

High-Jacking History: Understanding the Historical Conundrums of the Journey to Academia for First Generation Black Doctoral Students (“F-GBDS”)

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[Abstract] In Spring 2018, as we sat in our Critical Race Theory (CRT) class, it became apparent that not only were the ideas we had about Black life in America steeped in white patriarchy, but the ideas we had about our identities as first-generation Black doctoral students (F-GBDS) were also framed in bias. Using CRT as a framework, we asked our classmates to address how *master* narratives often conceal the true histories of Black people in America. Since then, we have seen major (un)biased efforts to conceal, erase, and omit the narratives of Black people surrounding American history. As junior faculty and doctoral candidate, we now evaluate how these same historical conundrums have shadowed our paths in the Ivory Tower. Our journeys have been marred at times with conflict over equitable research agendas, justifications for the use of non-traditional methods and lack of funding by our institutions for conference presentations about *Black life in America*. We notice that neither our progress nor persistence is exceptional as the deficit framework would have us believe.

We used qualitative research to co-create narratives with our participants, as this methodology reflects the storytelling traditions of Black Americans in the antebellum South that were intrinsic for mapping out safe houses and freedom maps. Once we learned about art-based research, it became clear that we were following the tradition of those torn from Africa who still used cultural artifacts and knowledge to survive by creating pieces identical to those they had lost on the journey. Understanding how historical narratives have been shaped to portray Black Americans has enlightened our understanding of the epistemic power that shapes doctoral programs and research agendas that are often forced on first-generation doctoral students. As an encouragement to those persisting toward these degrees, we affirm belonging on our journeys and resilience taught from our own ancestral stories, which is why we selected Intercultural Programming for this conversation.

[Keywords] critical race theory, counter narratives, doctoral journeys, epistemic power

Introduction

In Spring 2018, as we sat in our Critical Race Theory (CRT) class, it became apparent that not only were the ideas we had about Black life in America steeped in white patriarchy, but the ideas we had about our identities as first-generation Black doctoral students (F-GBDS) were also framed in bias. It occurred to us that over our combined 40+ years of education, not once had we been

taught to question how we as first-generation doctoral students were already destined for these paths instead of being seen as anomalies in this space.

The deficit frameworks used to study Black America were the same we had used to explain our success in academia. Using CRT, we created a seminar that asked our classmates to address how “master” narratives often conceal the true histories of Black people in America. Along with this period of classroom reflection, we devised scenarios where our classmates would be placed in small groups and presented with an outcome. This led to their individual and group reflections, in addition to us providing them with a chance to provide one word to summarize their thoughts after the exercise.

Inspiration For Article

Before and during the CRT class, we witnessed major (un)biased efforts to conceal, erase, and omit the narratives of Black people surrounding American history. Today, as junior faculty and a doctoral candidate, we evaluate how these same historical conundrums have shadowed our path in the Ivory Tower. Our journeys have been marred at times with conflict over equitable research agendas, justifications for the use of non-traditional methods, and a lack of funding by our institutions for conference presentations about “Black issues.” Rather than allow these instances to derail our goals as researchers and lifelong scholars, we made the decision to self-fund our travels to conferences, both at AAU institutions, including one Ivy League, where we were the first students from USF’s College of Education to present during the conference. These are two foundational reasons that we persist today, knowing that despite the lack of support, we choose to endure and carry on with the essential research.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emphasizes that racism is so rooted in society, appearing as routine for most, creating a socially constructed space where people are classified and identified solely based on their race (Coles & Powell, 2020; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). CRT gained footing in the mid-1970s, with Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman who displayed their vast disappointment with the glacial pace of progress taking place in the United States regarding reform for racial issues (Delgado, 1995; Hiraldo, 2010; Holley, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1998). In addition, CRT can defy conventional assertions, illustrating how educational guidelines are a decree of White supremacy and how suspensions retraumatize Black/African Americans, as they often face a higher rate of trauma, past and present, based on Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (Degruy, 2017; Dutil, 2020; Holley, 2021). Our CRT professor encouraged and challenged us in each class to not only seek the purpose of CRT in our coursework but also find the bevy of ways that it is applicable to everyday living and relationships in society. This led us to develop a presentation consisting of scenarios to analyze with our classmates. These were examples of how CRT is visible, past, present, and, if the status quo continues, in the future. These illustrated eight scenarios listed are in no way exhaustive.

Scenarios

The following is a list of scenarios we used in our classroom assignment, as well as updated examples, as we plan to use these in future workshops and seminar discussions. The main purpose of the scenarios is to create a space of critical conversation, breaking the class and/or audience into small groups, then presenting them with random scenarios, allowing them to process what we've read to them, and giving space for their reactions. Please note that this scenario list is not exhaustive, and we plan to add more as we continue these conversations with others inside/outside of academia.

1. Passing

You have chosen to apply to the university of your choice. All are required to submit a photo with their admissions application. You check "white" on the application. Based on the photo you submit, where you appear as "fair-skinned," and your living address, you are granted entry. When you attend orientation, you are questioned about your application and think that perhaps someone may rescind your decision.

2. Crack vs. Opioids

Half of you is living in South Central Los Angeles in the 1980s. You were born into an orphanage because your mother is strung out on crack, and your father is incarcerated for his third offense. There are no rehab facilities for your mother, and no restoration centers for your father upon release. You've been up for adoption since birth, but seem pessimistic, now that you are aged 17, and never placed with a family. The other half is currently residing in Manatee County, Florida in the year 2017. You are placed with a temporary family, you're currently 15 years old, and you get to attend a scheduled, supervised meeting with your mother and her case manager at her rehab facility each week. Your father, previously strung out on opioids, is now in a work release program, which provides temporary housing, three meals a day, and skills training, with the possibility of management positions upon completion.

3. Middle Passage

You have been captured, along with your fellow villagers, chained, and forced to board a slave ship, headed across the Atlantic Ocean, to unknown lands. However, while in route, the person next to you starts coughing, then develops a fever and chills. Once this is noticed, people within an entire line (50+), are thrown overboard, including you, at the fear that you will contaminate the entire ship.

4. Civil Rights

One half of you is participating in a "sit in." Hot coffee is poured on you, along with other food products. You're called several names, including "dog," "boy," "gal," "n-lover," and "coon," just to name a few. After leaving the "sit in," you hear of a lynching within a 2-mile radius of where you participated in the "sit in." The other half of you is dropping people off after a march. On your way to your home, unbeknownst to you, an angry white mob follows closely, rams your car, then opens fire on your vehicle. You are pronounced dead at the scene.

5. Black Lives Matter

After recent events, you, Black parents, sit your children down to discuss current events where unarmed black men and women have been killed. One evening, you receive a phone call saying that your eldest son has been shot. This occurs in your neighborhood, at a parentally supervised party for one of your son's friends, who is White. You discover that the shooter is a member of the neighborhood watch committee, that claims he did not recognize your child as he walked home after the party. Your fellow HOA members console you, stating "we never thought this would happen in our community." They are now concerned for all the children, as they truly believe this was not racially motivated, and that #AllLivesMatter.

6. Colorism

You are made aware that you will soon be offered a high-ranking position within your company. A fellow co-worker approaches you pertaining to the news, offering to give you advice and tips, as she is currently in the position you are up for. She states that your "unconventional dread locks" may prevent you from getting the promotion. When you ask her why she feels this way, she claims that it will be more difficult for you because you are darker skinned.

7. Intersectionality: Country Music Access & White Supremacy

You are protesting Beyonce's "Cowboy Country" album, declaring that Beyonce is strictly an R&B singer and has no place in country music. You don't believe she has a right to sing this music, even questioning where she is from. After finding out she was born and raised in Houston, Texas, you persist, saying only certain "American" singers should have access to it. Yet you have no opposition to other country singers Keith Urban, who is from Australia, and Blake Shelton or Shania Twain, who are from Canada. You scoff at the idea that Beyonce could win awards or be seen as an idol in the category.

8. Squaw and Human Zoos

You are now the property of a white colonist. As a Native American woman, you are referred to as "squaw," forced to denounce your heritage, culture, and family. A few years later, you reconnect with your family when you see them on display at a human zoo in St. Louis, Missouri. You are appalled, and when speaking with your husband, you ponder if you are viewed similarly as property to him and his friends.

Discussion

At the conclusion of our seminar, we include(d) a moment of reflection, allowing our classmates the time and space to share their perspectives and reflections. Then, we asked them to use one word to summarize their thoughts and feelings. Their reactions are portrayed below in a wordle where words appear larger the more they were referenced.



The decision to have a one-word reaction to the seminar was intentional, in order to refine the reflection process, as our time within the class session was limited. As we expand this work, we would like to explore ways to grow this process and create more space for discussion with participants.

Conclusion

Using qualitative research to co-create narratives with our participants reflects the storytelling traditions of Black Americans in the antebellum South that were essential in creating the mapping system for safe houses and freedom maps to the north. Once we learned about art-based research, it became clear that we were following the tradition of those torn from Africa who still created cultural artifacts identical to those they had lost with their freedom. Understanding how historical narratives have been shaped to portray Black Americans has enlightened our understanding of the epistemic power that shapes doctoral programs and research agendas that are often forced on first-generation doctoral students. As an encouragement to those persisting toward these degrees, we affirm belonging on our journeys and the resilience from our ancestral stories, so we selected Intercultural Programming for this conversation.

Understanding how situations have shaped the portrait of Black life in America has enlightened our understanding of the epistemic power that we can create among ourselves and in the community together as first-generation doctoral students. For those of us on this path, we must emphasize to our classmates and teachers that we do not take it lightly that we are the first because the system has not encouraged the forms of research that would study the populations and issues that impact Black life in America. As an encouragement to those persisting toward these degrees, it is important that we find belonging in the truth of our journeys and the resilience of our own ancestral stories. This article addresses the narratives we thought explained our paths, then provides examples of equitable research agendas and methods that we hope many first-generation Black doctoral students will notice/utilize as they navigate the Ivory Tower to self-realization.

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