

Unbroken: A Critical Autoethnography of a Black Woman's Doctoral Experience During BLM

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Abstract. In this critical autoethnography, I examine my lived experiences as a Black woman doctoral student during the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Further, as I recount my academic journey in the wake of assaults to Black life and resulting Black resistance, I discuss the pedagogical interventions of Black women faculty members that made me feel as if my life and work mattered in their classrooms. I revisit spoken word poems and class assignments written between 2015 and 2017 along with news articles documenting national events occurring at the time as relevant texts to help me explore and understand my experiences. I utilize Critical Race Theory as an analytic lens, focusing on the following tenets: persistence of racism, critique of color-evasiveness, and counterstorytelling. I conclude with implications regarding how introducing graduate students to critical theory and methodologies can equip them with the tools to empirically explore and articulate their lived realities. Moreover, I discuss how such explorations can be validating and healing as students navigate particularly challenging academic and sociohistorical contexts. Additionally, I describe how providing students with creative outlets to express themselves in coursework can help them process their experiences and produce material that is humanizing, liberating, and life-giving.

Keywords: critical autoethnography, critical race theory, Black Lives Matter, higher education, teaching

*I am not broken
I am not silent
I am not invisible...*

Standing on a dimly lit stage, facing an audience of my peers and faculty, I felt a surge of strength course through my body as I declared these words. It was 2016, the end of the second year in my higher education doctoral program, and this spoken word performance was a key moment in my educational experience. As the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—a global network of organizers committed to resisting state-sanctioned violence against Black people (BLM, n.d.)—gained momentum nationally, I was finding the words to articulate the materiality of my existence in a doctoral program where I was once likened to an apparition.

In this critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Holman Jones, 2016; Madison, 2005), I examine my lived experiences as a Black woman doctoral student during the rise of the BLM movement utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as an analytic lens. I purposely frame this study using CRT because my engagement with this theory in graduate education pivotally influenced my racialized sensemaking of my doctoral experience and the world around me. As such, it felt fitting to return to CRT as I critically re-examine and recount my academic journey in the wake of assaults to Black life and resulting Black resistance occurring at that time. I also discuss the pedagogical interventions of Black women faculty members that made

me feel as if my life and work mattered in their classrooms. I revisit spoken word poems and class assignments written between 2015 and 2017 along with news articles documenting national events occurring at the time as "relevant personal and cultural texts" to help me explore and understand my experiences (Adams et al., 2015, p. 49). In the literature review that follows, I briefly discuss recent scholarship on the experiences of Black women in doctoral education and provide an overview of CRT to denote its history and current relevance as I embark on this autoethnographic undertaking.

Literature Review

Black Women in Doctoral Education

Research has demonstrated that Black women in doctoral education may experience a lack of mentorship, feelings of imposterism, and differential treatment based on the intersections of their race and gender (Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017). Additionally, Black doctoral women at predominantly white institutions have reported contending with personal and vicarious racially discriminatory experiences that have made them feel unwelcome in their academic environments (Shavers & Moore, 2019). Conditions like these can make it especially difficult for Black doctoral women to feel safe being vulnerable in their academic contexts. For instance, Black women attending predominantly white institutions in Shavers and Moore's (2014) study described using academic masks, or professional facades, to protect themselves from stereotyping and hide their private selves in their doctoral programs. Although participants adopted academic masks for protective purposes, they shared that such masking negatively affected their emotional and psychological well-being. Denying aspects of themselves in professional settings left Black doctoral women in the study feeling "incomplete, disconnected, and exhausted" (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 404).

To navigate the various obstacles Black women may confront in their doctoral programs, scholars have emphasized the importance of Black women seeking and sustaining culturally responsive mentoring relationships (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013; Gooden et al., 2020; Rasheem et al., 2018). Bertrand Jones et al. (2013) asserted that Black doctoral women benefit from relationships with mentors who are aware of the intersecting oppressions Black women encounter in their lived realities. Mentors can also help Black doctoral women begin to understand their standpoints as insiders (e.g., doctoral students) and outsiders (e.g., Black women) in the academy, which allows Black women to "critique, as well as contribute to knowledge construction" (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013, p. 333). Relatedly, in Gooden et al.'s (2020) autoethnographic study, the authors expressed the importance of connecting with critically conscious mentors who can help Black women navigate predominantly white institutional contexts. Black doctoral women participating in Rasheem et al.'s (2018) study reported benefitting from relationships with mentors who shared their identities and interests. These relationships provided Black women in the study with transformational growth and personal development, as their mentors offered encouragement and promoted mentees' success in their programs. Though this critical autoethnography focuses on the pedagogical interventions of

Black women faculty that helped me navigate my doctoral program during BLM, literature pertaining to the mentoring experiences of Black doctoral women is relevant because, as an aspiring educator and scholar, I considered my instructors to be mentors. Learning from these faculty members inspired transformational growth and personal development for me as I began to apply critical theory and praxis to my own research and practice.

Critical Race Theory: An Overview

Originating in the 1970s, CRT was developed by lawyers, activists, and legal scholars committed to maintaining and advancing the gains of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, which were being attacked by oppositionists in law and politics at the time (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Under the leadership of founding scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, and Patricia Williams, the CRT movement quickly gathered momentum, and, by the 1980s, scholars and activists from various disciplines came together to expand its reach (Zamudio et al., 2011).

CRT's foundations in critical legal studies and radical feminism contributed to its critique of power and power's relationship to the construction of social hierarchies and the domination of marginalized people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Though the tenets of CRT can vary depending upon the context in which it is being applied, common propositions of CRT include the following: racism is an everyday, commonplace experience for People of Color; Whites, as members of the dominant group, benefit psychically and materially from racial hierarchies; racism advances the interests of wealthy and working class Whites; race and racism are socially constructed; the process of racialization varies depending on the evolving interests of the dominant group; people experience intersecting systems of oppression as related to their complex social identities; and the voices of People of Color should be centered to contest dominant narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

CRT's groundbreaking theorization concerning race and racism with regard to systemic oppression has led to its adoption and evolution in fields outside of law, including education. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate are largely credited for introducing CRT to the field of education in the 1990s (Zamudio et al., 2011). During an American Education Research Association conference presentation in 1994, Ladson-Billings and Tate specifically called for new directions in research rooted in CRT to address the need for further theorization regarding race and racism in relation to educational inequity (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Zamudio et al., 2011). Since then, several scholars have responded to Ladson-Billings and Tate's call and have used CRT as an analytic lens to better understand racial inequality throughout the education system.

While CRT has been taken up in legal and social science disciplines as a useful tool in both understanding and combatting racism, it has received considerable criticism from oppositionists. Recently, CRT garnered national attention as the Trump administration issued an order for federal agencies to end racial sensitivity trainings utilizing it. In September of 2020, the Office of Management and Budget released a

memo directing agencies to identify and terminate any contracts related to such trainings, referring to them as “divisive, anti-American propaganda” (Schwartz, 2020). Specifically, the memo relayed that the former president called for the cessation of these trainings on the basis that they may suggest the U.S. is a racist country or any race is “inherently racist or evil” (Schwartz, 2020).

Despite the misunderstandings and misapplications, along with attempts to stifle its influence, CRT remains a vital theoretical frame. Its current contestation a clear indication of its contemporary relevance as America reckons with its longstanding history with race and racism. Furthermore, I would argue that it is no coincidence that CRT is receiving renewed scrutiny while the BLM movement continues to gain momentum.

Created by three Black women—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—BLM was initiated in response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man responsible for fatally shooting Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager in 2012 (BLM, n.d.). BLM has since coordinated efforts worldwide to demand justice for atrocities committed against Black life—including more recent demonstrations and political action in response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. As members of the BLM movement continue their forebears’ struggles for justice and Black liberation, CRT may once again be called upon to help maintain and advance the strides made.

Conceptual Framework

For the purpose of this project, I utilize CRT as an analytic lens, focusing on the following tenets: persistence of racism, critique of colorblindness or color-evasiveness, and counterstorytelling. Persistence of racism refers to the endemic nature of racism in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). I discuss how enduring legacies of racism influenced my educational experiences as well as the lives of Black people such as Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile whose lives were taken by police. Critique of colorblindness describes critical race theorists’ contestation of post-racial ideologies that ignore the significance of race in social stratification (Zamudio et al., 2011). Throughout this article, however, I use the term “color-evasiveness” advanced by Dis/ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) scholars to disrupt ableist language which conflates blindness with ignorance (Annamma et al., 2017, p. 153). I offer examples of how color-evasiveness pervaded doctoral courses where race was not addressed, both in subject matter and with regard to national events happening during that period. Counterstorytelling privileges the lived experiences of People of Color; thereby, disrupting dominant narratives and strengthening “traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). I provide examples of how I began to engage in a praxis of counterstorytelling at this time, which informed my approach to scholarship and became a means of survival and healing for me.

Methodology

To examine my lived experiences as a Black woman doctoral student attending a predominantly White institution during the rise of the BLM movement, I engage in critical autoethnography. Critical autoethnography 1) blends theory and storytelling together, 2) bridges material and ethical practice by linking analysis with action, and 3) reveals ways of embodying change (Holman Jones, 2016). Moreover, critical autoethnography addresses injustice and offers a first-person account of discrimination and difference (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014; Madison, 2005). Though traditional autoethnographies also require reflexive, systematic analyses of personal experiences as situated in cultural contexts (Bhattacharya, 2017), I found critical autoethnography to be appropriate for this study in its explicit emphasis on examining one's lived experience in the interest of advancing social justice. In this critical autoethnography, I bring together CRT and stories of my educational experience, while also demonstrating how CRT, the BLM movement, and the pedagogical interventions of Black women faculty informed my critique and contestation of anti-Black racism as a Black scholar. Additionally, through storytelling, I embody the transformative power of critical theory for Black graduate students while navigating a particularly challenging sociohistorical terrain.

Data utilized for this critical autoethnography included class assignments and original poetry written between 2015 and 2017, along with news articles concerning the events within that time period as relevant texts to help make meaning of my academic experiences and the sociohistorical context (Adams et al., 2015). Specifically, I reviewed the weekly reflective journals for Dr. Camille Wilson's class from Fall 2016 and the final cumulative course project completed in Dr. Jacqueline Mattis' class in Winter of 2017. For this piece, I found and referenced news articles from the ProQuest database. I searched for news articles either written within the time of interest or written about events that occurred within that timeframe regarding the BLM movement and Black lives lost as a result of police brutality. I used search terms such as "Black Lives Matter" and "BLM movement," along with the specific names of Black people who were killed by police during that period such as "Tamir Rice," "Freddie Gray," "Sandra Bland," "Alton Sterling," and "Philando Castille." In total, I reviewed approximately 20 news articles, which helped me create a timeline of events leading up to and coinciding with my engagement in Dr. Wilson's and Dr. Mattis' respective courses. The news articles were primarily used to contextualize my experiences and assignments between 2015 and 2017, as they are artifacts of the sociohistorical moment. Further, reviewing these articles deepened my reflections about the poetry I wrote and performed then, as I was able to revisit the events and reconnect with the emotions that inspired my writing of those pieces.

Regarding my analysis, I coded my course assignments for evidence of my interrogation and critique of the persistence of racism and color-evasiveness in my doctoral experience and higher education more broadly, along with my understanding of and engagement in the process of counterstorytelling through course activities and projects (Creswell, 2009). For instance, I coded the following journal entry from Dr. Wilson's class as color-evasiveness, as it demonstrated my

growing awareness and critique of education scholarship that evaded discussions of race despite it being pertinent to the topic at hand—in this case, qualitative methodology.

It is interesting that race is not discussed in this piece. At first, I overlooked this omission...yet, after another look, the omission of race is glaring, and makes me think how accustomed I've become to **not** reading about race in journal articles. Perhaps this is why when race is discussed it feels refreshing, and when it is not mentioned explicitly, its absence is not readily detected.

This code not only captured my understanding of color-evasiveness as a concept, but also my developing thoughts about the consequences of color-evasiveness in higher education research. As I share the findings of this critical autoethnography, I utilize citation, or the quoting of pertinent texts, as a technique to "enact the intervention of theory in the writing itself" (Holman Jones, 2016, p. 234). In other words, I cite critical theorists throughout my writing to make meaning of my experiences and highlight the significance of theory as an intervention for me as a student.

Findings

In the sections that follow, I offer three stories of my doctoral program experiences between 2015 and 2017 as framed by the CRT tenets of color-evasiveness, persistence of racism, and counterstorytelling. Within these stories, I offer valuable strategies from the BLM movement and two Black women faculty members regarding how Black students can contest the deleterious effects of anti-Black racism. Such strategies include declaring the inherent worth of Black life, bearing witness, and engaging in a praxis of counterstorytelling.

What We Can't Ignore: Color-Evasiveness

As I entered the second year of my higher education doctoral program in the Fall of 2015, I felt desperate. There was a longing inside of me to find spaces where Blackness was centered rather than an afterthought, if thought of at all. My doctoral experience was unfolding against the backdrop of what would become one of the largest social movements in American history. Yet, during my first year (2014–2015), it seemed that the urgent rallying cry of BLM did not reach the classroom. Despite the tragic deaths of members of the Black community and ongoing acts of resistance happening nationally, the lesson plans for my core-curriculum courses remained unchanged, the psychological and emotional toll of these events went unaddressed by most of my department's faculty members, and I was expected to soldier on as if what was occurring outside of the classroom was not affecting me inside of it. At the time—with the exception of courses purposefully focused on race and racism—it was uncommon to meaningfully discuss anti-Blackness as a department, in spite of current events that demonstrated the relevance and materiality of it on a national stage.

I distinctly recall finding it difficult to focus when Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old Black boy was killed by a police officer while playing with a toy gun in November of 2014 (Fitzsimmons, 2014). Likewise, I was distracted in February of 2015 when the U.S. Justice Department announced that no federal civil rights charges would be brought against George Zimmerman, who was found not guilty in 2013 of the murder of Trayvon Martin (CNN, 2020). Processing the disappointment of such blatant injustice, April 2015 came and marked the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old Black man who sustained spinal cord injuries during an arrest and soon after died while in police custody (Stolberg & Nixon, 2015). Moreover, the summer did not bring the reprieve I prayed for when that July, Sandra Bland—a 28-year-old Black woman and activist—was found hanging in a Texas jail cell after being arrested days earlier during a traffic stop (Hassan, 2019).

Times like these, I would avoid the common throughways and gathering spaces of my higher education department—fearful that if someone asked, “how are you?” I would slip up and give them an honest reply. It was easier to keep my head down and move quickly or muster up a smile and keep the conversation light. Yet, one day I crossed paths with a White faculty member who upon noticing me, exclaimed, “It’s like I’ve seen a ghost!” What this person could not have known was during that period I felt like an apparition in my doctoral program—lifelessly going through the motions while my true self was invisible to most and silent. The energy to explain why I may have been communally grieving or exhausted from harboring generational knowledge of oppression and pain was too much to give.

Managing the typical challenges of a doctoral program while shouldering the weight of the sociohistorical moment left me intellectually and emotionally weary. When I returned to school in the Fall term of 2015, I was determined to take courses that engaged race and racism and did not reduce Blackness to a variable. bell hooks (1994) wrote:

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (p. 59)

Similarly, I was drawn to courses in critical theory from a hurting place with the hope that I too would find healing. From that point on, I filled my schedule with electives outside of my department in psychology, sociology, and educational studies that provided conceptual and theoretical frameworks to help me make sense of the world around me. Along my academic journey, I entered the classrooms of Black women faculty members who perhaps at some point in their careers were searching for healing also.

As I began to learn more about CRT, I experienced firsthand how theory can help one feel acknowledged and provide language to describe one’s lived realities. For example, color-evasiveness helped me unpack why the silences concerning race at my predominantly White institution made me feel invisible and as if I had lost my

voice. Sue (2015) defines colorblindness, or color-evasiveness, as a "belief that race should not influence decisions or actions toward individuals or groups, which overlooks the notion that racism continues to be a significant negative factor in the lives of people of color...by intentionally or unintentionally ignoring race and racial differences, race is relegated to being an insignificant factor in the lives of people of color" (p. 77). Not discussing the significance of race and racism in coursework mitigated its relevance in my lived experience.

While CRT helped me name the mechanisms that served to perpetuate color-evasive racism, the BLM movement offered a strategy to combat it. According to its creators, the BLM movement is "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (BLM, n.d., para. 4). The specification that *Black* lives matter is a contestation of color-evasive rhetoric that ignores the material consequences of anti-Black racism in a society plagued by white supremacy. CRT and BLM empowered me critique color-evasive ideologies that ignored the salience of race and racism and assert my self-worth as a Black person. In the winter of 2016, I wrote "Unbroken" as a personal declaration that I would not allow racism to render me silent or invisible any longer.

Unbroken

*I am not broken
I am not silent
I am not invisible*

*eyes low
mouth shut
neck bent*

*That's how you want me to be
How you need me to be
How you hoped to find me*

*However, your refusal to see me does not negate my existence
the space I occupy is not vacant
I am not here to smile, serve, or submit*

*My back is not your footstool
so please don't confuse my humility with timidity
Thinking you can humiliate or intimidate me*

*I refuse to be disrespected, dismissed, or disregarded
You don't own me
Can't define me
And certainly won't break me*

*I will not yield
I won't relent
I will not wait for permission*

*I will press
I will push
I will protest*

Bearing Witness: Persistence of Racism

I never had the stomach for the spectacle of murder, let alone that of my people. The viral videos of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile being murdered by police officers circulating in July of 2016 were haunting for me. Sterling pinned down and shot at close-range in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Castile shot and killed in front of his girlfriend and her daughter while reaching for identification in Falcon Heights, Minnesota (Poniewozik, 2016). Those videos reminded me of being a child watching documentaries of slavery at school. Without warning, the next visual could be a Black body swinging from a tree with lynch mob members and spectators looking on. I do not recall ever having a teacher say, "this might be triggering for you." Or, "this may be difficult for you to watch, if you need to avert your eyes, or leave the room, do whatever you need to take care of yourself." Why did my teachers not think to warn me? What made Black death more acceptable to watch in a classroom? Was the fact that it happened in the past supposed to make it less painful? Why, as a child, was I expected to grapple with the complex emotions such images stirred within me alone?

As these videos, and others like them, continued to spread like wildfire, I felt as overwhelmed as I did as a young girl—confused, angry, and heartbroken—struggling to process these feelings. When I returned to campus for Fall courses in 2016, the horror and grief I experienced reading and watching the news that summer was still fresh. Yet, I found comfort in Dr. Camille Wilson's *Critical Race Methodologies for Qualitative Research* class housed in educational studies. Grounded primarily in CRT, the course introduced principles, philosophy, and strategies for engaging in critical methodologies, which consider "the interrelated nature of race, knowledge, power, inclusiveness, representation, and the educative value of research" (Wilson, 2016, p. 1). The first session, we dove right in, collaborating as a class to develop working definitions of race and racism which we would revisit throughout the semester. As the class progressed, we also explored the tenets of CRT as well as other critical theories and began to utilize such theory as lenses through which to examine our research questions, methodological approaches, and philosophical standpoints regarding qualitative research. The week we discussed the persistence of racism tenet in CRT, I found an answer to the questions that troubled me as a child and an adult woman regarding the palatability of Black suffering and death in America.

The persistence—or permanence—of racism tenet asserts that racism in American society "is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). In other words, the

commonplace nature of racism in America renders horrific and inhumane assaults to Black life, such as killing a Black man in front of his loved ones, "normal and natural." Yet, in naming the persistence of racism, "the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). To unmask and expose, one must bear witness.

Writing about his "field trip" accompanying Medgar Evers as he investigated the murder of a Black man in Mississippi with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), James Baldwin (2017) penned,

I was to discover the line which separates a witness from an actor is a very thin line indeed; nevertheless, the line is real...this was sometimes hard on my morale, but I had to accept as time wore on, that part of my responsibility—as a witness—was to move as largely and freely as possible, to write the story and to get it out. (pp. 30–31)

Baldwin was writing of the weight of witnessing. Though it weighed on him at times to not be directly involved with organizing in Mississippi—"I did not have to sweat cold sweat after decisions involving hundreds of thousands of lives" (Baldwin, 2017, p. 30)—he understood that he had a responsibility to witness and report the events there so that the stories were not lost, nor the struggle in vain. Unmasking and exposing racism necessitates witnessing and naming it where it occurs.

The BLM movement gained momentum from the courage of individuals who decisively chose to bear witness. Using cell phone footage and social media, BLM mobilized activists and grassroots organizers as well as contested state violence against Black bodies by gathering and disseminating evidence across digital platforms (Hill, 2018). Witnessing was engaging in resistance. Witnessing was powerful.

Learning more about and discussing CRT in Dr. Wilson's class gave me new perspective regarding the necessity and responsibility of witnessing as a scholar. As an ongoing class assignment, Dr. Wilson tasked us with keeping a journal of key concepts and arguments in our course reading, along with connections we were making to our research interests and positionalities (Wilson, 2016, p. 3). Relating the persistence of racism tenet to the educational system, on September 20, 2016, I wrote:

Race and racism permeate throughout the educational system (how it's structured, who benefits, what schools get the resources, who is in charge, what is taught, what forms of knowledge are valued). The fact that people associate racism with individual acts and irrationality strips People of Color from the language to describe everyday acts of discrimination is incredibly frustrating, but it belies the importance of being bold enough to name sites of oppression (even if it isn't polite).

Thinking back to my childhood upbringing in a Black Baptist church, *witnessing* described the sharing of personal stories about the goodness of God. Witnessing

was testimony. Being "bold enough to name sites of oppression" was a means of testifying and resisting the silencing of racism, whether it be in the educational system, criminal justice system, or elsewhere. Dr. Wilson's course helped me realize that witnessing is an integral strategy in contesting the persistence of racism. Further, as a scholar, I have a responsibility to witness. My understanding that bearing witness is resistance, power, and testimony, led me to use poetry as a means of witnessing. In the Winter of 2017, I wrote and performed the poem below at a school event to express my feelings regarding the Black lives stolen by police brutality, but also to hold others accountable for sharing the responsibility of bearing witness.

I Woke Up and I Felt It

*This morning, I woke up and I felt it
That familiar ache spreading and shifting
Scorching and searing
Erupting in flame
An all-consuming fire igniting my bones
Threatening to burn me alive from within
I can smell it, taste it even
The stench of my own flesh melting away clings to the back of my throat
I want to vomit, I want to scream
but when I open my mouth, stretch my jaws, shut my eyes, nothing comes out
I can't breathe, I can't breathe, I. CAN'T. BREATHE
It feels like I'm dying
The crushing weight of the inevitable presses down on my chest
Silently suffocating me as reality breaks like the dawn through my window*

*I'm alive, but I've been holding my breath for what feels like forever
Waiting for another message, another call, another report to tell me that another
one is lost
Another brother, sister, daughter, son, father, mother, lover...gone
Left broken in the street
Bathing the concrete in their life blood
Dead over skittles, CDs, or maybe cigarillos
Draped in sheets, growing cold until someone can speak their name
Evoke the spirit that inhabited that body
And say this one was mine*

*You see with every death, a little piece of me dies too
Cause it could've be one of mine
It could've been me
So, I'm tired
Tired of stitching the tattered pieces of a heart torn open
Tired of that empty feeling slowly swallowing me whole
Tired of fearing faceless phantoms when I find myself alone
But I have to get up
Have to face the day, have to face the questions I know will come*

"Did you hear about it?" Of course
"What do you think?" What I always do
But, today let's turn the tables
I have some questions for you...
When did society become so consumed with propriety that I'm expected to mourn
privately?
Why can't we be like children who cry without abandon,
who wail and yell and kick and thrash until we are spent,
and then someone attends to our pain,
whispers soothing words of comfort and holds us tenderly, lovingly until we feel
safe again?
Why do I have to tell you that my life matters?
Or explain that this is real?
I wish it were a dream too,
But what will you do when you wake up?
You asked me how does it feel.
I'm trying to tell you
This morning, I woke up and I felt it

No longer a child, through poetry, I found the words to express that was happening to Black people in America was neither normal nor natural. Anti-Black racism must be unmasked and exposed, "even if it isn't polite." I will continue to bear the weight of witnessing as difficult as it continues to be.

Owning Our Stories: Counterstorytelling

Dr. Jacqueline Mattis' classroom was a sanctuary for me. In Winter of 2017, a trusted mentor recommended that I enroll in Dr. Mattis' class, and when I asked what exactly I should expect regarding the course content, she replied, "Whatever the subject, if Jacquie is teaching, you take the class." After one session with Dr. Mattis, I understood what my mentor meant. When I entered that space, I immediately felt cared for, safe, and profoundly understood. I also felt excited because our lessons evolved and responded to our pressing questions, needs, and desires as emerging scholars. As hooks (1994) writes, "to enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share and the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress" (p. 7).

The course was *Urbanicity and Positive Prosocial Development*. Building on the foundations of positive psychology, the course utilized a critical, interdisciplinary lens to examine human strengths and virtues in urban contexts (Mattis, 2017, p. 1). Further, we explored strategies for developing scholarship grounded in the lived realities of people residing in urban communities (Mattis, 2017, p. 1). What transpired in that classroom those Wednesday afternoons was a healing ministry. Dr. Mattis led us to interrogate raced and classed dominant narratives of urban spaces and people, and engaged us in the humanizing work of defining the urban for ourselves based on our lived experiences, empirical evidence, and theory.

Though CRT was not the focus of the course, upon reflection, I believe that Dr. Mattis' pedagogy revealed a praxis of counterstorytelling.

Critical race counterstorytelling is a "method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people" (Yosso, 2006, p. 10). Further, these stories raise critical consciousness about social and racial injustice, as well as contest dominant narratives that "omit and distort the histories and realities of oppressed communities" (Yosso, 2006, p. 10). Counterstories can also build community among the marginalized and let them know that they are not alone (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories can also create new possibilities that are richer than the stories themselves or the current reality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In Dr. Mattis' class, where five of the six students were Black women with research interests or upbringings in urban contexts, we engaged in the process of counterstorytelling, centering our lived experiences and those of the communities we aspired to enter as researchers. With Dr. Mattis as our guide, we learned how to share our stories and allow them to inform our approaches to research and life.

First, we uplifted the good. We surfaced narratives of love, optimism, creativity, faith, wisdom, and altruism in urban contexts. For those of us who grew up in such environments, we told stories of how our cities and neighborhoods instilled values and taught lessons that shaped us into who we are. Second, we interrogated silences in the media and research regarding urban spaces, focusing our attention on the stories that were not being told. Though keenly aware of what has been said about urban contexts and people, particularly racialized, deficit-based narratives which emphasize criminality, poverty, and violence, we asked what questions were not being asked in research and how could we study the goodness we understood to exist in such spaces. Third, with our new questions in mind, we searched for a heartbeat. Dr. Mattis would tell us that the answers to our research questions, and possibly new questions, rested with people. People are the beating heart of research and hearing others' stories gave our questions life. We talked with people we knew about our work and research, but we primarily listened and allowed those conversations to help guide us moving forward. Fourth, we imagined new possibilities for methods and theory, giving ourselves the freedom to dream of what we could create if there were no limitations. What would we need to conduct research rooted in goodness that honored the dignity of urban communities? Finally, we shared our imaginings with each other. As we shared our visions and plans, we moved one step closer to actualizing them. My peers and I became strategists, collaborators, and accountability partners for one another. In our classroom, we were building a community and discovering how we could contest dominant narratives and uplift the stories that mattered to us in our scholarship. Furthermore, we were given the freedom to share our ideas creatively, which gave us an opportunity to express ourselves through art. For my final project, I delivered a spoken word poetry performance dedicated to the Black residents of my hometown, Detroit, Michigan. As I wrote my counterstory of the city and its people, I also was writing a piece of my history and imagining my future.

See I love her, in the most absolute, all-encompassing, complicated sense of the word

I know her heart

Fiery and strong she bows to no one and bears her scars without shame

At a moment when I felt afraid, angry, disheartened, and frustrated that Black life was being targeted, and Black people still needed to fight to assert our humanity, Dr. Mattis' class gave me hope and invited me to dream. The lessons we learned with respect to counterstorytelling in research were applicable to my everyday existence. ***Uplift the good.*** There is good in me and my people. ***Interrogate silences.*** Filter out the noise, think of what's missing, then determine how I can use my voice to tell another story. ***Search for the heartbeat.*** In times of uncertainty, look and listen for signs of life, the answer may be there. ***Imagine.*** Dream without limitation. ***Share those imaginings.*** Find others to build and create with, this work should not be done in isolation.

When our class sessions ended those Wednesday afternoons, I felt full. The stories we told and aspired to tell nourished me and gave me strength. I mattered. My work mattered. I was not alone. Such affirmations healed me from within and reminded me how sacred teaching truly is. As hooks (1994) suggests, teaching in a manner that "respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). I also experienced the power of art as a means of self-expression in the classroom. Having the freedom to share my ideas through poetry in a classroom setting unlocked something inside of me. I felt as if I could finally speak in my authentic voice and be received as I intended.

Discussion and Implications

When I sought I out courses in critical theory and methods, I was hurting. The anti-Black racism in this nation as evidenced by the recurring assaults on Black life pained me, and I understood as Baldwin (2017) did that for Black people, "the line which separates a witness from an actor is a very thin line indeed" (p. 30). Though I was pursuing my doctorate and attaining the education my ancestors fought for, my humanity as a Black person in this country was up for debate, and there was still a need to assert that my Black life mattered. Yet, CRT offered me language to help articulate my lived reality and examine the experiences of other marginalized people. While CRT offered a valuable frame of analysis, the BLM movement became a case study in strategic resistance. Boldly declaring the inherent worth of Black life and responsibly bearing witness to injustice as a means of combatting it were clear strategies of the movement that I could apply to my academic and personal life. Introducing Black graduate students to critical theory and methodologies can equip them with the tools to empirically explore, make meaning of, and articulate their lived realities. Such explorations can be validating and healing as students navigate challenging academic and sociohistorical contexts. Critical theorization can also help Black students imagine new possibilities of self, resist oppression, and dream of freedom.

Additionally, Drs. Camille Wilson and Jacqueline Mattis, demonstrated through their teaching effective strategies to help students learn and adopt critical theory in their

practice. Dr. Wilson encouraged us to thoughtfully consider how critical theory could inform our epistemologies (i.e., ways of knowing), ontologies (i.e., ways of being and seeing), and methodological approaches to research through assignments such as reflective journals. In these weekly journals throughout the semester, we processed how we could apply critical frameworks to our research questions and future studies while also considering how our positionality might influence the frameworks we chose as well as our understanding and use of them. By the end of the course, we each had at least 11 weeks of journal entries that documented our reactions, reflections, and evolving ideas regarding the course content.

Dr. Mattis offered what I refer to as a praxis of counterstorytelling that allowed our stories as researchers to guide our approach to scholarship. During the very first class meeting, Dr. Mattis centered our knowledge and standpoints by asking us about our communities and neighborhoods, encouraging us to uplift the good that often gets overlooked in the media and scholarship. This laid the groundwork for counterstorytelling throughout the course, as we imagined research studies that would similarly center the lived realities of our populations of interest, which were primarily communities of Color—and in my case—Black communities specifically. She also cultivated a community within the classroom that allowed us as students to creatively share and constructively hold one another accountable for conducting the type of research we envisioned together. Giving graduate students the opportunity to reflect, map out, and share how critical theory may inform their ways of understanding and conducting research through coursework allows them to develop their ideas in a supportive environment while cultivating networks of accountability and collaboration. Further, providing students with creative outlets to express themselves in coursework can help them process their experiences and produce material that is humanizing, liberating, and life-giving.

Exposing students to critical theory and methodologies in graduate education may also encourage them to identify, name, and contest anti-Blackness in their professional careers. For instance, once aware of how color-evasiveness and racism persist in academic institutions, future educators may be more cognizant of the absenting of Black scholarship from the curriculum and intentionally integrate such work in their courses. Additionally, guided by counterstorytelling, researchers may begin to imagine new possibilities for studies that center Black joy and love, or perhaps methodologies that honor the dignity and beauty of Black life. Students trained in critical theory and methods have the potential to become transformative leaders who combat anti-Blackness in the spaces they occupy.

Finally, this critical autoethnography adds to the extant literature on Black doctoral women's experiences by discussing how transformational mentorship can occur in the classroom setting. Black doctoral students who aspire toward careers in academia may benefit from witnessing faculty members employing critical theory in their pedagogy. As I was studying critical theory in Dr. Wilson's and Dr. Mattis' courses, I was also a student of their teaching—closely observing the ways that they uplifted counterstories in class discussions and readings or challenged us to consider how racism persists in social science research and ways to combat it.

Furthermore, Dr. Wilson and Dr. Mattis were instrumental in helping me navigate the sociohistorical context and my academic environment as a Black woman. The safety I felt in discarding my academic mask (Shavers & Moore, 2014) and being vulnerable in their classes was due in large part to our shared identities (Rasheem et al., 2018) and their attention to race, racism, and social justice in their courses.

Conclusion

Much has happened since I took the stage in 2016 and declared that I was not broken, silent, or invisible. The parallels between the present moment and then are telling. During the summer of 2020, another litany of atrocities were committed against Black life. Yet, as evidenced by the ongoing protests and demonstrations of solidarity worldwide, the struggle to resist anti-Black racism in America persists. As for me, I have once again reached for my pen to grapple with the weight of the moment. Guided by the wisdom of critical theorists, the BLM movement, and beloved sister scholar teachers, I will continue to contest anti-Blackness in higher education by writing of my existence and the lives of others who have been rendered broken, silent, or invisible. I also think toward the future and imagine how I will help students feel whole, heard, and seen in my classroom.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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