

Essay

Time and Place for Counter-Storytelling as Liberatory Theory and Collective Healing Practice in Academia: A Case Example of a Black Feminist Psycho-Socio Cultural Scholar-Artivist

Alexis D. Jemal 

Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College, New York, NY 10035, USA; aj1423@hunter.cuny.edu

Abstract: The institution of slavery engineered racialized gendered capitalism that locks Black women in multiple social identity-labeled boxes on the sociocultural and economic hierarchy. Acts of cultural invasion have produced controlling images and oppressive narratives to maintain the status quo of white male wealth and power. Critical race theory scholars have offered counter-storytelling as a theorizing method to study the impact of intersectional oppression on Black women and to develop strategies for resistance and healing for those who are at the margins of society. This manuscript weaves the voices of Black feminists with a creative arts methodology to explore resistance and healing practice rooted in lived experience and provides a case example of counter-storytelling in a predominantly white academic space. For future directions, there is a need for guidelines on how to navigate the use of counter-storytelling to safely engage and protect the Black woman's humanity and not be a tool for public displays of Black pain or for trauma voyeurism.

Keywords: counter-storytelling; critical consciousness; healing; feminism; Black women



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1. Introduction

The United States' paradoxical origin story begins with Africans stolen from their homeland by European colonizers, tortured, and enslaved for their forced labor to build, on the soil of stolen land, a home of the free. The socioeconomic, cultural, and political system of slavery that established the US as a global superpower created white European American male prosperity and hegemony. The institution of American slavery was a unique form of slavery that differed from other forms of slavery practiced around the world as it was reserved for Black people and their descendants (and not equal opportunity slavery). As such, American slavery of Africans not only stole the people and their labor but it also attempted to steal their futures. What was the most valuable "crop" or product grown and sold in the United States? "Black people" or, more specifically, people who were born enslaved. Black women were the only ones who could reproduce enslaved babies as the enslaved status followed the lineage of the mother to ensure that white rapists and enslavers could not spread their status as free human beings to the products of their crimes. Consequently, two nations came "[o]ut of the [attempted] rack and ruin" (Hughes 1935) of enslaved Black women's wombs. She birthed the United States and delivered a new people (i.e., ethnicity)—the African American—indigenous to, made, and only sold in the United States.

The institution of slavery engineered racialized gendered capitalism that informed the dominant ideology in the United States. "Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people" (Collins 2000, p. 4). The ideology most prevalent in the United States reflects the interests of white, wealthy, cisgender, seemingly heterosexual, Christian men. A society's ideology dictates how that society (its people, institutions, systems) operates. "Within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely, seen as natural, normal, and inevitable" (Collins 2000, p. 4). Moreover, the convergence of "race, class, and gender

oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another. . . It also created the political context for Black women's intellectual work" (Collins 2000, p. 4). Racialized gendered capitalism stratified all labor along the visible lines of race and gender, becoming not only the US' socioeconomic system but also its capitalist culture that capitalizes on dehumanization. The best way to make capital is to (1) have free or cheap labor and/or (2) eliminate your competition. Within this socioeconomic and cultural system of racialized gendered capitalism, Black women are treated as free/cheap labor and/or the competition to be annihilated.

The intersection of marginalized identities gives Black women a starting position at the bottom of the social hierarchy only to be forced into a hole when occupying other marginalized identities (e.g., LGBTQ, disability). Intersectionality pertains to the interlocking nature of oppression associated with occupying two or more marginalized social identities. The intersections create a unique experience of oppression (i.e., the dehumanization of marginalized group members). When these intersections are not considered, the judging observer will overlook Black women's experience and effectively erase their existence. The case for intersectionality became relevant in a courtroom. As Kimberlé Crenshaw explained, a judge found no merit to a Black woman's lawsuit for employment discrimination. After all, the company had hired Black people and women. Unfortunately, the court did not consider that the company hired Black men and white women and had not hired any Black women. Somehow belonging to two protected classes (Black race and woman gender) left the complainant unprotected. To add insult to injury, prospective employers probably punished and blacklisted her for having the audacity to use her voice to complain about the harm she experienced. The dominant narrative flips the script and transforms the Black woman's character into a whiner, an ungrateful complainer, the angry aggressor playing the race and/or gender card. This interpretation then justifies harm (e.g., maltreatment, disrespect, intimidation, violence) against Black women and the lack of protection from harm. In 1962, before Malcolm X stated unequivocally that the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America is the Black woman (Embe 2019), Claudia Jones, writing in 1949, called for greater militancy on their [Black women's] behalf since "they remain the most oppressed class in the population" (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 152).

In essence, ideologies of dominance (e.g., racism, classism) that originated during the slave era and continue today are like bars on a cage of intersecting marginalized identities, locking Black women in their place on the sociocultural and economic hierarchy. The institution of slavery designed by racialized gendered capitalism has informed and defined the terms of Black women's existence in the US, and, as a result, constructed their methods of resistance and survival. To be a Black woman is to be in a constant fight for your life—to exist, breathe, live, love, and labor on one's own terms.

2. Black Women's Oppression

The dominant society's ideologies of dominance birthed oppressive tactics, such as violence and controlling images, to silence, define, and justify egregious harm committed against Black women's minds, bodies, spirits, and environments. Controlling and stereotypical images attempt to define and defy Black womanhood to maintain the status quo and hierarchies of white male power. Claudia Jones again writing "'An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women,' which appeared in *Political Affairs* (1949)" summarizes the Black woman's experience under a system of racialized gendered capitalism as follows:

[The Black woman] is the victim of the white chauvinist stereotype as to where her place should be. In the film, radio, and press, the Negro woman is not pictured in her real role as breadwinner, mother, and protector of the family, but as a traditional "mammy" who puts the care of children and families of others above her own. This traditional stereotype of the Negro slave mother, which to this day appears in commercial advertisements, must be combatted and rejected as a device of the imperialists to perpetuate the white chauvinist ideology that

Negro women are “backward,” “inferior,” and the “natural slaves” of others. (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 158)

The negative stereotypes and the associated controlling images—“from the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture” (Collins 2000, p. 4)—contain dominant narratives at their core that have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression. First, dominant narratives draw on the dominant group’s limited knowledge about folks who hold marginalized identities including multiple layers (e.g., home, work, attitudes) and multi-levels (e.g., interpersonal, institutional, cultural) of assumptions and perspectives that filter the reality and experience of racism, sexism, classism, and so on. Second, majoritarian stories privilege and honor the experiences and perspectives of “whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals by relying on these social locations as normative points of reference” (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, p. 244). Third, these narratives and stories are spoken “from a standpoint of authority and universality in which the experiences of one group (whites) are held to be normal, standard, and universal” (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, p. 244). Fourth, when dominant narratives and majoritarian stories are deemed the “truth,” they distort and silence the experiences of the dominated (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, pp. 244–45). As such, a myriad of untruths hold the keys to the psychological, social, political, economic, and cultural shackles that reinforce racialized gendered capitalism and perpetuate Black women’s dehumanization and oppression.

Black women are often excluded and left out in the cold, on the corner at the intersection of their social identities. Claudia Jones, in 1949, noted, “President Truman spoke solicitously in a Mother’s Day Proclamation about the manifestation of “our love and reverence” for all mothers of the land. The so-called “love and reverence” for the mothers of the land by no means includes Negro mothers like Rosa Lee Ingram, Amy Mallard, the wives and mothers of the Trenton Six, or the other countless victims (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 155). This quote brings to mind the mothers of the Central Park Five, and all the mothers of Black people wrongly imprisoned and/or murdered by the US’ criminal legal system, and their subsequent erasure and exclusion from the “mother-to-be-celebrated” narrative. Also, consider the US’ suffrage movements. First, Black men argued they should have the right to vote because they shared “man” status with white men, unlike women. Then, white women argued they should have the right to vote because they were white like white men, unlike Black women. Again, Claudia Jones’ 1949 *Political Affairs* essay states the following:

that the super-exploitation of the Negro woman worker is thus revealed not only in that she receives, as woman, less than equal pay for equal work with men, but in that the majority of Negro women get less than half the pay of white women. Little wonder, then, that in Negro communities the conditions of ghetto-living—low salaries, high rents, high prices, etc.—virtually become an iron curtain hemming in the lives of Negro” women “undermining their health and spirit! Little wonder that the maternity death rate for Negro women is triple that of white women!” (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 156).

The continuance to grapple with these same issues today is evidence of how the US’ heart roots are lies consisting of dominating narratives that deny Black women their humanity based on not having the right hue and not being man, and thus deemed as “inhu(e)man”. Likewise, Lorde notes that there is a reluctance to see Black women as “whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as human—rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women” (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 372). That is the story of Black women’s lives.

3. Black Feminist Praxis: Survival, Healing, Resistance, and Liberation

Black feminist theoretical frameworks and perspectives provide Black women with ways to understand themselves and their experiences. Black women's canon of knowledge includes songs, creative writing, and academic scholarship. Black feminist practice provides a method for standing on their knowledge of self, community, and society. Black feminist praxis is the combined efforts of Black women to translate theory into practice for survival, healing, resistance, and liberation. To be more engaged in Black feminist praxis, in January 2024, I attended a workshop titled Utilizing Arts-Based Research Methodology to Center Marginalized Voices through an Intersectional Lens at the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) conference led by Britton Williams and Yasmine Awais, two women of color. In this workshop, using lines from bell hooks' (1991) *Theory as Liberatory Practice*, Shawn Wilson's (2008) *Research is Ceremony*, Audre Lorde's *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, and Barbara Christian's *The Race for Theory*, I created, and now offer, a poem that attempts to capture Black feminist praxis.

Relationships do not merely shape reality; they are reality (Wilson 2008, p. 6).

Build relationships between the storyteller, the story, and the readers (Wilson 2008, p. 6).

Our theorizing is in narrative forms, in the stories we create (Christian 1987, p. 52).

Theory as intervention, as a way to challenge the status quo (hooks 1991, p. 59).

For within structures defined by power, interpersonal to institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive (Lorde 1985).

I saw in theory a location for healing (hooks 1991, p. 59)

If I hadn't believed it, I wouldn't have seen it (Wilson 2008, p. 6).

We pursue our magic (Lorde 1985).

The dark place within where hidden and growing our true spirit rises (Lorde 1985).

Finger pointing at the moon is not the moon (Christian 1987, p. 53).

It is our dreams that point the way to freedom (Lorde 1985).

These places of possibility within ourselves (Lorde 1985).

Quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change—language—into idea into more tangible action (Lorde 1985).

How else have we managed to survive (Christian 1987, p. 52)?

One strategy for survival rooted in Black feminist praxis is to resist external definitions imposed by dominant groups on Black women's life, labor, and love and replace those images with their own self-defined perspectives. As Audre Lorde (1984, p. 45) states, "It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment". Angela Davis' landmark essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," is an early example of Black feminist discourse. Its revisionist approach "debunks prevalent stereotypes about Black women and unmasks androcentric biases in American history by calling attention to the scholarly neglect of the intellectual work and experiences of Black women," including their strategies of resistance to slavery (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 264).

In the words of hooks,

feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires. (hooks 1981, p. 194)

However, the paucity of literature on Black women; the suppression/silencing of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional scholarship; and, the "exclusion of Black women from positions of power within mainstream [academic] institutions," (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 264) maintains their invisibility, reinforces the rampant rampage of stereotypical images of Black women in popular culture and public policy (Collins 2000), and jeop-

ardizes the action initiatives needed to reorganize society to protect and support Black women's humanity. Black women's silence is perceived as acquiescence to the dominant narrative that "allows and reinforces fictitious clichés. These clichés have "given credence to grossly distorted categories through which the Black woman continues to be perceived" (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 264). In response, Angela Davis advises, "when confronted with these reified images of ourselves, we must still assume the responsibility of shattering them" (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 264). Countless Black feminists have challenged Black women to not only resist and reject these negative images but to replace them with self-defined images that speak our truth. Black women theorize with their lives. In practicing bell hooks' "Theory for Liberation," Black women create theories for survival from lived experiences of resilience and have made a practice out of resisting "continued devaluation by countering the dominant stereotypes about us that prevail in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy by decolonizing our minds" (hooks 1993, p. 1). Consequently, Black women as alchemists have transformed sources of oppression into revolutionary resources for themselves and their descendants. Importantly, as demonstrated in this paper, Black feminist praxis has been informed by our Black ancestral mothers' wisdom and established over centuries. As I stated under my high school yearbook photo, *I am who I am because of me, but mostly because my mother is also a beautiful Black woman. My daughters will say the same.*—Dr. Jemal, Mills College Yearbook 1972.

4. Counter-Storytelling

The African ancestors of enslaved African Americans provided stories of identity, family, and culture that opposed the stories imposed by enslavers. Traces of these stories inform counter-storytelling practices used to resist personal and cultural narratives that support white male hegemony and the discriminatory social practices that these images perpetuate. Counter-storytelling is a tool designed by critical race theory (CRT) scholars used to "contradict racist characterizations of social life" (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, p. 244). Additionally, counter-storytelling aims to expose remnants of anti-blackness and white privilege hidden in race-neutral discourse "to reveal how white privilege [and anti-blackness, independently or in combination] operate within an ideological framework to reinforce and support unequal societal relations between whites and people of color" (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, p. 244). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) define counter-storytelling as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" including people of color, women, gay people, and the poor (p. 26). Counter-stories or narratives stand in opposition to narratives of dominance and serve to undermine racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist narratives. "Counter-stories facilitate social, political, and cultural cohesion as well as survival and resistance among marginalized groups. Therefore, they need not be created only as a direct response to majoritarian stories" (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, pp. 244–45).

Although "[s]torytelling is a powerful method for creating meaning as well as challenging myths (Delgado 1989)" (Merriweather Hunn et al. 2006, p. 244), my doctoral education trained me to perceive objectivity and subjectivity in opposition and that objectivity was the gold standard for scholarship. However, by incorporating Black feminist perspectives and traditions, I have come to reconcile the tension between subjectivity and objectivity in producing scholarship by inserting my story, lived experience, and myself into my scholarship. The Black woman's liberation movement centers identity and the stories that resist being defined through the racist and/or sexist eyes of gendered and racialized capitalism that were established by the conditions of slavery. "For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women's survival" (Collins 2000, p. 100). As such, we gain knowledge and we come to understand ourselves, each other, and the world from our lived and shared experiences. The healing power of shared narratives can reduce isolation and create community. When people share stories from their life experiences, the listeners are witnesses. This witnessing allows people

to reclaim their identities, be defined in and on their own terms, be seen through their own words, and be heard in their own voice (Solorzano and Yosso 2002). Likewise, centering my stories and experiences have been forms of resistance, sources for healing, and strategies for liberation. As poet June Jordan (2005) wrote, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.”

With these ideas in mind, I took the opportunity to practice storytelling as a method of survival, healing, and resistance when a colleague asked me to do a colloquium for their school’s doctoral program in psychology. I thought it would be most helpful to the doctoral students to tell them my story of how I came to my work as a critical-radical researcher, scholar, and practitioner in the field of social work. One goal was to assuage their anxiety that they’re supposed to complete their life’s work overnight. My story is personal to do this work is personal and deeply rooted in my lived experiences. Telling my story aloud always activates a multitude of emotional responses. Thus, subsequent to a brief introduction, I began my talk with a trigger warning for myself, so that the audience would not be surprised if my emotions overcame me or, rather, if a real person took control of the automaton I often reverted to during these presentations.

5. Excerpts from Presentation on Academic, Art, Action, and Intervention Research (A3IR): The Praxis of Translating Theory into Research, Practice and Education

In an effort to be on my healing journey and to do humanizing work, I have been focusing on developing authentic relationships and being more vulnerable and transparent about my story. This includes the harm I have experienced as a Black woman and the healing that I have received from being and working in community. I will mention that telling my story at times is painful and emotional for me as living in a dehumanizing society can be soul-crushing. My hope for this talk is to identify the pieces of my professional story that are, at key moments, indistinguishable from my personal story, and ultimately, integrate my passion, purpose, and the people for whom I do this work.

My radicalization began when I was born as a Black baby girl with a dark brown complexion to a Black single mother with a PhD in psychology. My mother almost miscarried because her obstetrician did not put her on bedrest. Instead, he sent her back to work a 50 h per week job in corporate America. As a child “race” never made sense to me because there were many skin colors in my family and I only recognized colorism. I knew that it was better to have a fair complexion. If you had fair skin you were treated better and received kindness. You were more beautiful. Also, my family had a weight complex and loved long straight hair. I did not connect any of this to slavery, historical trauma, internalized oppression, anti-blackness, racialized capitalism, etc. I only knew that there were people who looked very “white” by skin color calling themselves “Black”. This group of people included my grandmother and her mother. [I display a picture of my grandmother beside a picture of Queen Elizabeth. When I acknowledge that the picture on the left is my grandmother¹, there is an audible expression of confusion, shock, curiosity. The pictures appear to show two aging white women that could have been best friends.]

When I was eleven and in the sixth grade, we moved from a predominantly Black town to a predominantly white town. To sum up my early adolescent years, my mother devised a theme song for me, titled. “I wish I were a white girl”. I will spare you the poignant lyrics, but suffice to say, it did the trick and squashed my desire to use skin-bleaching creams. When I was about fifteen, I wrote a story that encapsulated my critical reflection on my experience in my family and the ideas and values that were reinforced daily in these white spaces. Here is an excerpt from my story, *The Birthday Wish for Good Hair*.

“God! My hair is so messed up!” Nefertiti, Ebony’s cousin, complained. She raised her elm complexioned, meaty arms with dimpled hands to fix her braids that were neatly wrapped and pinned around her head forming a crown of glory. “Sometimes it’s so hard to work with.” As she unpinned each spiral, the sandy brown strands fell gracefully, with a queen’s wave, and brushed her chubby buttocks.

Ebony watched her cousin’s hair with enlarged pupils to take in all the wonders and beauty. Nef’s long, wavy hair seemed to embrace Ebony like Dr. Strange’s magic cape.

Once again, the pseudo-enchantment began. Ebony ran into the bathroom, and returned with a towel draped around her head. "See, Nef, I have long hair, too," Ebony said as she swung her imaginary hair to either side of her slender body.

"No ya don't, Ebony. You just put a stupid towel round ya nappy hair," Nef said and then began to laugh.

"My hair ain't nappy." Disputing the disrespect was a level one retort, but Nef's hair was above reproach in Ebony's eyes. That night when everyone was asleep Ebony lay on her back, staring at her glow in the dark universe plastered on her ceiling. There was always a shooting star ready to make wishes come true. With the skill of a night predator, she artfully maneuvered her way from between her two sleeping cousins. She opened the door and peered into the hallway, lit only by two small night-lights. With cat-like steps, Ebony tiptoed through the hallway to the full-length sized mirror. She sat down on the carpeted floor with crossed legs and glared into her own eyes. She believed the person in the mirror was not her, but her twin, trapped in another dimension. Ebony named her mirror twin Willow. Willow watched and followed Ebony's every move. "C'mon Willow," she whispered. "I won't hurt you. Talk to me." Ebony tried to coax Willow with the most encouraging words to speak to her, but Willow held her tongue.

Aggravated and tired, Ebony could no longer run from the question gnawing on her thoughts. She tried not to let it bother her, but she had to know the truth. She slowly began to reach her hands to her ponytails. "Dookie braids," she mocked, "I don't have dookie braids." She entwined her fingers into her thick, black hair, and gently began to pull the pieces apart. She remembered Nef when she uncoiled her braids. All Nef had to do was pull one link in the chain and the braid unraveled. Ebony pulled the first chains apart and then removed her hands quickly. She glared at Willow's hair hoping to see the same chain reaction Nef's hair had accomplished earlier. Somehow, defying gravity, the braid remained like an outstretched index finger admonishing a small child. Ebony continued to stare. It needs a little more time, she thought. She waited a few more minutes, but the braid did not attempt to unravel. It stood there, held its ground, ready for battle. Ebony gently took her finger and poked it, but the braid indented, and kept its new form like clay. Frustrated and on the verge of anger, Ebony took her hand and swiped the braid with all her might. The braid bent down across her scalp, popped up erect, and repositioned itself on its throne. The braid was the epitome of selfish pride and intense dignity. Ebony's bottom lip began to quiver, and her eyes burned with the threat of tears. She yanked the braid apart and tried to pull it down past her shoulder, but it could not reach. Ebony pulled as hard as she could, and at times, it would reach, but, when she let go, it would curl back up to her ears. She ripped through her hair as a tidal wave of emotion surged through her body. With each pull, she felt and heard the snapping strands of hair. It hurt, but she did not stop.

"I hate my hair. Why did I have to be born with this hair? I don't want it. I hate it," she whispered to herself with a tone of disgust. "It's so ugly. . . it's so ugly." She looked in the mirror and watched her fury explode before her. She pulled. She yanked. She tugged. "Why can't it be straight?" She forced her words through clenched teeth. Finally, her arm tired and fell in her lap. Mangled ponytail holders remained wedged between the tight thick curls. She raised her eyes and found Willow staring at her. In Willow's eyes, Ebony found no comfort, only a look of mutual hate.

Her hair was a mess. It was tangled and going in every direction. Out poured her tears. She fell forward and leaned her wet cheeks against the mirror. Her chest heaved with each muffled sob, and with every broken breath she told herself, "I am so ugly. I hate myself." She stared in the mirror and watched her eyes redden and her lips curl down. "I am so ugly!" She cried until her stomach hurt. She cried until she couldn't breathe. She cried until she made no noise. She cried until she had no more tears, and then, she cried herself to sleep on the floor. Ungranted wishes exposed to all, Willow watched, and wept with her.

Every time I tell this story, I become a weeping Willow, and this time was no different. I could barely finish reading the story without having to take deep breaths to keep the tidal wave of emotions from drowning me. However, this story is not unique to my experience. Whoopi Goldberg wore a shirt on her head in a scene from the Broadway production of her one-woman show “Whoopi Goldberg.” Similarly, in 1975, Michele Wallace wrote in her essay, *Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood*, that

[o]n rainy days my sister and I used to tie the short end of a scarf around our scrawny braids and let the rest of its silken mass trail to our waists. We’d pretend it was hair and that we were some lovely heroine we’d seen in the movies. There was a time when I would have called that wanting to be white, yet the real point of the game was being feminine. Being feminine meant being white to us. (Guy-Sheftall 1995, p. 291)

At the time I wrote the story, I had no idea that Black girls draping their heads with towels or scarves to have long flowing hair was a cultural artifact buried within our shared stories. The convergence of Black women’s lived experiences echoes in truth. That is rigor. I have since learned that wishing to be something or someone else is not the answer. It became clear to me that no matter how hard I tried, I would never be able to live up to white standards of beauty because, for example, because this standard was not made for me or by people who look like me. So, why was I trying to change myself or wishing to be different in order to be accepted? Maybe it was not me that needed to change. Perhaps the world needed to change to be more accepting of me. However, even with these powerful epiphanies, the strong emotions are a testament to how much the psychological pain is still with me today. It is no secret that my psyche and my heart bear the scars of cultural invasion.

6. Cultural Invasion

Culture is a word for a group of people’s way of life, comprising, for example, norms, values, traditions, behaviors, and language. Culture passes from one generation to the next through various forms of learning and socialization processes. Invasion is a form of social, economic, and cultural domination. “All domination involves invasion—at times physical and overt, at times camouflaged, with the invader assuming the role of a helping friend” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 153). Thinking about the history of social work, the idea of a “helping friend” always caught my attention as being possibly analogous with “friendly visitors” who entered/invaded people’s homes and judged their way of life against white Eurocentric standards of living. The U.S. also has a history of invading indigenous homes and using missionaries to “civilize” indigenous populations, attempting to strip them of their clothes, language, and culture.

“Cultural invasion” is a phrase defined by Paulo Freire ([1970] 2000), a Brazilian educator and activist who taught illiterate peasants to read their worlds with the development of critical consciousness, a pedagogy for liberation that leveraged the strengths and actions of marginalized groups. “In this phenomenon, the invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s’ potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 152). Cultural invasion is a tool of oppression and conquest and is “always an act of violence against the persons of the invaded culture, who lose their originality or face the threat of losing it” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 152). It creates a distinction between the invaders as subjects and the invaded as objects. The subjects are the authors of, and actors in, the process. They mold. They act. The objects are molded. They are to follow the choices made for them by the invaders. “They are acted upon or only have the illusion of acting, through the actions of the invaders” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 152). Culture is a part of being human. When one group invades another group’s culture, effectively transforming the invaded into objects, such as property, with assigned value by the invader, that is a dehumanizing act for all parties involved. To be clear, invading dehumanizes the invaded and the invader. For example, only a dehumanized being who has lost their

humanity could bring their loved ones to eat, frolic, and chat while attending lynchings, the public mutilation and murder by burning or hanging of another human being.

Cultural invasion “is an *instrument* of domination” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 154, italics in the original) that may result in internalized oppression. To serve the purposes of oppression, cultural invasion involves a narrow “view of reality, a static perception of the world, and the imposition of one worldview upon another. It implies the “superiority” of the invader and the “inferiority” of those who are invaded, as well as the imposition of values by the former. . . .” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 160). Internalized oppression seems similar to Stockholm syndrome, a condition that causes hostages to develop a psychological alliance with their captors as a survival strategy during captivity. “Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 153). For cultural invasion to succeed, it is essential that those invaded become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. Since everything has its opposite, if those who are invaded consider themselves inferior, they must necessarily recognize the superiority of the invaders (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 153). This, in turn, leads people to treat themselves and others who look like them with the same dehumanizing mainstream treatment condoned and perpetuated by society as a whole.

When persons internalize stories about themselves and their group, even when they do not fully accept them, the stories are harmful and can create shame and possibly self-hatred. “Internalizing the problem makes the person feel that they are to blame. It leads to discouragement and often to a feeling of helplessness” (Abels and Abels 2001, pp. 69–70). “This can be particularly true if the group you belong to is often singled out in the media, in books, and in public discourse. . . [and if] many of the contributions of the group are not known or have been suppressed” (Abels and Abels 2001, pp. 69–70). In response, some people attempt to become more “acceptable” by donning the style or look (e.g., mask, costume) of the attackers (Abels and Abels 2001, pp. 69–70). “The more invasion is accentuated and those invaded are alienated from the spirit of their own culture and from themselves, the more the latter want to be like the invaders: to walk like them, dress like them, [and] talk like them” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 153). Disney’s (1967) *The Jungle Book* seems to epitomize cultural invasion with the song “I Wanna Be Like You (The Monkey Song)”. “The social “I” of the invaded person, like every social “I”, is formed in the socio-cultural relations of the social structure, and therefore reflects the duality of the invaded culture” (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 153). Once oppression is internalized, it is a terrorizing enemy, requiring a “battle on two fronts: the oppressor within and the oppressor without” (Bulhan 1985, p. 123).

The Clark and Clark doll experiment provided evidence of the psychological trauma that occurs to Black children living in a white supremacist society and being inundated and bombarded with white supremacist messages. Although this study was used in *Brown v. Board of Education* to end segregated schools because it “proved” the psychological harm that occurs from being kept apart from white people, I saw it as showing the harm from the violence of being treated as an inferior or subhuman being, which continued to occur in desegregated spaces. While attending the Public Science Project’s 2019 participatory action research (PAR) summer institute, the facilitator asked participants to write to the person or people for whom they do this work. I wrote, “Since the day I saw the video of Kiri Davis’ high school project, a remake of the Clark & Clark doll experiment, your face has been etched into my mindscape. I do not know your name or the names of your parents, but I call out to you as if I were your mom. I replay the moment you told the interviewer by pointing to the Black doll instead of the white doll that she was the bad one, the ugly one, the stupid one. Then, she asked you the soul-crushing question, which one looks like you? You instinctively reached for the white doll—wanting to pull it toward you—so it could embrace you as fiercely as you had embraced all that it stood for—but your hand stopped as if it hit a wall. You hesitantly switched direction. Barely touching the Black doll, you pushed that Black thing toward the interviewer and lowered your shame-filled eyes. I cried then and I cry now, because I know your pain intimately. I’ve seen it in my own

eyes. And, I've seen it in my daughters'. To all the little Black girls who wished they were white at one time, now, or sometime in the future." I left the training with one question on my mind: what intervention could I create that would address the psychological harm for Black children and people who are inundated with messages of white supremacy?

As a student of creative writing and as an applied theater practitioner, I understand that the creative arts are a powerful tool for working against cultural invasion. As a method, the creative arts can spotlight invisible, underlying oppressive factors that exist in our daily lives. Theatre and other art forms have the power to amplify the voices of the silenced and raise awareness of horrific and problematic events that people attempt to ignore. For example, theater companies brought the inhumane act of lynching to center stage. Theatre dramas, primarily produced by Black women, brought to life the knowledge gaps at the intersections of race, class, and gender that decentered and deconstructed white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy (Perkins and Stephens 1998). Lynching dramas exposed the mentality that stereotyped Black men as rapists, Black women as prostitutes, and white women as the property of white men (Hill and Hatch 2003).

A particularly transformative element of the creative arts is aesthetic distance. Applied theater employs strategies to provide an aesthetically distanced mirror that allows participants the appropriate amount of space (not too close to or too far from the content) for self-reflection and to perceive issues from various viewpoints or angles, try on new or different perspectives, and to think critically about topics that normally may engage their defensive tactics (Jackson 2008). Similarly, applied theater strategies help us identify the inherently oppressive script of the white supremacist status quo that we have been socialized to follow, whereas improv exercises provide time, space, grace, and opportunity to break free from the social script and be creative and spontaneous. Radical imagination that ignites transformative potential lives in that liminal space. As such, the dramatic arts can become "'the practice of freedom,' the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 34). These transformations can be personal, communal, physical, social, environmental, structural, political, cultural, and/or societal.

7. Black Indigenous Women of Color (BIWOC) Educator's Heal

My experience of micro- and macro-aggressions as an educator in the academy, a predominantly white institution, negatively affected my mental and physical health and necessitated multi-level healing from the micro-molecular-soular to cultural levels. Recognizing the interplay of social injustice processes and individual-level outcomes, Dr. King (1958) noted that there must be a rhythmic balance between attacking the causes (i.e., the forces of dehumanization) and healing the harmful effects. To continue my healing journey, I assembled a team of BIWOC educators and we initiated BIWOC educators' healing circles that resulted in the cultivation of the Space to Breathe Initiative, a physical and virtual space where women of color—faculty, students, administrators, and staff—can find respite from racial and gender micro-aggressions and institutional oppressions. The solutions that come from the systems grounded in white supremacy do not work for us. The time, space, and place for refuge to safeguard our well-being are often difficult to locate (see Jemal et al. 2023 for an example of a BIWOC educator's healing circle). Thus, there is a need to create intimate healing spaces for us by us that will explore both the trauma and healing potential from the impact of violence and harm rooted in racialized gendered capitalism and white supremacy. These spaces will mitigate the sense of isolation, inform community care, and allow us to reclaim traditional healing practices that include connection to nature and being in community with holistic experts of color. bell hooks (1993) explained that such a practice could serve as an avenue for Black women "to offer radically different images of ourselves" (p. 2).

An underlying principle of my healing process is that this work needs to be done in community as each of us is the healing agent of the other. Dr. García Peña wrote in her book *Community as Rebellion* (García Peña 2002) that "We need to find our people, and together

we need to take the resources available to us through our institutions and use them to build spaces that sustain us. That is how we make it. That is how we thrive” (p. 51). And, in doing so, we as Black women, necessarily threaten the status quo in “moving ourselves from manipulatable objects to self-empowered subjects” (hooks 1993, p. 2). In this way, we excavate and eject the cultural invader that was forcibly injected into our minds, bodies, and souls. Freire notes

The oppressed suffer from the duality, which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. . . They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and recreate, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed. (Freire [1970] 2000, p. 48)

8. Lessons Learned from Presentation

During and after my talk, I had trouble reading the room. Did they feel my pain, which I thought was palpable? I could not tell if my story landed, if my emotion was being shared, or if I had exposed my soul unnecessarily. Could they use my vulnerability as a weapon against me? Would they violate my humanity? My questions point to the need for a methodology for how to navigate the boundaries between storytelling as resistance in predominantly white academic spaces and storytelling as a potential, unintentional manifestation of trauma voyeurism. Trauma voyeurism is the practice of making another person’s pain or misfortune, or body, public domain. How do BIWOC engage in the practice of counter-storytelling in predominantly white spaces in a safe way? Is there a specific time and place needed to practice resisting the oppressive stereotypical images of Black women stemming from racialized gendered capitalism?

This paper reflects my ongoing struggle to reclaim my voice and to purge and heal from the impact of dominant narratives imposed upon me and forced down my throat, choking the life out of me. Everyday Black women navigate complex life-or-death situations by simply existing. And, every day that we survive, live, strive, and thrive is another day that white supremacy and racialized gendered capitalism have tried to kill us but failed. “Our sufferings do not magically end; instead we are able to wisely alchemically recycle them. They become the abundant waste that we use to make new growth” (hooks 2000, pp. 80–81). Despite and in response to the daily assaults on Black women’s humanity, as hooks (1993) proclaimed, “We have changed” (p. 1). As products of that change, Black women’s activism comes in many forms as mothers, community leaders, intellectuals, and artists, and has often been as educators and/or students in pursuit of education. As a Black woman who occupies these roles in the current moment, my hope is to explore these changes with counter-storytelling through mixed-genre creative writing efforts of afro-futuristic biomythography novel playwriting as a means of challenging the dominant narratives that reinforce white male hegemony. Guided by our Black feminist ancestral mothers, may I/we always reinforce the message—*So it is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive.*—Audre Lorde (1997), *A Litany for Survival*.

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Notes

¹ I consider my maternal grandmother and her mother (for that matter) to be white African Americans, meaning their ethnicity is African American as having African and European ancestry and being the descendants of enslaved people. I know we do not use that racial terminology/distinctions for African Americans but I use it in my head because it speaks to colorism and its unique impact. Regardless of how you self-identify, society will treat you based on your perceived race, which is often based on skin color and other physical features. Perhaps all ethnicities that have a plethora of wide-ranging skin colors could be racialized as white, Brown, or Black? I am not sure if that racial designation is helpful or harmful. That is a discussion for another paper.

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