

Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies

Olivia N. Perlow • Durene I. Wheeler
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Editors

Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies

Resistance, Transformation, and Healing Within
and Beyond the Academy

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We dedicate this volume to our foremothers, bloodmothers, and othermothers upon whose shoulders we stand and whose fighting spirits live in us today. Their impeccable foresight, fortitude, and commitment to social justice and equality has expanded our horizons and improved our communities and our lives. We continue to be inspired by them and we are honored to follow in their formidable footsteps.

PREFACE

This book is simultaneously a personal and political project, which are of course inextricably linked. The idea for this volume, conceived via “kitchen table” talks and *sista* girl check-ins, was birthed out of our relentless resistance to the continuous denial and dismissal of Black women’s intellectual production and liberation projects. In these moments, we began to envision an intellectual space to celebrate the breadth of Black women’s liberatory practices, contextualizing them within our lived experiences.

Over the course of this project, we have learned many life lessons, one of the most profound being that despite numerous academic and political accomplishments, so many Black women carry a *brave bruised girlchild* inside of them. She has continually been told that she is not good enough, not smart enough, and that she does not deserve to let her light shine. Even though Black women are often able to intellectualize our awareness of the negative socio-political messages constructed about us, it is not easy to escape their impact.

We came to realize that with all of our presumed sophistication, we were not exempt from this conundrum. Consequently, we found ourselves coaching many of the authors and each other through the very difficult writing process, which required collectively and radically embracing our vulnerabilities as well as our knowledge, skills, and ways of being as Black women and as scholars. By cultivating mutually empowering co-mentoring relationships with many of the Black women in this volume, we engaged in what Denise Taliaferro Baszile calls the *praxis of radical Black female intersubjectivity*, or what Mary Louise McCarthy calls a *pedagogy of*

Sistership. Guided by the spirits of our ancestors and foremothers, we invoked the bonds that stretch across time and space. In so doing, we were able to discover and/or reclaim our collective power as Black women. Acknowledging each other, we reaffirmed our own and each other's humanity.

The editorial process took unfamiliar twists and turns, leading us to places we never envisioned or experienced, but nevertheless embraced. Throughout this process, some of the women (including ourselves) experienced illness (both physical and mental), financial strain, the dissolution of partnerships, the incarceration, and even the passing of loved ones. And yet, these are the everyday lives of Black women. Although we took extra precaution to be tender with each other, if at any time we failed to be as gentle as we could've or should've been, we are truly sorry, for transcending the *culture of domination* is not always easy or straightforward.

Notwithstanding these challenges, we were able to provide, not only an intellectual space but also, in keeping with our African traditions, a spiritual and familial space in which we constructed a community of resistance as we continue to develop and hone our talents and skills as educators and activists. Within the context of such nurturing intellectual spaces, we can continue our resistance and liberatory work that challenges the Western intellectual tradition of white and male superiority, of socially constructed knowledge and exclusivity—spaces where we develop, set forth, and share strategies for liberation.

To be sure, in the final analysis, the purpose of this volume is not to appease, make comfortable nor safe, those that do not share our struggle. Rather our primary goal is to plant seeds of resistance, water the roots of transformation, and cultivate the fruits of healing for Black women, our communities, and humanity as a whole. In conclusion, for us as well as many of the authors, this volume has been about going home—a spiritual and metaphysical repatriation—an honoring and celebration of our ancestors and foremothers as well as our African roots, all of which have kept us grounded in a vision of a more just and humane world. Ashe.

Chicago, IL
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LIBERATION PEDAGOGIES

(For the twins, Minnie Lee and Mattie Mae)

—Joy James, Williams College

Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies provides many examples of what it means to risk to be both teacher and learner in the pursuit of freedoms that serve privileges or predations of the captor.

The authors write as liberators—for themselves, their communities, and institutions. They labor for *thinking* that revives concepts of what is *just*. The issue of justice, so central to this volume, is of course an issue of politics and power.

These first decades of the twenty-first century have been a political roller coaster ride. The breakneck speed of our perilous journey in democracy is marked by cheap thrills and screams yet offers no new destinations: We end up where we started. This book brakes at personal, national, and global impulses that shut eyes tightly against a blurred, accelerated world where carnival barkers and salesmen engineer nerve-wracking tumult with threats and violence that most—especially Black women—can neither avert nor control.

In this climate, *Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies* becomes essential. It has the courage to call us to senses shaped by community “theorizing.” Historically depicted as interlopers within the realm of “higher thinking,” infantilized as entertainment and caretakers, Black women see the scope and depth of their intellectual, political, artistic-spiritual autonomy overlooked or underestimated. Still, as progressives or radicals they redefine

the academy. Re-centering its pantheon and factory, while deflecting abuse or “micro and macro aggressions,” Black women educators continue to demand accountability and insight.

Dismissive attitudes and attacks challenge Black female presence, scholarship, and integrity reflected in research, narratives, critiques, and art. However, this book moves past vilification to examine how educators turn victimization into inspiration in order to leverage a productivity that focuses on liberatory, critical thinking.

Victimization does not constitute leadership. Resistance does. In subtle and bold ways, *Black Women’s Liberatory Pedagogies* presents scholarship, insight, humor, and humility that rewrites what it means to be a thoughtful, caring person with capaciousness for thought directed toward reality rather than deceptions. In and as resistance, these writers “threaten” demagoguery and refined and vulgar violence in which capture and consumption disproportionately fixate on Black women.

In a fair fight, opponents meet you in a battle of ethical ideals and intellectualism. Fair fights are rare. With the absence of public, intellectual debate, distortions and lies are increasingly more fashionable than virtue. Recognizing precarity, this book unveils unethical ploys and rewrites the codes for obtainable freedom.

Not everyone desires pedagogies of liberation. Structures demand unwavering loyalty to themselves, at the expense of truth telling and theorizing. Yet, here readers find fidelity to forms and figures of brilliance that allow teaching with dignity and honor.

Books are not sufficient on their own to make necessary changes. Backlash and co-optation are common. The dismissals of Black women building liberation pedagogies function in a similar way to man-made CO₂ emissions. Anti-Black female intellectualism exudes a pernicious toxicity. The denigration or celebration of Black female resilience co-exists with Black women’s emotional, intellectual, biological amputations, prosthetics, and graveyards. This is why the political organizing expressed in this text is extremely important.

We celebrate this publication for varied reasons. First, because, as Audre Lorde observes, we were never meant to survive, and definitely not in the academy. Second, because, as Octavia Butler notes, with foreign bodies clearly marked by dismemberments and mutations, Black maternals disciplined by love inevitably fight captivity. Third, because collective genealogy reveals that ancestral mothers made formidable demands upon the

truth: Whenever and wherever truth was interred, they unearthed everything including their own lives to restore it.

We have all buried and will continue to bury our mothers. Some mothers raised us intellectually with spirit. Other mothers abandoned us after giving what they could spare in a rage with defeat that they thought could not be undone. The maternal lineage exists in the tutelage of Toni, Zoe, Cecile, Uvanney, Valerie, Kirsten, Andrea, Raven, Kathryn, A. Marie, Edward, Eyo, William, Loretta, Stephanie, Eve, Janaé, Derise, Lakeesha, Denise, Jennifer, and Olivia, Durene, Sharon, BarBara.

Their anthology is thorny. Its painful and devastating experiential knowledge shapes scholarship, alphabet, and grammar in a fiery critique written on the board and wall. With steely, patient kindness, these epistemologies work to refuse cheap games and offer instead a transformative thrill: Swim in the dark, cool waters of Yemoya and Oshun, and, rather than fixate on drowning, focus on the fires lit to illuminate shore.

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