Black Women and the Legacies of Survival and Agency

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Abstract

How can Black feminist and Pan-Africanist ideas inform creative curriculum and pedagogy with young black women? This portfolio explores this question through the following: a self-reflexive essay on the key educational principles of Pan Africanism and Black feminist thought; a facilitator's guide laying out a step-by-step workshop on self-esteem and creative praxis for young black women; and a photo-exhibit which documents pedagogy in process working with young women in Africa. This constitutes my portfolio which lays out a process by which young black women may begin to think critically about the world around them and the way it influences their identity formation.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Gloria Brown, who epitomizes the essence of African Womanhood. It took me a long time to realize that you are my first source and example of a strong Black woman. There are many women in our family and immediate circle that have depended on you for every type of support that comes to mind and you rarely say no. I witness your generosity and empathy on a daily basis and it reminds me to open my heart and spirit to others in need. I am eternally grateful and fortunate to call you Mother.

Acknowledgements

I have faced many challenges and achieved many accomplishments in my life and I believe that the Creator has always provided me with the support of committed, passionate and skilled mentors that show up for me as friends, colleagues, educators and Ancestors at crucial times and places throughout this journey. This MES process was no different. I would first like to thank my family for allowing me the space I needed to undertake this program.

To Nene Kwasi Kafele, medassi pa for introducing me to this program and offering to support me throughout the process. I was also privileged to share the journey with a group of women that I encountered in Honor Ford-Smith's Cultural Production course, which was pivotal to the outcome of my work. They are artists who consistently provide encouragement and support in person and through endless amounts of sweet texts messages and emails that always come at just the right time. Honor, thank you for creating safe spaces that allowed me to challenge my fears and set the stage for me to practice different art forms that enabled me to share a story, my story.

Angela, you are the angel that your name implies, thank you for always knowing what I need and for helping me to stay the course. You more than anyone else understands what it took for me to see this process through to the end. Lilia, you are my Rites of Passage Sistren and visionary partner in all things concerning girls programming. I am

eternally grateful for your organizational skills, leadership and friendship. Davia and Tawana, thanks for stepping up and joining me on the path towards a critical mass of Sistrens who are willing to give of ourselves, resources and time for our Black girls.

Thank you to the Paramount Chief, Nene Sakite ll, of the Manya Krobo Traditional Area for granting permission for my team to conduct the project and deliver the program in the community. To Juliana Baidoo and Manye Makutsu, thank you for laying the ground work by recruiting participants and securing space to host the program. The project would not have been successful without the full participation of the members of the Manya Krobo Girls Program.

Contents

When Ancestors Speak Wisdom Is Passed On

I hear the voices and feel the spirit of my Ancestors.

Sojourner gently places her strong hands on my shoulder. I take on the stance of a woman who knows her worth and is proud of her contribution to mankind.

Queen Nzinga stands behind me and whispers in my ear. The road that lies ahead is not smooth nor straight and the roadblocks and detours can and will lead you off the path towards your destiny. But you must remember that my sisters and I walk with you and in you.

Nanny stood before me and I looked into her eyes, I saw my people gathered in the cane fields by the twilight fire. I listened as they passed on instructions to me of how to be strategic and disciplined.

Marie Joseph Angelique touched my left hand. I felt the power of resistance envelope my body. I was grounded.

Harriet stood akimbo on my left side and motioned for me to lean towards her. She showed me the map and told me to study it carefully because I could not physically take it with me.

Nana Yaa Asantewaa placed a note in my right hand. It simply read, you can only be defeated if you give up and you must resist the temptation to stand by idly.

A familiar voice called out to me, "come madda Brown".

I stepped forward confidently knowing that I have never walked alone.

My Ancestors continue to guide and support me.

Foreword

This portfolio explores ways in which Pan Africanist and feminist principles that support empowerment, self-reliance, human rights and interdependence can form the basis of a creative curriculum for young African girls. My portfolio consists of the following elements:

1. A research paper entitled, ''Black Womanhood and the Legacies of Colonization and Survival", that details some of the factors that influence development of identity of Black women

2. A facilitator's guide that was developed through the focus groups and workshops within the Manya Krobo Girls Program.

3. A photo exhibit which documents the workshop experience of the Manya Krobo Girls Program in Ghana, West Africa.

This portfolio is the culminating exercise of my plan of study. There I identified my learning objectives as:

- Exploring how race and gender influence the development of self-esteem of Black females,
- To increase my knowledge and understanding of the role of history in relation to Black women's experiences,
- To identify the issues that impact the health of girls in Manya Krobo

- To develop a culturally appropriate program that provides opportunities to address them

The various pieces of my portfolio aim to meet these objectives in theory and reflexive praxis.

Motivation, Questions and Histories

What brings me to this work? This is a question that I have contemplated time and time again; however, I have come to realize the need to adjust the question to reflect my growth and development throughout this journey. It is not so much about what brings me to the work but why this work is important and why it is necessary. Furthermore, I've come to understand that this is just another aspect of my journey and it is assisting me to fulfill my purpose. My first instinct is to define this journey as an academic endeavor, but it is much more than that, it has been a life changing experience that has kept me on the path towards fulfilling my purpose, which is demonstrated in the research project that birthed the Manya Krobo Girls Program in Ghana.

Who would have thought that in addition to improving my research skills and increasing my knowledge, this academic experience could also strengthen my connection to spirit; but that is exactly what happened. An example of this is the morning that I awoke to the voices of my Ancestors providing me instructions that require me to take action and reminded me of their wisdom, strength and resistance. Their collective voices affirmed that spirit is very much alive and present and their lived experiences reinforce my own value, responsibility and agency as an African Woman.

Ubuntu, Pan Africanism, Feminism And The Practice Of Education

"Ubuntu" – is the Swahili term for,I exist because we exist. This concept resonates deeply with me. For that and many other reasons, I feel that I have a responsibility to equip myself with the knowledge, expertise and attitude required to work on behalf of women and girls of African descent and to contribute positively towards a healthy global village. I make a conscious effort to work in a way that is African-centred and respectful to my community, however, I need to acknowledge that I am a Black woman who is also a product of my environment and this Eurocentric education system. I had to do more than acknowledge this; before attempting to conduct a research project and implement a program for girls in a Ghana. I had to find a way to work through it.

This required that I research and re-educate myself in order to re-member who I am and why I this work is assisting me to fulfill my purpose. In this journey I was inspired by the work of many Pan Africanists. African Caribbean women such as Amy Jacques Garvey and Amy Ashwood Garvey carried out early organizing work in Pan African women's activism and blazed a trail of action for all of us to follow. Carol Boyce Davies (2008) has written about the important work of dedicated feminist communist Claudia Jones whose work in the Black radical tradition centres the black experience as one which has particular lessons about emancipation for all groups of people. All of these women, and many others in different ways, practiced forms of Pan Africanism as a way of interrupting and fighting the debilitating effects of Eurocentric colonial education.

I myself was formed by a Eurocentric education. I spent most of my life misinformed and miseducated about Africa and its people. I was influenced by this educational system and mainstream media to believe that Africans were uncivilized and required saving by the outside world; primarily people of European descent who would graciously send money to save the life of an African child. I can vividly recall the World Vision commercials of children in Africa who were visibly suffering from malnutrition and crying as flies swarmed around their faces. That was the Africa that I was exposed to from an early age and I knew no other.

Approximately, 10 years ago I was introduced to a different Africa through a Toronto based Rites of Passage Process that encouraged me to utilize an African- centred lens. Rites of Passage marks the various stages in an individual's life, for example, birth, adolescence to adulthood marriage, death etc. In many African cultures young people undergo a process that marks their transition from childhood to adulthood by participating in various rituals and challenges. Being raised in the West, I did not have the option of participating in a Rites process. I decided to engage in this life altering experience to strengthen my identity and develop a deeper commitment to family and community.

This worldview influences how I work with girls of African-descent and has challenged me to seek answers to questions such as: Who am I? What is my purpose in this world? How might I use my skills and talents to contribute to my Pan Africanist community? The Rites process has helped me to develop a more informed perspective on Africa and my people. This re-education introduced me to the ideology of Pan-Africanism. A movement that stresses the unity of all African people and the need for us to eradicate

colonial systems that continue to oppress Black people and promotes our social educational and economical upliftment.

Pan-Africanists such as Marcus Garvey, C.L.R. James, Amy Jacques Garvey, George Padmore, W.E.B. DuBois and Amy Ashwwood all understood the need for freedom and justice for Black people and viewed Africa as their source for culture and identity. Each was instrumental in the struggle against oppression which has its origins in the enslavement and exploitation of Black people and the resources of the continent. Pan Africanism promotes an end to neocolonial and colonial systems that continue to dominate and exploit African people. Moreover, Pan Africanism is regarded as a means for Africans on the continent and in diaspora to acquire peace, freedom, unity and solidarity amongst each other.

Pan Africanism is not only concerned with the plight of African people across the Diaspora but also with racial injustice and human rights. Black women have and continue to contribute significantly to Pan Africanism. For example, Amy Ashwood Garvey, one of the founding members of the United Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) brought women's issues into the organization and spent much of her life campaigning for the liberation of Black people (Reddock, 2014) . Garvey was instrumental in organizing women's organizations in West Africa and the Caribbean; Additionally, she played a significant role in the anti-racist movement in England.

Scholarly works of authors such as Tiffany King (2013), Rhoda Reddock (2014), Filomina Chioma Steady(1985), bell hooks (1981), Margaret Kovach (2009) and Mary C. Lewis(1988) have helped me to locate myself in this work . King's version of the invisibility

and non human status of the Black female slave body, acts of violence perpetrated against her and forced breeding as a mode of production and to increase the wealth of the slave master; along with hooks (19810 account of the continued oppression, dehumanization and stereotyping of Black women is the catalyst that inspired me to identify the role feminism does or does not play in my life and work. Additionally, I utilized an Indigenous methodological approach that is influenced by an African-centred worldview that includes recognition of spirit, living in harmony with nature and among other things, a belief in cooperation, collective responsibility and interdependence. Central to this effort was an attempt to ensure that this research was not reflective of the patriarchal colonial practices which have historically marginalized and exploited African people.

A range of challenges faced by Black girls and women in the Diaspora and Africa are a direct result of colonization. The intersection of issues such as race, gender, poverty and violence creates multiple forms of oppression that negatively impacts the lives of Black girls and women in Africa and across the diaspora.. Early drafts of my Plan of Study acknowledged the impact that the intersectionality of gender, race, poverty, class and violence place on the lives of girls of African-descent. This awareness initially led me to focus all of my attention on girls living in the Greater Toronto Area, however, my personal quest for reunification with the "Motherland" exposed me to young women in Ghana that have similar concerns.

Each component of my portfolio draws on the legacies of the struggle, survival and self-reliance of Black women through slavery and post emancipation. In my paper I offer a self-reflexive discussion of the key principles of Black feminism which inform my design for

an empowering curriculum for young women. I include my facilitator's guide and curriculum in an accompanying example of how to operationalize these principles. As a result of carrying out my curriculum design with the young women from the Manya Krobo group I have also been able to identify some of the issues that impact the healthy development of girls that emerged during the sessions of the Manya Krobo Girls Program in Ghana. Their gender coupled with the experiences of racism, sexism, violence and other forms of oppression influences their identity development and can have an adverse effect on the mental health and well-being of many of them.

I've come to understand that the quest for knowledge and understanding is full of questions that generate more questions. That has been a large part of my experience in this space called Academia. I came into this environment with specific questions that I felt would help me to be more effective in my work with to support girls of African-descent to strengthen their identity and increase their chances of having a healthy and productive future. What has consequently occurred is the realization that a significant part of this work begins with me identifying and addressing my own identity and womanhood. This required that I seek answers to questions such as, what does it mean to be a Black woman born in Jamaica and residing in Canada and how or what shapes my identity and womanhood? You would think that the answer to these questions would come quite easily for me, as a woman of African descent engaged in work related to positive gender and identity formation of Black adolescent females, but it doesn't. My journey towards seeking answers is rooted in a history of slavery, spirituality, "her-stories" of resistance, resiliency, self-reliance and survival.

Black Womanhood and the Legacies of Colonization

This portion of my portfolio elaborates the theoretical components of my educational approach. The curriculum and facilitators guide addresses the following questions; What factors influence the identity development of womanhood of women and girls of African-descent? What are the issues that impact the healthy development of girls in Manya Krobo, Ghana? How can a girls empowerment program improve their health, promote education for girls, assist in the development of realistic career options and creatively support their mental health and well-being?

To answer my first question about identity I needed to develop a framework for thinking about the ways in which women's identity has been impacted by colonization and also by resistance to it. I decided to do this work by beginning with my own story and by way of situating myself in the social and racial landscape as it has been wrought by colonization. In what follows I propose that Black women have been formed by colonial legacies which have shaped both the material realities of their lives and the disfigured representations of these which circulate in the dominant culture. The work of Black feminist education is to undo this disfigurement by providing the basis for women to resist these, understand their struggles and recreate their collective possibility.

The Journey Begins with "Me"

There have been several points in the research and writing of this paper where I have experienced different emotions such as anger, hate, sadness and incredulity. It has been a difficult process to engage in this work as it has influenced me to reflect on my own life and story of womanhood. To what degree has my life been impacted as a Black woman born in born in the West Indies? I will admit that some of the major decisions that I have made have been because of society's stereotypical view of Black women. I too have bought into the negative portrayals of Black women which have influenced how I have made decisions in my personal life. I never wanted to be seen as the stereotypical Black woman who had several children by several different men. Ironically, I am a mother raising two Black males.

Shortly after the birth of my second son I made a promise to myself that I was not going to be "that" Black woman with multiple children by multiple partners. In my mind society sees me as the stereotypical Black female and unwed single mother. This battle with myself to not be a stereotype has pushed me towards trying to become that strong Black woman – the matriarch. The another irony is that I was raised in a home with both of my parents who, 4 children and 48 years later, are still happily married. I have always viewed my family as something more of a phenomenon rather than the norm. If I take a closer look at the friends and family around me, I realize that there are many two parent

households but I was persuaded by media and literature that the Black family was and is fractured and being led primarily by single mothers. It seems like with each turn there is another stereotype designed to challenge the Black woman's image of herself and the Black family.

I felt a strong connection to King's work, *In the Clearing,* and to bell hooks', *Ain't I a Women,* but I have come to realize that I need to better understand how and why I feel this way. I need to find out how the experiences that hooks and King write about connect to me as a woman with my West Indian roots. This comes together for me in the histories of my maternal great grandmother and my paternal grandmother. It's astonishing to me, how much of my own life has been influenced by the stereotyping of Black women. My early memories and perceptions of Black women were of characters who personified strength and resiliency. In many ways this is not a bad thing but I'm beginning to recognize it not so much as a direct effect of slavery, as it is an ancestral tradition of womanhood for many women of African descent. In western society, these characteristics rather than being acknowledged in a positive light are seen as negative traits and the Black woman is made to feel that she directly challenges the Black man's masculinity.

My paternal grandmother was married to a man for whom she bore six children. My father was her first child but not one of the six. Even though I did not have the language I did recognize that her children and the immediate community recognized my grandmother as a "matriarch". I spent summers and holidays at my grandmother's after my parents had migrated to Canada in search of a better life for my younger brothers and me. I can recall my step-grandfather leaving the house very early in the morning and coming back late at night. During the time that he was gone my grandmother was kept busy pursuing her

business of selling homemade coconut oil, eggs and fowls. In addition to that, she worked the afternoon shift of 3pm-11pm at the town infirmary for the elderly and mentally ill. I have fond memories of walking from her home with my aunts to take her supper. The thing that strikes me now is the comments that I heard from others over the years before she died about how hard she was forced to work and how rarely my step-grandfather was at home. I have so many memories of my grandmother's house but the odd thing is he is absent from many of them it.

When asked to reflect on the female influences in my life, my grandmother who was fondly referred to as Nanny, is one of the first images that come to mind. The other is my maternal great grandmother, affectionately known as Granny. This 5'0" woman of South Asian descent raised seven sons and several motherless grandchildren and great grandchildren. My mother was one of the many grandchildren for whom she cared. I believe that Granny was also part of my early perceptions of womanhood. She had a reputation of being strong and fierce: strong because she raised seven sons primarily on her own and fierce because her disciplinary style was extremely harsh. My mother speaks very highly of the woman who raised her from the age of three to the age of 16 when she was forced to flee from the abuse to live with her father. The physical scars that she bears do not take away from the lessons of womanhood and survival that were imparted to her. According to my mother, these lessons have fared her well and she can often be heard imparting her grandmother's words of wisdom in her Jamaican patios that always start with, "fi mi grandmadda always say…".

Looking at these two women one sees them as physically different: one was a fair-skinned black woman of African descent and the other a brown-skinned woman of Indian

heritage. The history of slavery in Jamaica for people of African descent is well-documented but I had little knowledge of the history of Indians who are sometimes referred to as Indo-Jamaican. My great grandmother's family were brought to Jamaica as indentured labourers. Rhoda Reddock (1985) notes that Indian immigration to the West Indies occurred between 1838 and 1917 and approximately 36,400 of them entered Jamaica. I've heard a few different stories of how my grandmother arrived in Jamaica: some say that she came to the island at about the age of three with both her parents; others say she was born on the island.

I bring these two women forward because it takes me back to King's work on slavery and settler colonialism. Both women were impacted by British colonialism and their Ancestors more than likely laboured on the plantations to clear fields for planting and to harvest crops. I see my great-grandmother's strength and resilience in the way my mother and her sisters work hard to provide for and take care of their families. Prior to her marriage, my grandmother singlehandedly raised my father up to the age of 15. My father was taught to do all of the things that were considered to be traditional roles for females such as cooking, ironing and cleaning. I don't find it a coincidence that my grandmother was called Nanny by her family both young and old and by her community. It is an on-going debate in my family about who is the better cook, my mother or my father.

Nanny of the Maroons is a National Heroine of Jamaica: she is revered for leading the Eastern Maroons in their war against the colonizers and is a symbol of unity and strength (Mathurin Mair, 1995) . The maroons are Africans who refused enslavement and set up their own communities deep in the mountains of Jamaica. From here they waged attacks on the plantation society and eventually won land grants from the British. Nanny

was likely of Ashanti origin. The Ashanti were themselves rulers of a Kingdom and so Nanny was a match for the British and personified in her strategy the rule of an Ashanti Queen mother in her leadership of the Maroons.

The Maroon communities of Jamaica acknowledge a debt to the Taino who themselves fought the colonizers. Prior to colonization and the introduction of the Atlantic Slave Trade to the island, Jamaica was inhabited by the Tainos. Like all the Indigenous people of the Americas the Tainos were ill-treated and overworked by settlers. Many were killed and brutalized in a genocidal battle for the island. Though some Maroons and inhabitants of particular communities in Jamaica claim them as ancestors, it is nevertheless clear that they were victims of genocide.

My two grandmothers are descendants of the enslaved and indentured labourers, whose ancestors were brought forcibly to the island to create the plantations that CLR James identifies as the first early modern system of agricultural production. The ancestors of my grandmother and great grandmother contributed to the clearing of the land and the production of wealth on the Island of Jamaica. The lives of my two grandmothers were strongly influenced by slavery and colonialism. The legacy of my grandmothers was shaped by a combination of hard work, independence and a struggle to care for their community and kin in the harsh circumstances of a colony of exploitation. I am inspired by their resilience and by the ways in which they sustained their independence while also offering their descendants an example of how to love and maintain community in practice.

Slavery, Identity and Womanhood

The works of bell hooks (1981), Mary C. Lewis (1988), Patricia Hills-Collins (1990), Njoki Wane (2002), Patricia Mohammed (2002), Janet Mock(2014), Tiffany King (2013 and others have encouraged me to look more critically at my own life and reflect on how my own identity and womanhood have evolved. I use the word "evolve" deliberately to highlight my journey of transformation and acceptance as it relates to my identity as an African woman for the past ten years. Throughout this journey it has become apparent to me that the significant role that my female Ancestors have played towards the liberation of African people has greatly influenced how I identify and present myself as a Black woman. In my quest towards a better understanding of their influence in my life, I have encountered gaps in my own perspective of the complexity of womanhood for Black females. This complexity is influenced by the intersection of race and gender, socioeconomic status, education and geography.

Throughout my pursuit of educational and personal development I am constantly reminded that I must separate being African and being an African woman because my gender creates a reality that is the same but different from that of an African man. *Is this actually possible for me? Who do I identify as first when answering the question Who am I?* Patricia Mohammed (2002) states "We are not born men or women, but we do become our gender. We each take our biological script and shape it into something we define as our gender or sexuality" (p. xv). Mohammed further explains that these categories fit into

society's normative framework and helps us to fall into "natural slots for labour and social relations-both inside and outside the home" (p. xv).

As I summarize the literature on the Black African experience and attempt to form a deeper understanding of my own identity and womanhood I am consumed with thoughts of how the experiences of African men and women differ and how I used to place my focus on the struggles of my people as a race first without paying closer attention to how it has affected me as a Black or African women. *Wow! Am I becoming a Black feminist*, and if so, isn't this a good thing? I must confess that feminism has not been something with which I have readily associated myself with. That might be related to the fact that I have primarily connected feminism to the white women's struggle during the suffrage movement and the women's liberation movement during the 1960's and1970's

Mainstream media coverage of these important and relevant historical movements has primarily focused on the experiences and impact on white women. Hence, the development of a narrow perspective of womanhood as it applies to my life as a Black woman and my need to develop a more comprehensive and factual narrative of a life that is continually evolving; Leading me on a quest to discover who I am and to produce a counter narrative. This discovery of a new narrative not only influences my life but through my passion for working with Black adolescent females it can help to guide them towards the answers to questions that I did not have the support to ask until well into adulthood.

In my pursuit to expand my personal narrative I find myself in the descriptions and facts outlined in the literature of King and hooks whose work is reviewed in detail. King's (2013) dissertation, *In the Clearing*, explains how the Black female body as unending

property was used to increase bodies, land and space during slavery and colonization. hooks (1981) uses her book, *Ain't I a Woman*, as a platform to discuss the survival and resiliency of Black women through various sources of oppression during slavery and post emancipation. I use words such as we, us, African, slave and Black interchangeably when describing the feelings and experiences of women. Identity and womanhood are used at times to refer to the same process.

Throughout my research of the impact of slavery on the identity formation of Black females, I have consistently come across writings that speak to the atrocities that were experienced by both the Black male and female slaves. It is evident that Black men and women were ill-treated, dehumanized and subjected to severe forms of punishment. However, authors such as King and hooks and a number of other Caribbean scholars (French and Ford-Smith, 1985) argue that Black women suffered more because of the additional violence of rape and other forms of sexual exploitation including the production of children for the profit of the plantation owners. King (2013), like Fanon (1967), suggests that the Western notion of the human can only exist through the negation and violent exclusion of Blacks from the category of human and the Black female is a non-human in slavery. However, these "non-human" bodies played a crucial role in the development and expansion of wealth for slave masters across the Diaspora. Black female bodies were used as labourers in the fields and households, vessels of reproduction and as objects to illustrate power and manhood through terror and domination (hooks, 1981). According to King (2013) slavery would not have had the same impact without Black female slaves as commodities and she adds that "black female bodies are the sites where multiple enactments of property occur".

Historically in the African diaspora, the Black female body has been synonymous with enslavement and sexual exploitation. In many instances the use and misuse of the Black female body was subject to the will of those with influence or power over her. This could include the slave master, white plantation workers, and in some cases the Black male slave (hooks, 1981). King (2013) confirms this when she states that, "The Black body, specifically the Black female slave body can be used in any way that is imaginable (and unimaginable) by the master" (p. 60). King explains that Black flesh is only gendered and considered female when it is in reference to her property-making and this ability to reproduce was the only factor that was shared with white women, not their humanity. Additionally, King (2013) references the work of Saidiya Hartman (1997) that states "the captive female does not possess gender as much as she is possessed by gender – that is, by the way of a particular investment in and use of the body" (p. 102). Moreover, Hartman (1997) argues that violence is the reason behind seeing the Black slave as female for it was only at this point that she became a rape-able form that was still considered non-human and merely another form of property. Referring to the Black female body as non-human implied that the slave masters had full control over their existence. It also justified the breakdown of the existing division of labour in both Europe and Africa which led to the masculinization of the black woman.

Masculinization of the Black Woman

The Black female was not differentiated from the Black male in respect to her productivity in the field. She was forced to perform roles that were deemed as masculine as well as carry out the expectations of a female slave which included rearing the children (hooks, 1981). hooks discusses the characterization of the Black female slave as a male surrogate and she suggests that the Black female slave's ability to perform these tasks as well as and sometimes better than her male counterpart influenced the "masculinization" of the female slave by the slave master , his workers and white females on the plantation.

The stereotyping of the Black female as masculine may have begun as a result of the Atlantic Slave Trade but it continues to play out in the lives of Black women today. My experience has been that Black adolescent females who display attitudes or behaviours which are assertive are sometimes characterized as being masculine and aggressive. Buckley and Carter (2005) assert that our conceptions of masculinity and femininity are determined by our culture. Their research report, *Black Adolescent Girls: Do Gender Role and Racial Identity: Impact Their Self-Esteem?,* also states that Black girls are typically encouraged from an early age to develop what society traditionally identifies as masculine gender roles/characteristics. One of the conclusions in the study identified that girls who conformed to androgynous gender roles often displayed high levels of self-esteem. I agree that many young women in the Black community exhibit a high level of self-esteem; however, this sounds very much like the beginning stages of the forming of the "strong black woman" image that many of us were raised observing and have bought into.

This image of the Black female slave with the ability to perform the work of males contradicted the white male patriarchal view of the female as weak and subservient (hooks, 1981). White males explained this through their characterization of the Black female as not a "real woman" but a masculinized sub-human creature (King 2013). Additionally, stereotyping of Black women as masculine was used to emphasize that they were not comparable to white women. They were made to feel incapable of possessing the softness, innocence and purity associated with being white and female. Black female slaves longed to be classed as "ladies" and to be adorned in the accessories and garments were deemed to be symbols of femininity. Black women who attempted to dress and carry themselves in the same manner as white women were often humiliated and verbally abused by whites and other slaves during slavery and post emancipation (hooks, 1981).

hooks (1981) argues that historically, African women worked in the fields and took pride in their abilities and results of their labour. As they assimilated into white America they adopted non-traditional values that supported the belief that performing manual labour and field work was only to be performed by men, and more specifically, Black men. Their ability to work alongside the male slaves in the field was not viewed as something to be proud of; instead, it forced Black women to question their own womanhood. From this questioning, Black women embarked on a journey to create their own definition of womanhood and carve out their place in society.

Spirituality and Survival

King (2013) uses Julie Dash's 1991 film, "Daughters of the Dust", to creatively express the violence and trauma that Black women have experienced and to highlight the spirituality, strength and resistance of people of African descent. It is important to note the significance of the film as the first theatrical feature film by an African-American woman. Dash allows us to view the blue dye-stained hands of the characters as symbol of the violence, trauma and sometimes death that occurred from the poison of the indigo dye and the violence that they incurred at the hands of the slave master/plantation owner.

Dash portrays the women in a way that does not "paralyze" the characters. They are not characterized as merely victims; we are permitted to observe them as resourceful, loving and playful towards each other. The film demonstrates the strength and resiliency of Black women. We find the character, Eula Peazant, pregnant and we are made aware that she is also the victim of rape by a white man. In an attempt to protect her husband from bringing harm to himself by avenging her honor and his manhood, she refuses to identify the rapist. Her husband, Eli, is tormented by this because it is proof that he was not able to protect his wife and he is also worried that the child that she carries may not be his. The film is narrated by the unborn child who is eventually tainted by the indigo dye.

King (2013) points out how Dash deliberately forces the viewer to see the violence and trauma with the same eyes that observe the agency of the Black female. For me, this is an illustration of the ability to heal the mind and body much of which has been handed down from the Ancestors through spirituality and tradition. It is recognized by the family

that the elder, Nana Peazant, has this ability to use rituals to heal. We see through the family that violence, and trauma have impacted but not destroyed them: they still have the capacity to find enjoyment and purpose in their lives.

On many occasions I have had the misfortune as – I'm sure have many others – of experiencing things that have negatively affected my identity as a Black woman. For me, "we stand on the shoulders of our Ancestors", means that I am here in this place at this time because of the struggle and the triumphs of my Ancestors. I have repeated that phrase many times and know in my bones that it is a fact. I say this now because I find myself consumed with thoughts of what my female Ancestors endured on my behalf. They experienced various forms of torture, terror and violence on their mental and physical beings. Through the characters, Yellow Mary and Eula, Dash exposes the familiar treatment of Black women as captive gendered bodies to be exploited and raped.

The Black female body as a reproductive machine or as an animal for breeding further supports the effort to distinguish her as non-human. King (2013) states that the colonizer and settler saw the Black female body as a site where their land and wealth increased. This status did not place any real value on the life or body of the Black female: she was still fungible. To demonstrate how much the human spirit and body can endure we need only look at the history of the Black female slave. She suffered the loss of her womanhood time and time again. Her body was used to produce children that she could not claim as her own. She was attacked and brutally raped on a regular basis and she was dehumanized in front of others when being beaten naked in public. Black female slaves were stripped and beaten publicly as means to further rid her of her dignity (hooks, 1981). Eli, in the "Daughters of the Dust", demonstrates the torment experienced by male slaves

because of the risk of severe punishment for defending another slave. Without an ally to protect her, the female slave was forced to develop and strengthen her survival skills. (hooks, 1981)

Stereotyping of the Black Female Body: Slavery to Pop-Culture

Today, centuries after the beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade we can see that the pain and trauma of slavery continues to impact the lives of Black women. According to hooks, "the systematic devaluation of Black womanhood was not simply direct consequence of race hatred; it was a calculated method of social control" (p. 86). This dehumanization of Black females as "sexual savages" has its roots in slavery. hooks (1981) asserts that this description defended the brutalization of their bodies by slave masters and men in general. Additionally, she states that white women believed that these captive female bodies were temptresses and were responsible for seducing white men who were powerless against their sexual overtures. Ultimately, it gave credibility to the belief that the Black female slave was wanton and responsible for being raped and other forms of "sexploitation".

Like her enslaved ancestors, the Black female continues to be exploited for profit – now through music and the Hip-Hop culture. Carolyn West (2008) suggests this form of entertainment portrays Black females as Jezebels, over-sexed and disposable commodities. She argues that the Jezebel stereotype was created to justify "and excuse the profit-driven sexual exploitation of Black women".

hooks (1981) reports that female slaves who appeared to submit to the constant attacks and invasion of their bodies were seen by white women and other slaves as being complicit. Bribes of dresses, small accessories or time off were sometimes granted to those

who appeared to comply with the advances of the slave master. hooks (1981) affirms that this response led to them being viewed as prostitutes by white men and women alike. Furthermore, some slaves were manipulated into believing that by surrendering they would receive food and better treatment for themselves and their children. hooks asserts that this passive submission should not be seen as complicit when the only recourse was to fight back and risk being beaten and raped. Being classified as non-human meant that this behaviour could not be considered as rape. Justice and fairness were only reserved for white women.

According to hooks (1981), Black parents are concerned that television lowers the self esteem and self-confidence of Black young women by depicting negative images of the Black female and/or by her invisibility. This sends a message to Black females that we are not desirable and are only seen when we are portraying the over-sexualized female. hooks (1981) implies that this exclusion in the media suggests that Black women are undesirable and are not worthy of portraying the image of the friend, mother or romantic partner. This omission of positive social references contributes to the development of a poor self-image for many Black adolescent females which in turn leads to many of the issues that I confront in my work with young Black females such as high risk behaviours, poor decision making skills low academic achievement.

One of the reasons why I work with young women is because I recognize that many of us have bought into the stereotypes that were birthed in slavery. I want to work towards dispelling those myths and stereotypes which say we are manipulative and sexually promiscuous and which encourage us, as women, to dislike and be jealous of one another. Audre Lorde (1984) says, “We have to consciously study how to be tender with each other

until it becomes a habit because what was native has been stolen from us, the love of Black women for each other." This statement motivates me to bring this example of sisterhood and way of being into the lives of young women and help them to dispel the myths and stereotypes about Black women and womanhood. hooks (1981) asserts that the post-slavery devaluation of Black womanhood occurred in an effort to destroy our self-confidence and self-respect.

There have been some small changes in how the media portrays Black women but predominantly she is absent. When she does make an appearance it is to replicate the image of the slave, sex object, prostitute or whore. These images affect how Black women are perceived by whites; however, my experience is that they cause significant damage to the psyche of Black women and girls. "If you do not see yourself reflected in society then how do you root your identity? And if your experience is seen as other and racialized how do you establish a strong sense of self that is rooted in your ancestry?" (Wane, 2002, p. 42).

The Black Matriarch Myth

hooks (1981) affirms that Black women have attempted to shift the focus away from their sexuality and move it towards a commitment to motherhood. In this "self-sacrificing" role she demonstrates her dedication to the family by providing economically for her children. This behaviour was viewed as the Black woman's attempt to further demasculinize the Black man who was experiencing barriers to employment. This negative stereotyping transcends race and class and affects the way Black females are perceived by their own race and how they perceive themselves.

In a patriarchal society, the message to Black men was that Black women were depriving them of their role as provider in the home and in some cases taking work away from them. The reality of it, however, was that many of the jobs that Black women performed were as domestic labourers such as cooks, maids, laundresses and nannies which were similar to their roles on the plantation (hooks, 1981). According to hooks (1981), working outside of the home placed Black women in direct contact with racist white male employers who oftentimes subjected them to sexual harassment, long work hours and various forms of inequitable treatment. Sacrificing personal dignity to support her family is a deep-set belief that is still alive in communities across the Diaspora and once again contributes to that "strong black woman" image.

This role of provider and head of the household has earned Black women the title of "matriarch" in their families (hooks, 1981). Both King and hooks reference the Moynihan Report (1965) and its typifying of Black women as matriarchs. A popular definition of matriarch is a woman who rules or dominates a family, group or state. My experience has

been that this perception of Black women as matriarchs has been accepted by Black people as well as society as whole. hooks (1981) suggests that this matriarchy myth encourages a bond between Black men and racist white oppressors based on mutual sexism.

Their belief is that in a patriarchal society it is not acceptable for the woman to be the head of the household. Consequently, this oftentimes creates a problem in relationships between Black men and Black women because western influences encourage Black men to view matriarchy as a direct challenge to their masculinity and patriarchal role in the family. However, we know that this is not necessarily the "African way". In many traditional African cultures the woman plays a significant role in the family structure and major decision-making processes.

King (2013) states that the Black female body post emancipation and the Black matriarch disrupt the heteronormative institution of the family. Settler colonialism views the Black female body as property that is also capable of increasing wealth through the production of labour and reproduction. Black women off the plantation are no longer identified as space making. According to hooks, the Moynihan Report (1965) does not see the Black woman functioning as property or having the ability to produce property, instead it views her as having unrestrained sexuality that produces unruly and undisciplined Black surplus. Moynihan (1965) further describes the matriarch and her children as "anti-property" that would more likely be responsible for the destruction of property.

King (2013) explains that gender hierarchies are foreign to African cosmology and worldview and brings to our attention writings from *The Black Woman: An Anthology,* that suggests that Man, Woman and Family are colonial constructions. Gender as described by King is a western concept:

> This tradition of naming gender and family as constructed is an important tradition that has the potential to unsettle some of the foundational concepts and organizing principles of settler colonial social relations and space making…This challenge to the notions of European manhood and womanhood is also a challenge to the coloniality of western gender. (King, p.166)

King (2013) references the work of Toni Cade Bambara (1970) in *The Black Anthology* which suggests that "western gender confines African as well as other colonized women". Bambara introduces the concept of "Blackhood" in place of traditional gender roles and suggests that it could perhaps unite Black people in their commitment to the struggle. What impact could this have on the Black male/female relationship? This concept challenges the constructed image of the Black woman as matriarch in western societies. Black women are receptive to the idea of the matriarch, which appears as more of a myth when viewed closely.

If a matriarch is seen as having status and economic power, how can the oppressed Black woman who is a victim of sexism and racism be a matriarch? Where is her political and social control? hooks (1981) proposes that the matriarch myth is an effort to brainwash the Black woman into feeling like she has some control and power that ultimately reduces the likelihood that she will organize collectively against this sexist and racist oppression. She further states that the " … false sense of power Black women are encouraged to feel allows us to think that we are not in need of social movements like a women's movement that would liberate us from sexist oppression" (p. 81).

> True feminism springs from an actual experience of oppression, a lack of the socially prescribed means of ensuring one's wellbeing, and a true lack of access to resources for survival. True feminism is the reaction which leads to the development of greater resourcefulness for survival and greater self-reliance. (Steady, 1985 p.36)

Black women are much more than just survivors of slavery and the efforts of contemporary and historical systems which have been designed to exploit and oppress us. Black women have been contributors to impactful social justice, economical and political efforts; women such as, Sojourner Truth, Nanny of the Maroons, Yaa Asantewaa, Queen Nzinga, Harriet Tubman and others like my grandmother Pearline McDonald whose image of resiliency and entrepreneurship lives on in my memory. The narratives of these women reflect countless examples of self-reliance and accounts of their development of survival strategies.

Rosalyn Terborg Penn (1995) introduces Filomena Chioma Steady's theory of African feminism. This theory suggests that self-reliance through female networks and the development of survival skills are the two dominant values that have become institutionalized in many African and African-descended communities (p.4). Terborg-Penn identifies three characteristics that can be evident when Black women practice self-reliance: "(i) younger women relying on older women (of 40 years or older); (ii) women looking to female kin, fictive kin and cohorts for support; and (iii) redefining household relations which may be primarily female"(p.5). She explains that Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Susie King Taylor exhibited elements of self-reliance through female networks in their work with other Black women as laundresses, cooks, nurses and teachers

in the Black military units. A large portion of their work consisted of assisting the wives and children of Black soldiers. Additionally, freed women were taught medicine and received instruction on hygiene by Tubman. (Terborg-Penn p.6)

Black women's development of survival strategies can include: "(i) resisting oppression; (ii) defining female leadership; (iii) redefining political roles for women" (p.6). Agnes Akosua Aidoo (1985) introduces Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa of Edweso as an example of a woman redefining leadership roles. During the War of Independence against the British in 1900 Yaa Asantewaa demonstrated courage and determination of the Queen Mothers to defend the integrity of the Asante Kingdom. Aidoo asserts that Yaa Asantewaa appealed to the "leaderless chiefs" and the Asante people that no sacrifice was too great to fight for their freedom and to maintain their cultural identity that is reflected in the Golden Stool. Asantewaa seized a gun and fired a shot to illustrate her seriousness and determination to go to war. This prompted the men to take an oath to end British rule. "It would seem that the political role of Asante Queen Mothers was particularly heightened in times of crisis when male leadership was either unavailable or ineffective"(p.75). Countless examples of Steady's characteristics of African feminism can be found throughout history in Africa and across the Diaspora.

In search of a language that could encompass my worldview and explain my advocacy/activism, one that allows me to express my womanhood- I encountered two definitions each of which resonates deeply with me. I begin with Patricia Hill-Collins(1996) introduction of Pearl Ceage's definition of feminism as, "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities—intellectual, political, social, sexual , spiritual and economic". Hill-Collins

(1996) contributes to this argument by suggesting that, "feminism constitutes both an ideology and a global political movement that confronts sexism, a social relationship in which males as a group have authority over females as a group" (p.12).

In her volumes of essays entitled, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* , Alice Walker (1983) presents the following definitions for the term womanist:

1. A black feminist or feminist of colour.

2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, and women's strengths. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist .

3. . ... Loves the Spirit. ... Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (p.31)

According to Hill-Collins (1996), the term derives from the description that Southern Black mothers use to describe female children, "you acting womanish". "Womanish" girls are perceived as courageous, willful and outrageous. Additionally, they appear "responsible, in charge, and serious" (p.10). Many African American women favour the expression womanism to feminism because it is "rooted in black women's concrete history in racial and gender oppression (p.10)". Janette Y. Taylor (2005) asserts that these definitions reflect Walker's perspective that African Americans require a term in place of feminism to reflect the complexities of their lives and it also uses the language and

principles of an African American community. Walker's (1983) definition ventures beyond the limitations of women's only agenda by encompassing the survival of all Black people.

Earlier on I described the apprehension and questions that arose for me around the word "feminism", there was something that didn't quite fit for me and the term, African feminism, helped to explain why. Filomina Chioma Steady's explanations and definitions put it into perspective for me. She asserts that the Black woman's feminism does not exist in narrow sexist terms but rather in human terms and history is the enemy, not the Black man (p.34). Steady (1985) further declares that the development of Western capitalism created processes that destroyed African social systems and led to the scattering of Africans across the world. A process which she states has a greater impact on "the Black woman, who has shouldered the heavier part of the burden of ensuring the survival of the Black race" (35). Steady, states that aspects of feminism highlights equal rights and access to participate in the labor force, however, Black women have had to work outside the home for survival of herself and family. Moreover, slavery and post emancipation has overburdened us with participation.

The Black female body has been synonymous with slavery and sex, she has been stereotyped and cast as promiscuous and at the same time masculinized she was forced to perform the same duties as the man. Historically, attempts have been made to dehumanize and break her spirit; however, she developed a legacy of survival and resistance that have been passed down through generations. This legacy is reflected in the lives of Black feminist Ancestors such as, Yaa Assantewa and Sojourner. Steady (1985) suggests that the

survival strategies including resisting oppression and self-reliance have been embedded in the Black community.

The ideology behind Pan-Africanism and African feminism that centres on the well-being of Black people through liberation and self-empowerment influenced my decision to implement an educational experience in a community in West Africa. Social media via cell phones and internet cafés can have a significant impact on the identity development of girls in Ghana. This can include, hip-hop culture which oftentimes provides a misogynistic portrayal of women and issues related to image and beauty that are prevalent on billboards across Africa. These sources also influence the fashion choices and image that young women are presenting in their communities. West African girls are also subjected to the Western ideal of beauty which promotes shadism through billboards that market whitening creams.

The next section will describe the process involved in creating the workshops, documenting the information and developing the facilitators' training guide which is included in the portfolio.

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