

## **Critical Sisterhood Praxis**

*The Journal of Educational Foundations*  
Vol. 34, No. 1  
2021, pp. 14-30  
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### **Curating a Woman of Color Feminist Intervention for Spiritual Reclamation in the Academy**

**Aja D. Reynolds**  
**Ree Botts**  
**Farima Pour-Khorshid**

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#### **Abstract**

*“Sis, but how is your spirit, though?”* This is a question we ask each other often, an inquiry that grounds us in the spiritual restoration that is necessary for our survival. We are women of color (WOC) academics trying our best to be well. As sisters first, and scholars second, our Critical Sisterhood Praxis demands that we show up on this page how we show up for each other—with unapologetic authenticity, compassionate care, and sacred intention. As we write within and beyond academia’s constraints, we reimagine what is possible for radical feminist scholarship written with our healing at the center. As we map our educational journeys of spirit murdering, we embody a collective effort of spiritual sustainability by affirming for ourselves that it is possible to be whole within and despite the academy.

*Keywords:* K-12 educators; spirit murdering; spiritual reclamation; healing praxis; Critical Sisterhood Praxis; Women of Color

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Aja D. Reynolds is an assistant professor in the Teacher Education Department of the College of Education at Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan. Ree Botts is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Farima Pour-Khorshid is an assistant professor in the Teacher Education Department of the School of Education at the University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California. Their e-mail addresses are: areyno35@wayne.edu, rebotts@berkeley.edu, & fpourkhorshid@usfca.edu

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## **Spirit Murdering and Slow Death: An Introduction**

In this article, we collectively narrate spirit murdering (Love, 2019; Williams, 1991) and spiritual reclamation, from our K-12 schooling to our experiences in academia today.<sup>1</sup> By revealing the nuances of our varied “sites of suffering” (Dumas, 2014), we map the coexistence of past and present harm and healing to develop future “freedom dreams” (Kelley, 2002) for a healing praxis that validates the Women of Color (WOC) academic in her totality.

Centering the little Brown girl in each of us, we frame spirit murdering as an ongoing process of “slow death” (Love, 2016) that disconnects the academic from her inner child, the part of us that is most directly connected to spirit. Each time our spirit is murdered in the academy, that little Brown girl is triggered. She remembers when her body was policed, sexualized, or invisibilized. She remembers when K-12 educators criminalized and minimized her experiences. She recalls messages that echo incompetence, disbelonging, and exclusion, all of which birthed imposter syndrome in her womanhood.

From grade school to graduate school, we were expected to divorce *mindbodyspirit* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Cariaga, 2018; Lara, 2002) in exchange for our subjectivity to prove us worthy of taking up space. Each time our bodies enter academic space, we are *still* read as out of place (McKittrick, 2006) and deserving of discipline or disposal.<sup>2</sup> As we strive towards spiritually reviving models within academia, we use Critical Sisterhood Praxis (CSP) to refuse institutional demands to show up as fragmented, dismembered, and disembodied (Anzaldúa, 1999).

We offer CSP as both an intervention and protection, meeting at the intersection of collective mirroring, radical healing, and spiritual restoration, to decenter whiteness and re-center Black and Brown girl joy through a shared struggle toward wholeness. While acknowledging the weaponization of whiteness and patriarchy that is often centralized in analysis of WOC academic experience (Buenavista et al., forthcoming), more complicated relationships between WOC scholars who perpetuate harm onto each other is less often considered academic violence. Yet it is just as prevalent. CSP propels WOC academics to heal collectively so that we might develop spiritual armor against spirit murdering within our own communities. In essence, CSP creates the space, with and among WOC, to name and disrupt these continuations of terror that manifest themselves at each phase of our schooling and careers.

## Literature Review

We utilize Black feminist literature and radical education scholarship to draw parallels between childhood/adolescent spirit murdering, academic spirit murdering, and collective fugitivity. These texts contextualize our efforts to discuss Black and Brown girls' Pre-K-12 educational experiences as part of a continuum to reclaim our *mindbodyspirit* (Cariaga, 2018; Lara, 2002) from these sites. In this section, we center the Black female body and later examine the tensions permeating education.<sup>3</sup> We revisit the present impact of our wounded inner child and the possibilities for being through our commitment to healing.

Black girls lie at the intersection of state, community, and intimate violence (Cox, 2015; Morris, 2016; Reynolds, 2019). The persistence of anti-Blackness finds the Black female body illegible compared to our white, middle-class female counterparts. Our endarkened bodies remain dangerous in the context of the United States as we work in opposition to the white gaze or framing that deem us as hypersexual, violent, or “ghetto” (Botts, 2016). We feel and witness these remnants through anti-Black policies in schools and professional settings. Continuously, we are left unprotected when others inflict injury on us for being unapologetic about our Blackness, or daring to stand up for ourselves or others (Hartman, 1996). Educational studies like Dillon’s (2012) reveal that Black girls are disproportionately disciplined for non-violent behaviors that are arbitrarily deemed deviant but are instead tactics to control Black bodies, movements, and agency. Morris (2007) found that teachers perceived Black girls to be “loud, defiant, and precocious” (p. 493), and more likely than their white or Latina peers to be reprimanded for being “unladylike.”

It is in the schoolhouse that we were often punished for talking too loudly or silenced for being “too talkative.” In classrooms and hallways, our teachers and classmates reminded us how our bodies and brilliance were a disruption to the order and compliance etched into the policies, pedagogies, and pillars of school (Laura, 2011; Nyachae & Ohito, 2019; Winn, 2019; Wun, 2016). Our humanity remains invisible at the same time that our faults and perceived deviance are heavily policed. These exact moments reinforce our understanding of how school is either not for us, or how we must be ten times as good to academically thrive.

Institutions of higher education reproduce these positionings of the Black female body through the use of camouflaged wording like “angry,” “strong,” or “unprofessional” (Harris-Perry, 2013). These terms—especially when assigned to Black women—expose racist, sexist, and classist readings of our bodies and behavior. Our refusal to assimilate or conform determines our inaccessibility to people and

resources rather than when we submit to respectability politics. Therefore, the Black female body is situated as illegible or out of place particularly in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Hartman, 1997; McCray, 2011; Spillers, 1987). This has led to overt questioning of our presence on college campuses as nothing more than diversity admittance or hire.

Although we each travelled different educational journeys, we found ourselves being moved by the spirits of the women who gathered in our kitchens during family events that reminded us of the power of sisterhood. Unlike the competitive culture of the academy, that especially starves students and faculty of Color of agency and resources, we sought out sacred fugitive spaces as sites of freedom, healing, and resistance (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). It is in these environments with other WOC that we engage in a process of cycle-breaking and uncovering internalized hatred toward ourselves and one another that has been taught to us since girlhood.

Inspired by Lorde (1984) and Alexander (2005), we resist the hazing that Women of Color academics are encouraged to enact onto each other. In contrast, we “dare to recognize each other again and again in a context bent on making strangers of us all” (Alexander, 2005, p. 279). Yet, in order to recognize each other, we must first recognize ourselves. This requires a reckoning with originary sites of trauma, namely our earliest encounters with racialized and gendered violence through schooling. Lorde reminds us about influences ingrained from birth:

We have been steeped in hatred—for our color . . . our sex . . . our effrontery in daring to pursue we had any right to live. As children we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves . . . echoes of it return as cruelty and anger in our dealings with each other. (p. 146)

Lorde (2004) also affirms that the only way for WOC to reclaim their spirit is to name our early wounds. When we acknowledge that “pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend it” (p. 16), we heal from the root of oppression rather than internalize it or project it onto each other.

Dillard (2016) urges us to (re)member who we are, to put ourselves and our spirits back together from the inside out by engaging in a sacred and spiritual process of reclaiming all that we have been taught or forced to forget:

As we learn to (re)member through uncovering and discovering our diverse identities, we initially engage in the process of (re)searching, seeking, looking, and searching again . . . . Another part of the processes of learning to (re)member is (re)cognizing, the process of changing our thinking and our minds about who we are in relation to one another. (p. 52)

From these inspired works by Black women, moreover, we arrive at our own conceptualization of Critical Sisterhood Praxis that began as our way of loving and caring for one another and that since has evolved into a methodology in how we approach the research for this article.

### **Methodology**

Our collective methodology, grounded in *Critical Sis Interactions* (Reynolds, 2019), was a process of authentic self-reflection and mirroring. *Critical Sis Interactions* affirm the political and social commentary that is casually exchanged between Black women, including the powerful use of lower frequencies like a side-eye (Hartman, 1997), or the many meanings of “girl” depending on the tone. Within these conversations, we produce rich theory embedded with cultural meaning. Thus, as we theorize our own lives as points of inquiry for this article, we center sisterhood as methodology.

Our sisterhood was brought together by our loving sister Farima. Although we each have our own stories of meeting Farima in some organizing space, we three bonded at a conference in Toronto in 2019. We presented on a panel together about our healing centered work and found ourselves back in the room every night laughing, crying and testifying about our experiences as womxn of color in the academy. This collaboration on this piece allowed for us to join together again intentionally to share the journey with others.

Over the course of five months, we convened eight virtual gatherings among the three of us. We structured our convenings as informal virtual sister-circles. We began every circle by organically checking in, asking, “How is your spirit, sis? How you holdin’ up today?” We took turns exchanging emotional support, sharing laughs, and dancing to our favorite songs. Gradually, as our spirits felt ready, we transitioned into discussing this written piece. We spent the first three sister-circles processing our historical and contemporary relationships with schooling, centering the ways we have learned to protect our spirit as we navigate spaces that deem our humanity illegible. The following sister-circle meeting, we rewatched recorded footage of previous meetings in order to bear witness to our praxis and engage deeper reflections. The next two sister-circle meetings, we journaled openly in a shared Google Doc to reflect on the question: *How has your K-12 experience of spirit murdering informed your relationship with academia?* In the last two meetings, after each of us had completed these reflections, we orally shared our stories with each other, methodologically bearing witness to one another by confessing our truths (Wilcox, 2021). We made space to cry tears for our younger selves, and share affirmations for the women we have become.

Our journal entries, and the conversations that birthed them, became both data and analysis. We engaged in open-coding practices (Glaser & Strauss, 1978) to collectively organize the themes that emerged through our journaling and recorded conversations. Rewatching the meeting recordings allowed us to revisit dialogues and examine our body language and responses to one another in those moments that added another layer of richness to the data.

Through verbal, artistic, and written dialogue processed in community, we affirmed one another's experiences and identified connections across them. Refusing to police our voices with academic jargon, we affirmed the nuanced theoretical innovations of our stories and engaged a praxis of spirit reclamation individually and collectively. In reflecting on past trauma and present healing—for this study and beyond it—we name our truths that we have been taught to silence, forget, and deny. As we moved in, through, and around the violent terrain in our schools, we did not have language to fully articulate our experiences. Therefore, we courageously use these pages and the process of writing to show-up for our inner child and reckon with the unhealed parts of our girlhood.

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### **Critical Sis Journaling Praxis as Mirror Work: I See Me, I See You, I See Us**

In this section, we offer examples of journal entries as snapshots that led to personal and collective mirror work and (re)membering practiced by cultivating the fugitive sacred space which birthed CSP. We map our own reflections and name for ourselves what is possible in sustaining wholeness in the face of white supremacy that demands our surrender at every turn to thrive. We journey through our lived experiences of schooling to identify patterns from girlhood through womanhood.

#### ***Aja***

What's coming up for me is the ways in which white women challenged my femininity and what it meant to navigate those interactions as a Black, plus-sized girl. The ways I would have to do things in protection of white women's fear as a way to protect myself. From an early age, I learned that my Black girlhood was illegible to the many white women positioned in authority to me as teachers and staff in the schoolhouse. I could see the fear in their eyes as I got taller and rounder in that my body size further justified their fear of me. It showed up in the subtle ways they tried to control my body—my characteristic of being talkative became a scapegoat for them to not have to acknowledge my brilliance.

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As I continued to grow, I internalized the fear that lay in their eyes as I tried to shrink and appear even more friendly than I was through the over use of smiles, good grades, and respectability politics. I knew how to laugh at their jokes and in return, make them laugh to ease the threat my presence caused.

While I cannot name a singular event or moment, I knew my tears and vulnerability were sacred and to be protected from them. My ability to make teachers and administrators laugh and smile was a superpower that allowed me to navigate into the honors program and pursue opportunities reserved for those deemed exceptional or “white and privileged.” My protection over my emotions continued to be a point of conflict with my white female instructor in undergrad, and then again with my white woman advisor in my master’s program. It almost seemed as if they were offended that I did not allow them my tears and weakness. This was their olive branch to reconcile their white guilt and it angered them that I wasn’t willing to accept their peace offering. They were unwilling to accept my vulnerability in the form of anger and frustration, which seemingly took away from my femininity or womanhood and drew out their fear. They wanted to save me, and needed me to concede.

As I observed class spaces with the both of them that called in uncomfortable and necessary conversations about race and gender, they made bold attempts to show up as allies. In turn, I challenged their whiteness and their positions of oppression that provoked white rage that showed up passively aggressively. They despised my unwillingness to find comfort in them enough to cry tears of victimhood, because it reflected their weakness and outed the ways they weaponized tears. And trust, I knew how to weaponize my own tears to get out of trouble at home or at least get a lesser punishment, but I learned early that Black girls’ tears didn’t hold up in the “real” world. Even in mainstream depictions of Black girlhood/womanhood, it was often other sisters that came to care for her. Therefore, I embodied and embraced the strong Black woman image as a shield to move in and out of white spaces, but this burdened me once I got back home to my own community and family.

What remained consistent was my sisterhood with other Black girls—in fact, I am able to celebrate 27 years with the homegirls I met in 2nd grade after transferring to a new school. Or the college sisters who toughed out the long college nights and shared glances as we sat outnumbered in our major courses—we knew that our life experiences could not be debated as if we were not even in the room. And the other lifelong friends I found when struggling through grad school that showed up even when I thought I wanted to be alone, or connected with at a conference after exchanging information after a presentation. In addition to the sisterhood, I was pushed into my healing journey as I

felt myself breaking and all the grief of loss of family, of feeling not at home, of heartbreak and of the weight of activism—this cumulative grief left me immobile one morning, which became multiple days as I laid in the dark in the first apartment I lived in alone. I knew it was bad, so I finally gave in and called a therapist and stepped away from leadership in the activist spaces I labored in. I re-evaluated my needs and desires to remain in the academy, as I felt called to the work I was doing. I had to work toward standing in my truth and examine what it meant to do this thing my way or the way that wouldn't kill my spirit. I had to boldly embody my feminism, and gifts as a healer, artist, activist, and educator to guide my pedagogy as a teacher educator.

### *Ree*

It started for me in the fifth grade. That is when I learned how Blackgirl and ghetto and precarious in my body I was to the world (Boylorn, 2016). Ten years old, unapologetic ghetto spirit child, seated on the step at recess, on punishment, in detention, stomping and clapping and stepping and chanting. Could not be contained. My body as a site of praxis. A space to proclaim my freedom. To take back what white women teacher was trying so hard to take from me. I realized then that she could never take from me my joy, my peace, my levity. That my body could force a recess step to be a healing space because I was just that sacred. I was just that powerful. And I knew it.

### **One Year Makes a World of Blackgirl Difference**

Sixth grade. Think I'm grown now. Someone say me and my man, who is also in sixth grade, had sex, but I was not sure. We went to the park and he pulled his thingy out and I just glanced at it from a far. I was thinking maybe that meant we had sex, but I wasn't sure. The whole sixth grade is now saying that me and my man had sex and the principal calls my mama and tells her I'm pregnant. How easy it was for Ms. Neiman to make me a child carrying a child. How easy it was for her to imagine that my twelve-year-old womb was womanly and unsacred. No one ever told me it was okay to feel violated by my white woman principal, by the entire school site that paid no mind to ghetto Blackgirl students. No one pulled me to the side. No one asked me if I was okay. Everyone who was big and mean made me feel like I was wrong.

### **One Year Makes a World of Blackgirl Difference**

Seventh grade. Second period. Math class. Somehow, by now, so many people had taken so much from me. Journaling love notes to my fragmented self. Tryna heal myself. Tryna calculate the time it would take to mend the wounds I ain't have words for. Tryna name the abuse nobody ever taught me words for. Purple notebook snatched. Reported

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to the office. Tall mean men play keep away with my sacred things. Play pass throw catch with my secrets of sexual harm. Pass my words over my head like they have no weight. Like I have no humanity. Sent to a therapist who refuses to see me. Nobody can see me. See me, I need someone to see me. These scars. This heart that is bleeding.

I remember how alone I felt. How unsure of the world and unsure of my skin. How school gave me no sense of knowing me. Only poking fun at the frictions of my identity. Yet, I always knew critical sisterhood praxis intimately. I learned early on that these schools wouldn't give us nothing but grief, but that our homegirls was the site of our healing.

Only ten Black girls in the entire fifth grade. Knew we had to stick together. Our own clique. Our own crew. Our own wave. Knew we had no choice but to hold each other down. Ten Black girls. Ten years old. Bold in the Black womanhood we learned to live in, even when we were just little girls. Found secret language for our pussies on they period. Whispered "the big red dot" in unhusbed tones with pride about how grown-up we felt. Coached each other in putting tampons into private parts, placing pads onto panties. Knew how to cultivate sisterhood for ourselves when this world would not love us, when these schools did not love us.

We knew how it felt to need each other, desperately, to name the things no one else would. We knew that we were each other's safe space. That the teachers hated how we convened. How, like maroons and quilombos, we made healing space within harming space to curate care in ways we needed. We knew how disgusted the institution was with us being our own best friends, being Black and girl and ghetto on purpose, out loud, in public. We recognized the ways we were seen, and we decided to love all they hated of us. To play with Black Bratz dolls on the school bus from Sandy Spring to College Park. To play hand clap games and be Stepping Angles at the talent show. To stomp snap clap to RIP Aliyah in air-brushed white fringed tees. We knew we had the right to be ourselves, even when everyone else told us otherwise.

I learned an everyday, round the way Blackgirl methodology from those ten Black girls, when I was ten years old. Learned how crucial, how essential, sisterhood was to my Blackgirl survival. Carried that politic of care with me after each grade, and even as each year brought its own Blackgirl difference, I leaned into sisterhood for sacred healing.

I went to Spelman College and loved that all that I was and all that I loved was reflected back to me. I was reminded of that grade five ethic of care. It became the ground I walked on. I went to graduate school and learned that Black Studies was not always a place where Blackness was studied with love. I learned all yo' skin folk ain't yo' kinfolk. Could not comprehend how Black women who study Black women could refuse

to love Black women, refuse to love me. But I learned quickly that this was not always about love. It was often about trauma bonds with the written word. About disassociation and erasing one's truth. I could not comprehend how Black women academics had allowed themselves to become so separated from the spirit of their own Black girlhoods that they forced their spirits outside of themselves, spirit murdered themselves for the sake of the academy over and over again. Attempted to project their unhealed wounds onto me. My little self, ten years old on recess steps, shrinks in the presence of her. I am small again, precarious again, sexualized and invisible and unseen again. I got free when I realized how unhealed assimilated Black women were, how adamant they remained on making me feel as small as they felt. I prayed for their spirit reclamation, and for all the Black women academics whose spirits are murdered at their own hands over and over again.<sup>4</sup>

### *Farima*

At just five years old, I put together the puzzle, I connected the pieces between my daddy being murdered, my mommy being scared and broke and immigrant, and school being the place where I got punished for it. As early as kindergarten, my trauma was grounds for punishment. Grief lingering in my nervous system, sometimes erupting in rage, other times flowing as tears, and occasionally bolting out of classrooms escaping to be with mommy again.

Bitch ass white teachers found it easier to isolate me from my peers and safety-pin citations on my back, instead of inquiring about the root causes of my defiance, instead of teaching me tools to self-regulate, instead of finding resources for me to heal, instead of hugging me and saying it'll be ok: With so many choices, they chose to be punitive. Those citations guaranteed double the punishment at home. After all, back in my mother('s)land, the Atlantic Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, her predominantly Afro-Indigenous, Creole but British-colonized schools were where she learned colonial violence first, perpetuated by Brown and Black bodies that internalized their oppression.

Just like her, my existence was perverted by the deficit lenses and carceral logics of schooling—school violence surpassed borders and generations, both global and timeless, and the normalcy of it all was what my spirit was determined to disrupt. From the time I was formed in my mother's womb, I knew I was called to be a cycle breaker, always guided by ancestors that had whispered within me since as early as I can remember.

Ditching in elementary school with my best friends, our act of refusal and righteous rebellion: We were the girls of color always punished for

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choosing freedom. Punished for talking, for laughing, for playing, for hurting, for being. Punished for resisting the policing of our bowels every time we escaped to the bathroom. Punished for passing notes, reading each other's Brown and Black girl affirmations, refusing to read about white experiences that had nothing to do with us. Punished for not producing the worksheet quotas before the bell rang. Punished for not walking silently in line with our hands clasped behind our backs, symbolically handcuffed. Punished for not rushing to devour manufactured lunches in the little time we were given to eat. Punished for not freezing and dropping to the ground when the guards- I mean the yard duty, blew whistles on the yard. Punished for not conforming or complying with standards or metrics we never even consented to.

We found ways to defy the dress codes that adultified and criminalized our young bodies, wearing forbidden spaghetti-strap tops, "gang"-colored scrunchies stacked in our hair, bartering lip liners and glittery glosses that were banned at school, rotating who would be next to hold the double dutch ropes in their backpack that I stole from the PE teacher, always fueled with the adrenaline of ancestral resistance flowing in our blood.

Suspended, banned from field trips, talent shows, or assemblies, threatened with grade retentions, and yet, nobody ever bothered asking us why we were resisting in the first place. If we learned anything at all, we learned to find joy in our resistance and we prepared for it in advance by wearing double the sweat pants for mommy's belt and buying telephones from thrift stores to hide under our beds to call each other when we were grounded.

The way I saw it, schooling was our purgatory—caught in the space between *childhood* and *childhell*, transgressing the oppressive realms laid bare at school sites, in search of the glory that we knew we had to exist beyond the confines of whiteness, bulletin boards, and blacktops.

I didn't know it then but I was a young abolitionist, melanated, marked as inherently "bad" because I dared to resist whiteness and carceral compliance and I chose to practice joy and liberation instead.

### **Fast Forward Two Decades Later: Grad School**

I'll never forget how that white professor put her finger in my face, trying to put me in my place, mad because I didn't worship her scholarship on teachers of Color. The irony. Or, how another one shushed me more than once in front of my peers so she could take up even more space self-proclaiming her allyship. Or, the neverending microaggressions that always went unchecked. Or, how my body always activated, fluctuating between the fight, flight, freeze, and fawn trauma responses that exhausted my *mindbodyspirit* daily.

All too reminiscent of my youth, navigating grief in dehumanizing

school spaces, imposter syndrome compounding my trauma, weeping, suffocated by white supremacy culture, praying to my ancestors for guidance and being led to commUNITY. Finding the answers within me and all around me. Organizing to heal and healing to organize. Cultivating healing spaces for BIPOC to talk shit, support one another and heal with. Finding mentors, femtors, and themtors that modeled refusal and revival. Protecting myself from those who were not accountable to their own healing and praying for them regardless. And now, here I am as a tenure-track professor, still co-creating sacred spaces with/for us to reclaim our dignity and replenish spirit, revisiting our childhood when we ditch academic conferences to play and to heal, as we embody our theory in the flesh. Unbreakable covenants. Accountability as a practice of love. Cycle breaking as our medicine.

Today, even after all these degrees, my younger self has ALWAYS been my greatest teacher. It is because of *her* that I can say that I survived the school-to-prison nexus, that I found self-determination and healing, for my ancestors, for my family lineage, for my students yesterday, today, tomorrow, and for the generations to come.

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### **Bearing Witness in/through Critical Sisterhood Praxis**

Recurring themes of our collective (re)membering that evolved through CSP were rooted in spiritual restoration, reclamation, and revival. Ironically, sharing painful stories of formative moments shaping our girlhood and womanhood played a critical role in spiritual restoration. For example, journeying back to our girlhood together, we identified patterns of spirit murdering through shared experiences of the policing of our younger selves, beginning with early interactions with racist teachers that led us to ask the question that Sojourner Truth posed in 1851, “Aint I a woman?” or in our case, “Ain’t I a girl?” We related deeply with one another’s experiences of how teachers and administrators wielded their power to “correct” and punish “mouthy,” “busy bodied,” Black and Latinx girls and how those harmful dynamics evolved for us within academia. We also connected to one another’s heartbreak from feeling let down by Black and Brown women that internalized and perpetuated the same violence they had experienced at the hands of academia. Naming the spiritual harm that we experienced across schooling and academic contexts became the first step in identifying how our spirit needed to be restored.

Restoring our inner child was also about taking up space that had been denied from us as girls, from our righteous laughter that loudly echoed through the hallways to our righteous anger for all the ways we were forced to remain “behaved” or silent as others harmed us. As current junior faculty and graduate students, we found reassurance through

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CSP to make decisions about when and how we choose to show up. It has been deciding at times to not submit to the “urgency” of academic white supremacy culture that our colleagues impose, or to the paternalistic interactions in which they institutionally “spank our hands.” This path has called us to heal our inner girl child that still shrunk or felt powerless in the presence of white academics and assimilated academics of color who continually aimed to discipline and punish us for desiring to be free.

Reviewing recordings of our sessions allowed us to revisit our CSP enacted when bearing witness and baring witness (Wilcox, 2021) to how we reclaimed our spirit, despite academic violence. Spiritual reclamation was our process of reasserting our right to claim our ancestral wisdom and snatch our spirit back. We observed the ways in which we mocked the hyperproductivity asked of us; we affirmed one another’s righteous rage when sharing stories of institutional violence and academic gaslighting; and we encouraged one another to prioritize wellness as our *lifeline*, in the face of so many arbitrary *deadlines*. We observed how we each intuitively checked in on one another’s spirit before ever thinking about our productivity, for this piece or for the academy more broadly. We traced how we made sense of our roles in academia and of our humanity as Black and Brown women navigating complex grief, which allowed for each of us to rely on CSP for support. For example, as we met within the context of a global pandemic, we supported one another through the losses of loved ones; when one of us contracted Covid-19 along with her entire family, we were there to support her spiritually and materially. Through each traumatic experience that unfolded within our time together, we knew to pause, to shift our initial plans for productivity, and to create space for grief and healing. We rejected the business as usual energy that our institutions were perpetuating, and instead we engaged CSP as inherently tied to our humanity, spirituality, and sisterhood. In these ways, spiritual reclamation was as much about how we resisted spirit murdering as it was about how we reclaimed our right to wholeness.

Critical Sisterhood Praxis also allowed for the reclamation of our spirit in the academy by utilizing our research to simultaneously serve our personal and collective healing. We disrupt the ideas of rigor and competition to get ahead in order to embrace the Swahili principle Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” Our commitment to do this study together is one of the ways we also engage in refusal of the expectations to be recognized as a “serious” or “worthy” scholar, or to be “ten times as good,” and map success by the way our mamas brag or by our research accessibility to those outside of the academy. Moreover, we measure the impact of our work by who we have brought along and who we have forgotten. We view our citational praxis as an additional layer of refusal, as we center WOC scholars whose work is often devalued within academia.

In essence, our sacred CSP and methodology was simultaneously our spiritual revival, which we saw as our renewed consciousness, investment, and vigor of spirit through our calling within the academy, ever-evolving and enacted collectively. We experienced spiritual revival through the meaning-making and connection that evolved in the moments that we were together, and then again, through our data analysis. Our spirit was activated as we moved through CSP in the present; when it became the past, we revived our spiritual relationship to our scholarship and our self-determination in choosing how we exist as scholar-healers. This has meant courageously walking the path less traveled and committing to the lifelong work of healing and sacred accountability.

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## **Conclusion**

This project is about Black and Brown women and girls creating sacred fugitive space to (re)member, heal, and to imagine our liberation through an embodied praxis rooted in critical sisterhood. Very much in line with the praxis of Black Feminist Theory, Black women continue “to create Africa wherever we are” (Dillard, 2016, p. 409), and in this context, we interpret that to mean that we cultivate a “homeplace” (hooks, 1990) with other kinfolk, specifically with Black and Brown women, in and out of the gaze of whiteness. We redirect our scholarly research to be the avenue for spiritual restoration, reclamation, and revival. We witness each other collectively, seeing the reflection of ourselves, and the love we have cultivated within and despite an academic system of hatred that we are forced to normalize.

Critical Sisterhood Praxis cultivated the space to name, examine, and refuse the spiritual abandonment that is either taught to us through observation or through expectation. Critical Sisterhood Praxis also allowed for us to engage in individual and collective accountability to the everyday embodiment of healing and cycle-breaking as an act of love as opposed to shame/punishment. We found that our commitment to healing was not only a way to resist spirit murdering within academia, but it also became a way to subversively utilize academia as a site to rightfully loot resources and milestone requirements for healing as reparations for our ancestors, our younger selves, and for future Black and Brown women and girls to come. We rest. We write in our own voice. We reclaim our inner child. We refute any disavowal of our linguistic truths. We build intentional community within and beyond the academy. We radically integrate communal epistemologies into our academic praxis. We curate enclaves of collective care within the trenches of institutional neglect. We heal for the women of color academics who never could, and for the little girl of color in each of us who desires for her spirit to be set free.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Structural violence creates psychological and spiritual harm, particularly for those who are at the margins of society and impacted most by structural oppression (Williams, 1991). This spiritual harm when compounded by the violence of schooling leads to spirit murdering which is rooted in the denial of “inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things a person needs to be human and to be educated” (Love, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>We define academic space as any setting shaped by academia’s norms that are rooted in white supremacy culture, including perfectionism, sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, only one right way, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, progress is bigger, objectivity, and the right to comfort as defined in *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun (2001). Academic spaces include but are not limited to universities, conferences, workshops, meetings, and more.

<sup>3</sup>We intentionally chose to focus on the research on Black girls because we each experienced anti-Blackness in schools enacted on us as African American or Afro-Latina girls.

<sup>4</sup>While I recognize that we first experience spirit murdering at the hands of the academia, at the hands of white folks and the hands of men, I am naming here the process of self-inflicted spirit murdering that illustrates an internalized process of spiritual abandonment that was learned from a colonial model of K-12 education and graduate study.

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