Breaking the Silence: Telling Our Stories as an Act of Resistance

Black Women’s Sharing in Resistance Within the Academy

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Love is a term that can sometimes be used flippantly and carelessly; however no more so than when we as Black women claim to ‘love one another’ or call each other ‘sister’. As Black critical race feminist (CRF) scholars (Wing, 1990; Berry, 2010), who are seeking a career behind the hallowed walls of the academy, we have found that love has sometimes been lost on us and lost for one another (Baszile, 2018). This article is the result of a committed effort to connect with each other despite all the other busy and unloving related parts of our lives in academia. The constant battle we engage in as Black women in academic spaces is necessary as we disrupt cultural practices and traditions which marginalize Blackness and womanness. We draw on duoethnography as a methodological approach that supports the multiple ways people “construct both unity and disunity… hence we engage in dialogue which intentionally makes room for our voices to rise and fall…” (Sawyer, 2013 p. 10). However, it is through a form of Black Girl Reality/Solidarity (Ladson-Billings, Cooper, and Ore, 2016) that acknowledges differences and similarities that we empower each other in spaces such as the academy that have not been designed for us, but have been built on the backs of the generations of Black women and men who have come before us (Wilder, 2013; Anderson, 1988).

Despite tremendous efforts to change the overall way Black women are regarded in imperialist white supremacist patriarchal capitalist culture, there is no Black woman, no matter how liberated, who does not encounter on some level in daily life efforts on the part of dominator culture to restrict her freedom, to force her into an identity of submission. (bell hooks, 2013)

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Sonia Sanchez points out that while fear compels us to do what is necessary to save ourselves, it is love that compels us to think, act and engage with great regard and compassion with/for others and for a better world. Through intentional and collaborative duo-ethnographic work, we have come together to grow as Black feminist scholars; it is through these acts of love that we purposefully sought opportunities to work together and support one another in difficult and challenging anti-black spaces (Dumas, 2016). As such, this work is not merely a creation of our own reflection, but also a testimony of sorts to the Black women who have dared to stand in the academy in an effort to create opportunities for others. It is through the varying acts of love that we engage in forms of revolution (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, and Baszile, 2017) not only within our writing, but also our experiences as instructors and researchers.

Introducing the ‘Duo’ of this Ethnography…

As duo-ethnographers we entered the act of this research and this writing with “...multiple and often interconnected intentions…” (Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2012) and as we learned about ourselves from our sister ‘Other’ we used stories shared to rebuild and realize and to make meaning. Our work draws on the personal, the shared, and the external experience - we ask that you as the reader juxtapose your own resistance stories and experiences in these contexts and engage with us as we examine these stories through an emic lens.

Liz: As a Black woman doctoral student who is very cognizant of space and place as it relates to race and gender in an academic community I am always thinking about the people in the room, the space they occupy, and the role that I may or may not play in each scenario. I am a woman who has dealt with her own multiple and intersecting identities on a daily basis in an attempt to navigate a campus community (and quite frankly an entire educational system) that was not originally designed to cater to needs that may be unique to me. I am intentional and blatant about finding and addressing gaps in the research that challenge the multiple layers of power and inequity that work against female bodies of color. I have relatively liberal views of the world, and am intentional about understanding the ways in which education is managed and mismanaged for Black children in America, particularly because I am a mother of three. While I have lived in multiple cities around the world, I consider myself to be from the west coast and my lifestyle and values broadly reflect that perspective.

ReAnna: As a scholar invested in the full acknowledgment and inclusion of Black women and their contributions to the field of science, I describe myself as a radical scholar. My work and teaching is very much influenced by my experiences in the field of science as a student and researcher, but also my coming of age and growing up in the rural Deep South. It is through work such as this, I pay tribute to the formal and informal women scholars, activists, homemakers, and teachers who have paved the way for Black women and girls in not only education, but
society. As such, I use my voice to highlight the ways Black women are integral to the process of teaching and learning, and as means of activism, prompting the academy to do better.

The Mattering of Multiplicativity…

Critical Race Theory (CRT) opened up a new way to challenge the law in the United States and brought together conversations of power, race, and racism to address the neoliberal notion of colorblindness. Critical race theory scholars believe that racism is sewn into the fabric of the constitution and the ‘American’ way of life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT scholars took those first steps that illuminated the “permanence of race” (Bell, 1987) by addressing racial realism and publicly proclaiming, “racism as an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society” (Bell, 1992, p. ix). He notes that no matter how much Black people fight for equality and justice it will never actually come to fruition – but acknowledged that at least during the struggle and fight – one understands the truth and in so realizing, will become empowered. Hence, racial realism became the first tenant of CRT. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) highlight the hallmark tenets of this theory:

- Racism is normal;
- Race is socially constructed;
- Interest convergence;
- Intersectionality & anti-essentialism;
- Counter-narrative (sometimes referred to as voice)

First, the normalcy of racism within American society is seen as an ingrained feature of the landscape, appearing ordinary and natural to persons within the culture, even to people of color (Bell, 1987; Bell, 1992). Second, culture constructs social reality; specifically race, in ways that allow for significant disparities in the life chances of people based on the categorical differences consciousness of race. Charles Lawrence noted, “We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions” (1987, p. 322). Central to this concept is differential racialization (Delgado and Stefancic, 2007) which acknowledges how society constructs and stereotypes raced people different than that of the white majority. Because all people are products of culture, the idea of self-determination, is not applicable (despite the mainstream ideal) and the dominant cultural mindset has a selective gaze and views people of color negatively (Brown & Jackson, 2013).

Third, interest-convergence is seen as a way that white elites tolerate or encourage racial advancement for Blacks (or people of color) only when also promoting white self-interests. Derrick Bell (1980) noted “The interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (p. 523). Fourth, intersectionality. Originally, articulated by Kimberle’
Crenshaw in 1991, it is defined as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 51). As human beings we are multifaceted individuals and possess multiple identities. Crenshaw (1991) noted that the work of feminist scholars and anti-racists efforts were significant, but proceed as though “they are mutually exclusive terrains” (p. 1242). Women of color are no more women than they are bodies of color. Women particularly, are especially subjected to the multiple ways in which their identities become fractured. Crenshaw (1991) goes on to say,

…a category such as race or gender is socially constructed that is not to say that the category has no significance in our world.

On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people – and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful- is thinking about the way power has closeted around certain categories and is exercised against others. This project attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them” (pp. 1296-1297).

Without the acknowledgement of intersectionality, women of color are forced to choose from a hierarchy of oppressions despite experiencing both racism and sexism as interlocking (and sometimes conflicting) oppressions. Crenshaw’s work also reminds us that the privileges that women do/ do not experience through ability, social class, and educational status also impacts the way women mediate racialized and gendered experiences. Intersectionality allows for the acknowledgement of the interplay between human, civil and constitutional rights from the perspective of a raced and gendered body. The fifth tenant speaks to the idea of giving voice or counter-narrative. Offering a story and retelling a truth – allowing for space that honors the voice of marginalized people. CRT operationalizes this counter-narrative three different ways. 1) to lift the voices of people of color so that race and racism are seen from an alternative lens; 2) pushes against ethnocentrism and one-world views to construct a new reality; and 3) works against silencing oppressed individuals and provides legitimated space for the ‘counter’ perspective/narrative to be heard (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Tate, 1994). The valuing of stories acknowledges that “…those who lack material wealth or political power still have access to thought and language, and their development of those tools…differs from that of the most privileged” (Matsuda, 1995, p. 65). This tenet of CRT speaks directly to understanding context in the social condition as well as addressing issues of power and privilege that can then be used to highlight disparities in a policy or program and push back against the so-called ‘neutrality’ of race.

Yet while this work in CRT is powerful and moving, we push again and pull from critical race feminism (CRF) as a lens to understand this space and academic world that we as women are navigating. As Black women scholars we adopt critical
race feminism as a theoretical lens and in so doing demand readers acknowledge that our experiences as Black women in the academy, in the classroom and in teaching, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of white women. The term critical race feminism was not coincidental. The intentionality allows for an emphasis on women of color while drawing from Critical Legal Studies, feminist jurisprudence and CRT. Originally used in an article related to anti-lynching and racial ideology by Amii L. Barnard (1993), CRF draws on similar notions as CRT but also critiques spaces such as critical legal studies (CLS) because they were unable to draw connections with women of color and the multi-faceted ways they exist in our world. Feminist (jurisprudence) spoke to women generally, but not specifically to women of color—forcing them to choose between race vs. gender—an impossible task.

...I contend that Black people must come to realize that our greatest strength, our salvation secrete, if you will, is Black women… (Derrick Bell, 2003)

As CRF is a multi-disciplinary approach to theoretical development and praxis it draws from multiple fields—both legal and non-legal to seek alternative and non-traditional approaches to resolve issues for women of color (Wing, 1990). In so doing, critical race feminism is also engaged in moving the agenda forward—not just writing about theory and hypothetical situations. CRF is present in more spaces than women’s law journals as it has an emphasis on generating conversation that creates change and in turn leads to progress in changing the world. Proponents of CRF call upon scholars to hold fast to the tenets of CRF beyond the academic space including addressing issues of educational policy, local government, access to adequate and preventive healthcare, prostitution, and women in prison as well as global issues to include women workers rights, sweatshop battles, food and farming inequities, sex trafficking of young girls and online predators. Regina Austin (1995) also calls to other academics and the legal community to fight unabashedly on behalf of the poor and minoritized women and to work against the disenfranchisement in these communities. Wing (1990) urges academics to write so that a push can be made to “…view the world with multiple consciousness…to make a deliberate choice to see the world from the standpoint of the oppressed” (p. 200).

While Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) describe the ways in which Black girls survive in K-12 environments, this work seeks to push the envelope in that regard and discuss the situation of Black doctoral women teaching and learning in the academic pipeline. CRF supports us as we work to understand the way that we as Black women in graduate school may silence ourselves in order to persist in the academy, it will acknowledge and honor the ways that Black women may feel pressured to conform to a whitened model of success in order to reach academic goals. This multiple consciousness (Wing, 1997; Matsuda, 1989) cannot be accounted for in theories that do not value the intersectionality (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, 1995) and anti-essentialist (Harris, 1990) perspectives.
ReAnna: My coming to know CRF was through my engagement in a CRT course which really turned my world upside right. During this time, I began to wonder, how epistemologically, science was indeed a white and masculine and through the teaching and learning of such, a culture of what was most worth knowing perpetuated an insubordination to other fields and people. Through my quest, I have considered what a Critical Race Science epistemology would look like. As I consider the voids within Critical Race Theory, I refocused my question into considering how a Critical Race Feminist Science fulfilled the needs of all students while centering the history of Black women and girls in spaces where their existence has not been willfully allowed, but seen as valuable due to the ability to produce.

Liz: As a Black woman in academia I have navigated moments where I didn’t belong or appeared to not be a ‘good fit’. I am used to being the ‘only’ in a room full of white academics and can navigate those spaces if need be, but it is not my preference. Critical Race Feminism informs my work as it gives fervor to my voice and provides a vehicle to drive home the argument of equity vs. equality or highlight the marginalized and silenced stories without so much as an apology. If applied correctly and used properly, CRF channels hope into spaces where there was none and peels back layers of hidden agenda so as to discover the real truth with “T” in that circumstance. A body of color is a holistic entity and cannot be separated when examining the levels of discrimination that have worked against them as individuals. Yet, despite our intersecting identities and the multiple layers of discrimination and oppression that Black women (and other women of color) endure, CRF advocates also work to empower these multi-labeled bodies. “Our essence is also characterized by a multiplicity of strength, love, joy, (with a spin leap alive, we’re alive) and transcendence that flourishes despite adversity” (Wing, 1990, p. 196). As CRF is a multi-disciplinary approach to theoretical development and praxis it draws from multiple fields—both legal and non-legal—to seek alternative and nontraditional approaches to resolve issues for women of color (Wing, 1990). In so doing, critical race feminism is also engaged in moving the agenda forward—not just writing about theory and hypothetical situations. I respond to this call and have adopted the tenets of CRF for myself and my scholarship (Bowers-Cook, 2017). That being said, CRF is part of the way in which I move in the world, the way that I pursue and develop lines of scholarship, and part of the way that I mother and care for my children. Critical Race Feminism is deeply embedded within me—even before I knew her name was Critical Race Feminism.

Critical Juxtapositioning: A Methodological Approach…

We engage Critical Race Feminist praxis through the art of duoethnography. Engaging in duoethnography is most often described as a formal data collection method within the context of social science research. Given the infancy of duoethnography as a methodology (est. 2004), there are not any published studies to date that have taken this critical race feminist approach. Our lived experiences as Black doctoral women and emergent scholars is a reflection of the multiple marginality
of our experience and is often undocumented by research that seeks to record either the lives of women in academia or minority doctoral students (Turner, 2002). Wing (1990) reminds us that our multiplicative identities cannot be separated; we are each “one indivisible being…” (p. 194). Yet for us, we drew on this method because it is uniquely able to provide for our wholeness as Black women scholars while also redefining a methodological space for ourselves inside our research. While we are both part of racial groups that have been ‘researched’, in this case, we are the researchers of ourselves. Duoethnography supports the multiple ways that people “construct both unity and disunity” hence we engage in dialogue that intentionally makes room for our voices to rise and fall in dissent (Sawyer, 2013, p.10). The use of this methodology within the context of this writing revealed not only our emotions; that could be deemed as clutter in other academic spaces, but prompted a resolution and healing.

This work centers our voices as both participants and researchers, witnesses to one another in this study while juxtaposing our experiences. In so doing, we intentionally suspend judgment and remain open to “…exposure, transformation, and uncertainty…” (Sawyer, 2013, p. 11) only to revert to individual methods of grappling with our own anger and frustration in order to arrive at a more complex and layered perspective, which in turn leads to love. Together we aim to produce writing that matters not only to Black women, but also challenges issues of power, hegemonic systems, and gendered stereotypes (Berry & Mizelle, 2006). Though there are over ten ‘living’ tenets to the duoethnographic process (see Sawyer & Norris, 2013; Norris, Sawyer & Lund, 2012), we draw upon two tenets specifically for this work. They are Difference and Trustworthiness.

**Difference:** disruptions and interrogation of stories is possible only when differences are articulated and discussed, they don’t seek ‘resolution’. Through our narratives of difference, we seek to be “…explicit about how different people can experience the same phenomenon differently” (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012 p.17). As Black women pursuing doctorates in education while also educating others in the classroom, we find ourselves approaching this journey from multiple angles. Our methods of survival and persistence differ, as we each seek diverging paths en route to the same end goal.

**Trustworthiness:** found in self-reflexivity, not Validity and Truth Claims. When we first began this duoethnography - we were like young Black girls in an all-white school. We cared for and cradled our growing relationship with one another, we were careful of our words and our feelings; we edit our writing for protection of the other. As time moved on in our relationship and in our respective academic programs the duoethnography responded to the various tensions and requirements of our individual degrees. There were times when we did not seek the solace of the other simply because the other knew too much. There have been times that it has been hard to write together because despite our respect for one another as raced women we disagreed about our approach or view of classroom situations and student
engagement. Similar to Norris and Sawyer’s reflections (2012) we have witnessed the change in one another over time and in the research conversation. So, out of love and respect, we step away from our shared text and write alone - pouring our thoughts and misgivings into other work so as to not hurt a sister-scholar in the field. In this way, the use of duoethnography as a critical approach adds to the body of scholarship, but is intentional and responsive to the needs of the authors who are both daring and vulnerable during their discussion of oppression and participation in academic spaces.

Excerpts of our Letters

...About Being a Revolutionary Educator

Liz: Revolutionary education…. Revolutionaries do not always have to be loud or find ways to be the center of attention. I like to think of myself as a more quiet revolutionary, a behind the scenes game changer who works with folks one on one and in the classroom to assert new ideas and introduce students to the possibilities of what it could mean to make change or challenge traditional paradigms... I however, do not know if I actually love my students in that way; Some of them have been hateful and unkind.

ReAnna: As I consider what is required of me as a revolutionary educator, I realize at the center of my work is love. As such, I’m committed to working with my students and engaging in research that disturbs mainstream ideas of knowing as a means of acknowledging and accepting ideas that have not been considered. In so doing, I’m reminded of the ways in which this type of love is very much active and as such, I must be willing to reveal and share parts of myself that I struggle to embrace or love.

Liz: Yet, at the same time I have become quite passionate about how we think about diversity in the classroom and the curriculum, the foundation and philosophy of higher education and access to those spaces. I believe that part of my job in the classroom is to help these teachers learn to ask the right questions and empower them to challenge the rules and regimens that work against students of color and other marginalized students in the spaces they spend the most time. To me that means that this kind of educating work is about loving what is just and right so much so that sometimes you will be alone and alienated in your own community because you push too hard or you have too much to say. I do a lot of things to the extreme...I love hard and teach hard and pray hard too...sometimes simultaneously...but more than anything I know without a shadow of a doubt that there are Black women who have given up space for me, limelight for me, glory for me and I want to always be sure to pay it forward. I want to always remember that love moves me to social justice even when it leaves me alone.

...Survival of the Fittest

ReAnna: Well loneliness then leads to survival, no? For me surviving in the
academy as a Black woman who engages in work centered on Black women as creators of knowledge is an act of resistance. Through this, my praxis serves as a way for me to resist dominant narratives that speak about the experiences of Black women within the context of teaching and learning as monolithic or even exotic. While I do find myself getting tired at times, I’m usually reminded by a close colleague or even local occurrences of why this work is important and what the power of narratives and stories do and I feel propelled to keep going. Even the act of reflecting on my students’ voices in the classroom through their sharing is something that often times reinvigorates me and pushes me onward.

Liz: I hesitate here ReAnna, I want so much to think that surviving is a good thing, it is connected to persistence and eventually to a doctoral degree, yes, but surviving feels like it is slowly killing folks. In all the community spaces that Black women go for solace and comfort (writing groups, online support networks, retreats and women-only conferences) I hear the message that just surviving is not healthy. What happened to thriving...the definition of thriving is ‘to grow and develop well or vigorously’...I cannot think of one Black woman I have met that has shared that they are developed well or are growing vigorously in the academy. That doesn’t mean they are not successful, but it does mean the academy is like a tolling bell....

ReAnna: Perhaps then the thing is to become comfortable in not thinking about surviving, but knowing that you will survive. When I begin to question whether or not I will survive, issues of doubt and anxiety begin to haunt me and I lose focus of the end goal. It is easy to be swayed by distractions that are designed to destroy me and my dreams. However, when I consider what my survival looks like not only in this space as a scholar, but also through my scholarship as well as through my spirit, I am able to thrive and so are others. If we were to take the academy’s definition of surviving, thriving, and even success and try to make them fit within the context of our work, I believe we might fall short. As such, while I am concerned about my survival in this space, I’m confident that my spiritual survival is eternal and I find comfort there.

Healing & Holdin’ On....

Liz: For a long time, I didn’t heal. For a long time, I didn’t know that I was breaking inside until I was sitting in a doctor’s office asking for help with what I thought might be depression.... I didn’t know that the environment in the academy the one I actively and intentionally sought out was slowly wearing on my soul and killing my lust to learn, my desire to educate and that the joy I felt in sharing ideas with others and engaging in an academic community had dissipated.

ReAnna: I feel you. It wasn’t until I got to this space I learned how much the role of laughter, home, and spirituality played in my healing. Simultaneously though, I’ve found healing in the intentional selection of courses and classes that speak to me. This was especially necessary when I took classes and had experiences with peers and even content that diminished me as a Black woman and as a scholar.

Liz: I was weary and worn and I was only a doctoral student. How does this happen?
How does one Black woman feel so much sadness and pain in an academic space that she just feels she is withering away? I relented to the sadness and seemed to disappear...as though I was standing against a wall, and everyone just kept rushing by...No one saw me. No one saw the Black girl with the smile plastered to her face who just kept saying she was ‘fine’. I was far from fine. I let go and retreated to the homespace. I went home to find the ones who have promised to love me all my life despite my flaws. I went home to find the ones that hear me and know that between the lines Black girls are usually left out or lost or considered last. I went home to find the safe space, the solace, to be reassured that I did belong and that in order to progress I would need to find a new way to breathe.

ReAnna: See, we both went home or found a home in our own way, didn’t we?

Liz: Yes, I suppose that is true. I built a sister circle, I reached out to other women who had a sad look in their eyes that never reached their smile.... I found women to share my burdens with, to laugh with, to connect with in our research and in our teaching. I began saying my truth. First aloud in my bathroom alone with the door shut, then in the teaching syllabi, then aloud in class, and then committing truth in my writing. I have since taken on writing challenges and projects that are new and exciting and in so doing, I have found other women, other writing spaces, and other conference connections to meet people who are also healing. Healing is not instant or eternal. It is an everyday commitment to find the good, to embrace what is working and revise that which is not. Healing means that this academic battleground will NOT take my #BlackGirlMagic nor will it use up all my reserves. Healing means that I have enough of myself to give my daughter at the end of the day allowing me to take on her worries and fears. Healing has made me more vulnerable but healing has also made me stronger. My commitment to healing means that I will survive this space. Maybe that is how other Black women teachers and educators have done this. Maybe they too are committed to healing and in turn are able to survive and persist and grow in the academy. Maybe I want to be like you when I grow up ReAnna....

ReAnna: No! No! No..don’t say that! I don’t want to be superwoman, I don’t want to have a complex about strength and survival, what I want is for us to work together at finding ways to help other women in the academy connect with each other so that the journey is not so lonely and painful. To have a conversation with new scholars prior to their receipt of class evaluations so that we are able to deal with the barrage of emotions that they bring, understanding that hate mail may have be written to us individually, but it is always about the larger collective. This is about making a space where we can be super women together...not trying to be one all-encompassing Superwoman.

Shared Resistance in (and) Healing

In the ways Richardson (2007) and Brown (2007), engage in work regarding Black women and girls in society at either ends of the academic pipeline, it is important to center our collective experiences through our work, while also acknowledging their personhood, struggles, and triumphs (Baszile, 2006; Richardson, 2013; Baker-Bell,
2017). Utilizing duoethnography within the context of healing and research that is intentional on focusing on the wellbeing of Black Women in multiple spaces—at home, in the academy, and more—is a form of Black feminist praxis that is essential to the liberation of the mind, body, and soul. For us, this liberation allows us to engage in a love not only for writing that speaks and hears our testimony, but also a trusting that is grounded in selfless love. When we first discussed and toyed with this idea of writing together we were concerned our influences and connection to formalized curriculum would be a challenge, both academically and spatially—but we have discovered despite our diverse upbringing and our differing HERstories, we can be more than just sister-friends moving through the academy. We are sister scholars and while our positionalities and perspectives may differ, we are able to write and support one another’s writing through fellowship, care, and love. This duo-ethnography is the result of our convergent and divergent stories around race, learning, and teaching as Black girls in the academy. As such, Black women loving each other and then in return learning to live and write and teach in a space and place that does not always love them back, i.e., the academy, is in fact our act of resistance, and therefore revolutionary (Taliaferro Baszile, 2017). Thus, centering love within the context of revolution is not only essential, but required for all as we consider liberatory possibilities that acknowledge the past—sung and unsung—and the future.

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Black Women’s Sharing in Resistance


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