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## Echoing: A Practice of Liberation through Transformative Education

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## Echoing: A Practice of Liberation through Transformative Education

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*Black people living in the U.S. have had to resource themselves with practices to help them remain resilient against the oppression they experience. Pandemic-inspired challenges have made the collective contemplation on how to engage in liberating, transformative practices imperative. Faculty across the country have been tasked with creating nuanced ways to cultivate contemplative, restorative, and liberatory pedagogy. The focus of the current study was to develop a clearer understanding as to how contemplative practices help inspire people constrained by structural inequities to actively shift their mode of being and teaching in higher education. Through a contemplative practice known as echoing (Laymon, 2020), the authors wrote brief love letters to one another. Thematic analyses of each letter yielded suggestions as to how this practice could be used to further resource resilience, well-being, innovative pedagogical practice, self-care, and spirit-nurturing rituals for*

*teachers, students, and staff inclusive of every part of the Black diaspora. Additional discussion is offered on how echoing can be applied across various contexts.*

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Members of the Black diaspora living in the United States have had to allow for the emergence of deep learning around healing, transformation, and collective liberation to remain resilient against the racialized oppression they experience—especially over these last pandemic years. Coupled with the emergence of a novel coronavirus disease in 2019 (COVID-19) was the persistence of the normalized white supremacist virus of old, both wreaking havoc disproportionately on the bodies of those racialized as Black in the United States. Those of us who have been engaged in anti-racist, social-justice work were met with requirements to social distance from one another. Those of us teaching the next generation of agents of liberation were required to do so remotely. Movements once thought to be limited to being practiced in-person were immediately forced to examine new processes for practicing with one another from afar. In other words, we have been challenged with having to rethink our conceptualization of safe space (Abegunde et al., 2020).

All movement runs on at least one power source (Brown, 2017). Human beings motivate both literally and figuratively via the heart (hooks, 1999/2018). Social movements motivate via the collective energy of the people. Prior to COVID-19, those of us engaged in work to help heal, transform, and liberate Black bodies from the various forms of oppression they experience were able to convene to create the spiritual and emotional containers required to hold the energy of the movement. The batteries of our movements were charged when we gathered at meetings, retreats, workshops, conventions, and other assemblies of the sort. When new colleagues organized to begin working together, they did so in person. In the age of COVID-19 however, we have had to cultivate new practices in which we could engage to create the energetic containers necessary to motivate our work.

With our collective work embedded within the historical opportunity programs of New York State, we have had to remain vigilant about cultivating socially-distanced, yet technologically feasible and sustainable containers for our students. The Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) Department<sup>1</sup> has consistently provided access and opportunity to historically underserved students. Such students tend to be economically challenged, first generation college students, BIPOC, and/or from immigrant communities where the health and economic disparities exacerbated by COVID-19 have been the most pronounced. Students from these communities were at highest risk for dropping out of college before the challenges imposed by COVID-19 (Chatman, 2019; Dualeh et al., 2017). At SEEK, we take our mission—to “produce life-long learners and advocates of positive social change”—seriously. As such, we have had to broaden our toolkits to encompass an even wider range of contemplative, restorative, and liberatory pedagogies to teach beyond content and towards shedding conditioned patterns of learning and knowing.

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The most impactful question on our work of late is, “How can novel contemplative practices help inspire people constrained by structural inequities to actively [re]engage in shifting the common mode of being, in general, and of teaching in higher education, specifically, from insipid to transformational; from oppressive to liberating?” When our collective formed, this question served as our primary challenge. Although we all shared one comrade in common, all of us had not previously worked together. As such, we were unaware of the similarities of our work and how we could best function interdependently as a unit, rather than as an amalgamation of independent experts. As a collective, we had not previously discussed what allows us to be inspired and what motivates us to

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<sup>1</sup> At its legislated inception in 1966, SEEK existed across the senior colleges at the City University of New York as academic departments with their own faculty. Through erasure of department status, there are only two campuses where SEEK departments remain. At most senior campuses, SEEK exists as a program. This impacts the ability to participate in college governance on campus.

show up to our work. We were unfamiliar with how to best connect with each other, and how to use this connection to be present with our pursuits of equity and justice for Black-bodied people—both in and around higher education. As we were all familiar with the power of using contemplative practices to cultivate interdependence, we agreed the best way to initiate our work as a collective would be via such methods.

Therefore, the intention of this paper is to share a contemplative practice to resource resilience, well-being, innovative pedagogical practice, self-care, and spirit-nurturing rituals for teachers, students, and staff—inclusive of every part of the Black diaspora. Ultimately, this work is intended to cultivate the capacity for building community and to inspire a vision that creates new possibilities for the transcendent and transformative work yet to be done (hooks, 1999/2018).

## **Method**

The contemplative practice in which we engaged has been referred to as *echoing*. As introduced by Kiese Laymon (2020), echoing is typically practiced in a group of four to five people who write brief letters to one another to express their gratitude and appreciation for the privilege of being connected to one another. Echoing is the process of repeating details that are similar to, and make you think of, or remember, something else (Laymon, 2020). The impetus of this contemplative practice is not entirely different from the common definition in that the letters written within the collective often yield similar details, while helping the letter-writers recollect shared interests and experiences that have had a significant impact on their lives. Echoing further allows the letter-writers to understand the core values each brings to the collective, in general, and to their classrooms, specifically. Echoing requires each letter-writer's attention to be focused on the present, ultimately bringing them into deeper alignment for collective action. The practice is conducted as follows: the 1st author writes their letter to the other authors; the 2nd to the 1st author; the 3rd to the 1st and 2nd authors; the 4th to the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd authors; and the 5th to the previous four authors.

Given our time limitations and busy remote schedule, as well as our desire to create a practice where we were present with what arose,

we met remotely to discuss what would be the best way to write our letters, at which point we concluded that we would have a writing session so that we could write our letters in one another's presence. After discussing our intended purposes for engaging in the practice, we came up with a short list of questions we could answer to facilitate the letter writing process (refer to Table 1). Basing our decision on the number of years each of us has served as faculty in the SEEK Department, we agreed that the elder of the group would write her letter to the other authors, the 2nd most senior member of the community would write to the elder, and so on for each author in the order of their arrival into the SEEK community.

When we convened again remotely to write our letters, we began the practice by listening to a series of affirming mantras. Afterwards, we each focused on the echoing questions in Table 1 to transition into writing our letters. After writing as much as we could for 30 minutes (with

**Table 1**

*Questions used to guide our echoing practice*

1. What (and/or possibly who) has called you into this work? a. What keeps you in this work? b. What sustains you to do this work in lieu of the challenges we experience in doing the work?
2. Who are we in "this" work?
3. What has resourced us in our journey in academia that we want to share with each other?
4. How are we continuing to evolve and/or what are we continuing to learn?
5. What unlearning has this echoing practice initiated for us?
6. What does liberation mean to us?
7. What should be echoed through for future generations of SEEK?

our microphones muted and cameras on), we briefly discussed how the process went for each of us. We then agreed to finish our letters individually over the next 24 hours, and to post them into a common document to share them collectively. Three days later, we met again to read our letters to one another out loud, in the aforementioned order. A bell was rung after each letter was read so as to acknowledge the vibration set within the collective by the reading of the letters. We met two additional times to discuss our reflections of the practice, the themes that arose, and our overall sense of what we learned.

## Results

### Thematic Analysis

After reading our letters aloud to each other, we each separately went back and reread each letter to assess emerging themes. In our last meeting, we deliberated and came to a consensus that there were four main themes (and eight sub-themes) which were echoed throughout each letter: grounding via the knowledge of our ancestors and *presencing* the elders (sub-theme: the importance of remembering the past); centering the teachings of Black educators (sub-theme: the work also referred to as the hustle, engaging *the struggle*); unlearning harmful patterns and systems to access what is hidden (sub-themes: unlearning the lessons of harmful educational systems; the call to experience transformation); and the power of vulnerability, storytelling, and being witnessed while bearing witness (sub-themes: who we are in the work; manifested outcomes; looking toward the future). As seen in Table 2, each theme and sub-theme was informed by specific phrases and concepts that were echoed throughout the letters. We summarized these themes and sub-themes as offerings of *resourcing*, or ways in which people of African descent can renew and expand their capacity to fully inhabit their bodies as well as the space(s) in which they find themselves. Each theme is discussed in further detail below.



**Table 2**  
*Results of thematic analysis*

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Phrases and Concepts “Echoed” Throughout Each Letter
<p><b>Grounding via the knowledge of our ancestors and presencing the elders</b></p>	<p><i>The Importance of Remembering the Past</i></p>	<p>SEEK Legacy, SEEK Mission = A Just Cause; Those who paved the way—Leaders &amp; Those Working Behind the Scenes; Soft Power to Influence Others; Sharing History and Wisdom; Honoring Ancestors &amp; Elders; Create/Design a Place and Space for Marginalized, Racially-oppressed Students</p>
<p><b>Centering the Teachings of Black Educators</b></p>	<p><i>The Work (a.k.a., The Hustle)</i></p>	<p>Relationships; Learn about Self/Others; Preparing Young People; Advocacy; Building Trust; Striving for Excellence; Meaningful Collaborations; Partnering on the Journey; Sharing Wisdom and Light; Curiosity; Empowerment; Honoring Human Dignity of Each Member; Rejection of Status Quo; Providing Support; Intentional Work; A Calling; Reflection; Evaluation; Modeling Liberation; Searching; Setting the Conditions; Being Teacher &amp; Student; Embodied Leadership; Service; Gifts and Talents; Decisions; Adaptability; Flexibility; Shedding Conditioned Patterns; Compassion for Self &amp; the Suffering of Others; Service; Teaching Beyond Content</p>
	<p><i>Engaging the Struggle</i></p>	<p>Opposition to Change; Obstacles; Barriers; Erasure; Rejection; Discomfort; Lack of Safety; Self-Doubt; Rejection of Self; Internalized White Supremacy; Degradation; Invisibility; Neglect; <i>The Good Fight</i>; <i>The Armor</i></p>

<p><b>Unlearning the harmful practices of white supremacist systems to access what is hidden</b></p>	<p><i>Unlearning the Lessons of Oppressive Educational Systems</i></p>	<p>Dominant Cultural Values; Beliefs, Practices of White Supremacy; Patriarchy; Capitalism; Harmful Practices that cause Damage/Trauma; Disdain; Low Expectations; Labeling; Reliance on Eurocentric ways of Knowing; Survival</p>
	<p><i>The Call to Experience Transformation</i></p>	<p>Arrival; Welcoming; Community; Acceptance; Unconditional Love; Patience; Nurturing; Community of Care; Healing; Comfort; Community Joy; Appreciation of Difference; Community Values; Storytelling; Community; Parental Quality; Protection; Family; Sisterhood; Visibility; Honoring Every Person; Loyalty; Respect; Authenticity; Magic; Wonder; Joy; Hope; Faith; Allies</p>
<p><b>The power of vulnerability, storytelling, and being witnessed while bearing witness</b></p>	<p><i>Who we are in the Work</i></p>	<p>Transmitters of History and Culture; Visionaries and Creators of Hope and Change; Champions and Warriresses; the <i>Dora Milaje</i>; Queens; Leaders; Liberators and Community Builders; Sisters and Brothers; Family; Keepers of the Faith; Teachers and Students; Believers in <i>The Dream</i></p>
	<p><i>Manifested Outcomes</i></p>	<p>Life Changing Experiences; Collective Achievement; Recognizing the Power within; Power with Others, not over Others; Self-Empowerment; Self Determination; Understanding about Life &amp; Mortality; Amplification of Voices; Focus on Humanity; Greater Appreciation for the Collective Experience; Ubuntu; Self-Love; Love of Community; Increased Compassion for Self &amp; Others; Capacity to be Fully Present; Liberatory Practice</p>
	<p><i>Looking Toward the Future</i></p>	<p>Preparing Future Leaders; Succession Planning; Creating Pro-Black Space &amp; Culture; Continuing the Practice of Interrogating Ourselves and the Work; Changing the Way we Show up to the Work; Undoing White Supremist Patterns and Ways of Being; Model for Community Change and not Policy Change</p>

### **Grounding via the Knowledge of our Ancestors and *Presencing* the Elders**

As we reflect on our work in the SEEK Department, of the utmost importance is that we acknowledge the presence of our ancestors. SEEK is grounded in the legacy of political activists (i.e., Percy Sutton, Basil Paterson), and social justice *sheroes* (i.e., Shirley Chisholm, bell hooks, Audre Lorde). As such, we stand on the shoulders of these warriors. The *echoing* practice allowed us to hold space for one another so that we could reflect on the power of those who came before us and how their work has been integrated into our ways of being in SEEK. Having both an awareness of how the past is ever present and gratitude for the teachings it provides, we are modeling the connectedness to those who paved the way. When we are rooted in ancestral wisdom, it enables us to be grounded in their protection while being present to what is arising *in the now*. This *presencing* allows us to better discern how we can continue to move forward and what we can leave behind.

As mentioned, this practice began by centering the elder of our collective. Although Black elders are often overlooked in academia, we invited our elder to lead this practice, in reverence to her wisdom. In doing so, we created an intergenerational model of collective learning and being which is often disrupted by white supremacist culture. Lastly, we learned that by honoring the ancestors and centering our elders, we can actively connect to our youth. The greater our capacity to thread generations through interconnectedness, the more we heal the disconnect that can arise from being part of institutional systems that attempt to erase our histories.

### **Centering the Teachings of Black Educators**

Current educational systems erase and devalue the contributions of Black intellectuals, scholars, activists, and leaders. When we center Black history, we reveal a deeply embedded wisdom that our communities have power to mobilize and bring change (Ortiz, 2018). Our collective echoing noted that academia is drowning in the centering of whiteness. We also named the continuation of the status quo with teachings of predominantly white men, as well as the banking method of educa-

tion, which is intended to indoctrinate students with little space for critical inquiry. We are currently experiencing increased attention on state violence, particularly on anti-Blackness and how it manifests in higher education. There have been initiatives to look at curriculum and other practices that counter the maintenance of white supremacy culture in the classroom this past year. With this current upswing of action and dialogue, we demand that the work of Black activism and scholarship not only be included, but centered in the structures of academic institutions. We remember both our collective power to organize, as it is in our bodies and is part of our history. We interrogate our internalized oppression, specifically how it manifests in the body and mind as discomfort and/or resistance. We invite the collective release of the “piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (Lorde, 1984, p. 131). As Black contemplatives, we welcome *all* that arises, even when what arises asks us to create deep change. Our letters remind us that we must rebel against the white-dominant norms of our institutions, even when we benefit from the privilege it affords. We hold the “both-and”: we invite advocacy for the creation of spaces that are *both* anti-racist and pro-Black.

### **Unlearning the Harmful Practices of White Supremacist Systems to Access What Is Hidden**

Contemporary authors share that to understand the lived experiences of Black people is to recognize positionality from a perspective of being objectified, marginalized, ignored, and feared (Menakem, 2019; Owens, 2020; Wade, 2020). Black bodied beings, especially those who are female/femme identified, are often positioned to endure more emotional labor than others, particularly as holders of anger and grief (Wade, 2020). To reclaim our agency and unlearn patterns of harming ourselves and harming others, we must give ourselves permission to sit in the discomfort of our grief and anger (Owens, 2020). It is important for us all to continue to examine these emotions in collective spaces so as to name and sit with all the ways in which anger, grief, and disappointment show up in our work and our lives to reconnect this knowing in our hearts and bodies. Healing is about reconnecting to all the parts of us, even those that might feel heavy or burdensome.

We also recognize that how we, as faculty, process our own healing serves our students. Our letters confirm that if we are not *all* fully liberated—if our brothers and sisters are still in chains, if our young people are not safe, if our elders are not cared for—*none of us* is liberated. The chains that keep us bound are both real and perceived. Liberation work requires engaging in unlearning ways of being that are harmful to ourselves *and* others as well as relearning ways of being that are life giving. Echoing invites us to offer love, compassion, and forgiveness to ourselves *and* others while we do this work. We all have our blind spots—the places we need to bring into conscious awareness, the things that hold us captive to behaviors which ultimately contribute to the replication of harm. In this contemplative exercise, we were tasked with taking an introspective look while also experiencing our colleagues' profound self-reflection. This practice allowed us to open a portal into our collective blind spots so as to highlight what is hidden when we cannot see and when we *do not want* to see. The more aware we are of our blind spots, the better equipped we are to transform our behavior and hold ourselves and the systems we inhabit accountable. Further, we noticed that when we engage in the practice of unlearning/relearning, we model for our students how to do the same, and they, in turn, further this practice with one another.

### **The Power of Vulnerability, Storytelling, and Being Witnessed While Bearing Witness**

Very seldom is the academy a space where vulnerability is encouraged. Storytelling, by students, but *especially* by Black students, is not often honored. The process of being witnessed while bearing witness to the experiences of BIPOC folks is rarely centered. Assata Shakur said, "Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free" (p. 181). By engaging in the echoing practice, we were invited to be in our full humanity, to bravely share while holding fear, discomfort, and the awareness of being seen. By writing, sharing, and witnessing our stories, this practice facilitated for us an embodiment of openness and transparency, which feels liberatory. We have each been offered a

glimpse of our eulogy *before* dying. By engaging in this line of inquiry, we were inspired to ask ourselves how echoing could increase our capacity to fully embody the person others who love us, believe us to be. By leaning into the practice of echoing for support, we were able to embrace the individual and collective power that academia has deemed disruptive. Echoing has reminded us of the importance of resisting a system that aims to devalue and dehumanize by revaluing and rehumanizing our wholeness.

### **Conclusion**

Although we engaged in the contemplative practice of echoing months before writing the final draft of this manuscript, we continue to feel the healing vibrations of the experience. As such, we are now contemplating and reflecting on the following questions:

*Where do we go with the practice of echoing in our SEEK collective?*

*What could we manifest if we did this practice more frequently?*

*How would this practice alter our state of being at work and in our personal lives?*

The wisdom of impermanence offered to us by the COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that we must not squander this life. We must take advantage of the here and now. We embrace fierce advocacy for our students, our need for connection, for well-being, and deep desires for joy and pleasure. Our letters taught us that our devotion to this work is grounded in love, joy, and celebration. We lean into love of ourselves—as Black women and men—and we honor all the varying ways in which we embody excellence. We connect to this work as a collective and we embrace our own unique desires of what brings us joy. By embracing our joy and pleasure, we strengthen our capacity to be fully present and to heal completely.

We understand that we can set an intention to build with interconnectedness. Further, we acknowledge that by first expanding our own capacity, we expand the opportunities for the betterment of our stu-

dents' lives and the lives of those who serve opportunity programs. We understand that containers for beloved communities must be built, and that we have the tools and resources to do so. We inspire resilience by sitting with ambiguity and suffering to create opportunities for connection. By remaining in touch with the past, we are reminded that we are grounded and rooted in the support and protection of the ancestors. We evoke their protection when we value how their sacrifices established the containers where we can be present to what arises—right here, right now.

We have been empowered to prioritize what we think is most important and to set the direction of our work. We are now the stewards of the work of SEEK. Our progress with this charge could best be summarized in the words of the Delaney sisters: we are *having our say* (Delaney et al., 1993). According to social justice activist and Buddhist teacher, Lama Rod Owens, “if you are not ready to be in the complexity of this work, then you are not ready to be free, nor are you ready to free others” (2021, April 28). Therefore, as we contemplate the legacy we want to leave behind, we invite other Black contemplatives to sit with the complexity of the work yet to be done through the embodiment of the reflective questions we offer in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Reflective Questions for Black Contemplatives*

1.	How does my embodiment of White Supremacy and anti-Blackness show up? a. How does this revelation inhibit my ability to live into liberatory practice? b. How does this revelation cause harm for myself and others?
2.	How does my healing, critical self-reflection, unlearning/relearning, accountability, and subsequent action to create a more human-affirming space allow my liberatory practice to thrive?
3.	What does a co-conspirator practice look like, not only dismantling anti-Blackness and White Supremacy, but uplifting a pro-Black space and culture?
4.	How do I, as a co-conspirator, best honor and magnify the transformative work our Black and Brown (SEEK) ancestors have done, and we continue to do?
5.	How do I find ways to be present to disappointment, grief, and anger in the work? a. How do we support our collectives in being present?

In closing, in an efforts to help facilitate the arrival of those who will stand in our place after we progress through the continuum of time and space to our next assignment in the universe, we invite the broader community of Black contemplatives to join us in our commitment to the following: teaching students the art of collective storytelling; continuing the work of embodied liberation and leadership; mentoring with respect and love; being teacher and student; engaging in both individual and collective hustle for liberation; knowing and accepting one another by knowing and accepting ourselves; and practicing radical love and compassion for self and others. After all, as Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes sang with Teddy Pendergrass in *Wake Up Everybody* (1975),

*The world won't get no better, if we just let it be.*

*The world won't get no better, we got to change it (yeah),*

*Just you and me!*

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