is you and my family. The reason being is because you're there for me when I need you the most in a situation like this to keep me motivated and positive. I feel like our bond has got closer since I've been in here.

Without any literature review or formal research, Kentrelle was able to describe the uncanny nearness proximity produces simply by reflecting on his embodied experiences. With Ken's insights and my own curiosities, I set out to add a literature base to this concept.

Consequently, I found that Stevenson wasn't the first or only scholar to think in terms of distance/closeness.⁸⁰ Long before Stevenson, W.E.B. Du Bois,⁸¹ through his early conceptualization of the Color-Line's literal separation of southern towns and lifestyles by race, clearly made a claim for proximity and relationality as he wrote,

We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached conclusions in our own minds, we are loth to have them disturbed by facts. And yet how little we really know of these millions,—of their daily lives and longings, of their homely joys and sorrows, of their real shortcomings and the meaning of their crimes! All this we can only learn by intimate contact with the masses.

As Du Bois suggested, my relationship with Kentrelle affords me a sort of “intimate contact” with both mass incarceration and with a subgenre of southern Black culture—Kentrelle's community—into which I would otherwise unlikely gain entry, or about which it would otherwise be “so much easier to assume [I] know it all.” Through this intimate contact, which for us is facilitated mostly through writing, I have become more compassionate toward Kentrelle's daily longings, sorrows, joys, struggles, and the circumstances that led to his incarceration. Simultaneously, I am learning to invite Kentrelle to know me on a personal level, too.

Most notably, this intimate expansion of my Spirit necessitates a sharper gaze toward my own embodied literacies and enables a critical analysis of how these literacies manifest in educative spaces. I've pursued this critical analysis through autoethnographic writing. In other words, as I've journaled through and narrativized mine and Ken's extraordinary and mundane encounters, such as the first time I visited him or my presence at his grandmother's funeral, I've

⁸⁰ See Du Bois, 1903/1994; Woodsen, 1993/2015; Kirkland, 2013; Mason, 2018; L.L. Johnson, 2018; Boylorn, 2013; Walters, 2016, among others.

⁸¹ (1903/1994, p. 84)

been able to slow down and interrogate the affective surges and material-discursive⁸² forces at work in those moments. These interrogations, like Du Bois suggested, often disturb my assumptions about the Other with facts, as chapter 4 will illustrate.

In summary, instead of surrendering to the tactics of systemic separation qua decreased proximity, Kentrelle and I have found ways to become more proximal through sharing our lived experiences and interrogating the different and similar ways we each move through the world. *Writing*, especially personal journaling, has been the greatest catalyst for increased proximity between Kentrelle's spirit and mine. For both of us, though in different ways, the reaching-toward and reaching-with involved with proximity nourishes personal and relational growth, despite physical distance.

While the system seeks to separate and erase, increasing proximity through writing and composing reminds Kentrelle and me that we (teachers, students, *all* humans) are still *there*←→*here*, that someone hears and sees us, that our stories matter, that our shared humanity matters, and that we truly are “more than the worst thing we have ever done.”⁸³

Methods: Composing Closeness with Kentrelle

As Ken's friend, TJ, beautifully illustrated for us (see Figure 3), the relationship Kentrelle and I share is imaginable as a collaborative work of art, held up by an easel whose legs are *literacies*, *proximity*, and *writing*. Through autoethnographic writing, which I conceptualize as an inseparable methodological and ontological performance (ontomethodology), I subtly interweave

⁸² Barad (2003, 2007) writes that bodies are material-discursive phenomena. She argues that through critical, living inquiry, (a close look at ways of knowing in becoming), we cannot separate words and things. Rather, because materials of all sorts are indeed discursive and cause particular phenomena to unfold, I focus my analysis on ways bodies are read and composed/read and compose other bodies through causal material-discursive intra-actions, or what I conceptualize as literacies in/of the body.

⁸³ (Stevenson, 2014, pp. 17-18)

posthuman and new materialist threads into my correspondences with Kentrelle. In so doing, I reframe literacies as relational, embodied multiplicities that can be a.) felt through affective encounters, b.) interrogated through writing, and c.) expanded through composing our body-minds into closer proximity with one another's.

Figure 5

Family Now: Collaborative Composition of our Shared Work



Although educational and carceral systems have worked against Kentrelle to silence his voice and erase his body, his circumstances have actually given him even more to say and plenty of time to think and write. Over the past four years, I have grown immensely as a literacy

educator and as a human because Kentrelle has invited me into his world and because I've learned to let him into mine. As we tap into the unique literacies in/of our body-minds, we activate our stories in resistance toward these systems of silencing.

However, though we work hard to resist this silencing, we *don't always* beat every part of the system, at least not within our original time frame/method. Put plainly, I originally longed for this work to be a co-authored, collaborative autoethnographic work that might extend Kentrelle's spirit toward the "free world" in a material way by sharing *all* of his unabridged, unfiltered writing and *all* of our correspondences. However, after months of going back-and-forth, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university overruled both Kentrelle's and my requests to use his real name or other details they believe could reveal his identity or inadvertently incriminate him [(as if he hasn't already been labeled guilty until proven innocent)—the irony of distant others making decisions for him rather than validating his capacity to choose, *or* the reinforcement of erasure through these prohibitions, notwithstanding]. In this case, proximity as a weapon *of* separation has overcome proximity as a weapon *against* separation.

Nevertheless, within these restrictions, I have chosen to limit the following chapter (traditionally the data narrative) to several important lessons I've learned about proximity, about myself, and about literacy education as I've composed closeness with Kentrelle.

CHAPTER 4: COMPOSING CLOSENESS BETWEEN BARS

"As literacy educators and researchers, we know more than most that humans are story-driven beings, bodies always telling their stories and always being interpreted by others. We tell, seek, and encounter stories everywhere, all the time; stories give shape and meaning to the worlds we inhabit"⁸⁴

-Elizabeth Dutro

Stories We Thought We Knew

The first time I ever met Kentrelle, which was the first time he ever saw me standing outside my bright aqua classroom door at Valleybend Middle School, this is how it went:

KEN: [from across the crowded hall, stopping in traffic to ease my way]
"Hey, lady! Who is you?
You ain't supposed to work here. You supposed to be at a private school."

ME: [laughing, sizing up this *maybe 5'2"*, *maybe 100-pound* sixth-grader, already confident enough to be in the seventh-grade hall on the first day of school]

KEN: "I'm for real. Why you teachin' here?"

ME: "Why you think I'm supposed to be at a private school? You too gangster for me?"

KEN: "Yeah. Probably so."

As the epigraph suggested, on that first day of school, we were, indeed, bodies already telling stories [problematic as they were] and already being interpreted by one another. And all these years later—Ken now twenty, me almost thirty—we both laugh at just how little we actually knew about each other. On that first day of school, we had no idea just how entangled our stories would eventually become.

...

⁸⁴ (Dutro, 2017, p. 332)

Stories We've Learned

May 31, 2021: Letter to Ken⁸⁵

Ken,

I'm sitting here tonight, *struggling* to write our story, and wow: what an understatement.

If each day of our lives, since that day you hollered at me across the hallway, had been recorded onto a single page of a book, that book would be over 2,840 pages, and twice that many if no pages of our stories ever intersected.

If each day of our relationship, from the day your body was caged until today, got just one page of a book, that book would have over 1,400 pages.

And if we narrowed down our story even more to include *only* the journal entries I've written to you, the letters you've sent me, and just a *few* of the phone calls we've had, that book would hold over 350 correspondences. That's *a lot* of plot.

I remember reading somewhere that the world's longest novel has over a million words. And even if I spent the rest of my life compiling all our words and memories into a massive volume of literature, even if I out-wrote that million-word writer, the final product would still be tragically underwhelming in its ability to communicate the love and friendship we've built over the years. To be honest, I don't know if any book will ever be able to illustrate the ways my spirit has become "Kendred" with yours. The more proximal we become, the more I realize how truly possible it is to Love another human beyond what I ever thought my heart could hold.

On that note, I know we've talked a lot about how the world always-already considers us teachers suspect who talk about "loving" our students, especially when love is shared between a Black male body-mind like yours and a white female body-mind like mine, especially when those body-minds become kindred in the Deep South.⁸⁶ But if I've learned anything by growing closer to you over these four years, it's the meaning of *compassion* and *love* that one of my favorite teachers/theorists referred to when he wrote, "The mind motivated by *compassion* reached out to know as the heart reaches out to love. Here, *the act of knowing is an act of love*, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other, of allowing the other to enter and embrace our own."⁸⁷ So, to have gotten to *know* you, Ken, is to have *loved* you. And you also know that, for me, this sort of Love is rooted in the way I've felt God love me throughout my life, and that's never been easy to explain either--it's something that's mostly *felt*. Then again, like you've told

⁸⁵ Because too often in academia, [white] scholars use high theory and technical jargon to talk *about* Black boys instead of dialoguing *with* Black boys, in a double move to a.) honor Kentrelle, and b.) dialogue *with* him, I've decided to compose several major parts of this chapter largely as letters to Kentrelle himself. In so doing, like Stewart (2007), "I write not as a trusted guide carefully laying out the links between theoretical categories and the real world, but as a point of impact, curiosity, and encounter" (p. 5).

⁸⁶ Because she understood that pedagogies of love are not the norm in American schooling, hooks (2003) warned, "When we talk about loving our students...voices usually talk about exercising caution. They warn us about the dangers of getting 'too' close." She continued, "Emotional connections tend to be suspect in a world where the mind is valued above all else, where the idea that one should be and can be objective is paramount" (p. 127)

⁸⁷ (Palmer, 1993, p. 8)

me before, “Jail make you an inventor.” So maybe we’ve just been inventing a new type of friendship and love the world isn’t on yet.

Regardless, our collaboration isn’t about proving facts or measuring results anyway. It never has been. It’s about writing ourselves into closeness—writing ourselves free—even as our physical body-minds are 6 miles apart.

-Mrs. Kidd

...

I spend the rest of this dissertation combing through select entanglements that have most significantly affected the ways I move through the world—encounters that have challenged, changed, and expanded the *literacies* of my body. As I piece together the data and fill in the narrative gaps, I interweave analyses of the emotional, ethical, theoretical, philosophical, and moral grappings that have accompanied the closeness Kentrelle and I co-compose between bars.

Stories Between Bars: Composing the *t/here* Space

In preparation for this chapter, I spent months chronologically organizing and meticulously coding *years* of data into four gigantic binders. Every day as the rainbow tabs accumulated, I told myself that everything would eventually come together as a cohesive, rhythmic narrative of the past four(ish) years I’ve spent teaching and learning with Kentrelle. Reading through the “organized” data, however, made crystal-clear how entirely staccato my relationship with Ken + my becoming-scholar has actually been. Even read chronologically, the data are fragmented, just like the access Kentrelle and I have to one another, and the stories are broken up as if by bars.

Bars that lock Kentrelle’s body out of the free world also attempt to obstruct our views of one another. However, rather than yielding to separation that insists Kentrelle is hidden *behind* bars, Kentrelle and I have learned to exploit the liminal space *between* bars, *between* there and here. We have learned to compose with/in the excess of the gaps, toward a space where there is neither *here* nor *there*, a space we call the *t/here* space.

Between bars, in the *t/here* space, I have learned the most about myself and about Kentrelle. Between bars, in the *t/here* space, I have learned to lean into *proximity* as a conduit for learning and producing new literacies. Between bars, I've found that leveraging proximity involves *bearing witness*: an ethical, relational engagement that requires *presence* and *reciprocity*.

...

6 Miles⁸⁸

“When we **bear witness**, when we become the situation—homelessness, poverty, illness, violence, death—the right action arises by itself. We don't have to worry about what to do. We don't have to figure out solutions ahead of time...Once we **listen** with our entire body and mind, **loving action arises.**”
-Bernie Glassman⁸⁹

Proximity through Bearing Witness

My whole life I've considered myself a problem-solver. Layers and layers of privilege have allowed me to creatively and resourcefully navigate challenging circumstances, and the ones that stump me, I can usually pray and push through until something happens or I find an alternative plan. In middle school, high school, and college, it was socioeconomic privilege, supportive parents whose schedules provided flexibility, talented little sisters always ready to assist, and other resources necessary for creativity to blossom that helped me work through problems. As an adult, being a “hometown girl” has meant networking with families, churches, and local businesses to troubleshoot issues from needing extra classroom supplies to making off-the-wall events like black-light pep rallies and Mustang Museum field trips possible. Overall, my life of immense privilege did not prepare me to take *no* or *not yet* for an answer. Needless to say,

⁸⁸ According to Google maps, the driving distance between The University and the Southern County Jail is six minutes.

⁸⁹ (Glassman, 2013, n.p.)

witnessing Kentrelle’s incarceration and navigating the tremendous structural inequities that prop up his circumstances has brought challenges of an entirely new caliber. Angela Davis wrote,

On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them...Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives...Because it would be too agonizing to cope with the possibility that anyone, including ourselves, could become a prisoner, we tend to think of the prison as disconnected from our own lives...We thus think about imprisonment as a fate reserved for others, a fate reserved for the “evildoers,”...The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism...⁹⁰

And until I became close to someone whose actual body-mind is trapped with/in this ferocious Prison-Industrial Complex, I had no idea just how frustrating it would be or how helpless I would feel to be completely unable to change even the slightest details of Ken’s material circumstances. I remember one of the first times this reality set in. By accident, I found out that Ken—the youngest inmate at SCJ for over a year at that point—had lain on the filthy mattress in his cell for over six months without a bedsheet. I thought, *maybe it’s protocol for new individuals who might be on suicide watch or who might not have certain privileges for whatever reason*. But when I finally got in touch with an SCJ representative (an act of Congress itself), I found out he didn’t have a sheet simply because “Look, lady—they cycle through what we got here, and each inmate just gets what they get.” I remember being *furious* at how *simple* I imagined the solution to this problem could be. I offered to have local businesses, a private donor, or local churches send either new linens or funds for SCJ to purchase linens themselves. But, as I now know, *nothing* about the criminal in/justice system in America—especially in Alabama—is simple. It didn’t matter who my family are, what church I go to, who I know, or

⁹⁰ (Davis, 2003, p. 9)

what level of education I have—there was nothing I could physically do to change the way things are at SCJ. And I still regularly feel these frustrations when Ken’s basic needs aren’t met. When his attorney walks in after four years and asks, “How long you been in here now, kid?” laughing like Ken’s life is some kind of game; when Ken’s sick and says he just *knows* it’s Covid, and he’s scared because he has asthma, but he’s given ibuprofen, Tums, and told it’s acid reflux...until he finally gets to medical two weeks later and a Covid test proves he was right, out the gate: these are the times the frustrations resurface. I could go on and on. In a recent letter to Ken I put it this way: “It’s so frustrating to know there’s an upper hand and not be the one who has it.” And as I put that frustration on paper, I realize how deeply my body knows *privilege* and *yes*, how little it knows of *struggle* or *no*.

These literacies of repair, fix, push, change had brought me pause in the face of Dr. Davis’s white-Savior discourse and her warnings that my unchecked Christian proclivities would harm Ken if I pursued this work. Consequently, for almost all of 2019, I grappled with my motives and whether or not I treated Ken’s “body-mind as if [he] matter[ed] only in service to [my] own.”⁹¹ But in April of 2020, I discovered in *Brilliant Imperfection*⁹² a simple observation that at once undid me, inspired me, and made my former advisor’s trepidations stutter. Clare wrote,

“I’m slowly learning the importance of **bearing witness**—a quiet daily recognition, **so different from the desire to repair.**”⁹³

And that was it. Like the time I had finally found the word I needed for *proximity*, I finally had the term for what and how I would have to re-train my body-mind to do. With Clare, I would slowly come to accept that while I cannot always have the upper hand, cannot provide a bed

⁹¹ (Clare, 2017, p. 31)

⁹² Eli Clare, 2017, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*

⁹³ (Clare, 2017, p. 59)

sheet when Ken needs one, cannot even always put money on his books, what I *can* do—what my body knew somewhere deep down that I had been doing all along—is to *bear witness*.

I can bear witness to Kentrelle’s story; I can bear witness to his humanity and to our shared humanity. On his worst days, when Kentrelle laments, “Mrs. Kidd, sometimes it feel like I threw my life away. Sometimes I be losing hope in here,” I can co-spiritually bear this weight with him. Without frantically searching for immediate fixes, I can continually whisper to Ken,

“...you are not alone...[I] will be [t/]here as your companion—knowing you, living with you through the unfilled hope...I am your witness.”⁹⁴

...

In summary, critical reflection and writing with Kentrelle have taught me that proximity involves bearing witness, not exclusively to the *trauma* bodies carry, but also to the seemingly mundane, to the *meanwhiles* that add richness to the intersecting subplots of our lives.

...

Bearing Witness to Trauma

From the time I was twelve years old, the same age Ken was when I met him, I lived in a 7,500+ square-foot home 6 miles from where Kentrelle stayed.⁹⁵ But until Robbie and I drove several of my students home after their basketball game one night, I had no idea Kentrelle’s neighborhood existed. And there is no excuse for this, as the complex had been built more than twenty years before I was born, which means I obviously had classmates who lived there, too,

⁹⁴ (Laub, 1992, pp. 91-92)

⁹⁵ In one of our conversations, Kentrelle and I talked about the difference in our language when we talk about our childhood homes. I noticed that where I say I *lived* somewhere, Ken said he *stayed*. While I’ve always said, “I *stayed* at her house” or “I’ve *stayed* at that hotel before” to indicate a temporary visit, Kentrelle uses the word *stayed* to describe places he lived for extended periods. He explained that *stayed* was the most appropriate word for the places he thought of as home because his arrangements were seldom permanent.

for most of my life. Here, it is tempting to set up a Venn diagram or columns that paint the contrasts between Ken's childhood and mine. Binary thinking is a literacy that has been written into my body since I was old enough to know that/why I'd be picked last in kick pin or why certain kids were paired with certain other kids as "Reading Buddies." But against these inclinations, I have learned to hear Ken's writing about his past as a way to understand how *survival* literacies developed in his body, while *thrival* literacies were cultivated in mine, just six miles down the street. These survival and thrival literacies—which are not binary operatives but exceed categorization through relational engagements—also inform the ways Ken and I move through the world today, still six miles apart—from SCJ to The University. The survival literacies of Ken's body "make [him] an inventor," and the thrival strategies in my body compel me to repair my broken literacies as I move from colorblindness to consciousness through engagement with stories like the following.

Ken's 2020 "Life Journal"

I came from a project where it was dirt everywhere, kids playing, people fighting, parties, etc. Walk outside you'll smell the aroma of burning rubber, cigarette smoke, and alcohol. I've seen blood from people either fighting or getting shot. I'm really traumatized by all the things I've seen in my life.

I hopped off the porch at a very young age. Largely because I had no choice, on account of being the man of the household. Sometimes bills were hard to pay, so I went nights with no lights, hot water, or gas. Going to a friend's house to take a shower or cook something to eat was always the worst because I never knew what my friends might have thought of me during that time. I had to do something to benefit me. My mom was barely at home because of work. I had to eat somehow. That's when I fell victim to the street life. That's when I started spending my mind on the world and thinking about ways to make money. Living in a low-class environment, you either had to hustle, work, or rob people to survive or benefit yourself. Good for me, I wasn't a robber. But I *was* a hustler. And I could work to my benefit. I was stuck on making fast money and getting my own dues out of the process. I took it far. By doing that, it brought a lot of bad energy around. I mean, until you really don't feel or see because you're so used to doing bad yourself.

I've been in shoot outs that almost cost me my life and other people's lives too. I've seen a person get shot in the head with a stray bullet when I was younger, so I have a little trauma problem. I've never seen a psychiatrist, but these days I'm still having nightmares about what I seen that day. Most of my friends say I'm crazy because I didn't see a psych doctor. In the long run...it took a toll on me. And I can still see the scene of

the crime today. Blood everywhere in the house, gunfire in the air, bullet shells around the building, and bullet holes in the window. Everyone outside was trying to see what happened, who got shot and who shot the person that got shot. Me? Being so scared or traumatized by what I'd seen...I was speechless. Kind of out of my mind, trying to shake back to reality. Because everything happened so fast, it was like a dream. I was about nine or ten when it happened.

My mom almost lost her baby boy at a young age behind nothing...Really tryna take up for my neighborhood, thinking everything I was doing was cool, I had the mind state of *fuck school, look cool for your homeboys, and protect where I step at*. I look back now and ask myself *was it worth it?* I should've stayed in school and succeeded, left the streets alone, and left all the negative so-called "homeboys" alone.

More bad company leads to more trouble. It may be trouble you haven't gotten caught for, but it all catches up with you in the long run. It may be a situation you had no knowledge of, but now you're caught up in it, and now you have to prove that you have no knowledge of what happened, just because of how you used to live your life. Your surroundings is always something that's gonna pinpoint you. That comes around the streets and trying to live life too fast for yourself. That energy leads to bad situations. That's how I had my surroundings. The lifestyle I lived, I had to pray I didn't get killed or pray I made it home safely. Fast money is not the way of life. It come with too many sacrifices.

You may look into my eyes and say *that's an innocent young man*. But the reality is, I've been through so much, when I was so young. So in these brown innocent-looking eyes is pain inside that most of you wouldn't or couldn't understand. No matter how much I tell a person what I've seen or what I've been through, they still maybe won't understand, especially if they don't care or just pretend that they were listening.

Entering Ken's world through his stories has reinforced the importance of *bearing witness* rather than slip-sliding into the white-Savior narrative that media like *The Blind Side* and often well-meaning white liberals (like Elena Richardson in *Little Fires Everywhere*, for example) perpetuate.⁹⁶ Rather than giving into impulses of pity or shock when I hear stories very

⁹⁶ Discussing the historical positioning of white women and Black students, Hackman (2018) summed it up when she wrote, "To be sure, White women are less able to be used as the justification of violence toward Black men, but this strategy has been supplanted by an even more insidious 'White liberal' and stereotypically gendered desire on the part of White women to 'save People of Color' and especially Black boys/young men. Movies like *Dangerous Minds* and to a lesser extent *Freedom Writers*, as well as the profoundly classist and racist work of Ruby Payne, depict White women braving the scary ghettos to 'help those poor kids' and especially to raise Black boys/young men from the 'depths of hopelessness' and 'place them on a path to success'...These White women assume that Black boys/young men are not succeeding because they come from broken homes, they have no role models, their communities do not care about education, and they have no internal resilience. And because their gendered social positioning

different from my own, I can, instead, layer Ken’s lived experiences as a middle-schooler with my memories of Ken at that age to critically examine the ways I read and misread bodies in educative and extracurricular spaces, as the following journal entry illustrates:

April 15, 2020, Letter to Kentrelle: “Move”

Ken,

Do you remember riding the bus to that massive, junior-college style football field for the jamboree game your eighth-grade year? All you football players were in the back $\frac{2}{3}$ of the clankety yellow school bus, and my cheerleaders and I were in the front. So. Many. Hormones. So many janks.⁹⁷ So many sounds. For some reason I want to say we had to be silent on the way there so y’all could get your minds right, but my pictures tell me otherwise. Maybe those were the ones from *before* Coach Trewitt got on the bus. Or maybe they were the pictures from on the way home. I’m sure we won. We won every game that season.

I remember you were wearing a sleeveless Columbia-blue Dri-fit. You were as close to my cheerleaders as you could possibly get. You had that “Ken” tattoo on blast, showing it off with every exaggerated motion and gesture you made. It drove my cheerleaders crazy in all the ways I assumed you wanted it to. The white boys, for the most part—whose booster-club mamas trailed us in their SUVs, most of them helicopter “Karen”s⁹⁸ dressed in t-shirts from fund-raisers past, eager to see if their sons would actually get in the game this time or if “*those* kids” whose mamas “don’t even bother to show up at the fundraisers and just expect their kids to get something for free” would play the whole time—marveled at the idea of someone their age already having a tattoo. They didn’t understand. I didn’t either. [I guess your peers were as surprised that you had really gotten a tattoo as you were the other day when I told you I’m getting one, when you said, “You so Christian. I never thought you’d get a tattoo!”]

That tattoo; those exaggerated gestures; the clever janks; the animated impersonations; suave, unobtrusive flirtation; hanging out of the seat into the aisle; smacking your lips then saying *bruuuh*...when a teammate said something you thought was dumb; dancing, wearing my cheerleaders’ headphones, a pink sweatband, a ponytail holder of theirs on your wrist—all these things were part of your performance. You were performing your own unique literacies. Your body-mind was performing parts of your culture, your identity, your desires, your creativity, your humor, your linguistic artistry,

dictates that women be ‘natural’ caregivers, these well-meaning educators see it as their duty to rescue these troubled, ‘at risk,’ and potentially dangerous Black boys/young men” (p. xxiii).

⁹⁷ “Jank” is a southern adolescent vernacular term for light heartedly making fun of someone, swapping nonsensical insults back and forth, either alone or as a group, by saying things off the top of your head; also called joning; ex. His head looks like a bean...old eraser-looking polished spoon head.

⁹⁸ Moms who outwardly performed concern for “those kids,” and genuinely felt their charity was benevolent, but whose conflicting feelings would slip out, here and there, when only other white women (like me) were around. See Goldblatt (2020) for a history of the moniker.

your ways of knowing/being/doing/moving through this world. You didn't know you were performing poetry.⁹⁹ Neither did I.

Today, as I write this, you move through my memory like you moved through the world back then, like you moved from seat to seat on that bus, from position to position on the football field that night: with freedom, ferocity, ignored or suppressed fear, a huge smile, animation, swagger, skill. You moved through the world freely, in all your abundance, the way a 14-year-old boy should.

But now, today, you literally move around a cage. You move from routine to routine. You move within a suffocating, dirty, concrete perimeter. You move day to day, month to month, year to year to year, never feeling like you're moving anywhere at all.

But somehow, despite everything, Ken, you

still move me.

...

This reflexive practice of layering informs how I grow with Ken now and how I will relate with students in the future. Reading the stories together in what Barad allows me to ask what new understandings are produced about literacies rather than slipping into the rigid dichotomy between the traumatized "other" and the person expected to bring healing as a totally un-traumatized party.¹⁰⁰ For Kentrelle and me, this means that if all we ever know of one another is trauma, we risk painting each other into binary categories—Ken, a body-mind always only experiencing trauma, stuckness, and sadness, lacking access to literacy A, in contrast to me, a magically trauma-free, joyful, privileged, free spirit out here writing my life away as I happily teach it up. In order to avoid these limiting narratives that would relegate our palette to black and white, Ken and I also understand the importance of bearing witness to one another's meanwhiles.

⁹⁹ Boylorn (2013)

¹⁰⁰ Dutro (2017) wrote, "Trauma comes with its bags already packed with notions of deficiency and pathology. Those assumptions too often already lurk within the narratives surrounding educators' work in schools serving children and families who experience the consequences of centuries of unconscionable economic, racial, and gender inequities," (p. 331) which points to the binary, deficit logic I have to re-route with/in my body before I can bear witness instead of pitying Ken.

Bearing Witness with/in the Meanwhiles

Guyotte et al. (2019) wrote “in/with *meanwhiles*” as “a framework for exploring the enfolding of seemingly disparate events that zigzag[ed] across time” in a way that “seeks to awaken individuals to the in-between” moments of intersecting lives.¹⁰¹ Similarly, the “meanwhiles” throughout this manuscript might seem to merely catalog the ordinary and the mundane. However, I’ve learned that the ordinary and mundane are actually entryways into our everyday lives. These entryways are vital to relational work because within the system of mass incarceration and separation, the mutual, humanizing details and ordinary goings-on of life are fractured by bars: rigidly divided into life behind bars and life in the free world. In this dichotomy, the traces of freedom, autonomy, or life *out here* gradually become invisible to the masses of incarcerated individuals stuck *in there*. Simultaneously, if we in the free world take for granted the ordinary details of our freedom—the space to grieve a loved one, the privacy to use the restroom, the freedom to watch the news, or the scenery at a stoplight—and/or don’t slow down to consider the ways incarcerated others are stripped of these freedoms, those behind bars gradually become less and less visible to us *out here*.

The meanwhiles keep us awake to the realities of erasure *and* highlight the common goings-on of our daily lives. In other words, while stories about the time someone who doesn’t wash his hands touched Kentrelle’s spoon or about putting up my Christmas tree might not *seem* relevant to Kentrelle’s or my roles in mass-incarceration or literacy education, they are, in fact, the very key to becoming more authentically and personally proximal to each other. Reading about the spoon violation affords me a covert peak into the dayroom where Kentrelle spends most of his time; knowing the meaning behind ornaments on my Christmas tree invites Kentrelle

¹⁰¹ (Guyotte et al., 2019, pp. 2-3)

to vicariously join one of my family's traditions while, even if just for a moment, his body-mind sleds into a space with the first Christmas tree he has [not-quite but almost] touched since he was sixteen years old.

Moreover, when the mundane details of our "meanwhiles" begin to sparkle, they invite readers and writers into a shared space of slowed-down recognition. As my body-mind slips through the bars and into Kentrelle's lived experiences, or as his body-mind wriggles beyond bars and back into the free world, the gaping *there*←→*here* space collapses into the shared *t/here*, as the *meanwhiles* throughout this manuscript and in the following section are meant to accomplish.

Meanwhile...June 16, 2019, Letter from Ken

Mrs. Kidd,
I've been stressing a lot lately not being able to talk to my daughter, my lawyer, or my baby momma. She acting like she don't want me to talk to ZoZo or nothing. She don't understand how I feel about not hearing my little girl's voice since I've been gone for two years, and I know that she's getting older now so I'm trying my best to get in touch with her so she can hear my voice and I can tell her that I love her.
I also need you to try to contact my lawyer for me and tell them to send my discovery so I can study my case before I go to trial, so can you please try to contact them for me? Their # is [1(234) 567-8910].
Thanks Mrs. Kidd!
I love you very much ♥!
-Ken

In this meanwhile, the parts of our spirits that love our daughters are *kindred*.

Meanwhile...October 13, 2019, Letter from Ken

Mrs. Kidd ♥
Every day that goes by I think about all the success I could've done in my life instead of being behind hard doors and small windows, not being there for my family, friends, etc. I feel like I'm nothing right now, but I know I'm a child of God and I know he has something good in store for me. I feel like people forgot about me since I've been in this situation. I know it's been

two years and life is getting hard out there. That's why I'm glad you take time out your day to see how I'm doing. You've been doing that for 27 months, thank you for being here for me through both of our hard times out there and in here. You are a very strong minded person with a lot of potential in life. I hope to see you soon!

I love you so much ♥!
Stay strong, keep your head up, and keep faith! I'll do the same! ♥
♥Ken

Here, our spirits are kindred as children of God.

Meanwhile...October 27, 2019, Kentrelle's To-Do List

To Do List

1. G.E.D
2. Get me a job
3. Find me a place to stay
4. Church (get baptized)
5. Take care of my family
6. Go to college
7. Help others try to be successful
8. Proceed with basketball

This is part of my to-do list that I'm gone try to proceed with when I come home!
I love you very much ♥!

Meanwhile...October 31, 2019, Phone Call

“Dang, I wish I could be trick-or-treating right now...”

Meanwhile...January 28, 2020, Letter from Ken

Mrs. Kidd ♥

Every night I go in my cell, I open my Bible and look at the pictures you sent me and I start tearing up looking at Rye and Raeli, seeing how much they have grown up. It also makes me think about my daughter and the time I spent with her before I left for this short/long period of time. She was 2 yrs old when I got arrested, she's 5 going on 6 now, and no one knows how it feels to leave your little ones out there for as long as I left mine, with no father to guide her in a better way or be there for her. A father plays a big role in a child's life, we can teach them how to choose things wisely as they get older, show them right from wrong. A mother can also. A

father word can have a different understanding than a mother's word. I sit back and think about all that and think about all the years I've missed in my daughter's life, I can't get those years back no matter how hard I try. It's not going to work because she's getting older, not younger! It seems like yesterday my little girl was a newborn. Now she's walking, talking, going to school, etc. Where has time gone? Everyone growing up so fast! My time coming very soon so I can guide my daughter in a better way and be a good father towards her! I ♥ my daughter, Zara
Amani Farris ♥!

Meanwhile...3.30.2020, 8:40 AM, during CSE 470 synchronous meeting

48 Ways I'm Trying to Survive the Corona Virus/Quarantine:

1. Joining my neighborhood's Facebook page.
2. Un-joining my neighborhood's Facebook page.
3. Staying up-to-date on local and national happenings.
4. Not paying *too much* attention to local and national happenings.
5. Sanitizing everything. Touching nothing.
6. Staying at home.
7. Tapping into memes. They've never been better.
8. Taking time for myself...somehow.
9. Praying.
10. Exercising.
11. Getting some fresh air. Every single day.
12. Rationing our toilet paper, paper towels, and Clorox wipes.
13. Writing
14. Keeping my mind active.
15. Keeping my mouth shut.
16. Literally, keeping my mouth shut.
17. *Slowvid-19*. Making the most of this time.
18. Controlling my bold little fingers.
19. Avoiding trying to control others' bold little fingers.
20. Put my phone down.
21. Considering the sparrow.
22. Praying for compassion.
23. Writing a letter.
24. Writing another letter. Mailing it.
25. Making my home a happy, stress-free space...organizing and keeping it that way.
26. Setting a schedule.
27. Following a schedule.
28. Becoming okay with changing the schedule.
29. Calling my elderly neighbors, family members, community members.
30. Listening to science.
31. Going to the source.
32. Doing the things I've been meaning to do.
33. Working on patience.

34. Cultivating kindness.
 35. Stocking up on sidewalk chalk.
 36. Becoming okay with sidewalk chalk covering my hands, clothes, butt, feet, floors.
 37. Buying stock in Swiffer.
 38. Lighting a candle.
 39. Looking at the moon and stars.
 40. Focusing on the grass, noticing the ants move and wind blow.
 41. Supporting local businesses.
 42. Being creative.
 43. Documenting everything.
 44. Making the familiar strange.
 45. Letting love guide me.
 46. Encouraging someone.
 47. Thinking about others.
 48. Staying woke.
-

Meanwhile...April 22, 2020, Letter from Ken

Mrs. Kidd ♥,

Thank you so much for everything you are doing for me. I really don't know how much I can thank you for the things you have done for me. I thank you and Robbie for the support you all have for me! You keep me going and keep me strong while I'm doing this little time. No lie, when things starts to get hard in here and I feel like giving up, all I have to do is call you and tell you what's going on and everything goes away! You boost my spirit up and make me stronger day by day! I'm happy I have you in my life because without you I don't know what I would do. Thank you again for everything and thank you for letting your family and friends be here for me.

Thank you for being here for me also! Even though you have never been in a situation like this before, you are still remaining strong. I'm proud of you for never leaving my side, because most people would've. 33 months is a long time, and you still remained here with me. Thank you so much. Somehow God let the both of us get through this together! I love you so much! I'll be home with the family soon!

♥ Ken ♥
FREE
ME!!!

Here our kindred spirits are grateful for one another and rejoice in shared family and friends.

Meanwhile...Ken's Selected Journal Entries, October 2020

Saturday: Today has already been stressful and long but alright. I really didn't want to eat lunch, but I had to eat to survive. Our lunch menu's horrible. We had spaghetti, green

beans, cornbread, cake, and milk. I don't really like to eat spaghetti. If I ain't see you cook it, I ain't gonna eat it, you feel me? I believe in voodoo, you see what I'm saying? Breakfast wasn't so good. Hotdog, biscuit, and grits—the worst meal ever. Grits don't have any seasoning or barely be cooked. I'm playing cards today also. I don't do that too often. It causes too many problems, and my game too good for the rookies.

Sunday: I woke up in a better mood this morning. Good healthy breakfast, now I'm ready to lay down and rest for a few. Today is chicken day. Yay. I dig that.

Monday: Today was the worst day.

Tuesday: I woke up this morning with a lot on my mind, ready to crash out. This fat dude that sit at my table had grabbed my spoon, then he don't even wash his hands. I was like, "Bro, You trippin' dude. I don't know what you got on your mind this morning, man, but don't touch my spoon. You could do it to some trash or something, but you just seen me put my spoon right there." I was mad. I was ready to crash. I still am for real, but I talked to you so I'm feeling a little better.

Meanwhile...October 13, 2020, Personal Journal Entry/Postcard to Ken

Ken,

Today we talked two times in a row. You told me you've started journaling about your days, and when you read some of your entries to me, I freaked out! My notes say: "THIS IS EVERYTHING!!!!!! YES!!!!!! The ordinariness of a spoon being touched by someone who doesn't wash his hands becomes extraordinary when my body-mind is transported into that space. And my body-mind cannot enter that space but through your invitation." After you shared your entries, we kept talking with each other like we truly do LOVE each other like family. I talked about Rye, and you talked about your little nephew liking *Paw Patrol*. I told you that even though Rye isn't verbal yet, he makes *lots* of car/motor noises. And then I remembered that YOU used to make the BEST motor noises when you were coming down the hallway toward my classroom. Some of my prized memories of you were the days you'd see me from a distance on your way to my class. I knew from the second you knew you'd caught my eye that you were about to cut up. You'd yell my name at volume BLAST, emphatically snatch your pants up extra high as if you were stepping onto an invisible ATV, do a little squat like you were plopping onto the seat, hold your hands directly out front to grip the pretend handlebars, kick it into gear, jerk your arms up and head back at an angle to take off, then start making those *crazy*, realistic motorcycle noises--*rrrrrrriiiiiin diiiin diiiin diiiiiiiiiin uh bwooooooOOOOOooooooo bwooooooOOOOOooooooo*--all the way down the hallway to my door where you'd peel in--*skkkkeeeeeeerrrrrrrt*. Those were the days! You and Rye would make the best sounds together. I wish you could be here to play with him.

Is that something you'd even want to do? If you could walk out of there today, would you come over and just play with my children? How awesome would that be for them to grow up with "Big Ken" as a constant in their lives?

I cannot wait!!

Rye and Raeli are at school, but I I'm glancing into my living room now, and I can just imagine, as if through a holograph, Rye standing beside the coffee table, slowly and methodically driving his cars like he does, making all the car sounds, and you sitting on the floor, leaned back on one arm, legs out comfy and straight, focused on playing with him. You'd make your crazy noises, he'd make his, and y'all would have the best play time two friends've ever had. All the while, Raeli would be serving you and several *Baby Alives* some type of food or tea or something in her plastic dishes. She'd be wearing a tiara and might be in her "bossy princess" mood. She'd be saying "Kentreeeeelle!" to get your attention every fifteen seconds, especially when she noticed you paying attention to Rye. She does that. She demands *full* attention, and she needs you to follow her rules (she must get that from Robbie... 😊). I can just imagine how funny it would be to see you react to her. Y'all would have the *funniest* conversations because you would definitely give her a run for her money.

How old will she be when you get to meet her? Will she still have time to play? Will Rye still have toy cars and make funny mouth noises? Will you still have to sit on the ground to be eye-to-eye with them?

What I just did hurt. It was fun and bittersweet and funny to imagine you into this space, here with my children, playing, laughing. Free. But it hurts. I feel my chest tightening and my eyes getting hot.

But I'm not going to cry.

I'm going to smile and write and think about you and think about hope and think about my children and think about my students and think about promises kept and think about the ways we *do* get to be with you instead. The ways you get to be with us.

When I talk *with* you—not at you—when we talk about the everyday and the mundane, when we imagine together, when we talk about how things are now and how things will be when your body is free...I know that you love me. I know when you say, "*I just told my roommate, 'Man, I love Mrs. Kidd. I love her so much,'*" that you mean it. And I know that you know that I love you, just like you are part of my family, sitting here in the living room, playing with my babies. The world might always insist there's something weird about our proximity, but we can show them otherwise. We can help re-write these literacies in and of bodies because truly there is nothing weird or impure or secret about the way I love you and you love me. We get to know each other. We share our lives with each other. We ask questions about each other's families, life, health, routines. We try to imagine how the other lives day-to-day. We respect one another. We would and do fight for one another. We hope together. We get to know together. We write together. We dream and imagine together. We critique the world together. We resist together. And through all of this, we become closer together. And after all, there is no law against Love.

-Briana/Mrs. Kidd/BGK/whatever you decide

In this meanwhile, I invited Ken to grapple with the dynamics of the familial bond we share.

Meanwhile...November 3, 2020, Journal/Postcard to Ken

Ken,

Today should be your first time voting in a Presidential election. But you can't. And that sucks. And actually, I don't know if you'll *ever* be able to. And that seriously sucks.

On another note completely, I started putting my Christmas tree up yesterday. It finally came in from the place I ordered it. You won't believe this, but knowing me, you definitely will. It's a 10-foot *Whoville* Christmas tree. In other words, it's a massive tree that is bent over like a hook at the top to look like something whimsical from *The Grinch*. I LOVE IT!!! I saw it online, and it was destiny. I had to have it. I sent a picture of it to Mr. Bartlow and Mrs. Mollis since they always thought all my classroom muchness was funny, and they were like, "That is SO Briana!" I started putting lights on it last night, and that's turned into a WHOLE job. I'll send you a picture of it as soon as I get it finished.

Idk if I've told you this before, but one of my *favorite* things about Christmas is a tradition Robbie and I started several years back. It's an ornament swap where we each buy the other an ornament of some sort that represents something we want to remember/something we were into that year (Well, TBH, it's usually just me buying him ornaments because he forgets! Haha. What a typical man... ☹️). For example, one year he got super into *The Walking Dead*, so I bought him an ornament that was an action figure from the show. I wrote "Ornament swap 2018, Year of *The Walking Dead*" on it so we could remember.

Since I have this memory disorder (that I'm sure I have told you about by now, probably a zillion times at least), this tradition is so much fun for me because each year when I unwrap the ornaments and read the bottoms of them, it's like those memories that were entirely erased from my brain come zooming back through the ornaments! A couple more examples of special ornaments I've collected over the years are a basketball ornament that I wrote "RJ & Tyreke, our sons, 2013" on for my first Christmas as a teacher; a police officer ornament from the year Robbie was *almost* a cop (remember how y'all kept calling him a snitch and saying you *couldn't believe* Mrs. Kidd was "finna be hitched to an 'op!"); a laptop ornament to represent the year Robbie became a software engineer; a white Toyota Camry ornament that says "Stewart" on it to represent the funny little old car (named Stewart) Robbie drives right now until he can afford a truck one day...when I finally have a grown-up job; a broccoli ornament from the year Raeli loved broccoli (that was short-lived! Ha!); and last night I bought a bus ornament and a tractor ornament to represent two of Rye's favorite things this year. Remember how I told you he doesn't really talk? Well, he can say "Buusshhhh" when he sees a bus and "Drack-duh!" when he sees a tractor, so I wrote those two sounds/words and "2020" on the bottoms of those. I look forward to remembering those details for many Christmases to come.

Anyway, all of that is to say that I ordered an ornament this morning from Lindsey (my friend who is all about your case, sometimes puts money on your books, and who makes ornaments as a side hustle) that will say "We family now" on one side and "We got this" on the other side. This ornament is in your honor. Those two things you've said to me have meant so much, and *this* will always be the year that you and I really started becoming closer friends/allies. I mean, I know our student/teacher relationship started a long time ago, but this year has been the biggest yet, in my opinion. I mean, we seriously are family now, right?

If you could choose any ornaments to add to my tree, what might they be and why? Or if you could choose an ornament to put on your own tree this year, what kind would you choose? Maybe if you can think of any to represent something we talk about or do or love or have been through, I can add them to my tree this year, too. Then I could give them to you one day when you're free, and you could put them on *your* tree and tell *your* family about them. Maybe I'll just hang a plastic spoon with some greasy fingerprints on it...

I hope you have a Christmas tree in there. If not, draw one. Draw one and hang it up on your wall. Or maybe you can hang the picture of mine that I send you when it's finished.

What's Christmas like for you there? What are some of your childhood memories of Christmas? I'd love to hear about them. Expect more postcards to keep coming. I love you, and I'm praying for you.

-Mrs. Kidd

These two meanwhiles invited Ken's spirit to share in memories of my family and to be part of traditions we share.

Meanwhile...December 23, 2020, Ken's Journal Entry

I used to be turnt. I had a lot of friends and a lot of fame from a lot of people. Almost everybody know Ken. I miss school, having fun, playing sports, and being a Champion in everything I played. Even though I may have been in a couple fights in school, got suspended a few times, I looked at it as having fun. My little brother Shon putting people in the trash can for me, fighting in the bathroom almost every class period was fun. I miss those days. I miss the pep rallies we had at school for all the athletes (I was one of them); school dances was turnt; I miss all that. I enjoyed being a class clown. I'm really a people person, everybody gets along with me. I stay putting a smile on someone's face, and I'm always janking people no matter who it was or how my day was going.

I remember going to parties being turnt having all my homeboys with me. I'm always the light/energy of the party anywhere I go. I love dancing, I love helping people out that's in need of help. I remember when I used to go to my teachers' classrooms and ask if they needed help with anything like grading papers, taking anything to the office or to another classroom. I always ran errands for teachers.

You never see me giving off negative vibes with anyone because I'm very respectful among everyone.

I remember when me and my teammates went to play at a college named Samford for a basketball tournament. That was one of the best times I had playing ball. All the adrenaline and fans we had watching us made me want to succeed with my career as a basketball player.

All I want to do in my life is be successful, get my mom out the projects, make her proud, and set a good example for the ones that look up to me, that's all I try to do—enlighten all my young brothers and sisters (black & white) to be better and succeed. Not just for ourselves, but for the society we live in. That's the type of time I'm on. Help others be great, help them succeed as I was helped to do. I've grown to learn to cherish what you have and what you learn.

In this meanwhile, Ken reciprocates my invitation into fond memories as he shares several of his with me.

Meanwhile...January 1, 2021, 12:06 PM, Personal Journal Entry/Postcard

Ken!!

I'm screaming! Remember how I told you a while back that my sister, Britney, and her husband were so surprised and excited to be pregnant, but then she miscarried, and I was so broken-hearted for them? Well, guess what?! She's pregnant again! And guess what else? IT'S TWINS!!! WON'T HE DO IT??? We think they're boys because they had low heart rates. And, for now, they're looking identical. [update: They ARE boys, and they ARE identical!! Their names will be Levi and Luka.]

I am beside myself. ELATED! I am going to be an aunt to TWINS!!! Have I ever told you that Dr. Johnson is a twin? Yep. She and her twin sister, Denise (Latrise & Denise), actually just published a book last year about their lives. It's called *The Mustache Twins*. Ha!

Anyway, you'll have to teach Britney's twins (and Rye) how to ball, and you'll have to teach me all you know about younger nephews. I know you super-love yours. AHHHHHH! I just had to tell someone, and you were definitely the first to come to mind. Hope to talk to you tomorrow when you're out of quarantine! I love you!

-Mrs. Kidd

Meanwhile...January 18, 2021, Letter from Ken

"Two Man Cell"

It's supposed to be two

But we're crowded by three or four

Two on the racks and two on the floor

Little pieces of cotton to lay on in the dayroom

Waking up asking yourself why so many in such a small room

Looking out a window just to see what you can see

All there is is train tracks and a pile of dead trees

Meanwhile...January 22, 2021, 9:30 AM, Personal Journal Entry

Ken,

Good morning!

1. I highly anticipate your call today since you're out of quarantine.
2. Courtney went home! He said he loves you and to tell you he hasn't forgotten you and something about "This is just a little struggle for a big dawg" but in much smoother terms than that. It's still hard to understand him, understandably, since he was shot in the jaw. Ugh. I love that kid.
3. While you were in quarantine, we got a W H O L E new President of the United States (POTUS). President Joseph R. Biden is now the 46th POTUS, and Vice President Kamala Harris is now the 46th Vice-POTUS, but she's the FIRST WOMAN to ever hold U.S. Presidential office, and certainly the first Black and South-Asian biracial woman to

do so. Regardless of where we locate ourselves on the political spectrum, this moment is incredibly inspiring. I *love* to see so many young girls so energized. The future really might be female! And still, I wonder how this administration—which you, like *so many* disenfranchised Black people in the South, weren't allowed to vote for—will affect YOU, if at all.

4. For the record, the entire time you were in quarantine, your attorney read my Facebook messages—as I was desperately trying to get an update on you—but she never sent a single word in response. Pretty sure you'd say, "She's trying to handle you, Mrs. Kidd!"
5. Your mom emailed the Southern Poverty Law Center about your case. I spoke with a representative, too. We're trying for you out here, Ken. I promise. It might not feel like it, but please just keep holding on.

Each of these meanwhiles collapses the space between us and gives entry into otherwise off-limits social and psychological spaces. As we write and read into these spaces, we become more *fully present* through the act of writing.

...

6 Feet Deep

Producing Proximity through Presence

Furthermore, in examining my own literacies through bearing witness to Ken's, I've learned that proximity requires *presence*—even if this *presence* isn't always physical.

February 8, 2020, 2:36 PM, Personal Journal Entry

Ken,

I'm sitting under the overpass, right outside Southern County Jail. I'm parked next to a sheriff's car, facing the jail where I see a *No Parking* sign, ominous cameras angled toward the Sally port; 4 signs screaming: *NOTICE UNLAWFUL TO TALK TO PRISONERS VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED*. Around the buildings where I assume you are held, there is a chain-link fence, at least 10-feet tall, topped with massive tangles of razor wire. The entire roof of the building is also lined with giant coils of razor wire.

This is Southern County Jail. I can see 7 security cameras from where I'm sitting. You are surveilled. Being in such close proximity, I'm sure I am being surveilled now, too.

When you called me over and over last weekend, I didn't realize until I looked closer that you had used our code. My phone read "Kentrelle Washington-Southern County Jail (9)," indicating nine missed calls from you. Nine consecutive calls. This is the code we

established to be used in times of emergency. If you call me 9 times, I know, like 9-1-1, something is urgent.

But I realized it too late. I always realize things too late.

Now I know you were trying to tell me your grandmother had passed away.

I knew it was coming, but I'm not sure you did.

You told me several weeks ago that she got to come home from the nursing home. You sounded happy for her. You were concerned because she had stopped speaking to you—she would sit in silence, you told me. But you thought it must be a good thing that she had been able to come home. You told me there were some nurses who started coming to her house instead of her having to go to the hospital.

My stomach sank.

I asked if you knew what they were called.

You said you couldn't remember.

But I could. I could remember the gentle Hospice nurses in their puke-pan pink scrubs who had come for home services right before my PaPa died when I was 16.

I remembered when he stopped talking, too.

Cautiously, I asked, "Was it called *hospice*?"

Yeah! Yeah! That's what it was called, you affirmed.

I didn't have the guts to tell you what that meant. So I didn't.

I answered the phone this past Monday when you called. It was around noon, and I was parked outside the grocery store in Highport, tired, wearing my *VOGUE* Disney princess t-shirt, still thinking about the class I taught that morning, and finally able to talk to you without interruptions. I picked up. Your voice sounded a little more...something...? than usual. Maybe panicky? Like someone had twisted the little knobs at the top of a guitar that tighten and loosen its strings. Yours were tightened, vibrating a little faster and with a little higher pitch. You sounded frantic, but you feigned calmness. You started our conversation like always: "Hey, how you doin'?" How Robbie and the kids been?" I answered you, asked the same about how you've been, then I just rambled on about how my college students had loved your letter and had written you postcards I'd send you soon. You waited what seemed like a polite stutter, then said, "I need you to do me a biiiiiig big big big favor."

Meanwhile...

I stop journaling for a second to read a text message from my parents who were watching my children. Ugly crying, I post the following Facebook status in response to their text:

In case anyone wonders if research is/could ever be disconnected from the heart, that's a **HARD NO**. I'm currently sitting in my car outside the county jail, typing a research memo on my laptop after an emotional couple hours or so of fieldwork (which isn't really "fieldwork" at all because it's time with/in actual lives—of others who I love and am

coming to know better as we share deep, differently felt lived experiences), and I get a video from my parents.
Rye took his first steps.

I missed them.

No. He won't know I missed them, and he'll take tons and tons and tons more. I know. But I still missed them. And it matters. It matters to me, to my work, to my family, to my heart, to, to, to... And it's all undeniably, deeply, stickily, emotionally, materially, affectively connected.

I'm all about creativity, imagination, possibilities, dreams, all the muchy things. But I don't think I'll ever have an imagination big enough to pretend any of these threads through my daily life+the lives of others could be separated.

...You told me you needed me to call your judge. Your grandma had died, and you wanted to go to the funeral. I was so shook. I hung up, called the judge, was told to call the attorney, called the attorney, was told they were already aware, then started texting folks to start praying for grace, mercy, strength, and peace for you. I knew it was probably a *no*. And turns out it was. But you're holding it together. You're so strong. I am so so sorry, Ken. I'm so sorry.

But I went for you today. I went for your mom. For your family I don't know.

I was the only white person there. I know everyone in that place wondered who the white girl was. I was CLEARLY the only one who looked like me. But I don't care. And actually, maybe they didn't care. In retrospect, it wasn't about me.

I felt like I was intruding. I felt like I was watching some secret and sacred tradition of the Black community. Like I was stealing feelings or something. The funeral was so beautiful and so simple. There were lots of Spirit-filled prayers, lots of call and response, lots of testimonies. There weren't huge flower arrangements, wonderful, elaborate hats, or a soulful choir like I'd remembered from [one of the only other Black person's funeral I'd been to, years ago. [Rest in Peace, Ms. LaBridgette Ellis.]]¹⁰²

Today, people came in their best—many in royal blue, which must have been your grandmother's favorite color—(which I wish I had known because I wore neon pink 🌸) and they were there together to mourn and to support.

There were solos without music. There were messages without alliterated points like I'm used to at white funerals and in white church. There were bishops and reverends and pastors who stood up around the room throughout the ceremony. There were cousins, aunties, brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren, great grandchildren. There were no empty seats.

¹⁰² Eric, to this day I have never attended a more spectacular event. Your mother's funeral was as beautiful and as lavish as she was (and you are!), and I am still in awe that at only sixteen-years-old you were able to compose such a perfect memorial for sweet Bridge. I know she's proud of the man you're becoming today. I miss her and love you, friend.

I stood in the back doorway, very conscious that my body would not block anyone's view or be in anyone's way as they moved in and out of the double doors. My presence felt distracting, but I tried to be invisible. I just wanted to feel-with, to know, to experience, to learn, to watch, to see, to hear, to be accepted, to accept, to understand, to witness, to honor.

I think my presence distracted *me* more than it did anyone else because no one actually asked me who I was or why I was there. No one really even seemed to notice me at all. Why did that surprise me? Had I *wanted* people to see me there or something?

One gentleman spoke to me at the end as I was leaving, and your mom got out of the processional line and hugged me tightly on her way out. She gave me her program to take to your attorney to give to you.

Your grandmama was obviously a loved and strong woman—a matriarch to be memorialized.

There were so many stories told, so many memories shared. But nothing at all felt forced or fake. Other than me—maybe I was forced or fake, but that's all. It was all so...*real*.

Outside, there were two vehicles, an old red jeep and what I've always referred to as a "Polly Pocket Car," that had to be jumped off after the funeral, and no one seemed stressed or inconvenienced by the hold-up it caused. White people—at least the ones I've been at funerals with—at least *I*—probably would have been perplexed. But your family were calm, and that made me calm. It felt...nice. Why does my body-mind always tell me I'm in a hurry?

There were women talking about whooping folks and men pretending to beat one another with their canes. There were little girls wearing braids and beads that made little clicking sounds as they ran and played in the patchy grass.

There were no unfamiliar smells, no one trying to steal anything, no one checking me out. No one smoking weed, no one holding weapons or throwing cash around, no one in bikinis leaning against fancily painted cars. No one wearing their pants below the waist. No one dressed extravagantly. (But *so what* if they had been?) No one catching the Holy Ghost or falling out. No one donning any of the racist, worn-out, violent stereotypes people who look like me often try to pin to people who look like you...who look like your family.

We do this—we hold these media-implanted images in our brain—because we rarely understand ontologies and bodies outside of our own. We make assumptions from a distance based on media and gossip because we never actually get close...at least this is what I realized I had done.

None of the racist tropes or literacies I was ashamed to recognize in my body were even close to the realities I actually read among bodies there.

Your family and friends and community were just *there*—mourning, gathering, being with one another, being fully present, acknowledging a life, supporting one another...being *family*.

The only thing missing was you...

And I wondered how many others would have been there if their bodies were free.

What was my body doing there? Was I imposing?
I felt like an outsider who sneaked in.
I am humbled, careful, and grateful to have been let in.

Yet I can't help but wonder what ways *your* body-mind might have been read and mis-read if *you* had shown up at the funeral of *my* grandmother, had been the only one who looked like you, had stood by the back door the entire time in bright colors, had hugged my mom or dad and left everyone else wondering who you were or what right you had to be in that space. Because they *would have*. They would have wondered. Your body would have felt itself being read in particular ways, just like I expected my body to feel today, except it didn't.

Ken, as soon as I left the parking lot of the funeral home, I came *here*, to this jail parking lot, to feel closer to you. I wish I could walk in and hand you this program. I wish I could see you, wish you could have seen her, wish so many things. But wishes don't always come true. Sometimes they're just that...wishes.
But there is always, always, always substance to *Hope*, and I witnessed that today.

For all the piety I put on, and as much as I talk about Jesus as *my* Living Hope, today I glimpsed Hope through a different lens. I saw worshipers and grievers praising and hoping with all their hearts. I saw folks proclaiming that God doesn't make mistakes, that He will always be with them. That He has never failed them, that He is sovereign, He is Deliverer. And in that space, that felt like a whole other level of faith and trust and Hope than I sing with when I worship and pray and say the same words. The Hope I witnessed today didn't seem pathologically proclaimed based on the super-abundant, charmed life I recall of my lived experiences as I lift my hands in praise. The Hope in that place felt like Hope derived from a whole different body of lived experiences...but from the whole same God. And for a moment, when I considered the Grace I'm shown and the kindness of a God who meets every individual where we are, I felt connected somehow with your family—in God's family—in our kindred Hope. I felt close.

I'm headed home to get my babies. I'm also headed home to answer lots of questions I know Robbie will ask me, especially since he's never been to a Black person's funeral. But I'm sure, even after this moving experience, I still have more questions than Robbie could ever imagine asking, mostly questions about myself and the things I *thought* my body knew.

I love you, Ken. Here's me waving goodbye to you, over there. See you soon.

-Mrs. Kidd

...

Writing through these affective encounters is a first step toward compositional closeness and reflection. But reflexively sharing my reflections with Ken [via postcard or during a phone call,

like the one summarized below] produces an even stronger sense of closeness—of *t/here*ness—even when I’m physically far away:

Also February 8, 2020, several hours later: Personal Journal Entry

Ken,

You called to ask how the funeral went. I told you it was beautiful. I told you it was *so so* beautiful.

“I wrote about it for you if you want me to read it to you,” I offered.

You said to *please* read it, and as I walked outside to get my laptop, I told you your grandmother must have been one *very* loved woman because there wasn’t a free seat in that wood-paneled room. You said you figured it would be like that.

You asked me if your mom lost it. I told you that I couldn’t tell if it was her or your aunt from where I was standing, but that one was pretty upset. “Your mom really seemed to be keeping it together though,” I told you. “She is a strong woman.”

“Most definitely,” you said.

I opened my laptop and read you everything I had typed when I was sitting outside the jail earlier. I heard other men yelling and banging around in the background, but I knew you were listening to every word I read.

At first I read quickly because all the first stuff, like the description of where I was writing and what I was seeing, seemed unimportant, and I knew the clock was ticking on our phone call. It’s always ticking on our phone calls.

Then I realized I hadn’t let up on the pace as I got to the more important part of what I had written, so I slowed down and read each word. Those words were heavy coming out of my mouth—heavier than they had felt leaving my fingertips when I first typed them, heavy like the closing of your grandma’s slick white casket. But I read you everything. When I got to the end, all the words suddenly just kind of stopped.

There was a long pause.

Then, in a softer voice than I’ve ever heard you use before, with slow and calculated sentences you said,

“Thank you for your presence.

Thank you...

*Thank you for your presence.”*¹⁰³

We sat there with/in those words, heavy in the silence for a few seconds. You might have been crying. I was definitely crying.

Knowing the phone robot was about to cut us off, I picked up the slightly crumpled program from my passenger seat and read each word of it to you. I described the photo of

¹⁰³ I read Kentrelle’s response to my *presence* at his grandmother’s funeral in two ways. First, he was thanking me for my physical presence in his stead. But second, I know that he was also thanking me for being present in his life, even in a non-physical way. I’m confident that this is how he meant this expression of gratitude because I feel the same gratitude for Ken’s presence in my life, even though I haven’t physically seen him in over four years.

your grandmother in her pink bedazzled shirt, told you that y'all look just alike and that y'all have the same cheekbones and same right double-dimple. This made you laugh—it made you *really* laugh. And this helped me breathe—it helped me *really* breathe. When I'd finished reading you the program, you said you hope they let you have it. You admitted that it will be hard to look at your grandma but that you want it anyway. And just in case they don't let you have it, I will make a copy. I will keep a copy for you.

-Mrs. Kidd

...

I knew that this whole encounter had shifted something inside me and had forced me to face problematic assumptions I'd felt welling up in my body during the funeral, but I didn't yet realize how sincerely it had moved Kentrelle, too. Eight months later, as we were talking about how anxious I was to sit down with his mom to talk about all our writing together, the following conversation unfolded:

K: Mrs. Kidd, you did something for me that probably nobody would ever do for me. I might tell 'em do this or that, but they ain't gonna do it for real. You went to my family funeral for me. You went to my grandma's funeral for me.

B: ... That's still one of the biggest honors of my entire life....you don't understand. That *changed* me.

K: You said it changed *you*? Well guess what? I put it to my mom like, *Mama, this lady just did something that...* I really just tried to put it to the test for real, and see if you would go for real. And then you went for real! And I'm like, *man, this lady really loves me.*

B: [*still at a loss for what to say*]

K: See, you a part of my family now, Mrs. Kidd. You feel me? That's really how I feel. We family now.

I have learned that *presence*—or a commitment to being *fully present* in any interaction or educative space—matters not only so that students/others know I care, but also so that as I explore how they read their worlds, I can also critically investigate the ways *I* read and/or misread their worlds. Just like I knew from the moment I recognized the nine missed calls from Ken that I could not turn away from his trauma, I also know that I cannot look away from racism and injustice in my own body. To choose at that point to look away would be the height of

hypocrisy and privilege. Thus, when I felt the racist scripts welling up at the funeral, I knew that I couldn't hide from those harmful literacies in my body. I was especially compelled by this truth when the feelings in my body-mind contradicted my Spirit's instruction to love my neighbor as myself. Love seemed pretty impossible when I so obviously held harmful, racist judgments of my neighbor. So instead of looking away, I had to look within to work through these problems and try to re-route the dysfunctional flows that cause me to read others in harmful ways. This introspection is ongoing and imperative for my growth as a human and as a literacy educator and requires me to be fully present.¹⁰⁴

Moreover, hearing Ken call me "family" as he reflected on this performance of presence was definitely a special moment. I appreciated the affirmation, and I felt accepted. Even still, it wouldn't be until several months later that I would understand just how deeply the literacies of *family* and *loyalty* live in Kentrelle's body, which I story in the final part of this chapter, "6 Feet Apart."

...

6 Feet Apart

Proximity through Reciprocity

In February 2020, following the emotional growth Ken and I had experienced as we navigated his grandmother's passing, I found myself frustrated that the writing I was getting

¹⁰⁴ Palmer (1993) wrote, "The most neglected reality in education is the reality of the **present moment**, of what is happening in the here and now" (p. 88), and hooks (2003) warned, "Since our place in the world is constantly changing, we must be constantly learning to be **fully present** in the now. If we are not fully engaged in the present we get stuck in the past and our capacity to learn is diminished" (p. 43). And taking their lead, I used the moments at the funeral and as I reflected afterward to make the most of the opportunity being in that space presented me to interrogate the literacies of my body, to consider the ways they injure others, and to see how they distort my connections with humanity around me. In this praxis, I understood why Tarc (2006) conceptualized literacy as a tool to "literally reread and rewrite humanness" (p. 300).

from Kentrelle felt shallow. I felt like over and over again, his letters were thank-you notes for everything I was doing, and this was hard for me to hear because I never felt like I was doing much at all to shift his spirit in any substantial way. But when I turned to the data, I had an epiphany. In a journal entry [that I would eventually send to Ken] I reflected,

February 28, 2020: Personal Journal Entry

Ken,

Last night on my way home from the grocery store, I started listening to some of the oldest voice recordings I have of our phone calls, and *good gosh!* Why have you never told me how much I talk???

No wonder all you usually say is “true, true.” That’s all I ever give you time to say!

I kept listening, even to the conversation we had yesterday, desperately hoping I’d notice a significant change, hoping maybe I was just talking so much a long time ago because I was so uncomfortable with the silences at first...but apparently not.

We’ve been chatting for three years now, and I *still* talk a lot.

I have *got to* learn to be okay with the pauses.

Also, I noticed that when we talk, you don’t really talk to me like someone you trust.

You talk to me like I’m still your seventh-grade teacher. Like I’m still running the show, and you’re just trying not to fall asleep in class—saying “True, true,” every now and then to get participation points.

Andbutso, how is it that I’ve *written* so much about so many feelings and emotions and memories, but our spoken conversations are this flat? How am I going to write a whole dissertation—and, more importantly, a *book*—that is “co-authored” with you and/or about you if I’m the one doing all the talking? Ugh. I have to *shut up*.

Hopefully you got my postcard today, and hopefully you’ll start writing more and more to fill the gaps, or maybe to correct the things I’ve written my way in my head. This is complicated. I didn’t even realize it. What else am I not realizing? You gotta tell me!

-Mrs. Kidd

...

From that point forward, I made it my goal to stop talking so much and to listen more. I wanted to let Ken talk and to hear his stories, but I still felt distant and confined by all the restrictions on our communication. In my journal entries, I continued to talk to Ken to feel closer, but his absence felt present in every part of my life, not just the “academic” parts.

March 16, 2020: Personal Journal Entry

Here I am on this beach, sand compact and slick beneath my feet,

and all I can imagine is *your* feet walking freely on this beach, too.

You could throw football with Robbie, play tag with Raeli and Rye.

You wouldn't believe this perfect weather—
crisp air, not too cold, not at all hot.
This is how freedom feels.

Little did I know as I typed this entry, the whole world—including that very beach—would shut down just two perfect sunsets later. Little did I know the distance, restrictions, and confinement were just getting started. Little did I know, the rest of the world would soon feel the same feelings, as Covid-19 forced *everyone* to maintain distance, restricted all our interactions, and required us all to confine ourselves at home.

Meanwhile...May 26, 2020, 5:01 PM: Personal Journal Entry

A Black man was murdered yesterday,
and today the whole world saw the footage—white cop, knee crushing black trachea.
Helpless onlookers, what could they do?
What will *we* do?

People will pretend they don't see my Facebook post about it.

3 inmates escaped from SCJ this past weekend. All were white.
They found one with his mother after she posted a photo of them together on Facebook.
She said no one could understand, they all just jump to judge.

Everyone saw that post.

21 inmates at SCJ have Covid-19.
The sheriff's department will purchase thirteen \$900 devices that shoot spider webs to
detain dangerous bodies.
We'll call it innovation and necessity.

I have Covid-19.
I followed all the rules. Wore the mask. Used the Clorox wipes. Stayed home. Distanced.
Our governor is accountable.
Our spiritual leaders will be accountable.
Thank God we didn't leave home to go to church.

I've told everyone I've been near, even the businesses.
There will be no Facebook post about it. If there was, no one would ignore it.

If I told, if I even asked for prayer, my children could be stigmatized and mistreated
because of ignorance once they return to school.
This is the first and probably only time I'll ever feel the need to protect them this way.

As the Black man died on the concrete, his raspy voice bellowed,
"Maaaaama...
... I'm through."

May 26, 2020, 9:15 PM: Personal Journal Entry

My first thought in response to the social media debates about George Floyd: "Don't
defend murder."

I could have made that my Facebook status. I almost did.

Then it hit me: is that what I'm doing in this work?

But also, what if that had been Kentrelle's body I witnessed heaving its last breaths
today?

All at once. So much at once.
Nothing in isolation.
Hands in pockets.
Knee crushing trachea.
Veins bulging.
Breaths quavering.
Phones recording.
Hands in pockets.
Knee crushing trachea.
Hands in pockets.

I started to put on Rye's diaper after his bath tonight, but he squirmed and squealed with
excitement as he nakedly escaped down the hall into sissy's room, me chasing him with
diaper and jammies in hand. High speed, hiney wiggling chase.

He tripped over a pillow and fell down, squealing because he'd been busted. A stalker
baby detainee.

But in that moment, when I wanted to giggle and squeal with my baby, as I knelt down to
velcro the Pampers straps, my body towering over his, all I could envision was the
monstrous, evil, vile thought of someone holding *his* body down, hands in pockets, as my
baby cries, "Mama!"

Knee crushing trachea.
Hands in pockets.

May 26, 2020, 11:47 PM: Personal Journal Entry

Having Covid is something I can hide.

Being Black was something George Floyd could not.

Covid is something I can conceal for my children's safety.

The color of her son's skin was something George Floyd's "Maaaaama..." could not.

In 2013, Goodall wrote, “If you are white, you can always look away.”¹⁰⁵ And for me, “the major racial storylines of the post-Civil Rights era,”¹⁰⁶ the grand narratives perpetuated throughout my schooling experiences—of a post-racial society and of racial reconciliation after the Civil Rights Movement—had allowed me to do exactly that—to look away. And whether my ignorance to ongoing racial violence throughout my first 21 years of life was a “choice” or not, Baldwin wrote, “It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”¹⁰⁷ Concerning this idea of “innocence” or “ignorance,” Rankine explained, “The fiction of the facts assumes innocence, ignorance, lack of intention, misdirection; the necessary conditions of a certain time and place.”¹⁰⁸ But, conversely, in 2020, it was actually our frozen time and place in history whose conditions facilitated a necessary pummeling of the fictitious facts my body and many other white bodies had learned to believe: that all in blue ought to be unquestionably backed, that there’s always two sides of a story and usually the whiter, wealthier, more credentialed side is right; that slavery and racism are things of the past that people need to “get over”; that *anyone* who works hard enough will achieve the American Dream; that incidents of bigotry and racism are rare, isolated events. And from what I witnessed during the summer of 2020 and thereafter, I submit that I’m not the only white person whose body-mind simultaneously felt miles more *distant from* the realities of Black bodies in America *and* radically *closer to* the body-minds and spirits of Black Americans.

In 2020, when the world shut down and Covid-19 forced us all 6-feet apart, the murder of George Floyd forced our body-minds closer to the *ongoingness* of racial terror in America. Before 2020, the convenient distractions of global capitalism, meritocracy, “making America

¹⁰⁵ (2013, p. xi)

¹⁰⁶ (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 77)

¹⁰⁷ (Baldwin, 1963, p. 6)

¹⁰⁸ (Rankine, 2014, p. 407)

great again” and “keeping America great” contributed to the veracity of Goodall’s: we *could* look away. Just like it had been true that I could look away from educational inequity my whole life until I became a teacher, just like I could look away from prisons and mass incarceration until I got closer to Kentrelle, we were able to look away from the suffering of many Black and brown neighbors

...until we couldn’t.

...until the forced distance of 2020 made us more proximal to the suffering of Others and exposed our own vulnerabilities.

As white people faced the violent reality of ongoing racial violence in 2020, it suddenly became important for us *all* to talk less and to *listen* more. Like I had realized in February, many of us realized we had been the ones doing all the talking—we’d been the ones running the show. We wanted so badly to get close, to understand the things we’d suddenly, violently been forced to confront. So we tried what we knew to change. We wore our Black neighbors out—asking our questions and offering our apologies even if we didn’t quite know what we were apologizing for. We went to rallies, scheduled lunch dates where we would “just listen” to our friends of Color who suddenly had something to teach us.

Likewise, I tried to change, too. I tried to be more honest in my writing and more critical about how I was making sense of things. I tried to let Ken talk more, and he did. However, even though he was saying more, I still wasn’t *listening*. And without *listening*, I lacked understanding. I still couldn’t grasp many of the ways Kentrelle saw and moved through the world.

Witnessing George Floyd’s body writhe and plea beneath the officer’s knee [crushing trachea, hands in pockets] as his spirit left his body, my spirit *felt* Ta-Nehisi Coates’s words I’d

read sometime in the past: **“There are people whom we do not fully know, and yet they live in a warm place within us, and when they are plundered, when they lose their bodies and the dark energy disperses, that place becomes a wound.”**¹⁰⁹ These energies and wounds, however they make themselves felt, are essential to how I understand and re-route my embodied literacies.

When I watched the officer’s knee bear into George Floyd’s neck, when I heard Floyd say over and over that he could not breathe, when I heard him call out for his mama, all I could imagine was Kentrelle’s body in that space, and all I could hear were words he had shared with me before:

July 17, 2020, Ken’s Journal Entry: “Three Year Anniversary”

I can still visualize the things that happened that day. Leaving my girlfriend’s house to go to my mom’s house, seeing multiple police cars riding past me as I’m walking in the early morning breeze, getting paranoid as the time rolls by. I hear the sirens from the police cars going up the street as I make a stop at my auntie’s house to get something to drink. My mind racing, heart beating at a hundred miles per hour as I get a call from my mom. Knowing what she’s calling to tell me, she gets no answer.

My girlfriend called, and I answered to see what she wanted. She tells me the police is at my mom’s house, so come back. I take a glance at my phone again thinking about what she had told me. I told her, *What’s the point of me running when I haven’t done anything?*

We got off the phone and I started walking again. Police still riding around looking for me, so I jumped a fence and went to a friend’s house instead of going home like I was supposed to. I knocked on my friend’s door hoping he’s at home. He opens the door, I grabbed the blunt of marijuana I had rolled up behind my ear and lit it. After I hit the blunt and pass it to my friend, I tell him,

“Bruh, the police might be coming to get me from your house.”

He said, “For what?”

I replied, “for a murder that I was a witness to.”

He replied, “Bruh, you tripping.”

I said, “Just chill. They can’t search your house without a search warrant, bruh, we good, don’t panic. Everything alright.”

Then the police swarmed through the house looking for me.

“Where’s Mr. Washington?” one police yelled out as I’m sitting on the couch with my head in my arms watching them walk past me. That’s when I tried to get off the couch, then multiple more police comes rushing in the house with all type of weapons

¹⁰⁹ (Coates, 2015, p. 54)

and armor on them. Gun in my face. That's when I got paranoid, put my hands on top of my head, and said, "I am who you're looking for."

They put me in handcuffs, slammed me and told me to "Stop resisting!" But how can you resist an arrest when you are in handcuffs?

Then they took me in for questioning, trying to manipulate my mind because I was so young, but it didn't work. Now they are all mad because I was letting them know they had accused the wrong person for the crime that was committed.

Some policemen are so crooked nowadays, especially where I'm from. They handle you all types of ways, and you really can't do nothing about it, that's the sad part about the situation.

Never in a million years would I have thought of being in the situation I'm in now. It really takes a strong young man who has been through the things I have been through to really just sit and realize what I'm talking about in this situation.

Now I'm awaiting trial, hoping everything works out well, scared about going to trial because I don't know how the jurors may feel about me. One false communication or body language, everything could turn out wrong. When it's you versus twelve people who doesn't even know you and trying to convict you by your looks, have no sympathy for you, and lose no sleep from it, having your family leaving the courtroom in tears will turn you into a heartless person. How can they do that?

...

The convergence of Ken's story, the literature I had read, and the footage of George Floyd's final minutes was a wrecking ball into my un/consciousness. All around me were neoliberal voices calling Mr. Floyd a "thug," folks changing their social media photos to "Back the Blue" GIFs or posting Confederate flags with bizarre explanations of their right to claim and honor their heritage. This whirlwind of ignorance, fury, rage, fragility, sadness, and violence in proximity with Kentrelle's incarcerated body made the threat of mortality qua melanin more palpable, as an earlier journal entry had foreshadowed:

May 30, 2019, 12:48 PM: Reflective Memo, from SCJ Parking Lot, Post-Visitation

Ken,

I walked in with a blank sheet of paper, a clean Clorox wipe, my license, and my car keys. I walked in with an eager heart.

I walked out with a full sheet of paper, scribbled front-and-back in pink ink—hundreds of words, of details, of quotes, of ideas, of emotions, of things to try to do that seem like more than just visiting and hurling encouragements at you.

I walked out with a filthy Clorox wipe, my car keys, my license—the one that pictures my white face, smiling, lipstick painted on, happy to be in this free world, but always already taking it for granted.

Today my heart crumbled as we neared the end of our conversation. We were talking about the differences in jail and prison, whether you were scared to go to prison, or whether you thought SCJ was a better place for you, since July 2019 will be your 2-year deathday of being here. (Yes, *here*. When I am *here*, in this parking lot, though separated by the brick, concrete, glass, locks, doors, laws, razor wire, cameras, I feel like I'm in your space. I'm in the here-now that you're in, except still always not.)

You said something like, "Some people don't make it home from prison. They have knives, stabbings, and... and... and...there." And although I know this, I know about the stabbings and murder/homicide rate at St. Clair, so all of the vivid voices and images are flooding into my mind (from the Equal Justice Initiative museum), I have never actually put YOUR body into that position. I've never copied and pasted *your* silhouette onto that backdrop.

Actual death has never been a possibility for you in my mind. Even a life sentence didn't materialize that mortal possibility in my head...until you said that today: you, right t/here in front of me on that screen, facial expressions pixelated, your hands holding the phone, your frame wiggling a little as you thought of your body there, too, your gaze a little distant but still calling me to search deeper.

Your eyes, your wavy, freshly cut hair, your hands, your heart, your soul—there in that possibility, transported to that space, that fate, that end, that terror, that danger.

And now I cannot breathe.

Can you?

What will happen to you, Ken? What will happen?

How can I help protect you?

How can you be safe? Have you ever been safe? Has the Black body ever been safe in America?

Were you sentenced from the start? Was your born-Blackness always-already probable cause to land you where you are or in another camp with the knives, shanks, stabbings, basketball teams, gyms, books, push-ups, guards, gates, years, programs, Crimeville?

I don't know what to do.

I can't move.

I feel heavy. This *is* heavy. And my "free" body isn't even the one carrying the actual weight.

How/what/where does it weigh on you? Help me cope. I want to help you. No. I don't think I can *save* you, but the inclination to do *something* is t/here.

I'd just said "Amen," "I love you, too, Ken," and waved goodbye as I slowly hung up the clunky, grimy phone.

Five minutes later, from these same praying lips, I want to utter, *fuck this system*.

Fuck. This. System.

And now I am actually whispering it alone in my car.

No, I'm screaming, *KEN! FUCK THIS SYSTEM!!*

Clenched fists. Hot tears.

I grip the steering wheel and squeeze until the tears splash down to my lap.

I have to go.
You stay. I go.
I love you, Ken.

...

Writing to Share: A Long-Coming Breakthrough

Since early 2019 I have kept a digital journal of “letters” to Kentrelle. Each of these 250+ entries holds some essence of myself that I wanted to understand or that I understood best as I wrote to Kentrelle. This practice made me feel like so much of me was written onto/into so much of him. However, because of the paradox of proximity—how I am confined to 4x6 postcards, how we only get fifteen-minute phone calls, how even those phone calls are fuzzy, how I cannot carry my writing into visitation appointments (which, since Covid, have been cancelled altogether)—I was never able to actually *send* most of my entries to Ken. So, for a long time, while I genuinely felt like Kentrelle really knew me because I was, indeed, “writing to” him, the problem was, he didn’t actually have access to those writings—to those deepest parts of me—because I didn’t think I could fit it all onto postcards. But in October 2020, I learned that I could *type* and *print* onto these regulated postcards, and, to my surprise, the jail allowed Kentrelle to receive [most of] them.

October 23, 2020, 1:29 AM: Personal Journal Entry

Ken,
You know what I just realized?
I probably feel like you know me better than you actually do because the *you* I’ve been writing to all this time in my personal journal, sharing all my thoughts and stories and emotions with, isn’t technically the same *you* I hear from on the phone or in your letters. I need to send *you*—the *actual you*— all these journalings.
The system has screwed me. I didn’t even realize it until just now.
It isn’t fair that I get to constantly write to you—or this idea of you’ve I’ve projected into space—and you never actually get to read it.
This process has allowed me to know myself better, but I don’t think it’s really allowed you to know me at all. But I want you to know me. I want you to know and read all the things I’ve written from the beginning, and I want you to write back.
I’ll do it now. I’ll start at the beginning and print at least a couple today.
Love you and thinking about you a lot. Keep your head up. I will, too.

-Mrs. Kidd

...

Before this epiphany and before I started sending my journal entries to Ken, I couldn't fully appreciate what literacies of *loyalty* or *family* meant to him. Specifically, I couldn't grasp his loyalty to a particular friend named Shon, as these data illustrate:

September 23, 2020, 12:24 PM: Personal Journal Entry

Ken,

I saw a post on Instagram earlier that Shon made about you. In the picture, Shon's holding a blunt, leaning against a car, and throwing up some sign I don't recognize. His caption said, "Can't wait til dey free Ken. That's my backbone" then something about trap phones.

I can't really describe what all happened in my body-mind as I read your name on his post. I'm not your mother. I know Shon, and I know he's your friend. But I also know that he said to me, verbatim, just a couple months ago when I saw him at the Juvenile Detention Center, "I ain't gone lie, Mrs. Kidd. I'll probably end up back in jail," as if he'd already made up his mind.

But, Ken, so will you. You and Shon will BOTH end up back in jail if your always-already jeopardized body is photographed holding a blunt, leaned against a hood, throwing up signs alongside another Black male body with a felony branded on his record. This is the reality you will come home to one day.

And this is the part of me and of our relationship that is the hardest to understand. I wonder who you are to Shon. Do y'all talk on the phone? If so, are you a different you when you talk about your future to him? Are your plans the same as they are when you write or list them to me?

All it takes is one time, Ken. Just *once* for your body-mind to be captured again. But here I am writing all of this as your body-mind isn't free. You're still captive. I don't know what else to say. I have to work through these feelings and concerns and motives. I don't want to white-savior you. I just love you like one of my own children, Ken, or like a younger cousin, a little brother—as my *family*. I love you so much, and I believe in you. I *don't* believe in our system. I *don't* believe in its ability to know you like I do or its capacity to *care*. And that's why I worry. That's why I'm writing this...to you...to myself. To Shon. To whomever will read it. I just want you to be free.

But then I'm scrolling through his feed when I see this: another post, but this photo is of you sitting in an office chair in someone's room, wearing your basketball practice uniform and that big ole smile, flexing and chewing on a straw. Shon's caption reads, "We have always held each other down thru thick n thin we spent a ben, we gone meet back up 1 day so we can talk about watt all we both missed. I miss u lil bra n I love you. U coming home soon just cause u gone don't mean ur forgotten. Free you Lil Bra." And immediately I remember this:

"Part of loving Black boys is helping them to love themselves and other Black boys."¹¹⁰

I read it today, and I taught it today.

¹¹⁰ (Washington, 2018, p. 160)

Too bad I didn't live it today.

-Mrs. Kidd

...

On October 10, 2020, Ken and I talked candidly about his relationship with Shon. I read him that journal entry, and during that call, Ken told me,

“Yeah, I taught Shon how to put the mack game down. I taught him how to drip, you feel me? When he came to jail a couple months ago he was like, ‘*Man, bruh, I love you,*’ and I’m like, ‘*I love you too, bro. My mama took you in like a real son, so that make you like my real little brother,*’ you feel me?”

And I said, “yeah, I feel you.” But I didn't think much more of the conversation at the time.

Then, later that same month, I had one last major epiphany that would change the course of our relationship:

Meanwhile...January 11, 2021, 10:45 AM: Personal Journal Entry

You tried to get to medical for weeks.

You felt bad.

Then came the chest pain.

Finally

you saw a nurse.

She checked your vitals and said it was acid reflux.

You were given two pills—

for acid reflux.

You said you couldn't breathe, you couldn't catch a full, deep breath.

You aren't the first Black man in America to say that.

Your inhaler didn't help.

The pills didn't help.

You didn't get better.

The nurse was wrong.

Jesus, don't let it be too late.

They should have listened to you.

You know your body.

But they control your body.

I encouraged you to stay strong, to be positive.

But the only thing that was actually positive?
Your Covid test.

You tried to get to medical for weeks.

Before I started really sharing my journaling with Ken, I couldn't understand things like his loyalty to Shon. But by 2021, as I read back through the transcript of that October 10th phone call, I finally understood what *family* meant to Ken. Knowing how wrong I'd had things in the past, I talked with Ken about it to confirm:

February 26, 2021: Selections from Phone Call Transcript

B: Do you remember a while back when I was confused about all of that stuff about Shon? Remember me telling you *I know that I love you, but I also understand that Shon loves you, but I also wonder what that is like because Son has...* I don't know. I wondered if you were a different you to Shon than you are to me, and...blah blah blah. You remember all that?

K: True. Yeah. I understand. I understand.

B: Yeah, so I didn't really understand this whole loyalty to Shon thing because I kept thinkin', *Kentrelle knows better. He knows better. He knows he can't do what Shon's doin'*. And you would say it, too. You said like, *The day he looked at me and said he came in here because he wanted to see me, I wanted to hit him in the face for real. I told him, 'Man, you trippin', bruh. Change your life!'* That's exactly what you said, and so I know all along that you know better than that, but at the same time, I couldn't make it make sense why you would remain loyal to him. BUT...then I was reading back through that conversation today, and you said, *He was like, 'Man, bruh, I love you,' and I'm like, 'I love you, too, bro. My mama took you in like a real son, so that make you like my real little brother,' you feel me?* And it hit me like a MAC truck when I read that: Ken...*Shon is family!!!* And I could be wrong about this, but you know, like the day we were talking about your grandma's funeral you said *I was really tryin' to test you. You're family now, we're family now*, and that meant *so much* to me. And so when I read that today I was like *oh my gosh, well THAT's why, that's why!! It doesn't matter what Shon does or what choices he makes. Kentrelle's still loyal and loves him because HE IS FAMILY.* Is that correct?

K: [confidently] Most definitely. Most definitely.

B: Okay. [breathing like I'm unwinding or deflating or something from being so wound up in my analysis]

K: [laughs, genuinely] We got somethin' on the wall that say *Blood make us kin, but loyalty makes us family*, you see what I'm sayin? So, I stick to the loyalty so strong, you feel me, like to the point where if you do something for me and I'm convinced you loyal, that's how I see it. I don't see that I have friends. Because I have *no* friends. I only have family. You feel me? So if I say that I conversate with you, or I message you in a strong way, then I look at you like family for real like, ay man, I'm riding or dying with you right here.

All along, I had expected my persistent and honest personal journaling to magically produce proximity between Ken and me. However, regardless of how honest or persistent I had been, because I hadn't actually been *sending* Ken my writing, he had no means by which to come closer to me, and he had no reason to invite me closer to him. This is *why* I felt like our talks in February were shallow. But when I finally did start sending my journal entries to Ken, his writing—his spirit—became exponentially more vulnerable and trusting, and our understandings of one another's worlds are rapidly becoming so much more authentic.

After all this time, I realized what Ken meant the day he told me we were “family now.” Finally, after reflecting on 3.5 years of feeling 6 [endless] miles away from Ken on the inside of SCJ, and now after surviving a whole year of 6-feet-apart on the outside of SCJ, I finally learned the key to proximity that I had been missing. I finally learned that to produce *real* closeness, I had to exhibit *reciprocity* in my writing.

Dutro wrote, “*Reciprocity* means that teachers must lead with their own difficult stories—not because they will be the same as children's, but to show that hard stories are present and welcome, that vulnerability does not lie solely with students, and that children can also serve as witnesses to teachers' humanity.”¹¹¹ This reciprocity often “comes as a process of exposing oneself and our injuries and then turning a lens onto ourselves so we may also see how we

¹¹¹ (Dutro, 2017, p. 333)

injure.”¹¹² Through this critical introspection, we relate *through* learning and learn *through* relating.

Knowing our students and allowing ourselves to be known by them is a form of active resistance against traditional schooling that hegemonically privileges some body-minds over others and contributes to the Prison-Industrial Complex. Kentrelle and I have been working against all along. Writing ourselves into closer proximity has convinced me that when we are willing to critically reflect and reflexively act on our lived experiences and the assumptions we have made—both consciously and unconsciously—we can facilitate emotional, psychological, intellectual, and personal growth in our classrooms and foster genuine relationships beyond school doors.

Through knowing and loving Kentrelle, I am learning more each day how to produce proximity—regardless of pandemics or prison walls—by *bearing witness*, *being present*, and vulnerably *practicing reciprocity*. These lessons compose the palette I will carry forward into the next chapter of my life story.

¹¹² (Garcia, 2015, p. 315)

CHAPTER 5: CLOSENESS IN THE CLASSROOM

6 Years Later

Perpetuating Proximity through Pedagogy

Kentrelle Ty’Carter Washington came into my life 6 years from when I will enter the secondary classroom again. Blending what I’ve learned with Kentrelle about myself and about literacy education, I will add the finishing touches to our artwork in this chapter as I think toward cultivating closeness in my future classroom.

...

April 1, 2021, 3:30 PM: Letter to Kentrelle

Kentrelle Ty’Carter Washington,

I have some really gigantic news to share, and I wanted to tell you first.

Here it is:

You came into my life on August 17, 2013. And this fall, six years from that very day, I’ve decided that I’m going back to where it all began.

I’m going back to the classroom, Ken!!!

I definitely didn't see it coming, but I have peace about this. I know it's what I'm supposed to do, Ken: back to the classroom, back to my first loves.

The classroom is where I dropped that privileged paintbrush and learned to paint-WITH. It's where I realized I was white and began to learn how that matters. It's where I learned to be painter AND canvas. It's where I channel my muchness. The classroom is where my Spirit feels most free. Ken, the classroom is where I met YOU.

And, to be honest, the classroom is where I've been this whole time. It might not have had desks, textbooks, a bell schedule, or assessments, but what even IS a classroom? Is it not a space where teaching and learning take place? I can't speak for you, but for me, that's exactly what all these years, all these postcards, pages, and phone calls have composed—teaching, learning, growing, becoming—all in this *t/here* space.

Earlier this week, when I told you about having an interview, you said,
Noooooo! You gone leave me?! You gone go back to teaching, and you not gone have time to talk to me no more!

But WRONG. I'm not leaving you. That would pretty much be impossible. I won't forget you or replace you or abandon you or not have time for you.

I've told you over and over again, and you ought to believe me by now: Your soul—your spirit—is forever fused with mine, so you're coming with me.

We are *Kendred Spirits*.

So stop playing [“more than I play with my own child at home” 😊], and take your own advice: We got this, Ken. We're family now.

-With muchness, loyalty, gratitude, prayer, and so much love,
your friend, your teacher, your student, your family,

Dr. Briana Gilbert Kidd

...

[In]Conclusion

Near the end of *Just Mercy*, Bryan Stevenson reflected,

I began thinking about what would happen if we all just acknowledged our brokenness, if we owned up to our weaknesses, our deficits, and our biases, our fears. Maybe if we did we wouldn't want to kill the broken among us who have killed others¹¹³...we could no longer take pride in mass incarceration, in executing people, in our deliberate indifference to the most vulnerable.¹¹⁴

With Stevenson, I refuse indifference. I refuse to look away. I refuse to forget Ken.

November 2020, A Thanksgiving Plea

Today is Thanksgiving, and all I want is to be around my family to enjoy it. Sometimes things are better with your family. You can build a closer bond with your loved ones. It's to the point where I don't even celebrate holidays anymore. Every day is just another day. Same old orange jumpsuits, same old ugly faces. Well, at least that's what they make it seem like while you're in this decreased form of proximity.

Nothin' special goes on. Just eat, watch some TV, and sit around all day. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm ready to come home; I'm ready to be around my family and have fun.

Give me another chance. Let me recover from this torture chamber and reunite with my family and friends. Get me back to society. Let me prove my innocence. Help me come from the dead. Even though I'm alive in here, I'm dead to society. I feel the energy. It's like I'm not even here/there anymore.

But I am still here, so stop thinking that I'm dead. I'm okay. I'm survivin' the best way I can right now.

¹¹³ Kentrelle *has not been convicted* of the alleged crime.

¹¹⁴ (Stevenson, 2015, p. 291)

With Ken, I commit to telling our story. I commit to bearing witness. I commit to being present. I commit to reciprocity. I commit to hearing Ken's earnest request and to tell our story until someone with the clout to fight for his legal freedom and his human and civil rights hears it, too.

With Ken, I move forward *always* aware that we're *family now*.

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APPENDIX A

Autoethnography as an Ontomethodological Orientation to Qualitative Research

To articulate the inseparability of knowing, being, and doing—the simultaneous, embodied performance of critical introspection and writing, what Bochner and Ellis (2017) refer to as “living an autoethnographic life,” (p. 118), Yagelski (2011) calls “writing as a way of being,” and L. P. Johnson (2017) calls “writing the self”—I use the term *ontomethodology*. In other words, autoethnography is *both* a way of being *and* a performative method of qualitative research: an ontology+a methodology=ontomethodology. Thus, as we write, autoethnographers enact ontomethodological performances that eliminate any distinction between living life and doing research.¹¹⁵ This orientation facilitates a shift from writing toward a *product*, to focussing primarily on the embodied *processes* of composing, about which Yagelski (2011) explained, “Writing is an act of becoming more fully present in the world at the moment of writing” (p. 116). Therefore, despite the actual enforced distances between our body-minds, as Kentrelle and I *compose*, we write ourselves into a deeper presence in one another’s worlds. Simultaneously, as we write with/in our circumstances, our body-minds are slowed down and attuned to the material and discursive forces around us. In these suspended moments, we are autoethnographers. In these trifling circumstances, we are composers. In these collaborative productions, we move together.

A Brief History of Autoethnography

“Academic disciplines don’t tend to be brave, daring, or fearless, you know.”
Art Bochner, *Evocative Autoethnography*, p. 39

Standing before a classroom of blossoming qualitative researchers, Carolyn Ellis (2004) drew three columns on the whiteboard. From left to right, she labeled them “Science,” “Middle Ground,” “Art.” Starting on the left column labeled “science,” Ellis explained that positivist

¹¹⁵ (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014a)

research, which privileges hard facts and mind over body, constitutes the left end of the continuum. The far right of the continuum, she explained, is where art and literature reside. But stepping between the two poles, she positioned her body in the liminal space. Between the “science” and “art” extremes, Ellis began to stir the components of each paradigm into the academic alloy she and her partner had come to call “Autoethnography.” According to Ellis, *autoethnography* was a mode of scholarship that occupies the vast middle ground between positivism and art, and this middle ground was exactly the terrain she’d searched for in her personal academic becoming.

As a sociologist, Ellis (2016) found herself longing to write about her emotions and personal experiences, yet even after she earned tenure from the publication of a relatively objective ethnographic study, she still felt pressured to make her writing more “scientific,” more objective. Until then, sociology widely meant the researcher entering a space, extracting information, then representing the “other” through her/his research reports. It was understood that a researcher’s subjectivity should be left out of academic work in order to avoid biased observations (Ellis, 2004). This framing left Carolyn stranded somewhere between the poles of hard social sciences and interpretive, imaginative humanities. However, Carolyn wasn’t the only scholar wandering this terrain. As her resistance toward the illusion of researcher objectivity intensified, restlessness and skepticism among other philosophers and researchers began to crescendo, too.

Among these rogue, rising voices, between the 1960s and 1980s, researchers like Geertz and Goffman published studies that resisted rigid positivist ideals. They aimed to “study life in its natural settings, to think aesthetically, employ rich and expansive metaphors, give thick

descriptions, and concentrate on meanings that take readers into the heart of lived experience.”¹¹⁶ Their arguments cited various postmodern thinkers who rejected grand narratives and “regimes of truth”¹¹⁷ by dismantling claims that language could be neutral. They called into question the power dynamics and politics at play in how research(ers) construed participants’ lives. Ripples of this ontological crisis seeped through the phenomenological, deconstructionist, poststructural, and posthumanist work of scholars like Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Butler, and Barad, among others. And this is to say nothing of the intellectually prior work of indigenous and Black scholars such as Gloria Anzaldua (2015), James Baldwin (1963), Angela Davis, June Jordan, and Alice Walker (1999, 2003, 2018), Hortense Spillers (1978, 1987), Sylvia Wynter (2015), and others who were always already aware of the inseparability of researcher/research based on their a priori understanding of “research [as] always already both moral and political.”¹¹⁸

Ontomethodological Literature

Today I follow the trails these scholars/methodologists blazed for me as I bear witness to Kentrelle's literacies and lived experiences and as I critically interrogate my own ways of moving through the world. The processes and products of this work bring visibility to Kentrelle's situation, make our shared humanity more urgent (Stevenson, 2014), amplify Ken’s voice and experiences, and operate as a form of creative resistance against systemic racism and erasure as we subversively cultivate and share literacies in putative, surveilled, off-limits spaces.

As transformative praxis, autoethnography crosses borders and accomplishes multiple life-affirming goals at once. In its fusion of scholarship, creativity, and social justice, autoethnography qualifies as *interventionist* work (Denzin, 2004; Bhattacharya, 2020) that seeks

¹¹⁶ (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 34)

¹¹⁷ (Lyotard, 1984, as cited in Goodall, 2000)

¹¹⁸ (Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008, p. 3)

to give voice to otherwise silenced selves and Others; as *compassionate research* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; hooks, 2003) that “involves working with lay people” and recognizes the researcher’s story as “secondary to the story of participants” (p. 183); and as *creative scholarship* (Pelias, 2019) carried out by artists who

call upon their literary skills to evoke the emotional and intellectual complexity of their subjects; who deploy their vulnerable, relational, and reflexive selves to expose and change problematic cultural practices; and who engage their embodied ideological and ethical sensibilities as researchers and cultural members to guide their scholarship. (p. 1)

To carry out this work, I lean on the wisdom of scholars such as Du Bois (1903/1994), Laymon (2018), Johnson and Johnson (2020), Asim (2019), Jones and Woglom (2016), Boylorn (2013; 2016a; 2016b; 2017), Coates (2015), Woodson (1933/2015), Walker (1973), and Morrison (1987) who have employed affective, artful methods to harness the power of personal writing as a way to communicate ways their bodies have [been] understood and mis/understood. This inward←→outward reflection and transformation is the goal of this writing+relating project.

APPENDIX B

Data Sources, Production, and Analysis

Data Sources and Production

Table 1 enumerates the data I have collected to date; however, because of the ongoing nature of my relationship/work with Ken, these numbers are constantly changing. Each time Kentrelle and I talk on the phone, each time we write to and/or about one another, each time we experience affective encounters, data are produced. Additionally, I have kept records of each JailATM deposit, each SECURUS transaction, and each postal expense as a means of illustrating the realities of the prison-industrial complex.

Table 1

Data Sources

DATA SOURCE	QUANTITY
Letters from Kentrelle to me	50 (and increasing)
Postcards to Kentrelle from me	45 (increasing daily)
Transcribed phone calls with Kentrelle	49 (15 minutes each)
Facebook messages with Kentrelle's mom	60+
Digital Journal entries by me	250+ (increasing daily)
Notes from phone calls with Kentrelle (Fieldnotes)	27+
Fieldnotes from visits with Kentrelle	17+ (visits currently suspended)
Visual/Verbal Journal entries	7
Photographs of individual and shared lived experiences	26
Anonymized/de-identified screenshots and news clippings about race, racism, education, and incarceration in the Deep South	86

Moreover, because every part of this ontomethodological process is multiple, relational, and productive, autoethnographic research facilitates [even requires] interpersonal, interactive, and ongoing meaning making. In other words, not only are autoethnographers' lived experiences and memories themselves data, but when we layer, narrativize, and share these data, we are ontomethodologically producing more data; we are constantly reading and composing new articulations of freedom, survival, and becoming with/in the world. Specifically, when I piece these data together and fill in the narrative gaps of Kentrelle's and my relationship, I am producing and analyzing data through the processes and products of *bricolage* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999; Kambrelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Ohito, 2013; Pelias, 2019; Rogers, 2012).

Data Analysis

In a tangible sense, I have compiled and collaged data from 2018 forward (including letters, postcards, returned mail, fieldnotes, newspaper clippings, journal entries, receipts, and transcripts) into physical binders so that the data read as the ongoing performance of our relationship. Using this compilation, I have analyzed data through close readings, creative reconstructions, and written interpretations of data (lived experiences and reflective writings). These analyses take the form of more writings, which I have selectively revised and sent to Kentrelle in the form of postcards. These postcards and supplementary layers of narrative writing fuse to create this dissertation.

Because of the restrictions of physical proximity, Kentrelle is not able to work with any of the tactile data other than what I send him in postcards. Through his postcards, which he [so far] has been permitted to keep, Kentrelle has access to every word of our becoming composition. These postcards include theoretical discussions, writing prompts, and lived experiences, mostly through the form of dated journal entries and added entries to elaborate and

apply philosophical concepts. Again, this is always produced in language that is both accessible to and respectful of Kentrelle's unique literacies.

As another method of cooperatively analyzing data, I also sometimes read journal entries aloud to Kentrelle over the phone, and he reads his own journal entries to me. Sometimes he mails me these entries, and other times he asks me to transcribe them so that he can keep his entries. At times as I've read my entries to Kentrelle, I've caught myself omitting words or turning phrases to make them more accessible to him. Any time this happens, I immediately note these stutters and revise the language of my entries to match whatever moment-by-moment verbal choices I made as I read aloud to him. In this way, Kentrelle is able to speak back, add to, question, and enrich the writings that will comprise the bulk of our story.

APPENDIX C

Historical and Geopolitical Context of the Study

Acknowledging historical roots is imperative to an expanded conceptualization of literacies as embodied because in any assemblage, “History is brought into the present moment.”¹¹⁹ Although it’s tempting to believe that ‘slavery is a thing of the past,’ it’s important to remember that until slavery was “abolished” in 1865, enslaved Black men were “defined by the American Constitution as ‘three-fifths’ of a man.”¹²⁰ Additionally, we must “Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.”¹²¹ This is to say that Black bodies in America have always been considered less-human than white bodies. And while we *know* this, per short snippets in textbooks and Black-History-Month posters and lessons, it’s still tempting—even appealing and popular—to choose ignorance (A.K.A. “colorblindness”) toward these still-lingering effects of this history of enslavement. “And the reason for this ignorance,” wrote Baldwin (1963), “is that a knowledge of the role [we white teachers] played—and play—in American life would reveal more about America to Americans than Americans wish to know” (p. 101).

Unless we re-evaluate the narratives we’ve always known, we will remain “trapped in this history which [we white teachers] do not understand,” and “until we understand it, [we] cannot be released from it.”¹²² So, amid discourses of “Mak[ing] America Great Again,” perhaps instead, if we can tune into the literacies of our bodies and the literacies of Other(ed) bodies,

¹¹⁹ (Wetherell, 2013, p. 360)

¹²⁰ (Baldwin, 1963, p. 84)

¹²¹ (Coates, 2015, p. 70)

¹²² (Baldwin, 1963, p. 10)

“...we can make America what America must become”¹²³: a nation that, understanding its egregious treatment of non-white peoples, can become more just, more free, and more life-affirming for all people. A first step toward this future is acknowledging and claiming our nation’s history.

Geopolitics of the Deep South

Carter G. Woodson wrote, “The conditions of today have been determined by what has taken place in the past, and in a careful study of this history we may see more clearly the great theatre of events in which the Negro has played a part.”¹²⁴ With this advice, it is essential to contextualize this project against the “theatre of events” that have rendered inseparable the educational and carceral backdrops of the southern United States, backdrops that are also entirely unthinkable apart from race.

I am a white literacy educator who has only ever educated and been educated in the Deep South. Kentrelle is a Black male who has also only ever been a student, only ever been mis/educated in the Deep South and is now incarcerated here. Because we are both subjects of these racialized carceral and educational systems, albeit in multiple different ways, it is important to understand the omnipresence and influence of these systems on the stories we tell and the stories told about us, even when we don’t explicitly call them by name.

Situating the Study in Place: Alabama, the Deep South

First, the place of this research is highly important to the literacies enabled and enacted here. Race-based work always has geopolitical roots in the Deep South, and those roots have supported branches that have borne bitter and “strange fruit.”¹²⁵ As I write this dissertation, I am

¹²³ (Baldwin, 1963, p. 10)

¹²⁴ (Woodson, 1933/2015, p. 13)

¹²⁵ Meeropol, A. (1954). Strange fruit [Recorded by Billie Holiday]. *Billie Holiday at JATP* [performance]. Original lyrics by Jewish activist Abel Meeropol, published in 1937 as a poem,

completing my studies at a predominantly white institution (PWI), The University. Allow me a moment to foreground this study with/in the sacredness of some of The University's settings—the stories of which are often erased, suppressed, or excluded from Alabama history books, tourism cites, campus walking tours, and historic markers.

The University is located in the heart of a city named by white settlers after a Native-American chief who was slain by Hernando de Soto. The city is established along the banks of the Black Warrior River, land that originally belonged to the Creek Indians. Our pristine campus and many of its grandiose buildings were originally constructed by enslaved Black folk in the 1800s. Some of these buildings still boast the names of white supremacists such as Josiah C. Nott who used his medical status at The University to unethically try to justify slavery.¹²⁶ Like Nott Hall, one of the many buildings lining The University's quad, these buildings were thanklessly defended by enslaved Black soldiers during the bloody Civil War, despite the racism these women and men faced on campus and throughout the city.

In 2020, etched in stone entryways to learning halls across campus, remain the names of numerous Confederate generals and prominent members of the Ku Klux Klan, while grandiose, multimillion-dollar plantation-style buildings house the majority-white Greek fraternities and sororities, many of their inner walls plastered with the same Confederate memorabilia that dons countless vehicles and windows around our city and its rural outskirts. As of 2020, if one were to walk the halls and sidewalks of The University, the presence of material or memorialized minority representation would seem like a slight blemish compared to the Confederate representation of “Old South” history.

“Bitter Fruit.” The “fruit” hanging from southern trees is a grim metaphor for lynched Black bodies.

¹²⁶ (Horsman, 2018)

The Color-Line

Just 2.2 miles from our beautiful campus, Kentrelle is confined by layers of concrete and metal at the Southern County Jail. As you leave campus and head west down 15th Street toward the campus of an HBCU that is also located in our city, you will soon approach an overpass, under which is the crumbly parking lot of the Southern County Jail, and just beyond which railroad tracks draw an almost tangible, three-dimensional line between the areas of campus/commerce (A.K.A. the white(r) sections of town) and the section of town where, almost exclusively, Black folk live. The aesthetic differences on either side of these railroad tracks are remarkable. Driving from one section of 15th Street to the other, one side of the Southern County Jail to the other, one college campus to the other, is like driving through a scene in a 1950s-1960s feature film. Segregation might not be the official name for it anymore, but the dividing lines are clear.

I am writing this report in late 2020. In 1903—literally *117 years ago*—W.E.B. Du Bois penned these words: “It is usually possible to draw in nearly every Southern community a physical color-line on the map, on the one side of which whites dwell and on the other Negroes.”¹²⁷ Full Stop.

Over 117 years later, this observation is still undeniable. Geopolitics make themselves legible through more than which neighborhood we grew up in. These race-based divisions, which Woodson (1933/2015) also observed as “a gap between the masses” (p. 40), have always already been at work in almost every aspect of southern life, especially in education.

To further situate this work, I will briefly summarize several critiques of American education since the early 19th Century and move toward the current state of education in the

¹²⁷ (DuBois, 1903/1994, p. 101)

South in order to situate myself and Kentrelle with/in these systems. From there, I'll provide a broad overview of race relations in the United States since the early 1960s as we move toward the current regime of mass incarceration of Black Americans, like Kentrelle, many of whom "lead scarred lives due to violence tendered by tacit discriminatory practices and the quiet but incisive hatred aimed at them. Yet, they live many stories beyond narratives of oppression, which, too, shape the ways they read, write, and manage their worlds of text."¹²⁸

Situating the Study in History

After the Civil War ripped through the South and destroyed both its economy and the brutal institution that had held it up, former slave owners found themselves desperate for a way to rebuild the war-torn southern economy. Although the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution formally abolished slavery in 1865, proving that where there was a will, there was a way, it didn't quite account for there also being angry white folk. Although Black literacy, Black political involvement, and Black social life thrived in the first part of the 12-year Reconstruction period,¹²⁹ the "Negro Problem" W.E.B. Du Bois would later describe had already become evident; Black freedmen, while technically emancipated, had minimal access to resources required to thrive and were up against a world they did not choose, and white folks, both rich and poor, had no idea what to do with so many suddenly "free" Negroes. Even as many emancipated Black people worked quickly and collectively to embrace the promises of emancipation, "it quickly became clear that *emancipation* in the United States did not mean *equality* for Black People."¹³⁰ Within no time, many whites recognized and exploited the 13th Amendment's loophole which allowed for "slavery" and "involuntary servitude" as "punishment for a crime."

¹²⁸ (Kirkland, 2013, p. 9)

¹²⁹ (Foner, 1988)

¹³⁰ (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020)

Thus began the round up and arrests en masse of Black men and women for petty crimes outlined by the “Black Codes.” With so many “criminals” now legally stripped of their short-lived protections from slavery, white propoerty owners had found the solution to their part of the Negro Problem. More Black bodies locked up meant more free labor...again. Thus began slavery 2.0: “Convict Leasing.”¹³¹ Through this system of control,

As many as 200,000 black Americans were forced into back-breaking labor in coal mines, turpentine factories and lumber camps. They lived in squalid conditions, chained, starved, beaten, flogged and sexually violated. They died by the thousands from injury, disease and torture.¹³²

So slavery wasn’t over; its conditions and the semantics were just remixed.

Altogether, the subversive and vile moves white supremacists made during Reconstruction, along with the hush of the rest of the country, according to Blackmon (2008), “explain more about the current state of American life, black and white, than the antebellum slavery that preceded.”¹³³ However, we haven’t necessarily been taught in detail the ignominy of Reconstruction. As The Equal Justice Initiative reported, “Our collective ignorance of what happened immediately after the Civil War has contributed to misinformed stereotypes and misguided false narratives about who is honorable and who is not and has allowed bigotry and a legacy of racial injustice to persist.”¹³⁴

When convict leasing started to fizzle out toward the beginning of the 20th Century (only to be replaced by chain gangs and other genres of enslavement), the criminalization of the Black body remained. Not only had overzealous police forces built up and acted upon this image, but

¹³¹ (Ford & Bowman, 2017)

¹³² (Ford & Bowman, 2017, “A new form of control,” para. 3)

¹³³ (Blackmon, 2008)

¹³⁴ (Equal Justice Initiative, 2020, para. 8)

infinite propaganda had also painted the American Negro as a savage, vicious criminal to be feared and contained, especially in contrast to white women—Southern Belles—who mythically represented purity and innocence.¹³⁵ These discourses of Black folk, especially Black men, as criminals spread like wildfire among southern whites who used these fears to justify the upsurge in incarceration and violence.

As masses of Black folk were imprisoned and forced back into unfair and brutal labor, “free” Black folks suffered the moral interpetude of the horrific Jim Crow era, which marked an intense 100-year reign of segregation and racial terror in the South.¹³⁶ Between *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, which legalized segregation qua “separate but equal” rhetoric, and the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board* that overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine, Black Americans were sorted into Black or white schools. And although segregation in public schools was ruled illegal, the forced integration of schools only heightened the racist rage in the South.

Events like the malicious 1955 murder of Emmett Till for his alleged interaction with a white woman who, in 2018, confessed that her statements were false, intensified the distrust between Blacks and whites in the South. In 1961, just under 2 hours from the Southern County Jail where Kentrelle is caged, the Freedom Riders bus was bombed by a violent mob of Klansmen who had coordinated with police to allow enough time to beat the riders before torching the bus. That year, the connections to our historical-present really picked up speed.

Simmons (2015) explained that the United States’s rampant carceral state can be traced to President Kennedy’s Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Control Act of 1961, which was picked up by President Johnson and (re)appropriated through “tough on crime” policies. As soon as

¹³⁵ See Hackman, 2018; Kendi, 2016

¹³⁶ See Equal Justice Initiative’s history of racial terror and lynchings in the South for extensive information about the severity and brutality of the Jim Crow era in the South.

Johnson took office, he understood the importance of quickly appeasing Americans who were frightened by the escalating racial unrest of the Civil Rights Movement. Johnson moved swiftly to sign Kennedy's previous work, which became the Civil Rights Act of 1964, arguably the most progressive legislative victory in civil rights history. This legislation, at least on paper, outlawed discrimination on the basis of color, class, race, sex, religion, or origin and granted Black Americans the right to fair wages, ended segregation in public places, and led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.¹³⁷

So while the bill represented progress in many ways, some of its material effects were quite contrary, especially in the South. Whites could now claim that everything was equal, per the law, as if the signing of a 1964 bill could instantly erase hundreds of years of African slavery and racial terror. The ability to point to a piece of legislation as proof of progress made it much easier to blame Blacks who were suffering from prejudice, bias, discrimination, and poverty for their own predicaments. However, many Black scholars had always already been skeptical of the true progress that could be borne of legislative action alone. Scholars and activists such as Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and James Baldwin were incredulous toward the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because of the white government officials and law enforcement officers who held the power to actually enforce its premises. They, along with many Black Americans, recognized the Civil Rights Movement as a necessary fight for freedom, not solely for equality in society, in the workplace, or at the polls, but as a much larger and deeper fight, a distinction which Kendi and Reynolds (2020) explain as the difference in fighting for fairness and fighting for life.

Just one year before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed—on the campus where I study, in the city where Kentrelle is incarcerated—the nation watched Alabama Governor

¹³⁷ See Reynolds & Kendi, 2020; Kendi, 2016; Alexander, 2012; Stevenson, 2014, Equal Justice Initiative, 2020

George Wallace's infamous "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" where he vehemently vowed his opposition to desegregation and attempted to block Black students Vivian Malone and James Hood from registering for classes. His words, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever!" reflected a reluctance to break from the traditions of the "Old South" and gained a monstrous amount of support. This strategy would heavily influence Presidential campaigns, political rhetoric, and social ideology for decades and decades to come.

In 1968, following the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., demonstrations and unrest among Black Americans, once again, threw many white Americans into frenzied fear as mainstream media, as per usual, used selective images of Black Panther violence, rioting, etc. to paint Black folk as predators and anti-law enforcement savages.¹³⁸

With the Presidential election on the horizon, Richard Nixon capitalized on this anxiety and tension by reverting back to George Wallace's Southern Strategy. The "Southern Strategy" would be weaponized over the next several years to further polarize races and invoke fear through the power of discourse. Without actually *saying* "scary Black people" or "innocent white people," Nixon was able to dredge trenches even deeper between classes and races. His goal, in the name of "law and order" was essentially to shut down all protests, riots, rallies, etc. that made whites increasingly uncomfortable. Essentially, this was a move to reassert the government's control over its unruliest citizens as it reassured whites of our safety and power. This strategy won Nixon the presidency.

Moreover, during the 1980s, President Reagan's "War on Drugs" reinforced the injurious ideologies behind "tough-on-crime" legislation.¹³⁹ Using the Southern Strategy to rally mostly

¹³⁸ See Reynolds & Kendi, 2020; Alexander 2010; Coates, 2015; Laymon, 2018; Asim, 2019; DuVernay, 2016

¹³⁹ See also Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* for extensive analyses of these policies and their lasting effects.

white supporters through veiled racial discourse that stoked fear, the War on Drugs overwhelmingly targeted “at-risk” communities. In other words, poor Black neighborhoods were infiltrated. Arrests for drug offenses created and continue to contribute to an exponential surge in the U.S. prison population. Between 1980 and 2017, the federal prison population grew from 40,900 to 452,964. This is a greater than 500% increase.¹⁴⁰ These tough-on-crime policies and the racist policies behind them were “driven by assumptions about the cultural inferiority and ‘pathology’ of African Americans.”¹⁴¹ These racist discourses have had substantial material effects in schooling, as well, because within this framework, schools provided an ideal market for security companies to push their promising products, regardless of the fact that schools were actually, statistically speaking, exceedingly safe places for children to be.¹⁴² In what follows, I will tie the criminal in/justice system to schooling practices in the U.S. today.

Southern Mis/Education

Through all the unrest outlined above, children still faced the challenges of schooling. Thus, the riddle of the Black male in U.S. education is not a new topic in social or educational research. Although we still have reports that “...Black boys continue to be largely underrepresented in gifted programs or honors and advanced placement courses (Schott Foundation, 2010)”¹⁴³ and that Black students are overwhelmingly more likely to receive more frequent and more severe punishment for behavioral issues than their white peers,¹⁴⁴ scholars and activists have critiqued the educational experiences of Black children for centuries. Addressing the ongoingness of inequitable education for Black boys in the U.S. and insisting on new

¹⁴⁰ (DuVernay, 2016)

¹⁴¹ (Perry, 2016, p. BR15)

¹⁴² (Noguera 2008; USDOE/NCE 2007, as cited in Simmons, 2015)

¹⁴³ (Moore et al., 2018, pp. 2-3)

¹⁴⁴ See Moore et al., 2018; Finnerty, 2018; Marshall, 2018

approaches to this work, Moore et al. (2018) wrote, “For Black people in the United States, getting an education has historically been an illicit activity rife with danger, personal risk, and structural barriers,” and he continued, “When schools fail Black boys, it’s because they are doing school the way that school has always been done” (p. 12). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) foregrounded this observation when he pointed out schools’ misunderstandings of Black childhood and Black childhood as he testified,

To be educated in my Baltimore mostly meant always packing an extra number 2 pencil and working quietly. Educated children walked in single file on the right side of the hallway, raised their hands to use the lavatory, and carried the lavatory pass when en route. Educated children never offered excuses—certainly not childhood itself. The world had no time for the childhoods of black boys and girls. (p. 25)

And pushing the connections between schooling and street survival and their embodied effects, Coates continued, “If the streets shackled my right leg, the schools shackled my left. Fail to comprehend the streets and you gave up your body now. But fail to comprehend the schools and you gave up your body later” (p. 25).

However, long before the work of Coates or Moore or Erikson or hooks or Hammond or Delpit or even Freire, two of the most influential critics of the American schooling regime were W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. In Woodson’s (1933/2015) publication, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*¹⁴⁵ and Du Bois’s (1903/1994) *The Souls of Black Folk*, both scholars

¹⁴⁵ While discussing Woodson’s and Du Bois’s work, I use the word “Negro” as they each did in order to point to a specific time period in U.S. history when this term marked the physical, emotional, economic, social, and educational conditions surrounding Black people in the South. As Du Bois went on to advocate even through petitions to the *New York Times*, “Negro,” with a capital “N” represented a culture, and was a respectable term to describe millions of Americans.

exposed the institutions that, since the beginning of slavery, have complicated and deterred the Negro educational experience.

First, Du Bois founded his critiques upon the premise that the existence of the American Negro, both for the Black man himself and for his white counterparts, was/is a problem because of the toll it takes on the Black man and the utter confusion it causes the white man. He described a major symptom of this problematic existence as a “double consciousness,” or “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, or measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”¹⁴⁶ Du Bois explained this dueling “two-ness” as the constant performed negotiation of “...an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (p. 2). Because two-ness in this context is exclusive to Black bodies, Du Bois would illustrate how the pedagogies of [predominantly] white educators do not account for it. Like his observation of the color-line, this pedagogical critique is still relevant in U.S. schooling today.

Further, according to Du Bois, in order for the white educator to begin to understand the plight of the Negro in the South, she must first “...accept some of the race prejudice in the South as a fact” (p. 104). This fact impacts many of the oppressive institutions of the South such as the police system, which was primarily designed for enslaved then emancipated Blacks and included every white man “ipso facto” as a member.¹⁴⁷ This prejudice and discrimination is also evident through the essential institutions for supposed betterment of the Negro, such as the school, whose results Du Bois (1903/1994) described as rendering a race that is “...poorly trained and hard

¹⁴⁶ (Du Bois, 1903/1994, p. 2)

¹⁴⁷ (Du Bois, 1903/1994, pp. 107-108)

pressed in severe economic competition, without political rights, and with ludicrously inadequate common school facilities” (p. 109).

Furthermore, Du Bois also wrote that white people in the South considered educated Negroes to be dangerous Negroes, which also complicated the schooling experiences of Black folk. He discussed the failed practices of teaching the Negro in the same ways whites have always been taught, which often prepared them for a life which they would never have the opportunity to live. Valenzuela (1999) echoed these observations when she claimed, “Ultimately, students of color experience *subtractive schooling* through the denial of their heritage and assimilation into White America.”¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, instead of yielding to lower, separate expectations like those Booker T. Washington suggested, Du Bois suggested that we white teachers study Black students honestly and carefully, something that I, 118 years later, am still learning to do and begging other white teachers to join me.

In his more specific critique, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson (1933/2015) testified to the hardships of becoming an educated, successful Negro in the South. Like Du Bois, Woodson claimed that the education of Negroes, as it were, had become only a reproduction of white culture and talent. He lamented, “Originality in the Negro, therefore, is discounted one hundred per cent to maintain a nominal equality.”¹⁴⁹ This, he explained, had given Negro students the impression that they were supposed to attend school merely to learn to imitate what other people did in life or, in our framework, to replicate the literacies they saw white bodies perform. Woodson advocated for the unique literacies of each race and warned against the dangers of an education that fails to acknowledge these gifts:

¹⁴⁸ (Salazar, 2013, p. 123)

¹⁴⁹ (Woodson, 1933/2015, p. 4)

If you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (p. 60)

Unfortunately, the consequences of this unheeded advice have made themselves manifest time and time again throughout American history, and they continue to be performed through our embodied literacies today.

APPENDIX D

Statistics

There are reasons for the distance between Black folks and white folks today, between the incarcerated and the free, between those labeled “competent” and “incompetent,” and there are structures of power and oppression that hold up this distance and inscribe these literacies of separation into our body-minds. To begin, the enormous prison institution in the United States is impossible to disentangle from our nation’s legacy of racial terror, which began centuries ago with the original Goliath institution of trans-Atlantic slavery. Since the Thirteenth Amendment’s formal abolishment of chattel slavery in 1865, there have always been echoes of chains—the moral chains of those who profited from the enslavement of others and the chains of those whose actual bodies were enslaved—but these echoes have been muffled by the surreptitious separation and removal of noncompliant bodies from the public eye and public consciousness. Whether through the removal of students from regular classrooms via pathologized push-out and tracking, or through suspensions and expulsions, or by removal from the “free world” via incarceration, bodies have always been sorted, disciplined, and trained to perform literacies of separation, survival, poverty, capitalism, punishment, rape, misogyny, hypersexualization, domination, fear, silence, hope, ignorance, anger, entitlement, compassion, jealousy, heritage, etc. These embodied literacies are always already making themselves known through educational and juridical institutions in the Deep South.

America’s carceral state is staggering. In the United States today, we imprison more of our population than any other nation worldwide, with a whopping 700-750 of every 100,000 Americans currently behind bars. In fact, 1 of every 5 prisoners worldwide is incarcerated in the

United States.¹⁵⁰ Studying the role of race in this assemblage, Reynolds and Kendi (2020) report that Black Americans “are five times more likely to be incarcerated as whites” (p. 102), which explains how even though only 13.4% of the U.S. population is Black, “African Americans make up 40% of the incarcerated population” (p. 105). And this system does not exclusively affect adults or become a scary possibility during adulthood. Rather, Finnerty (2018) reported that “Black children are eighteen times more likely than White children to be sentenced as adults in criminal justice courts and represent 58 percent of children sentenced to adult incarceration facilities (Poe-Yamagata & Jones, 2007, as cited in Goff et al., 2014)” (p. 57).

Punitive disciplinary protocols in public education today reflect and even exceed those of the U.S. criminal justice machine. For example, under federal law, police must obtain a warrant for searches, and obtaining said warrant requires reasonable cause. To the contrary, school officials, per Supreme Court rulings, do not have to have reasonable cause for searches of students’ property; reasonable *suspicion* is justification enough.¹⁵¹ Further, according to Simmons (2015), many schools have “adopted a punitive standard of mandatory punishment that has been deemed too harsh with the adult criminal justice system (Martin 2001).” And, she continues, “Under zero tolerance policies, schools incorporate few of the criminal justice system’s standards for the presumption of innocence, due process, and the right to a trial (Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers 2001).”¹⁵² These policies often result in punishment before proof of “criminality,” which only adds more insult to the original harm.

¹⁵⁰ (Alexander, 2010; The Sentencing Project, 2020; Simmons, 2015)

¹⁵¹ (USDOE, 1996, as cited by Simmons, 2015)

¹⁵² (Simmons, 2015, p. 84)

Discipline and Punish

One major way we see these severe and racially biased practices surface is through suspensions, expulsions, and dropping out. These practices are disproportionately wielded against Black students.¹⁵³ On a national level, “According to data from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights, black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts for comparable offenses.”¹⁵⁴ In numerical terms, while “Black boys [are] 15.8 percent of the total public school male enrollment,” they comprise “35.4 percent of all boys receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions.”¹⁵⁵ Additionally, a significant proportion of the two-million students expelled or suspended each year are “low performing” or “at-risk” students,¹⁵⁶ a lingering side-effect of teachers “respond[ing] inappropriately to Black resistance to racial dominance by overpersonalizing the circumstance and further marginalizing racially targeted students.”¹⁵⁷

Zooming In: Alabama Issues

According to ProPublica, Alabama’s population is 33% Black and 55% white. However, statewide discipline statistics are nowhere near proportionate to these demographics, as Black students account for 65% of all out-of-school suspensions and white students account for only 29% of all out-of-school suspensions. Similarly, 55% of all expulsions in the state of Alabama involve Black students, and 38% involve white students. In other words, Black students in Alabama are 3.7 times more likely than white students to be suspended.¹⁵⁸ Even in total disciplinary infractions, not all of which result in suspension, Black students are still grossly

¹⁵³ Because my work focuses on relationships between white teachers and Black students, I will only pull statistics specific to these two groups.

¹⁵⁴ (Davis, 2014, p. 40)

¹⁵⁵ (Moore et al., 2018, p. 3)

¹⁵⁶ (Simmons, 2015, p. 91)

¹⁵⁷ (Singleton, 2018, p. xviii)

¹⁵⁸ (Groeger, Waldman, & Eads, 2018)

overrepresented. For example, during the 2017-2018 school year, 60% of reported disciplinary infractions in the state of Alabama were attributed to Black students, while only 35.95% of infractions involved white students.¹⁵⁹ If discipline were proportionate with racial demographics, these numbers would be almost exactly *opposite*.

These statistics are too often prophetic of cycles of struggle throughout students' school years and afterward. Too often the trajectory follows this path: a student who is suspended as a middle or high schooler will be three times more likely to drop out of school by the 10th grade than would a student who has never been suspended. And if said student does drop out, her/his/their chances of incarceration later in life will triple.¹⁶⁰ Given this scenario, it is no surprise that three-fourths of inmates in the U.S. are high-school drop-outs.¹⁶¹ And this cyclical pattern makes sense when we realize that an overwhelming majority of prisoners in the United States are not first-time subjects of separation, discipline, or trauma but are victims of recidivism and perpetual cycles of poverty, violence, and discrimination. And these cycles are not just a reflection of "bad" kids or "superpredators" or "savages" or, or, or...you name the trope. Indeed, according to Morris (2018), "Being abused and/or neglected as a child increases the risk of arrest among children by 59 percent and among adults by 28 percent" (p. 11). Given this increased vulnerability, both educators and criminal justice officials should consider how an individual's lived experiences affect her or his behavior and potential. But these are the details—the stories—we can only know when we get close.

¹⁵⁹ (Dailey, 2020)

¹⁶⁰ (Davis, 2014)

¹⁶¹ (Simmons, 2015, p. 40)

May 26, 2021

Briana Kidd
Dept. of Curriculum & Instruction
College of Education
Box 870231

Re: IRB # 20-10-4017 "Kendred Spirits: An Autoethnographic Account of Composing Closeness between Bars"

Dear Briana Kidd:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 5 as outlined below:

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis)

The approval for your application will lapse on May 25, 2022. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the Continuing Review form to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent/assent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpentato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP, EXCS™
Director & Research Compliance Officer