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A Black Gaze, a Freedom Dream and the Afrofuture:

A Black Feminist Reframing of the EdD Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the notion that alternatives are deficient or less substantial. In the Black-oriented homeplace, we situate alternatives as organic and ordinary, but also revolutionary and radical acts, where the Black gaze, freedom dreaming, and the Afrofuture serve as tools for reimagining possibilities and disrupting traditional forms and functions in the EdD landscape. We primarily focus on the methodological and theoretical decisions of Black women scholars, researchers, and graduate students because their decisions are many times culturally rooted, lack institutional support, and are reshaped during the dissertation process or co-opted in ways that strip their radicalness so that they pass through portals of Eurocentric masculinist acceptance. We also advocate for non-traditional graduate students whose unique experiences and needs often remain underserved in traditional graduate education. We argue that due to the knowledge-validation processes, new ways of knowing are deemed deviant or peculiar. However, despite questions around the legitimacy and quality of Black women's knowledge production, their incalculable ways of knowing and acts of resistance against epistemic violence serve as emancipatory blueprints to guide the reimagining the EdD.

KEYWORDS

Afrofuture, black gaze, education doctorate, freedom dreaming

> "I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle" (Lorde, 1993, p.15)

In the farthest-out social positions and extremes, Black women have produced and validated incalculable ways of knowing (Collins, 1986), some ways remaining contained and celebrated within their neighborhoods. In these spaces, Black women have historically walked in the West African tradition of griottes (Hale, 1994) or community storytellers, knowledge bearers, problem solvers, wisdom wells, and time-weavers of histories. As Black women researchers whose work predominantly centers the experiences of Black women in their educational pursuits, we understand that Black women are not a monolithic group (Collins, 1986). However, in recognizing their diversity and complexity in contemporary society (Abrams et al., 2014) and their distinct backgrounds, lived experiences, identities and socioeconomic statuses (Reid, 2004), we believe that Black women as knowledge producers are protagonistic. Individually and collectively, Black women embody the epistemological characteristics that can organically reshape and reimagine the everyday spaces they enter.

How Black women produce knowledge is also the impetus to transform the broader academic community as it has done historically in the Black-oriented homeplace, which (hooks, 1990, as cited in Allen, 2011) defined as both a physical and symbolic place where Black women seek refuge, empowerment, control, and belonging. Also, drawing upon hooks' work, Goins (2011) reiterated that the homeplace is a safe space where Black women tell stories and share knowledge in friendship groups buttressed by acts of resistance against oppression. The Black-oriented homeplace by no means resides an echo chamber for crafting and communicating intellect. Cooper (1892/2016) believed that intellectual Black women possess influential, world-transforming abilities—because intellectuals, particularly those at the margins, produce and share knowledge, affect societal change, foster critical consciousness, resist oppression, and envision alternative futures. In historically assuming the roles of abolitionists and liberators, Black women have engineered and coordinated the physical and psychological liberation of their people to move beyond mastering and reproducing dominant ideologies and oppressive realities (Neal & Dunn, 2020). As marginal intellectuals (Collins, 1986), these women's actions often inspire the liberatory movements of other subjugated groups and peoples (Collins, 2009). Abolitionist-thinking Black women pursue and espouse both knowledge and consciousness as integral to

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transformation. Fanon (1963/2005) noted that consciousness-raising as a means of liberation is where marginalized folks stood to gain freedom as co-creators of knowledge. In addition, Fanon (1963/2005) argued for the critical role of the intellectual because they had the most potential to conquer oppression and create a (re)built, new man (person) who resists oppression and engages in a new way of thinking about another present time or alternative future.

In this article, we explore the concepts of alternative and difference as we reframe the Doctor of Education (EdD) landscape through a Black gaze, a freedom dream, and the Afrofuture. First, we provide a rationale for utilizing a Black feminist lens to the ongoing discussion around revolutionizing the forms and functions of the EdD dissertation because the Black feminist standpoint draws upon redefinition and resistance (Collins, 2009) to offer oppositional knowledge. Second, we situate alternatives as organic and radical by discussing the intent of difference due to the historical positioning of the EdD (Perry, 2012) and contemporary calls for its reimagining (Perry et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2024). Third, after establishing a Black feminist redefinition and counter-perspective of the concepts of alternative and difference, we utilize Audre Lorde's work on the institutionalized rejection of difference to recognize that EdD programs continued push for more creative, postmodern expressions of student inquiry both challenges and exposes sociohistorical programming. In fact, Lorde's (1993) plea to reject old definitions and structures as "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 123) is what inspired us to propose Black gaze, freedom dreaming, and the Afrofuture as new tools for reframing the EdD. With these new tools, we share suggestions for alternatives in dissertations rather than alternative dissertations to invoke resistance against normativity and romanticized, established structures. In the conclusion, we encourage graduate program leadership and faculty advisors to make room for choice and multiple, alternative ways of knowing that do not require strict adherence to Western standards and structures to produce knowledge. We believe that there is enough space for tradition and revolution.

Rationale for a Black Feminist Lens

As we consider integrating alternative elements of knowledge production in the EdD, we center the paradox of Black women's intellectual work as a focal point. The number of Black women pursuing advanced degrees continues to increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), thus, their growing intellectual presence and influence across multiple fields of study. Despite the functional attractiveness and practicality of Black women's research to individuals from various races, ethnicities, and cultures, Eurocentric masculinists have questioned its legitimacy through their knowledge-validation processes (Collins, 1989). One might wonder if the perceived omnipresence of Black women doctorates in the contemporary ivory tower is evidence of a shrinking weaponization of such processes. Yet, how Black women tell their stories, and the lens through which they tell them, are still surveilled by traditional systems and gatekeepers controlling how their stories ultimately look (Matias et al., 2019). And anti-Blackness plays a role in the covert actions of faculty who discourage Black students from researching such topics as diversity and discrimination (Bell et al., 2021), topics that are central to studying real-world problems. Black women's knowledge production, no matter how applicable or otherworldly, can be subject to manipulation and suppression.

These situations exemplify the institutional omission and commission that not only affect the dissertation journey for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) but also non-traditional graduate students with unique lived and professional experiences. The way in which these specific student groups perceive and navigate problems as working professionals may be different and therefore should be studied and produced differently or *alternatively* (i.e., using theoretical frameworks and methods that are consistent with how these groups make sense of the world). To this point, Collins (1989) stated, "Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups" (p. 747), a standpoint which, Collins argues, lends itself to different interpretations of reality. Different, not invalid. However, Black women's expressions or articulations of their realities are more vulnerable to suppression because Black women have not historically controlled the social mechanisms, platforms, or resources for knowledge or perspective sharing (Collins, 1989). And while there is a significant gap in the literature about the knowledge production of non-traditional graduate students, current research shows that non-traditional students are a fast-growing population who remain underserved in traditional higher education programs (Hittepole, 2019) and have lower retention rates in online doctoral programs for both external and internal reasons (Kebritchi et al., 2023). Future research could address how graduate programs marketing to and enrolling large numbers of BIPOC and non-traditional adult learners could honor their rich backgrounds as well as support their ways of producing knowledge.

Furthermore, we believe that co-optation of knowledge warrants frank discussion as it also occurs rather openly on multiple levels—influenced by neoliberalism (Cannella & Koro-Ljunberg, 2017; Rodriguez V., 2019). Participatory research methodologies from radical or critical traditions endure institutionalization and reconstitution (Jordan, 2003, 2009) and radical theories and discourses (e.g., identity politics), particularly those created by Black feminists, become redefined, appropriated or stripped down (Rodriguez V., 2019). A recent example of the latter is Jennifer Buck's siphoning from the lived experiences of Black women to enter trap feminism discourse, which centers the "hood" Black woman thriving in the subculture of trap music, hustling, unabashed sexual expressiveness, and resistance to hegemonic ideals of respectable femininity. Sesali Bowen (2022), who coined the term, shared on her YouTube channel,

> No one was willing to consider how we might be liberating ourselves or how we might be entertaining ourselves or how we might be the sources of our literal own joy [sic] and survival and livelihood. I knew that people didn't get how like wearing our bonnets or like twerking or scamming were actually like possibly keys to our liberation and survival… There was something about hood Black girls that was special. That was trap feminism. (14:12-15:14)

Contrary to Bowen's authentic engagement with the material reality of trap life, Buck, as a theology professor, reportedly tethered her interest in trap feminism and her proximity to the trap community to her fondness for hip-hop (Alter & Harris, 2022). More importantly, Buck's use of a primarily Black woman research team, the financial compensation for their labor (Solis, 2022), and the trivializing of Bowen's foundational work as a footnote also reflect the common minimizations (sometimes to the level of erasure) of Black women's contributions to knowledge production.

In reflecting on some Black women graduate students' experiences in our research, we draw from Young's (2002) five faces of oppression in which she notes marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous because it can expel an entire group of people from participating in particular spaces and aspects of social life. We found that the type of terminal degree matters little as many doctoral programs succeed in marginalizing Black women graduate students through Western ideals and practices. As a result, these students are ultimately at risk of exploitation, disempowerment, feelings of invisibility, and even educative-psychic violence (M. Foster et al., 2023, 2024). Collins (2009) noted, "Domination operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing African American women and members of subordinated groups to replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with dominant group's specialized thought" (p. 306). Moreover, when we consider how doctoral programs create and maintain marginalization within seemingly democratic institutions, we recall Young's (2002) assertion that oppression does not disappear by giving someone something material because the "giving" does not diminish the marginalization. That is, Black women graduate students' experience abandoning or deculturizing their ways of knowing to earn a prestigious terminal degree. Any suggestion that Black women do not have to tolerate deculturation or marginalization, especially in the 21st century, dismisses the real fact that systemic barriers firmly grounded in K-12 educational opportunities for Black girls ultimately limits their access to high-prestige postsecondary settings (McLewis, 2021; Neal-Jackson, 2018; Zamani, 2003). Many young Black girls and women who pursue higher education and have already experienced racialized legitimacy related to their fitness and readiness in K-12 classrooms understand that internalizing traditional ways of knowing is required to enter top-tier collegiate spaces. For Black women in graduate education, choice is often constrained by economic necessity and limited alternatives (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998), making participation in potentially oppressive academic systems more a survival strategy than a free choice. Black women may enter prestigious programs strategically but face gradual pressure to abandon their cultural capital, which reveals the complex interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints in academia (Carbado & Gulati, 2013).

Thus, despite the pervasive assessing and surveillance of Black women's intellectual work , our utilization of a Black feminist lens to explore alternatives makes sense--for the forms and functions of the EdD, when compared to the traditional Doctor of Philosophy(PhD), have similarly faced challenges and criticisms about fitness and appropriateness related to research topics, methodologies, theoretical frameworks and dissertation formats. The PhD is the standard, and thus we accept that a significant level of reshaping the EdD to fit the norm is a natural outcome. However, the manner in which some higher institutions present the EdD mirrors the ideals and structure of the PhD. If the larger academic community more broadly accepted and implemented the EdD as an alternative or a different kind of doctorate (Ma et al., 2018; Perry, 2012; Shulman et al., 2006), we argue that calls for reimagining or redesigning it would not be so ubiquitous and consequential.

Furthermore, the Black feminist lens is appropriate because of Black women's experiences at interlocking forms of oppression (Collins, 2009) drive the manner in which they approach and disrupt hegemonic ideals and domains of power. The academy *is* a space with an ongoing relationship with elitism and colonialism (Dancy et al., 2018; Patton, 2016). Even though neoconservative political discourse has been critical of the academy as a progressive space catering to liberal bias (Gabbard & Atkinson, 2007; Henry, 1994/2017), all school systems, regardless of educational stage or subdivision, maintain a matrix of domination (Collins, 2009). Black women's sociohistorical interactions in structures of oppression make their perspectives as agents of knowledge ideal to provide a blueprint for liberatory, emancipatory doctoral processes for not only BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students but also any group of emerging scholars experiencing challenges to presenting new and radical kinds of knowledge production (i.e., as Toni Morrison articulated, "the function of freedom is to free someone else."). As Black feminist researchers, we believe our reframing of the EdD landscape underlies the type of activism needed to transform doctoral programs and higher institutions that draw BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students in significant numbers. Our research advocates for those much sought-after students, particularly Black women, to transform the traditional academy into an epistemologically free space.

The Intent of Difference

In discussing the concepts of difference and alternative, we discuss the historical positioning of traditional processes and structures for knowledge-making and contemporary calls for reimagining. The positioning remains the dominant perspective. We argue that to make the case for alternatives in dissertations that we must first reject deficit-based descriptions and criticisms of the EdD when comparing it to the PhD. Juxtaposing alternative and traditional forms and functions in dissertations simply encourages the usual romanticization of established methodologies and degree structures. We redefine alternative or difference to avoid othering it and measuring its legitimacy against established or normative understandings of difference, predetermined notions of legitimate knowledge, and predictable outcomes. More importantly, we situate difference and alternative as something ordinary, organic, radical, and revolutionary.

Historical Positioning of Traditional Processes and Structures

Institutions of higher learning and graduate schools tend to be traditionalist in nature. Academia maintains and regulates its own ecosystems. The historical gatekeeping of standards to crystallize intellectual production in the Western academy sits firmly in colonialism and essentialism (Leonardo, 2018) and preserves the scholastic culture of the nineteenth century. In short, the standards developed in German universities came further west and influenced the nascent American university system (Cole, 2011; McClelland, 1980), molding the landscape into a seemingly fixed position. Almost sixty years separates the first PhD and the first EdD earned in the US, and this timeframe is key in understanding the concept of alternative and why the difference between both degrees continues to spark debates over a century later. In 1920, Harvard granted the first EdD as another terminal degree, rooted in application and practice and meant "to avoid the literal application of essentially alien standards imposed by the dominant graduate faculty from older and more traditional disciplines" (Spurr, 1970, p. 141). Despite the intent of difference, the two degrees have become virtually similar in format (Dill & Morrison, 1985; H. Foster et al., 2023; Wergin, 2012) but varying in relation to status and reputation (Perry, 2012; Shulman et al., 2006). Ongoing debates and analyses over the two terminal

degrees certainly reflect conflicts between academics with what (Kliebard,1986, as cited in Apple, 2003) called competitive views of legitimacy.

Contemporary Calls for Reimagining

Contemporary calls for doctoral programs to reimagine and develop differentiating aspects between the PhD and EdD have waged on for decades and extensive empirical and theoretical research published by a multitude of scholars revisit the well-documented histories of the terminal degree, examine their similarities and differences and restate efforts to raise the status and reputation of the EdD. We add our current analysis of an aspect of both the EdD and PhD that tends to be one of the most common characteristics pointed out in previous research studies and thus subject to initiatives that promote alternatives: the structure or format of dissertations. Though the naming conventions of dissertation chapters varied, we noted that the Problem of Practice (PoP) and Dissertation in Practice (DiP) overwhelmingly followed the traditional four-to-five chapter format (i.e., introduction, literature review, research methods, findings/results and summary). The prevalence of traditional format definitely reflects a commitment to established processes that speak to the validity and reliability of students' dissertation research and "meets both classical and modern definitions of genre" (Duke & Beck, 1999, p. 31). And, based on our research, we found that there are other factors that influence the macrostructure: dissertation resources, exemplars, and even PhD-degreed advising faculty contribute to the dominance of traditional format in EdD programs. Thus, the decades-long argument about redesigning the EdD represents how Western intellectual tradition tends to eat its own. By filtering scholarship and knowledge production through traditional gaze, traditionalists in doctoral programs ensure that the high status and stringent structure of the PhD is preserved.

Even with some twinning of the terminal degrees on the structural level, the emphasis on difference still tends to be the point of contention--with the education doctorate enduring academic shaming and othering in elusive intellectual circles (Wergin, 2011). After a review of the literature, we noted similar framing or labeling of the EdD as a substitute doctorate, as the perceived lesser. The "low-end Ph.D" (Shulman et al., 2006, p. 25). However, we believe that some of framing was meant to situate the need for redefinition, elevation, or alternation (Ma et al., 2018) as well as the restructuring of EdD programs (H. Foster et al., 2023) in establishing meaningful differences between the terminal degrees.

We also reviewed a plethora of educational websites highlighting the differences to help prospective learners see the benefits of both degrees; yet we thought the side-by-side comparisons added to the minimization of the education doctorate in relation to rigor, intellectual production, employment outlooks, and earning potential. To be clear, every website conveyed a respect for the EdD, but some of the comparisons were deeply concerning to us. As tradition dictates, anything birthed from an *other* becomes further othered. In this case, an intellectual othering. We noticed that the language and even visualizations used in describing the PhD and the EdD, to contrast position of theory in relation to practice, suggested a hierarchy. To prospective students seeking to understand the difference between the terminal degrees, these words and images might introduce or perpetuate the belief of an intellectual difference.

If we consider the implications of othering the EdD in larger academic community, we assert that the possibilities of imparting new ways of knowing become harder to materialize and more subject to scrutiny or attempts to delegitimize. If, as Wergin (2011) suggested, the assumption that developing theory is the most important outcome of scholarship and "[a]s long as practice is considered to be an exercise in application, the appearance of intellectual rigor in the practice-focused EdD diminishes" (p. 120). Further, innovative or collaborative ways of producing scholar-practitioner research specifically through companion or group dissertations face significant concerns about rigor, accountability and quality. Thus, in othering, even brilliantly produced alternatives may become more alienated or marginalized within the EdD landscape that is still fighting a long battle to substantiate its own separate identity. We believe a critical response involves showing the feasibility of alternatives in dissertations and rejecting notions that alternative forms of intellectual work do not involve rigor or substance.

Black Feminist Redefinition

The historical positioning of the EdD and contemporary calls for reimagining require us to offer a Black feminist redefinition or counter-perspective on the concepts of alternatives and difference. We understand that othering is at best an ideological positioning of the differences between traditional versus progressive views, and we accept that perspectives at the opposite ends of any ideological spectrum rarely quietly, comfortably, and equitably co-exist. Given how hard-fought ideological campaigns tend to be around preserving structures and processes, it is important to acknowledge the benefits and guidance of tradition. Nonetheless because of the sociohistorical treatment of Black women's intellectual work, especially in academic settings, we possess a unique standpoint in that Black women can create and benefit from marginality (Collins, 1986) and othering. In the Black-oriented homeplace, we are not limited or restricted in our knowledge production. Alternatives are ways of knowing, concepts, and routes that we navigate on a daily basis insofar that they are "ordinary" circumstances of life. How we navigate them may also be radical and revolutionary expressions that reflect the resistant and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) of a people who have survived oppression and exclusion. Thus, because of our lived experiences, especially around combatting epistemic violence (Dotson, 2011) and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2013), we reject the binary, normative concepts of alternative and difference and demonstrate what is possible when ways of knowing are not limited.

Institutionalized Rejection of Difference

As marginal intellectuals in academic settings, or rather marginalized intellectuals, Black women possess an insider/outsider within status (Collins, 1986). The dichotomy of our status not only informs our intellectual work but also our dismantling of oppression to reframe concepts and see possibilities. We have looked overwhelmingly upon Black feminist work to inform our critical consciousness and understanding of worlds, present times and futures. Further, in rejecting the normative understanding of difference, we drew from Lorde (1993) who wrote,

> Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human difference between us

> with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. (p.115)

Though Lorde (1993) was speaking about the real differences related to race, age, and sex, we apply her explanations in attempting to make sense of the fact that differences in knowledge production do not separate us as much as our refusal to recognize differences and examine the distorted renaming of differences that impact our behavior. For example, hostility toward differences is normalized. Fear has a way of softening or destroying the complex philosophical and political practices of rejecting tradition. In addition, and more importantly to our point, sociopolitical programming underlies our fears, in that we have been taught or conditioned that difference exists in simplistic, binary opposites (Lorde, 1993). Something is either good or bad, right or wrong, superior or inferior. And the perceived lesser is normally something to be dismissed, dominated, or erased.

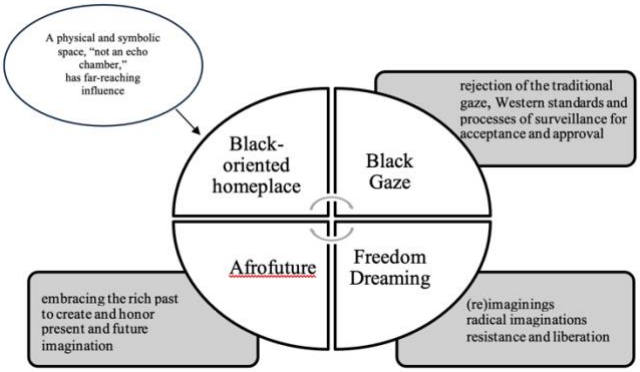
As related to the current EdD landscape, we found in our own research with some pre-candidacy Black women graduate students that while they wanted to produce dissertation work that rejected traditional ways of knowing, they tended to uphold tradition out of fear about how doctoral faculty would respond to their pursuit of other possibilities (M. Foster et al., 2023, 2024). Fear that their radical epistemologies and methodologies were too different and would not add to the field of research or be accepted as legitimate. In our analysis of these graduate students' chapters after they had earned candidacy, we did notice slight variations in naming conventions and content organization but a firm adherence to traditional techniques, strategies, or methods. Their experiences speak to the paradoxical cycle of hope and disappointment that affects Black women's knowledge production--welcomed by the academy but accepted through reshaping. The questions of fitness related to their methodologies and framework often lead to conforming to ensure legitimacy. Yet it is these interactions with control and interlocking forms of oppression that Black women's perspectives are relevant and appropriate for reframing the EdD landscape. Because despite Eurocentric masculinist knowledge-validation processes and questions of legitimacy, Black women scholars and researchers *continue* to resist and produce new ways of knowing.

Tools of Possibilities

We assert that alternative ways of knowing and intellectual production offer possibilities when operationalized through a Black gaze, a freedom dream, and the Afrofuture (see Figure 1). The Black gaze (Howell et al., 2019) sustains the power of a counternarrative. While there is an equally powerful and useful Black feminist gaze, we call upon Black gaze as a broader approach to rejecting the traditional gaze on the intellectual work of BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students, not just Black women scholars. Freedom dreams (Kelley, 2002) stir up the radical imagination to activate liberatory and emancipatory purposes for research that explore joy and thriving. The Afrofuture (Eshun, 2003) brings the inspiring possibilities of the future into the present. While there are several conceptions and definitions of Afrofuture(ism), we call upon Hamilton's (2017) defining of it "as a mechanism for understanding real world situations of oppression in the contemporary world in the context of the ever-present past, while charting the future situation through the arts" (p. 19), arts that included various kinds of narratives. We do not view the three possibilities as detached, separate processes, but as interconnected and interdependent. These alternatives make space for BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students to integrate their perspectives in order to center and "legitimize" their knowledge and realities. Furthermore, in speaking specifically of Black women graduate students, these tools create an awareness of a Black reality that co-exists equally with this place and time--which has been a challenge for Black researchers because the concepts of knowledge and truth are recognized and legitimized in research only when they represent European conceptions of reality (Bakari, 1997).

Further, in exploring the Black gaze, freedom dreaming and the Afrofuture, we provide additional context for their application by offering suggestions related to theoretical frameworks, research designs, and data collection sources. Here, we express caution in conveying to BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students in seeing these suggestions as exhaustive or exclusive. We wholeheartedly believe that emerging scholars should inform their own visions and conceptualize the possibilities for themselves; however, we also realize that showcasing ordinary and revolutionary processes that change the traditional dissertation structure *from within* is meaningful, as Lorde (1993) would say, "for altering the present and constructing the future" (p. 115). More importantly, while we root our explorations of these possibilities in the Black feminist lived experience, we understand there is a diverse community of learners who could benefit from these tools of possibilities, especially those who exercise cultural competence and sensitivity while engaging with marginalized or minoritized groups in their professional practice or dissertation research.

Figure 1. Interconnectedness of a Black Gaze, a Freedom Dream and the Afrofuture



A Black Gaze

The Black gaze functions as both a theory and a worldview. As a theory, we rely on Howell et al.'s (2019) definition: "To perceive Black students' behavior as a cultural asset that is understood and valued by Black women teachers who foster sociopolitical consciousness" (p. 24). As a world view, we draw upon Toni Morrison's (2016) perspective about seeing our work through our own eyes and honoring the processes that are true and natural in the lives of Black people. In practice or application, traditional research

methods maintain a traditional gaze. Hegemonic processes that shape and control practitioner-oriented behaviors and decisions support Eurocentric theoretical frameworks and established methodologies. The traditional gaze is abjectly inadequate to capture the nuances particular to BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students. The current EdD landscape often lacks resources that honor and affirm diverse backgrounds and experiences that can support graduate students from culturally rich, racial/ethnic groups and need to use non-traditional methods to seek social change and justice in their professions.

Also, as critical theorists and researchers, we engage in courageous discourses to assess and critique structural and societal oppression in the examination of educational practices. We recognize that critical theories are adequate because they acknowledge that power imbalances in organizational systems that reflect problems rooted in America's own unresolved handlings of colonialism. For these reasons, we suggest that BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students center a decolonized gaze as their worldview so that they have guidance about how to navigate the unequal power relationships in research and surround themselves with individuals who can assist them in maintaining academic control of their intellectual work. In drawing upon coalition-building, these graduate students can be empowered to utilize critical and culturally rooted framework as alternatives in their dissertations.

How we have utilized the Black gaze

Porter (2023) discussed the need for Black women students to do their own research in seeking theoretical framework and methodologies as the academy falls short of espousing or offering the resources, expertise, and exemplars that these students need and desire. Theoretical frameworks developed in and for the dominant culture are the most offered and available in graduate programs but are not the most appropriate lenses through which to view the problems by BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students want to study and address through social action and justice. For example, we know that Black women's experiences are distinct from both Black men and White women because intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism, and classism often shape Black women's lives and perspectives (King, 1988). We have witnessed Black women graduate students who wanted to research Black women's experiences as leaders but were recommended Western leadership theories that were devoid of the nuanced complexities of engendered racism and were used in studies that did not attend to cultural and collective ways in Black women navigate systemic barriers and center their own healing. In response, we did our research and began compiling a list of critical theoretical frameworks with associated scholars (not exhaustive) and gathering peer-reviewed articles to share with BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students in Spring 2022 (see Table 1). However, as we have studied both PhD and EdD programs, we are aware of the challenges of supporting the use of similar resources with BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students whose dissertation studies require and demand a critical lens, especially if advising faculty have no or little experience with operationalizing such frameworks.

We believe that graduate students utilizing critical frameworks as alternatives to traditional, Western-centric frameworks is an effective means of offering new possibilities in the EdD landscape—because critical frameworks introduce, substantiate, and validate alternative ways of knowing and intellectual production.

Freedom Dreaming

In Kelley's (2012) preface to his seminal work, he conceived *Freedom Dreams* as a way to recover ideas and visions from Black activists who had "proposed a different way out of our constrictions" (p. xii). Liberators call upon the memories and radical responses of Black revolutionaries as inspiration. Kelley (2012) offered dreams of other places, new lands, outer-spaces and encouraged the summoning of the Black radical imagination (that honored the dreams of Black women to liberate humanity). In the field of education, Neal and Dunn (2020) call upon freedom dreaming as the appropriate vehicle to create a sense of urgency and new, inspired realities.

Table 1. Theoretical Frameworks Related to Empowerment, Liberation, and Disruption

Theoretical Frameworks	Associated Scholars
Black Feminist Thought	Patricia Hill Collins
Intersectionality	Kimberlé Crenshaw
Africana Womanist Thought	Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd
Critical Race Black Feminism	Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd
Endarkened Feminism	Cynthia B. Dillard
Historical Womanist Theory	Nicole Rosseau
Womanism	Alice Walker
Chicana/Latina Feminist Thought	Dolores Delgado Bernal
LatinCrit	Daniel G. Solorzano; Tara J. Yosso
Community-first Land-centred Theoretical Framework Critical Indigenous Theory Indigenous Standpoint Theory TribalCrit Two-eyed Seeing	Sandra Styres; Dawn Zinga Bryan Brayboy Mi'kmaw Elders Albert & Murdena Marshall Bryan Brayboy Debbie H. Martin
Critical Race Theory	Derrick Bell, Gloria Ladson-Billings
AsianCrit	Robert Chang
BlackCrit	Michael J Dumas; Justin A. Coles
BlackBoy Crit	Nathaniel Bryan
DisCrit	Subini Annamma
Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework	Shaun Harper

In freedom dreaming, we must first acknowledge that Black people in the United States have experienced traumatizing relationships associated with ownership (i.e., controlling the Black body and its labor). In three decades after enslavement, there was still the prevailing belief that Black people were not physically or intellectually capable of self-management and would eventually become extinct because their inadequacies did not allow them to meet the demands of freedom (Wolff, 2006). We argue that the impetus of freedom dreaming or dreaming of freedom was as vital to our survival in the past as it is in the present and future.

How we have advocated for freedom dreaming

As related to processes, freedom dreaming in the EdD landscape not only disrupts BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students' feelings of isolation, invisibility, and imposter syndrome but also empowers them to reject deficit-based perceptions and research

about Communities of Color and those whose lived experiences are unique. For example, the earliest applications of interviewing and observing human behavior in the field informed colonial knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), and statistics, eugenics, and scientific racism have an ideological and methodological relationship (Bentrim & Dixon, 2022). To counter these traditional processes with freedom dreaming would open the door for culturally rooted methodologies like sister-to-sister talk (Few et al., 2003), which reduces the power dynamic between the researcher and their participant by framing interviews as dialogues, talks or conversations; or Black feminist archaeology (Battle-Baptiste, 2011), which sees the cultural landscape, as a meaningful artifact for knowledge production, and through observation, reveals how people create and use physical space to tell organically about themselves (see Table 2).

In many EdD programs, graduate students often select the qualitative case study as an appropriate approach to study real-world problems and predominately use semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and occasionally observations and artifacts (when appropriate) as data collection sources. Frankly, we argue that the production of similarly constructed case studies not only signals a comfortability with conventional formulas but also the fear of the kind risk-taking that promotes evolution and ingenuity needed to keep graduate programs attractive and in demand.

Table 2. Traditional Versus Culturally Rooted Methodologies

Traditional Data Collection Sources	Culturally Rooted Qualitative Methodologies	Alternative Ways of Knowing
artifacts	journey boxes (based in social studies)	To tell personal stories related to culture, place and time; to offer counter-narratives
interviews	sister-to-sister talks; dialogues; testimonies	To center the co-production of knowledge; to focus on joy and (self) liberation
observations	sense of place, physical spaces, site of resistance, geographies of resistance, ecology of resistance	To decenter researcher bias and stereotyping inherent in observing people; to minimize the notion of humans as objects;
"narratives" framed in a traditional format	endarkened storywork	To center Black storytelling and the dialogical voice (Lockett et al., 2024)

Utilizing these culturally rooted methodologies honor the lives and experiences of the participants, to highlight how they disrupt and dismantle systems that cause real problems for them, and to reject characterizations that marginalized groups need saving and will be saved through someone else's (often an outsider's) research. These groups, though historically demonized and blame for their own circumstances, know loving, dreaming, thriving, and healing. Of note, advocating for these alternatives within traditionally structured dissertations has faced a great deal of resistance based on the notion that scholar-practitioners cannot solve real-world problems with "stories" or through storytelling. We reject this assumption because, as Hendry (2009) argues, there is a narrative component in *all* research.

The Afrofuture

Many people associate Afrofuturism with science fiction and alternative realities that include the experiences and contributions of Black people often omitted in white framings of the future. Eshun (2003) and Morris (2012) explained that Afrofuturism reclaims the histories of counter-futures along the Afrodiaspora. The Afrofuture underpins the spirit of the Black self-concept across multiple timeframes and spaces and calls upon collective resistance to include Blackness as a part of self-expression and the greater production of knowledge. The Afrofuture revives the affective and spiritual orientation of the Black emotional self and consciousness. In conjunction with the Black gaze and freedom dreaming, the Afrofuture allows Black women graduate students to define themselves rather than adhering to labels prescribed by others, as self-definition and reclaiming controlling images and labels are critical expressions of Black feminism. Buttressed by their own lived experiences as Black women who daily navigate power structures, Black women engage in everyday acts of revolution, hoping that they would inspire others to higher purposes. In the EdD landscape, the Afrofuture is a notable tool of self-emancipation as it directly challenges the traditional aims, processes and practices of how the educational system functions as an instrument of the dominant culture.

How we have engaged with the Afrofuture

In our own experiences (M. Foster et al., 2024), we as faculty and graduate students engaged in the Afrofuture as a process by pooling together our collective cultural capital one year ahead of writing the first two chapters of the dissertation. A forward-thinking student, moved by her own self-emancipation to learn more about producing her knowledge, prompted the charge for the group emancipation of other BIPOC graduate students. Just in her second term in the EdD program, after sharing her potential PoP topic in a course, the student began experiencing the traditional gaze from her non-Black peers. She worried that her journey toward doctoral candidacy might be in jeopardy, even though earning candidacy was more than a year in the future. Her feelings were common as they spoke how Black women's knowledge is evaluated by a "community of experts" (Collins, 1989, p. 752) who represent particular ideological and political standpoints that have taken a deficit-based view of Black women's intellectual work, and thus deeming their new ways of knowing invalid.

From 2022-2024, we came together as a student-initiated affinity group and constructed an online homeplace, meeting at our virtual kitchen tables via Zoom one Saturday a month, to share innovative methodologies and culturally rooted theoretical frameworks and to practice their methodologies and frameworks through research and publishing. Rooted in the cultural practice of women gathering at their kitchen tables (Baker-Bell, 2017), we designed each meeting to understand future writing expectations by examining the present delivery of the curriculum. We discussed what was "doable" given the prevalence of traditional processes, how they could advocate for themselves in chipping away as traditional advising approaches, and why using some culturally rooted approaches, even minimally, was organic and radical, such as telling a story as an introduction to the problem in their PoPs. The EdD program leadership was supportive in understanding the need and benefits of Black students needing a space to learn and reclaim agency along their dissertation journey, and because of the

successful program completion of 70% of the Black women in this group (i.e., graduated within three years), leadership has encouraged the sharing of our processes at conferences and peer-reviewed journals.

It is important to note that not every BIPOC and non-traditional graduate student needs to experience an alternative reality that co-exists alongside a perceived or real inadequate educational space. Constructing and sustaining in an online homeplace also might not be possible for those who need an alternative, given that doctoral faculty already tend to be overextended with teaching, advising, and publishing. However, provided with the appropriate resources and faculty mentor, BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students can create and maintain an online homeplace to support their needs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With respect to the Carnegie Project of the Education Doctorate (CPED) and its mission to redefine the EdD and dialogue around alternative dissertations and dissertation alternatives, we appreciate the massive undertaking toward advocacy and redesign given the number of brick-and-mortar education systems and online graduate programs producing dissertations in the United States and abroad. The academic conversation around the need for reimagining and redesigning remains an important one. We assert that the conversation should continue to push frank discussions to other factors that retain and champion the structure and purposes of the PhD in EdD programs, such as the influence of PhD earners who find their way into EdD spaces.

The growth and evolution of the EdD remains challenged by traditionalists in graduate schools and particular academic circles that remain loyal to particular kinds of knowledge construction and ways of contextualizing realities. When concerns arise about straying too far from Western ideals and academic traditions, there is a tendency to uphold the traditional gaze upon doctoral work and adhere to prescriptive means of regaining standards. As Freire (2000) noted, “Authentic education is not carried on by “A” *for* “B” or *by* “A” *about* “B”, but rather *by* “A” *with* “B” mediated by the world—a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views and opinions about it” (p 93). Nonetheless, faculty advisors and graduate program leaders in general see themselves as fulfilling their job responsibilities and adhering to expectations, not as agents of oppression (Young, 2002). However, if graduate students are going to continue to be limited to producing a four-to-five chapter, traditionally structured PoP or DiP, then they should have various methodologies, theoretical frameworks and research design for doing so. The Black gaze, freedom dreaming, and the Afrofuture offer several legitimate possibilities that still require rigor and substance.

We honestly sought to answer the central, compelling question about doing dissertations differently. In envisioning alternatives in dissertations, we cannot underestimate the real and perceived value of fear and how it shapes our behavior and actions to avoid adverse consequences. We asked ourselves these questions -- if advocating for more possibilities that actually lead to production of alternative dissertations on a large scale**,** would we succumb to self-doubt at some point? Would we eventually wonder if our advocacy leaned more to pursuing “trends” or creating necessary and long overdue ways to get more knowledge to and through more diverse groups of people? How will we know if alternatives are good or bad in the long-term for the evolving EdD? Will we come to regret or applaud our efforts in opening up possibilities and pushing boundaries? Will future scholar-practitioners appreciate or abandon the paths of new possibilities created for them?

However, without the graduate program leaders and faculty advisors disrupting tradition or redefining their positions as mentors, graduate students will continue facing obstacles to pursuing alternative courses of action in developing their dissertations. Furthermore, because it requires collaborative resistance to disrupt traditional systems and structures, students and faculty must embrace their radical pursuit toward the alternative dissertation. We argue that there must be a wholesale organizational commitment to support the evolution of the EdD. Graduate program leadership must understand that alternative dissertations are just one more way to showcase knowledge production, not a replacement of the endearing forms and functions of the traditional dissertation.

To further our point, based on the notions of empowerment found in Black feminist thought, we call upon Collins’ strategies of resistance and conceptualizing of Black women’s activism. Collins (2009) expressed,

> The second dimension of Black women’s activism consists of struggles for institutional transformation--namely those efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, the workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions… Because struggles for institutional transformation are rarely successful without allies, this dimension of Black women’s activism relies on coalition-building strategies. (p. 219)

We argue that graduate program leaders and advisors draw upon radical leadership, resistance and disruption to support BIPOC and non-traditional graduate students who engage in authentic and revolutionary actions to produce knowledge. As these students’ ways of knowing do not always respond or thrive under prescriptive systems of advising or retain their richness in formulaic traditional dissertations, it is particularly significant for these faculty in particular to understand that they best encourage and actualize students’ creativity and innovation when they serve as liberators. We understand that advisor feedback is crucial in developing these students as researchers, but advisors can unknowingly create mentor-mentee relationships that are prescriptive and transactional. Dissertations can become the products of the advisors’ imagination and institutional legacy. However, graduate students, as working professionals and subject matter experts outside the academy, are accomplished in their workplaces and possess knowledge and competence that are integral to their ways of knowing and producing knowledge.

Finally, we ask that EdD program leaders and advisors to engage in organizational and self-reflection on why they may be resisting new possibilities in the EdD landscape. Just as artificial intelligence (AI), once outside the realm of material reality, is now a part of everyday lives; and whether or not they are comfortable with it, the use of AI is becoming more common and normalized in the dissertation process. Reluctance to allow alternative dissertations or the insistence on adhering to traditional dissertation format, in this age of advanced technological tools paired with specialized human thought, brings out a great deal of contradictions and questions about how subjective notions and standards of legitimacy really are.

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