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Black Activist Mothering: Teach Me About What Teaches You

JACQUELINE ROEBUCK SAKHO-- DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This work defines Black activist mothering as a position of strength, courage, and brilliance that requires being in conversation with elders in order to make meaning of the present. Told as a conversation between the elders, the author enacts important cultural traditions that demonstrate the significance of intergenerational conversations in the process of becoming a mother, an activist, and an educational leader. The theoretical framework bridges the gap between Black mothering, leadership, and narrative all the while addressing educational inequities without compromising identity, culture, and womanhood. In the end, the piece demonstrates the author's ability to move in and out of dominant structures all the while evaluating from both dominant and oppressive positions.

Elder Malidoma Patrice Somé (1999) in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual and Community* shares that “Among the Dagara one can say to a healer, ‘Teach me what you know’; but the better request to make the healer is, ‘Teach me about what teaches you’” (p. 81). *Black Activist Mothering* is how I teach about my discovery of something rich and thick about black women as mothers doing community work that is worth talking about and building a critical inquiry stance around. In this spirit, I use italics in this piece for emphasis to express my spoken and unspoken thoughts. I am discovering that what teaches me are these unspoken knowledge systems comprised of emancipatory and spiritual militancy strategies learned through my Mothers inclusive of, “community other-mothers” (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 174) hustlers, elders, griots, and professionals and

their old ways of navigating intersectional dynamics of abusive oppression. These unspoken knowledge systems are a way of practicing mothering and laboring that are beyond the biological function! Black Activist Mothering is a laboring of “way showing” (King & Ferguson, 2011, p. 67), sense making and new knowledge production birthed by black women as mothers. That is, black women as mothers have an unspoken traditional practice of enacting their intersectionality as critical community engagement. This way of practicing mothering for black women unfolds as an interconnected process of story listening, storytelling and story writing practices as emancipatory work, to get free! In other words, in my words...

We move back and forth between the margins and privileged (center) spaces, I often hideout in liminal



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spaces sometimes with my “plus one” to gather intelligence on the ways in which the oppressive forces are at play and I stand in the gap, as acts of resistance and transformation.

The Birthing Process

The *Birthing Process* is the “act of bringing into existence” (Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology, 1988, p. 95) how this essay is written. Or, what can be considered in traditional scholarship as the introduction or the blueprint of the essay. The reader will encounter me moving back and forth in my work between discourse dictated by westernized doctrines of research and scholarship and the cultural speak of my motherline. The motherline is a conduit for delivering storytelling traditions that “begins with a woman’s particular genealogy and fans out to include all the female cultural heroes” (Willis, 1989, p.6). For those reading this work who come from places and spaces like where I come, “y’all already know” but, for others, I offer a birthing guide to this work. For instance, you will notice that I place the higher title of Elder in front of the academic title of Doctor of Philosophy for scholarly canons like Nikki Giovanni and Patricia Hill Collins and, you will also see the title, Ancestor(tress) as spiritual militancy and both to announce my Grandmother and W.E.B. Dubois as scholarly voices who have since transitioned. You will also encounter the title “Sister” or “Brother” to signal that he/she/they are critically thinking and problematizing issues of injustice. These are ways of intersecting my motherline as a justified knowledge system with the more traditional ways of exposing epistemology (the theory of how one knows what they know).

What follows then, can be considered an “oppositional stance” or a revolt against traditional knowledge structures that only deliver one dimensional oppression narratives about black women as mothers that involve fixing, curing, and saving, us from ourselves and from everyone else. Because, quite frankly, these notions and stereotypes about black women as mothers, “. . . are actually distorted rendering of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to white patriarchy (Hill Collins, 1986, p. 17). This essay is intentionally situated in an oppositional stance to white patriarchal knowledge because the work focuses on my own culture, the culture of black women as mothers broadly defined and the, experiences of both.

One way the reader will see this act of transgres-

sion is when cultural speak of the black motherline is presented as a way of teaching and learning or demonstrating what teaches me and how I intersect multiple learning vehicles. The motherline cultural speak is a type of cultural linguistics that is guided by the thinking, behaviors and experiences of our motherline. It is where all the complexities of our culture/worldview as black working class women and mothers intersects with language to become a lens through which we see the world and thus, practice our crafts. Black Activist Mothering is also an oppositional stance since it is designed to be a “bottom-up intersectional” (Isoke, 2013, p. 28) analytical framework. Meaning, the practice is “beyond simply describing the subjective experiences of [black women as mothers] . . . [r]ather, this paradigm, seeks to reveal how identities are produced, forged, and then deployed to disrupt oppressive vehicles of power” (Isoke, 2013, p. 28) that define the culture and identity of urban schools settings. In these ways, Black Activist Mothering is subversive, a demonstration of critical community engagement and, therefore, in line with Sister Oka’s (2016) thinking and call to action for revolutionary praxis too. In her work, Mothering as Revolutionary Praxis, she advises us, that, in order, “to revolt we [black women as mothers] must measure the depth not of our victimization but of our capacity and resilience” (Oka, 2016, p. 53).

To demonstrate capacity and resilience, Black Activist Mothering operationalizes critical storytelling as an emancipatory tool in order to “counteract stereotypes and expose the contingent nature of presumed universal truths” (Bridgeman, 2011, p. 145) and find new ways forward. Critical storytelling as a bottom-up intersectional analytical tool allows the art and imagination of storytelling tools like “stories, fables, apocryphals, folk sayings, quips, instructions” (King & Ferguson, 2001, p. 67) to become a revolutionary process of resiliency, resistance and new meaning making processes capable of measuring the dynamic capacity of Black women as mothers. Now . . .

Allow Me to (Re)Situate My(Self) – “I can show you better than I can tell”

Who am I, who am I working for and what is my authority in this work? In this section of the work, I establish my(self) as a Black mother and othermother first and as a critical scholar-practitioner second. Most

significantly, I approach my scholar-practitioner work from a community-centered vantage point. “I can show you...”

I am my grandmother’s daughter because her daughter is my vessel. My grandmother, my mother’s mother, Mrs. Minnie Blanche Williams transitioned into the high place of Ancestress in 2015. When I asked her in my meditation to help me name this chapter she spoke, “I can show you better than I can tell you”. She was, hands down, a “proverb master” (Prahlad, 1996, p. 124). My grandmother brandished many folk sayings and proverbs to show us the way, to help us decipher and navigate this world as black girls and women. But, “I can show you better than I can tell you” is one she used often. It was a sassy remark, a quip she would throw at someone if they were doubting who she was and what she could do.

Allowing me to reintroduce my(self) is me showing who I am and what lens I am looking through to do in this work. This is also a way in the tradition of Black women for me to ask permission of the Ancestresses and Ancestors to bless my way forward. I will use the following storywriting tale in order “to actualize [my] work, to render it meaningful, to give it life” (Greene, 1990, p. 236) and receive permission to move forward. Through, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni* (1992) I combine published writings with my thoughts to conjure up an imaginary conversation with the Elder, poet, activist Nikki Giovanni through my cultural speak, I legitimate the rendering of this chapter. The Elder advises me to remember who I write for and why I both stand up and get down in the ways I do.

NG: “Really the first thing you have to do is write as honestly as you can” (Giovanni, 1992, p. 14).

I am listening intently.

NG: “So the first thing you have to do is know who your audience is and how to get to them” (Giovanni, 1992, p. 14)

My audience are Black mothers who find their place on the margins and occupy space at the critical intersection of race, class and gender and like Wing and Weselmann (1999) say, “bear the punishment for deviating from the law’s definition of the ideal mother” (p. 274).

I imagine Sister Giovanni nodding her head.

NG: “I think you have to be honest about who you are at the point where you are...[if not] you’re going to start writing rhetoric which means nothing to you” (Giovanni, 1992, p. 14).

You right Elder. I don’t have time to be writing rhetoric. I am thinking about Black Feminist Scholar Alexander-Floyd (2012) who is fired up about the cooptation and consequential disappearance of Black womanhood. ...And, for that matter, all it means to be a Black women as mothers from academic view.

Alexander Floyd quoting hooks called this a systematic “commodification and consumption” of the black female body “eating [of] the Other (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p. 2). I am chuckling a bit now, because...

I hear the legendary lyrics about structural inequity, poverty and revolution from Hip Hop icon, DMX on the track, “Stop Being Greedy” (DMX, 1998)

Y’all been eatin long enough now stop being greedy? Just keep it real partner give to the needy. Ribs is touchin’, so don’t make me wait! Fuck around and I’m’a bite you and snatch the plate!

I am hungry for radical inquiry of Black women as mothers by Black women as mothers broadly and within the discipline of urban education leadership specifically. The gluttonous nature of eating off of the experiences of Black womanhood has created a theoretical and methodological famine. The starvation of the intersecting experiences of Black women as mothers while engaging in activism against relationships of power and inequity is at a tipping point, again.

I am spanning across and between multiple dimensions of power. I am a practitioner of the tradition of black working class mothers, I’ll speak more on that later. I am a product of and currently “living in the black community and sharing its troubles” (Townsend Gilkes, 1983, p. 133). I am also “an employed intellectual who uses my mind and my skills to instruct others” (Omolade, 1987, p. 34). You know what Elder, I ran into this Xichana scholar, Dr. Minerva S. Chavez (2012) and she describes this point where I am, my positionality, this moving between the intersections of race, class, gender and social standing as “an anomaly” in higher education .

I hold an anomalous space in higher education, in part argues Black Feminist scholar Dr. Alexander-Floyd (2012), because of a systematic “misappropriation of the black feminist academic terrain, [a] disappearance of black women and black feminist scholarship” as knowledge bearers and producers (p. 2). After a decade of an “occult” like research fetish of “black womanhood and black women as academic subjects” (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p. 3) in the 1980’s and 1990’s, there remains a reduced amount of interest in even the desire to understand “black women as academic subjects” (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p. 3).

Chavez (2012) suggests I use this unique point to “disrupt forms of knowledge that render the author’s identity inconsequential [and]...draw attention to my marginal position inside dominant structures of education” (p. 335).

I haven’t spoken with Sister Omolade (1990) yet, but, I feel like she would consider where I am to be in line with her notion of the “griot-historian” (p. 284). Because, she defines the griot historian as black women who choose to be “a symbolic conveyor of African oral and spiritual traditions of the entire community...a scholar in any discipline who connects, uses, and understands the methods and insights of both Western and African world-views and historical perspectives” (Omolade, 1990, p. 284).

NG: “...you’ve got to be honest in your conviction whatever it might be” (Giovanni, 1992, p. 14).

I am a black working mother developing Community-centered Urban Educational Leadership. I am operationalizing intersectionality through Black Activist Mothering as an analytical and pedagogical tool for speaking back to relationships of power and inequality within urban school spaces.

My imagined storywriting conversation with Nikki Giovanni serves as both a counterstory construction (my cultural identity) and as dialogic analysis (my scholar identity) by demonstrating how I am influenced by and then, how I expand upon this written work. It is the continuation or expanding upon written works that creates naming spaces. Also, in this example, I am emancipating knowledge production by unleashing the critical and strategic acts of storytelling traditions of Black women as mothers alongside western traditions of writing scholarship. However this work, “is

not everything you can talk, but...” (Boyce-Davies, 2003, p. 112).

I am borrowing “is not everything you can talk, but...” from Dr. Carole Boyce-Davies (2003, p. 112), a folk saying from her motherline. Throughout this work, the motherline is exalted and is demonstrative of the innate capacity and resiliency of Black women as a chain of knowledge producers whether it’s my Grandmother or my other cultural heroines. Elder, Dr. Toni C. King and Sister S. Alease Ferguson in their work about Black women as mothers and leaders are in agreement. They say, the motherline is, “any [Black] woman who serves as a source of Motherline knowledge constitutes a link in this intergenerational chain” (King & Ferguson, 2011, p. 23). is not everything you can talk, but... is a way to tell your listener that there is pain embedded within and emotions affixed to the story you’re about to hear – and, the whole story might not be everything you can talk, but... Meaning, the process of critical storytelling and counterstory construction for empowerment through “the narratives of the oppressed” (Bridgeman, 2011, p. 144) or black women as mothers, is almost always political and personal.

I believe Dr. Trica M. Kress (2010) would agree that the above storywriting tale featuring many of my cultural heroines is both political and personal, and can be described in her thinking as “stepping out of the academic brew” (p. 267). This way of conducting dialogic analysis is representative of how I actionize my anomalous situatedness in higher education. Like other such storytelling approaches to follow in this work that demonstrate the capacity and resilience of black women as mothers who can labor and deliver knowledge too. Kress (2010) and I are “flattening knowledge hierarchies...[and] continually working within and against traditional academic knowledge structures”(p. 267). Thus allowing for the innate abilities of those most vulnerable to be valued knowledge contributors towards transformative change or as mentioned in the above storywriting tale, Omolade (1987) called us doing this type of work griot-historians¹. Enter, the griot-historians...

Black Activist Mothering – The Primordial Waters²

Waves go out. When they come in there is always a rock-back. It is not the same wave in the same place and the sands have shifted to never again be the same. I am in fact doing the same thing that my mother did and that my sisters did. The sands have shifted, but the motion I carry is from them. If we understand that we are talking about a struggle that is hundreds of years old, then we must acknowledge a continuance: that to be Black women is to move forward the struggle for the kind of space in this society that will make sense for our people. It is different today. Things have changed (Reagon, 1982, p. 82-83).

Dr. Bernice Reagon, (1982) founder of Sweet Honey and the Rock, describes in the above quote the process of resiliency, resistance and new meaning making using the flow of water into waves as a metaphor. These waves of resiliency, resistance and new meaning making come from the primordial waters of Black women as mothers and critical story birthers. For example, Dr. Joy James (2000) shares that since the great orator, Ancestress Harriet Tubman's military incursion of 1863, designed to rescue and make accessible pathways to freedom, the storytelling and counterstory construction waves of what and who Black women as mothers are and how they accomplish such feats in the midst of grave brutality has gone out and returned to shore many times. Before moving into the wave of Black Activist Mothering as a conceptual framework and set of pedagogical tools for resiliency, resistance and new meaning making, I will acknowledge the Elders who have laid the labor for its birth.

In the literature, the notion of "activist mothering" emerged out of Naples' (1992) study of black "low-income" women living in urban neighborhoods who were engaged in community work. However, it was McDonald (1997) – A Black female scholar – who contextualized and thickened the activist mothering standpoint of black mothers engaged in community as black activist mothering, a specific a way of knowing and navigating space, place and time as an oppressed body. Black mothers participate in developing the wholistic wellness of spaces, nurture extended fam-

ily networks, and engage our "outsider within" (Hill Collins, 1990) position in higher education to enhance our political activism efforts. According to Hill Collins (1991), "A substantial portion of Black women's status in African American communities stems not only from their roles as mothers in their own families but from their contributions as community othermothers to Black community development as well" (p. 174).

The work around reassessing and redefining the ways in which black women engage in community work and their roles as mothers (Edwards, 2000) goes back to the work of Dill Thorton (1983) who unearthed socio-cultural tools utilized by black domestic workers to establish strategic upward mobility plans for their children. Townsend Gilkes' (1983) work raised up how community work for black women equaled utilizing a strategic upward mobility process. Townsend Gilkes (1983) discovered that black women from working class and middle class backgrounds working and living in urban cites had a formula for "going up for the oppressed" as political activism and black community nation-building. Townsend Gilkes (1983) defines "going up for the oppressed...[as] a type of economic and career mobility that comprises a set of activities aimed at social change and the empowerment of the powerless" (p. 119). Hill Collins analyzing Townsend Gilkes' study of black women doing community work and framed it as "the power of Black motherhood" (as cited by Edwards, 2000, p. 87) Who will name us?

Naming Ceremony

The ceremony is initiated with the opportunity to name Black Activist Mothering as a cultural identity in time and space: who are we now, who we were then and how have we evolved. Elder, Dr. Hudson-Weems is adamant about the importance of "proper naming or nommo" (Hudson-Weems, 2000, p. 208). The African concept of nommo an "interconnecting phenomenon" (Hudson-Weems, 1998, p. 449) is representative of merging our individual and community knowledge of systemic injustices. When we "give name to a particular thing, [we] simultaneously give it meaning" (Hudson-Weems, 1998, p. 449). The Naming Ceremony needs sacred spaces that are tangible and intangible – this work is an example of an intangible space. In order to name our cultural identity and to engage counternarrating or counterstory construction – critical and strategic acts of storytelling as emancipatory work. Critical storytelling is a revolutionary process that involves challenging

master narratives in order to create new meaning making or counterstory construction.

Critical storytelling is involved with counterstory construction in a strategic dance of negotiating between finding other tongues to describe the pain caused by the oppression of these toxic master narratives; while, simultaneously conjuring the “determination to articulate, to challenge, to reveal, to share” (Boyce-Davies, 1994, p. 112) the unspeakable and create a new pathway toward healthy and just narratives. This is an exploration process that unearths the weightiness of how external perceptions and policies often undergird and thus defines our cultural identity and the mitigation of inequities in their communities is not everything we can talk through.

Black women as mothers who are engaged in community work are intentionally living in the margins and do so as acts of resistance and transformation. This is the foundational perspective of Black Activist Mothering. From this standpoint, more often than not, we have a clear vision of the system and the ways in which instances, issues and problems are embedded within these systems (Townsend Gilkes, 1983). The handed back and handed over practice of critical storytelling and counterstory construction is how we are able to see systemic interconnectedness. It is also the mechanism employed to translate what teaches us, theory and policy into creative and constructive ways of responding to oppression enacted within and upon our communities. Here, in this work, I am naming this practice Black Activist Mothering. I am affixing to this practice a conceptual framework (Her Pocketbook) and pedagogical tools (The Àjé in Her Pocketbook).

Her Pocketbook

The pocketbook is a term for a woman’s purse. For black women as mothers, it is a constructed place where life’s necessities are carried. The great Ancestor Langston Hughes (1958) describes the black woman’s pocketbook in his chronicle, *Thank You Ma’am* as “a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails” (p. 1). The pocketbook for black women as mothers is also a metaphorical term for the vagina, as a sacred resource. Dr. Teresa N. Washington (2005, 2010), English Literature scholar says, it is our sacred resource because of the “Àjé...resident in menstrual blood” a Yoruba, West African philosophy to describe the sacred life force of black women as mothers (2010, p. 18). *Her Pocketbook* makes clear the significance

of how I understand the academic notion of a conceptual framework for *Black Activist Mothering*. *Her Pocketbook for Black Activist Mothering* serves as the inquiry system constructed of “my stories, intertwined with the experiences of my community(ies), are read alongside academic settings and serious texts” (Chavez, 2012, p. 335) and becomes the conceptual framework. What follows are the beliefs, assumptions, theories and notions that define the *Black Activist Mothering* conceptual framework.

I have combined my identity as a Black working class mother, my situatedness of intentionally holding space at the margins of the academy and other power structures. *Black Activist Mothering* is my political, social and cultural standpoint – an internal navigation and belief system, the root of my practice and therefore, personal. It is also the lens through which I examine the work of community-centered urban educational leadership and foregrounds the work of expanding the role of urban educational leadership. For these specific and focused reasons, *Black Activist Mothering* functions as a Black Feminist intersectional analytical framework. As an intersectional framework, informed by Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory, it is a way of analyzing narratives about Black women as mothers as a political community that communicates across space, place and time. Therefore, it is a “politicized social and cultural construct” (Rodman, 1992, p. 640). *Black Activist Mothering* expands the capacity to learn, listen and create knowledge that is translatable across unequal dimensions of power.

Conceptualizing *Black Activist Mothering* as a cultural identity and intersectionality framework establishes the oppositional stance and sets it on the margins of the traditional academic framing and is therefore, political. Choosing this type of conceptual framework for *Black Activist Mothering* is a political stance in part because Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory are two critical informing theories that place the lived experiences of race, gender and class oppressions at the center of inquiry (Alexander-Floyd, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). In addition, because of the ways in which intersectionality has been coopted, commodified and disappeared as a theoretical and conceptual process for Black women specifically to be able to package their experiences as knowledge and research. According to Alexander-Floyd (2012) the theoretical and conceptual development of intersectionality has been “flatten[ed]... resulting in a failure to recognize the structural sources of inequality” of black women specifically (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p.4, quoting Berger and Guidroz, 2009a,

p.70) and reduced to “just multiplying identity categories rather than constituting a structural analysis or a political critique” (Alexander-Floyd, 2012, p.4) across disciplines. Intersectionality is also a personal stance because of the ways in which racism, sexism and classism intersect with the lived experiences of Black women as mothers engaging in community work as activism and transformation. *Black Activist Mothering* when in action and reflection is community work. It is political and personal.

Community work practiced through the tradition of Black Activist Mothering is a way of operationalizing our intersectionality toward reclaiming empowerment of our cultural, social, political, and economic spaces and places for the enrichment of our children and communities. This requires interrogating the ways that power and privilege inform our identity and how we view ourselves compared to how we are defined and how others perceive us. Black Activist Mothering when operationalized as community work “is focused on internal development and external challenge, and creates ideas enabling people to think about change” (Townsend-Gilkes, 1983, p. 231). Through this quote, I hear Townsend-Gilkes (1983) describing Black Activist Mothering as a rhythm. It is the liberatory rhythm of developing the internal capacity of black working class mothers to resist the narrative internally and, to do so while generating responses to external challenges manifested out of the very same poisonous narratives in order to create new pathways toward change. The tradition of Black Activist Mothering as community work is always political and personal and is not everything I can talk but,

...is not difficult for me a black woman. This is not difficult for me, a marginal woman. This is no more difficult than breathing. This is the place where multilayered oppressions push us. This is where and when we as black women enter (as cited by King, 2011, p. 95 emphasis by the author).

King is explaining how the labor of community work has become like second nature or instinctive for Black women as mothers. Similarly, Black women as mothers have learned to perform and produce community work while simultaneously navigating our marginality and the discomforts of oppressions. To enact this navigational performance Townsend Gilkes (1983) describes us as “mobile mothers” (p. 124). We are typically coming from working class backgrounds and we strategically chose career paths and educational attainment that allow us to facilitate community work

as acts of activism and empowerment. We utilize our mobility to move back and forth between the margins and dominate spaces by negotiating dimensions power and privilege. Therefore, Black women as mothers are consistently boundary spanning, passing through cyclical systems of oppression that intersect vertically and laterally. Black Activist Mothering then, is, “...‘boundary-work’ taken to the extreme, boundary-work beyond race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class [it] works the margins and liminal spaces between both formal knowledge and what has been proposed as boundary knowledge, knitting them together, forming a new consciousness” (Lincoln, 2001, p. 694). Black women as mothers have a tradition of doing Lincoln’s boundary-work as “marginal intellectuals” (as cited by Hill Collins, 1986, p. 15)) and do so as acts of resistance (hooks, 1989). Meaning the situatedness of the margin is transformed from being a place and space of disempowerment to vantage point of resistance.

The Àjé in Her Pocketbook

Gurl, what you got in your pocketbook? The Àjé in my Black Activist Mothering Pocketbook are my pedagogical tools. These are the mechanisms of teaching and learning informed a Black Activist Mothering standpoint while living both marginalized and privileged.

I continue to observe when navigating spaces of higher education, academics want to know what I know, “I want to pick your brain, they claim”. They are wondering how I know what I know, how I learned what I know. Remember, what teaches me are these emancipatory inquiry tools, learned by mobilizing the sixth sense (mother’s wit, emotional intelligence, intuition etc.) in order to pass through the veils of “isms” and be able to translate, facilitate and navigate multiplicities of truths, perspectives and ways of knowing. Professor M. K. Asante (2013) describes operationalizing the sixth sense as “growing eyes that hear and ears that see” (p. 179). Wielding these tools requires a process of retrieving and returning. This means, when I work the margins and liminal spaces I am passing through the veils. It also means that my quest is not only to transport and translate knowledge from the dominant world back to marginalized spaces but also, to carry that rich thick counter-knowledge back up from the bottom and across systems of power.

The following Àjé are representative of behaviors

and practices that triangulate my lived experiences with theory and practice. I am naming the pedagogical tools that operationalize *Black Activist Mothering: Gumbo ya ya* (how we communicate across space, place, and time), Veil Walking (how we navigate within and between space, place and time) and *Holding Space* (how we facilitate the process of generating knowledge and growing agency).

Gumbo Ya Ya: Translation Tool

Luisah Teish (1985) teaches us in *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals* that *Gumbo ya ya* is a southern creole term meaning, "everybody talks at once" (p. 140). It is a folk saying to describe how she and other women in her family communicate each individual history into a communal history. To the outsider, *Gumbo ya ya* is most likely a chaotic interaction of black folks all talking at the same time – *they say, we loud and boisterous... but, really, we are almighty and fierce when we engage Gumbo ya ya as Black mother work.*

Where I come from, "*Gumbo ya ya*" (Teish, 1985, p. 139) is how I make sense of counternarrative storytelling it is both concept and practice. The ability to listen to multiple conversations simultaneously and follow those various conversations around to create a communal story...*all the while, calling out history.* Now, some of those stories might be "tales" told to be truth and some are truths never heard, while others are acts of "specifying" which require naming "the direct relationship between history and community" (Willis, 1989, p. 16). Counternarratives are storytelling and storywriting to instigate different thinking and to signify about master narratives. Zamudio and colleagues (2011) define master narratives as,

...the overarching message behind the conglomeration of concepts, stories, images, and narratives that serve as the bases for, and aid in the maintenance of, a culture, institution, or system's clam to know what is (and what is not) truth and reality (p. 125).

Simply put, *Gumbo ya ya* is a practice of agency to push back against oppressive narratives. Historian, Dr. Elsa Barkley Brown (1992) explains the storytelling practice of *Gumbo ya ya* as creating a communal dialogue by synthesizing each person's journey "in concert with the group" (p. 297). She argues for this practice as a wholistic practice of telling and making

sense of history, a form of resiliency, a tie that binds individual histories into communal histories and those into political, economic and social histories.

Gumbo ya ya as a sense making tool; then, allows for critically thinking about multiple stories including master narratives across space, place and time simultaneously while in concert with an event. While not necessarily documented, we, Black women as mothers, cultivate our intellectual and political development by invoking *Gumbo ya ya*, to make sense of our lived experiences by "layering multiple and asymmetrical stories" (Barkley Brown, 1992, p. 307). The ways in which our lived experiences collide at the social intersections of race, class and gender is not for the uninitiated.

Veil Walking – A Navigational Tool

Veil Walking, a Black Activist Mothering folk saying, shifts the veil metaphor from a barrier to be lifted or shattered to one that can be passed through and thus serves to transform marginalization from a victimized position to one of power. *Veil Walking* is how I carry messages and possibilities back and forth between individuals, systems, structures, and histories. In this sense, *Veil Walking* serves as our travel papers allowing us to move between veils, post-up in the margins, stand in the gaps activating processes of instigation and disruption "that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer...[and] speak the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter-language" (hooks, 1990, p. 150). What I am speaking on is a counter-language of words and actions that can be a methodology.

The notion of the veil of race and racism is reflected on by the great Ancestor W.E.B. DuBois in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folks*. Intensely sharing about the discomfort of this ethereal type space, which he named "double consciousness," a veil separating the socially constructed white world from the black world. DuBois (1903) discusses the ways in which black folks learn to manage living within both worlds and passing back and forth between them. This notion of the veil "operates at the personal or intrapsychic and at the institutional or structural level of social interaction" (Winant, 2004, p. 1) and black women as mothers navigate it by will or by force. Black women as mothers through the experience of "tripartite oppression" (Hudson – Weems, 1989, p. 192) learn to manage living within, passing back and forth and between multiple intersecting veils of various social, cultural, economic and political dimensions. Tripartite consciousness

functions as a portal that exposes the learning of us as othered and thus, transforms the experience of marginalization into an asset.

Townsend Gilkes also discovered with Black women as mothers from working class backgrounds "... were also more apt at...seeing the system" (Townsend Gilkes, 1983, p. 128). This expanded sight can be attributed to our marginality that yields experiences from traditional educational settings and our deep roots in the community. Thus, it is through my lived experiences that sharpen my capability to see the system" *in operation*. *Veil Walking* is about navigating between systems to learn and transport knowledge and requires the entire body to intensely see not only the system of the problem but also, how that system is informed by and nested within structural and historical systems. *Veil Walking* is also about passing through these veils whole, intact, not leaving any parts of the self in the void. It is also about navigating space and place, passing through and between as an outsider within. When we *Veil Walk*, we are carrying messages and possibilities back and forth between individuals, systems, structures, and histories. This means that when we *work* the borders, gaps, margins and liminal spaces we are passing through veils on a quest not only to transport and translate knowledge from the dominant world back to these uneven and inequitable spaces but also, to carry that rich thick counter-knowledge *from the bottom up* and across systems of power.

Holding Space – A Facilitation Tool

Sister, Reverend Tammy Lorraine McLeod

When I hold space for you...I'm opening the window for you to feel the sun on your face and the refreshing breeze in your soul. Holding space means, my vulnerability meets your vulnerability with an open heart for the purpose of creating a safe moment in time where we can express authentically, courageously and vulnerably in any way we choose; free of judgment, agendas and expectations. When we allow ourselves to hold space in this way AND receive this act of love from another, true healing of pain, suffering and fear takes place (T. L. McLeod, personal communication, November 17, 2016).

Working the gaps, margins and liminal spaces Black women as mothers doing community work are often compelled to learn the art of *Holding Space*. *Hold-*

ing Space is a spiritual act and requires that we enact veil walking because, in places and spaces of political vulnerability, we are facilitating relationships between people, space, place and time. It is being able to sit with the discomfort of sitting with discomfort. *Holding Space* asks for the willingness to honor a multiplicity of truths with a level of vulnerability that resists judgment while at the same moment holding inequity and injustice accountable or unapologetically enacting spiritual militancy. For this reason, it is important to learn how to become the watcher or the witness of thoughts, actions and behaviors that are connected to systems and structures of systematic oppression. Or, *Holding Space*, can be thought of as a vehicle for Black women as mothers having a knowing that operates at the "micro-level of identity, where we experience the divisions and struggles within the racialized self [and at]...a macro-social [level] of the social whole, the collectivity, the state, history, the nation of racism" (Winant, 2004, p. 6). Activate, operationalize...

Black Activist Mothering in Action...throw some "Sass" on it!

Black Activist Mothering as an intersectional analytical framework through the practices of *Gumbo ya ya*, *Veil Walking* and *Holding Space* utilizes "critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis to increase awareness, acknowledgment, and action" (Brown, 2004, p. 78). It is an emancipatory process, "[that] involves exploring how [black mothers] might reorganize ourselves to meet common needs in this historical moment [in urban school reform], including the capacity to raise and nurture whole, resilient individuals as well as autonomous communities of resistance" (Oka, 2016, p. 53).

The tradition of *Black Activist Mothering* allows me to move between these spaces as acts of resistance and transformative change. This mobility grants me a vantage point to see instances/issues/problems from both the perspective of the dominant structure and from perspectives of racial, class and gender oppression, a heightened observational talent to comparatively evaluate multiple perspectives. Such is the case in the following installment of this *Gumbo ya ya*, a community meeting for us but not by us. My role, then, is to instigate conversations in key places like this community gathering about and for black women. My purpose in these types of spaces is to disrupt normative practices that produce inequities and challenge historical grand narrative scripts and translate theory and policy back

into what teaches us.

The setting, a community forum for black folks, is specifically for black women to organize our ideas around various key topics and then report those out as solutions.

I was invited by a sister friend born and raised in the city who comes from a long line of black activist mothers and now works in an influential political position. The forum organizers are black male elected officials in the city whose mission is to collect the voices of the black community and to jointly create a policy agenda to serve the needs of black folks across all black districts. A philanthropic and advocacy organization serving women and girls provided data utilized to set the context for our discussion. We are told that 77% of households in the city living in poverty are headed by single mothers. Race is not specified, but, it is implied that black single mothers represent the greatest percentage of the 77%. Here's how...One of the black public officials explained that while white families do live in poverty in our city, there does not exist white improvised neighborhoods in the city. However, he emphasized, ALL black neighborhoods in the city are classified at or below poverty. Bottom line, the context for the "who" that is guiding our discussion and solution process – poor and working class black single mothers.

I was hopeful at first because of the circumstances that pulled all these black women together to focus on us – but, then, I thought... who is the "us"? Whose culture and experience will have capital during our discussion? Will it be the cultural identity of poor and working class black single mothers with deep rooted historical and political master narratives?

Naturally, I joined the Education think group. Our table is mostly intergenerational black women, we are educators, a city school board member, community organizers, mothers and the facilitator. In our group of about 11, three participants are white, two women and one man. We were given three questions to guide our discussion. The first question asked, what we perceive to be the most pressing educational issues in our neighborhood schools. As a natural practice the black women began their Gumbo Ya Ya work. I threw out into the Gumbo Ya Ya my experience as a mother of children attending these neighborhood schools and I suggested that teacher preparation programs

are not properly equipping urban teachers to deliver culturally responsive practices in urban school settings. At the same time, I am listening to the historical and hegemonic narratives at play. During Gumbo Ya Ya, the white folks are mostly silent. They are speaking through expressions and gestures though. Stories are shared, current practices in schools were presented and a solution already written in the school district policy was explained. Other stories were shared about the inequity with the quality of education, the lack of funding in black neighborhood schools as compared to other more wealthy school districts, along with stories of discipline disparity.

Over time I have learned that a master narrative is harmful for what it does say – e.g., black single mothers are lazy, inherently criminal, drug addicted, sex fiends, who do not value education or take care of their communities. But, more importantly, "the master narrative can be just as harmful for what it does not say" (Bridgeman, 2010, p. 145). In my experience when working in racially binary teams of black and white folks to address issues that have been historically, politically, economically and socially attributed to black folks broadly and black mothers specifically, a question, comment or suggestion is raised to spotlight the "blackness" in the conversation/room.

A white female participant shared her personal story about growing up in a school where all the parents participated in organizing the parties and activities in the school and therefore, these parents held dimensions of power relating to how funding and such moved around the school.

What is not being said, are embedded apathy notions about black mothers and school involvement along with self-efficacy and empowerment. The embedded hegemonic narratives in that story are linked to the economic theory of meritocracy, which simply says if you work hard you will be rewarded and those who are not successful, did not work hard enough or where I come from, "you gotta pull yourself up by your bootstraps". Deficit thinking paradigms about Black mothers and their ability to be adequate stewards of our children's educational experiences. My assumption is informed by the literature, historical context and my lived reality that I weave together in order to create a "whole" narrative; thus, problematizing the single and often fragmented truth being constructed.

Our white female participant-observer did not say

explicitly, “why don’t black mothers just do more, just participate in their children’s education?” As Bridgeman points out, it is the master narrative’s ability to be hidden and harmful that causes the Black women to respond, no, really, to explain away, distance themselves and/or defend hegemonic narratives.

In this case, directed toward bringing forth ways in which we can galvanize this moment of converging interests of the black political leaders orchestrating these black community listening sessions and black community workers advocating for the rights of black women and girls and the broader issue of educating our youth. But, “it’s not everything I can talk”

The following three responses, shared by the black women at the table are quite significant in this particular war of the narratives: (1) that tactic (what the white experienced as parent involvement) is contextual and will not work with black single mothers; (2) schools have not traditionally been welcoming spaces for black single mothers; and (3) black single mothers just don’t care (this response shook my spirit). I notice the black women are distancing, explaining and defending through their responses. I read these acts as a way to disassociate the individual’s blackness from the stereotyped blackness of black single mothers. In the war between stories, narratives that seek to justify why things are the way they are do battle against narratives that seek to interrogate why things are the way they are (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 124).

The first response came from a black woman in the role of table facilitator: In a general way, she seemed to distance herself from the problem group of urban black single mothers by casually sharing information about the school district policy where she lives – outside of city and a Black community that is classified middle class. Then, she explained how the white woman’s reality is that of “stay at home” moms with a working dad and therefore, so much more opportunity for parent involvement. The facilitator went on to explain that our context is one of single Black mothers. The second response came from a Black woman who intentionally or inadvertently held the position of shining the light of racial inequity threaded throughout the issues discussed at our table. She spoke about the discomfort of “inner city” mothers not feeling welcomed in the school or having traumatic experiences while in school themselves as a barrier to the notion of volunteering as an act of

empowerment.

This negative belief about feeling unwelcomed is vastly supported in the parent involvement literature; however, in strategic counternarrating, we “transcend the boundary of otherness and inferiority defined from above...by seizing the negativity [and] formulating an alternative vision” (Willis, 1989, p. 45). An alternative story in the literature points to the ownness of creating welcoming spaces for black single mothers still rests with the school and the broader school district community.

The last response was shared by one of the parents at our table. She expressed that, young mothers simply don’t care. I was a bit surprised but understood this perspective as it came from a younger sister, with a very powerful presence. Her position seemed to track that the real problem with education in our neighborhoods is really what is happening at home – young mothers who have given up, young mothers who don’t care, young mothers who choose partying over parenting. This mother was speaking from her heart and from her lived experience. While she laid her claim with experiential examples as evidence, one of the Elders in our group, also a Black mother and elected official, said to me, “she is just like her mama, I taught her and her mother was from the community”.

This is a crucial nexus in the critical storytelling and counterstory construction process of *Black Activist Mothering* because, it is where we can map the roots of these stories, to connect these tales to community and historical narratives – strategic counternarrating. Without needing to express here the Elder’s facial expressions and body language when she made this statement, I can argue that this young mother whose mother was also an advocate in the public school system is connected to stories of knowledge through her motherline that could be different from her peers. She is presenting an analysis and making critical inquiry that is informed not only by her lived experiences but also from these motherline stores of knowledge – a sustenance that enriches her worldview of schooling and education and could very well be different from her peers. This is the motherline being operationalized as a way of discussing and defining what has happened with black mothers who have children attending neighborhood schools and who are living in urban spaces because, “for black women, history is a bridge defined along motherlines” (Willis, 1989, p.6).

There are several ways to set in motion strategic counternarrating in regards to young mothers described as “*partying, and hanging out, not really interested in what is going on at school with their children.*” For example, I can enact my motherline by looking to the work of Elder, scholar, Patricia Hill-Collins (1986), *Learning from The Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought*, in order to be disruptive toward this narrative about Black women as mothers. In this critical body of work, Hill Collins (1990) subscribes that “Black women judge their behavior by comparing themselves to Black women facing similar situations and thus demonstrates the presence of Black female definitions of Afro-American womanhood” (p. 18). Now, the context for this statement are Black women in the academy. The counterstory construction has me inquire around whether a similar behavioral transmission exist for black working class women and if so, who has asked about their experiences from a position of strength?

Dr. Tracey Reynolds (2002) questions the notion of experience and whose experience has capital within the Black Feminist Standpoint paradigm. Reynolds challenged us to think deeper and seek thicker experiences to enrich the black feminist standpoint. I consider *Black Activist Mothering* to be a response to Reynold’s challenge. *Black Activist Mothering is a call to Stand Up!* Because, quite frankly, these false notions and stereotypes about black women as mothers, “...are actually [a] distorted rendering of those aspects of Black female behavior seen as most threatening to white patriarchy (Hill Collins, 1986, p. 17).

Black Activist Mothering – The Next Wave... *rebuking the okie doke!*

Black Activist Mothering is a cultural identity and a complex practice of biological mothering, community othermothering and political activism that admonishes false rhetoric about the capacity of Black women as mothers. It is a complex practice that is driven by resiliency, resistance and forges new meaning making in order to transcend struggle (Edwards, 2000; Hill Collins, 1990; Hill Collins, 1991; James, 2000; McDonald, 1997; Townsend-Gilkes, 1983). Further, it is a continuous process of “*going up for the oppressed*” (Townsend Gilkes, 1983, p. 115) meaning, being fortified to assess which cultural, social, political and economic strategies are most appropriate to meet the needs of black women, their families, and the Black community(ies)

(Townsend-Gilkes, 1983).

Since at least 1863, we know that Black women as mothers have repurposed marginal placement as spaces of resistance and liberation. We can also confirm that Black women as mothers while occupying space in the margins have invoked strategic storytelling to engage transformative change as a tradition. Then, to be clear, as a conceptual framework and set of pedagogical tools, *Black Activist Mothering* is not only to be experienced by black folks or black mothers, specifically. Rather, it is to be experienced as a set of culturally informed beliefs, methods and practices known to activate empowerment within urban neighborhoods and to improve the quality of life through teaching and learning. Holding this notion as true;

How do we prepare 21st century urban educational leaders to view leadership as community-centered (Roebuck Sakho, 2016; Sakho, Whitaker & Hopson, 2015) through a *Black Activist Mothering* lens? What leadership literacies are needed?

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