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I AM an Angry Black Woman: Black Feminist Autoethnography, Voice, and Resistance

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This article couples Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) and autoethnography to advocate for Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) as a theoretical and methodological means for Black female academics to critically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood. Rooted in my desire to “talk back” (hooks, 1989) to systemic oppression as a biracial (Black and White) Black woman, I position anger as a productive force that fuels coming to voice through BFA as an act of resistance. In this article, BFA is used to self-reflexively explore my everyday experiences as an “outsider within” (Collins, 1986) and problematize the omnipresence of racism and sexism (at the least) in the everyday lives of Black women. Situating my anger as just and justifiable, I locate my voice directly in response to controlling imagery, such as the angry sapphire that denotes angry women of color as unruly, while simultaneously highlighting the need for “progressive Black sexual politics” (Collins, 2005, p. 16) that bear witness to the productive anger of Black women.

Keywords anger, autoethnography, biracial identity, Black feminist thought, resistance, voice

Anger is loaded with information and energy. (Lorde, 1984, p. 127)

I AM an Angry Black Woman. Unapologetically, rationally, and rightfully so. I am blistering mad! I am frustrated and enraged! I am devastated, and my blood is boiling at a temperature so hot that I think my heart might stop beating at any given moment! I am so angry that I feel neurotic; it feels as if my mind has been lost to my critical eyes (Pelias, 2000). Every morning when I wake up and inhale our world, my anger is accompanied by a sharp pain that twists my spirit and challenges my faith. Making my pain a matter of public record as a biracial Black woman¹ is terrifying. For as long as I can remember my Black/White, White/Black body has been taboo: a detested female bridge suspended between racial locations (Anzaldúa, 1990; Ono, 1997). Written to those who embrace binaries as absolute, trample on

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agency with their essentialist stampede, and feed into the frenzy of dehumanizing Others, this article illuminates the omnipresence of oppression in the lives of Black women in general and in my own life as a biracial Black female academic in particular.

To do so, I first address the invisibility of Black women in the field of communication and the larger academy. Then, I chronologically process through my personal introduction to Black feminist thought to position Black feminist scholarship in conversation with autoethnography. Connecting the two leads to a discussion of Black feminist autoethnography (BFA), followed by my use of anger to fuel my Black feminist autoethnographic reflections. Finally, I end with a discussion of the rich offerings of BFA as a means of resistance that can inspire alliances at the intersections of marginalization and privilege. I invite readers on my journey to position BFA as a means for Black academic women to highlight and challenge U.S. American society's failure to fully reckon with racism and sexism. In response to this failure, I AM an angry Black woman.

For those who are angry right alongside me, I welcome your presence and can only hope that this article helps strengthen your determined embrace of autoethnographic writing as a means of resistance. This work is dedicated to every woman of color who has had to bite her tongue so hard that it bleeds to protect her body, mind, soul, loved ones, livelihood, or even her life. Preparing us for this venture, Calafell and Moreman (2009) remind us that "Feminists of color have long argued for the importance of listening to the experiences of women of color and attending to the politics that underlie these voices" (p. 124). More expressly in relation to Black women, numerous scholars within and beyond the field of communication have marked the invisibility of scholarship by and about Black women (Collins, 1986, 2009; Davis, 1998, 1999; hooks, 1981; Houston, 1992; Houston & Davis, 2002). Reflecting on history, Davis (1998) asks, "Where is the critical voice which speaks to Black women's identity constituted in the experience of slavery, exile, pilgrimage, and struggle?" (p. 83). Speaking to contemporary scholarship, Houston and Davis (2002) offer, "The unfortunate fact is that communication scholars have yet to develop a substantial body of scholarship that explores the lived communicative experiences of African American women" (pp. 2–3).

Black women have much to be angry about in the academy, including the poor representation of Black female scholars (Gregory, 2002; "The Profession," 2011)² and the difficulty of getting race-related research published (Hendrix, 2002, 2005, 2010; Orbe, Smith, Groscurth, & Crawley, 2010), both of which fuel the absence of emancipatory scholarship by and about Black women. Looking back to move forward, the anger that I feel is not inventive, since Black women have furiously contested injustice in education and elsewhere for centuries (Allen, 1998; Cooper, 1995; Davis, 1998; hooks, 1981; Houston, 1992; Jones, 2003; Lorde, 1984; Madison, 1994, 2009; Patton, 2004; Shange, 1975; Stewart, 1992; Truth, 1992). While I find a fierce sense of hope in the power of repetition, my hopefulness feels tender up against the grim reality that past calls for equality voiced by Black women have yet to genuinely resonate with the hearts of most. Nevertheless, I am optimistic in believing if I step into the space that resistant cries have created, maybe, just maybe, something about my resistant voice in this moment will be heard, taken in, and taken seriously. Maybe.

To embody the prideful tenacity that Black womanhood brings forth, I will do the very things that Black women are discursively disciplined not to do. I will rant

without a hint of regret, and I will do so with my head held high believing that I am worth standing up for in a world that crudely tells me otherwise! Planting my feet in defiance, I will finish just as I have begun—wearied, depleted, “shaken, though not shattered” (Yancy, 2008, p. 2), and convinced that I am a brilliant woman of color who is worthy of sheer honesty, deep contemplation, and everlasting celebration. To soothe my nerves and strengthen my voice, I turn to Shange’s (1975) refrain in *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* when the lady in brown says:

somebody/anybody
 sing a black girl’s song
 bring her out
 to know herself
 to know you
 but sing her rhythms
 carin/struggle/hard times
 sing her song of life
 she’s been dead so long
 closed in silence so long
 she doesn’t know the sound
 of her own voice (p. 4)

Embracing the cultural practice of call and response across generations, the articulation of BFA that follows is offered to bear witness to her appeal.

Reading Black Women to Write Myself

I began imagining the promise of BFA in the field of communication while reading the works of Black feminist writers and activists. The writings that I remember the most are the ones that seemed to read me as I read. The authors who wrote them created space for women who look like me to be remembered, considered, and fought for. These women took to the page with a sense of fury that left permanent impressions on my heart. As I read, I could feel their fed-up rage bolstered by a depth of frustration and loss that I have only let myself know in secret.

Remembering each moment of exposure to Black feminist thought, the first time I read bell hooks’s (1981) *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, I got chills as she insisted that the world take notice of the historical and contemporary maltreatment of Black women. Titled after Sojourner Truth’s famed speech, hooks expanded dominant confines of womanhood to include those who are not White, middle class, and/or formally educated. She beckoned me into her pages by marking the ironic lip service directed at Black women from within the women’s liberation and civil rights movements. Using words as her pedagogical arsenal, she forewarned me of the wars at the complex crossroads of race, gender, and class. Relieved by her intersectional mindfulness, I accepted the tension that I have always felt as a biracial Black woman as bona fide, as opposed to dismissing it as an oversensitive figment of my imagination. bell hooks (1981) not only found and affirmed me; perhaps most important, she helped me unearth self-love to serve as my sanctuary in a world largely unwilling to grant me legitimacy as a human being.

Similarly, Angela Davis's (1981) pen marked permanent discontent with the ways that Black women are silenced and often erased in *Women, Race, and Class*. As she heightened her refusal of ideological domination with each damning page, I felt inspired by her desire to mark our oppressors and their purposeful orchestration of Black female suffering as shameful. She reminds us of the historical underpinnings of contemporary Black female invisibility and brings forth the increased vulnerability and incessant labor of poor Black women. Her words changed me as she recounted the indignities of slavery and segregation, and the struggles for equal rights to make certain that those who suffered beyond our contemporary imagination are not forgotten. After Davis came my first reading of Patricia Hill Collins's (2000) *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins brought my pen to life in a way that I had never known before. As I turned each page, I scribbled in the margins to record all the ways that I knew her words to be true. Her intellect tickled my heart; I laughed, trembled, and cried—sometimes all at once.

Having first found Black feminist thought beyond the field of communication, I eventually turned toward our field hoping to find more of what I had been missing. Encountering absence and invisibility at first glance, I eventually came to know the works of Brenda Allen, Olga Davis, and Marsha Houston, followed by Joni Jones, D. Soyini Madison, and Tracey Owens Patton. The first time that I held *Centering Ourselves: African American Feminist and Womanist Studies of Discourse* (Houston & Davis, 2002), I was struck with delight and dismay. I was delighted to find a book in our field dedicated to exploring the communicative lives of Black women but dismayed at the ways in which I knew their words to be true when I read "Black women's texts are much more welcomed in higher education classrooms than Black women themselves" (Houston & Davis, 2002, p. 9). Reading this line over and over again, I felt my face get hot as a slideshow of memories crossed my mind. I remember the stark moments of being an "outsider within" (Collins, 1986) and an insider outside as well; the ways that I have always been the "too Black to be White" and "too White to be Black" girl in school. The Oreo. The Zebra. The Mutt.

Centering Ourselves (Houston & Davis, 2002) led me to Houston (1992), who taught me how to academically defend marking the nuances of Black womanhood without using the typical "'add Black women and stir' approach" (Houston, 2000, p. 679). Scared but prepared, I felt ready to begin articulating myself and my work as intersectional; I began to understand that I could position my body as a bridge on my own terms. Reminding me of the significance of self-definition and self-determination, Lorde (2009) says, "If I do not bring all of who I am to whatever I do, then I bring nothing, or nothing of lasting worth, for I have withheld my essence" (pp. 182–183). Having been barred from bringing my angry essence for so long, since angry emotions are outlawed for Black women who wish to be welcomed, I yearned for a medium through which my voice could be heard.

Still academically immature, I craved more insight into the lives of Black women generated by communication scholars. I wanted to know how they theorized and what they felt. I was warmed and warned by the transparency of Davis (1999), Jones (2003), Patton (2004), and Harris (2007), who politicized and publicized the ways that racism and sexism infiltrate their experiences as Black women in the academy. Then a cherished mentor introduced me to Joni Jones and D. Soyini Madison, both of whom enriched my perspective on how to understand Black feminism as an embodied practice that had been, could be, and needed to continue to be written into our field. Meeting Miss Bertha on the page, a family elder in her nineties who has

“experienced war, poverty, depression, Jim Crow, and civil rights” (Madison, 1994, pp. 46–47), I learned that the bodies, experiences, and voices of Black women do the important work of communicatively carrying culture. Miss Bertha’s rhythmic voice, at the intersections of race, gender, class, and age, taught me to listen through my anger for stories of faith and progress.

After Madison (1994), I began to wonder if I could channel my anger productively and manage to see more than just red. I imagined myself peering purposefully inward to question how I understand who I am, our world, and how I move through our world. Slowly grasping how to do so, I listened closely when Lorde (1984) told me that “Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change” (p. 127). Given the vulnerable enormity of doing such work from a Black feminist standpoint, in response to the queries of why? Why try, why write, why speak, why stay, why struggle?, akin to Jones in “sista docta,” “I believe that the work can be transformative” (Jones, 2003, p. 240). Also, mirroring Houston (1992) and Collins (2009), I feel obligated to use my access to class and academic privilege to advocate for women who look like me to have access to voice. I do so in pursuit of being and becoming a Black woman intellectual (Collins, 2009): “Black women intellectuals are neither all academics nor found primarily in the Black middle class. Instead, all U. S. Black women who somehow contribute to Black feminist thought as critical social theory are deemed to be ‘intellectuals’” (Collins, 2009, p. 17). Inspired by Collins (2009), I more clearly came to understand the need to consciously leverage my PhD to work against oppressive forces; having a PhD accompanied by middle-class status, in and of itself, simply is not enough.

These Black feminist authors and activists, named and unnamed, offered me what bell hooks (1990) refers to as “homeplace.” Their offering of homeplace as a space to speak my angry biracial Black female truth is quite meaningful since I have been wandering somewhere amid and between an “outsider within” (Collins, 1986) and an insider outside for so long. Jointly, they built a platform from which Black academic women can autoethnographically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood. Their foundational commitments to self-determination, intersectionality, and strategic essentialism (Boylorn, 2008; Collins, 2009; A. Y. Davis, 1981; O. I. Davis, 1999; hooks, 1981; Houston & Davis, 2002; Jones, 2003; Lorde, 1984) are invaluable to creating bodies of academic work that include our subjugated voices (Collins, 2009). Finding the productive energy of my anger between their lines, it became fair, real, and speakable. In this article, it is their labor that I wish to honor and extend through the articulation of BFA as a theoretical and methodological means to resist the hegemonic imposition of domination.

Locating Common Ground: Black Feminist Thought and Autoethnography

In the field of communication, autoethnographic “Other stories” (Calafell & Moreman, 2009) that work against systemic forces such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism from the perspectives of women of color remain rare.³ As a methodology positioned to embrace subjectivity, engage critical self-reflexivity, speak rather than being spoken for, interrogate power, and resist oppression (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Denzin, 1997; Jones, 2005; Warren, 2001), autoethnography can be productively coupled with Black feminist thought for Black female

scholars to “look in (at themselves) and out (at the world) connecting the personal to the cultural” (Boylorn, 2008, p. 413). In addition, Black women with access to academic privilege can use BFA as a means to speak to, with, and at times for Black women “who have no direct access to the public forums of our conferences, journals, and books” (Houston, 1992, p. 55). Affirming Collins’s (2009) assertion that the experiential insight of Black women offers a “unique angle of vision” (p. 39) despite our orchestrated exclusion from the epistemological realm, Davis (1999) says, “Black women have been invisible to the dominant culture; their unique ways of knowing and understanding the world have not been known” (p. 152).

Positioned to contest this absence, the formal conceptualization⁴ of BFA renders Black women more visible in the realm of autoethnography, which in the academy is more often associated with and published by White women (Calafell, 2007; Calafell & Moreman, 2009). Such writing exposes, politicizes, and narrates the “subjugated knowledge” (Collins, 2009) birthed from a standpoint informed by intersectionality (Beale, 1970; Crenshaw, 1995; King, 1988). Taking the multitude of systemic vulnerabilities that Black women can encounter into account allows us to intersectionally map how, for example, feminist efforts have been undermined by racism; racial unity stymied by classism; and class consciousness deferred to preserve patriarchy (Collins, 2009; Davis, 1981; hooks, 2000). Black feminist autoethnography also offers a narrative means for Black women to highlight struggles common to Black womanhood without erasing the diversity among Black women coupled with strategically “talking back” (hooks, 1989) to systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, classism).

Breathing life into the meaning of “talking back,” bell hooks offers:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (1989, p. 9)

Drawing from her insight, fusing Black feminist thought and autoethnography together necessitates an explicit commitment to move from merely looking at life toward a standpoint rooted in interrogation, resistance, and praxis. Voicing this critical commitment, Collins (2009) says, “knowledge for knowledge’s sake is not enough—Black feminist thought must both be tied to Black women’s lived experiences and aim to better those experiences in some fashion” (p. 35). In alignment with the overarching commitments of Black feminist thought to “subjugated knowledge” (Collins, 2009) derived from lived experiences, self-definition as empowerment, and intersectional strategies of resistance (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1984), BFA as a means to voice is obligated to raise social consciousness regarding the everyday struggles common to Black womanhood; embrace self-definition as a means for Black women to be labeled, acknowledged, and remembered as they wish; humanize Black women at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression; resist the imposition of controlling imagery; and self-reflexively account for how Black women can reproduce systemic oppression.

Although this call for BFA likely reads simple from mouth to ear, it is important to acknowledge that despite a determined and versatile pursuit of scholarly visibility,

there are relatively few Black female communication scholars who have published accounts of their personal experiences with and/or critiques of oppression (Allen, 1998; Davis, 1999; Harris, 2007; Jones, 2003; Patton, 2004), and even fewer who explicitly mark their work as autoethnography (Boylorn, 2008; Durham, 2004; Hendrix, 2011). I suspect, feeling rather queasy myself about this venture, that our absence is perpetuated by multiple forces. Not only have Black women been taught and told via dominant discourses that our lived experiences are insignificant but we have also learned hard lessons around the consequences of speaking our truths to power. Furthermore, many Black female scholars struggle to achieve “real” scholar status as academics whose work is widely published, read, respected, and celebrated (Davis, 1999; Hendrix, 2002, 2005, 2010). Always already concerned with the struggles of publishing race-related research, which is often received with accusations of self-interest, narcissism, and vendetta (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Hendrix, 2005, 2010; Orbe et al., 2010), choosing a contested and subjective method such as autoethnography (Ellis, 2009; Shields, 2000) runs the risk of providing more ammunition for those with a vested interest in silencing our voices.

Feeling the promise of BFA as I move forward, fueled by the churn of my anger, I have no intention of keeping the personal private because treading lightly when it comes to racism and sexism is killing me softly. To ensure that I do not die a slow death or at least do not pass away in silent demise, I am going to tell you all that I can about my anger—in anger, through anger, and with anger—to contest the oft-assumed notion that an angry Black woman is a crazy, domineering sapphire. Rooted in the social institution of slavery and popularized by the 1950s’ television show *Amos ’n Andy* (hooks, 1981), Black women as sapphires are characterized as evil, dangerous, and vengeful via their rage, hostility, and conniving wit (hooks, 1981; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982). Describing the sapphire according to dominant ideology, Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2003) offer “over bearing, bossy, sharp-tongued, loud-mouthed, controlling and, of course, emasculating” (p. xxxiii).

Reminding us of the sapphire’s contemporary presence via the “angry black woman” (ABW) stereotype, Madison (2009) deconstructs public discourse surrounding First Lady Michelle Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign and argues, “To stereotype her was both easier and more compatible with normalized notions of gender and blackness than to engage the more complicated genealogy of black rage in the USA” (p. 323). Importantly delineating between Black women as the stereotypical ABW and Lorde’s (1984) articulation of anger as righteous and useful, Madison offers, “To disassemble the stereotype and attempt to comprehend the contexts of black women’s anger opens the possibility of radically altering assumptions about *belonging* relative to the rewards, consequences, and constructions of citizenship” (2009, p. 323; emphasis in original). In the section that follows, I articulate my anger productively as an example of BFA.

Angry Black Feminist Autoethnographic Reflections

Preparing to encounter my anger on the page, I imagine we will mutually (albeit likely at different moments and for different reasons) feel unnerved, upset, and unsettled—perhaps even bludgeoned by my candor. Nourishing the possibility that fury can bring, Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us that angry emotions

will not kill us if we can articulate them with precision, if we listen to the content of what is said with at least as much intensity as we defend ourselves against the manner of saying. (p. 131)

Finding hope in her words, I move closer to the risk of BFA with watery eyes and, like Smith, “holding my breath . . . and putting on my body armor” (Orbe et al., 2010, p. 185). To calm the flood of fear, I look back to Lorde (1984) one more time for encouragement:

We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. (Lorde, 1984, p. 42)

As her words dance between my ears, I garner a sense of agency. Swallowing her sweet candor like a lit match, my anger flares up, urging me to fight for myself on the page harder than I ever have before because even if I shut up in all the ways the world tells me to as a Black/White, White/Black female Other, *I will still be no less afraid*.

This realization swells my anger to the point of overflow like a pot of water that has reached a scalding boil. I feel enraged that much of my daily labor is anchored in convincing others of my humanity. Every day, I encounter the price of resisting what we all have been socialized to believe I am: a hot mama, a money-hungry whore, a public charge. Crouching in the lonely corners of my heart, I fear the lesson that our histories preach:

Cerebral Minds and Humanized Bodies of Black Women UNWELCOME HERE

Despite my angst, I position my access to voice as a form of academic and class privilege. Although forces of systemic oppression have been and continue to be imposed upon my life, to voice my anger reflects privilege alongside marginalization because many without reprieve or recourse live with their anger, ending their lives long before the promise of death delivers. Buttressed by those who left a trail, I have reached a critical turning point in my “personal/academic” (Ono, 1997) life: I am more afraid of silence than I am of the harsh response my voice will likely beckon. At least I think I am. As I catch and release my anger through BFA, I speak not for all Black women but for myself in the hopes that my voice will echo and affirm the experiences of women who look like me.

Tracing My Anger

Countless times in my life, I have been asked from someone using an exasperated tone, “Rachel, why are you *so* angry?,” as if the expression of my anger should come with a warning sign, an apology, and a cleanup crew. On most occasions my response is to pose questions back by saying, “Look into the world. How can I *not* be angry? How can you *not* be angry?” On a day when sass spills off the tip of my tongue, I might add, “How can the *whole damn world* NOT be angry?” Confronting these inquiries, I have discovered the usefulness of tracing my Black female rage through and among the lives of women who look like me: their perspectives,

experiences, actions, lives, and deaths. Here I offer the same, in case you too are wondering why I am so damn angry.

I am angry at the White Europeans who implanted the roots of systemic violence and callous disregard in the United States when they built the social institution of slavery. I am angry at the Black Africans who sold women who look like them into that same treacherous system. I am angry that the conditions of slavery were so vile that many Black mothers knew in their hearts that killing their babies offered them more relief than living ever would. I am angry at Black men who maim and brutalize the bodies of Black women and use racism as a justification for their violent choices. I am angry at the pacifying effort of dominant society to offer remembrance as if it were an equal exchange for the loss of life. For example, I find the convenient presence of Blackness in the public eye during Black History Month troubling because our realities as people of color are shaped and shaded according to racist ideologies all year round. I am angry that Black History Month can be more accurately titled Black Male History Month, given the remembrance of Black women on the margins of the margins. The example that strikes closest to my heart is that Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., as almighty as he became, was in high school when Rosa Parks began building the foundation for collective resistance that birthed the civil rights movement (McGuire, 2010). Knowing that Parks, one of few Black women nationally and internationally acknowledged for her advocacy, is most often remembered secondary to King brings forth the painful frustration that only erasure and loss can bring.

I am angry and dismayed that we forget to remember Black women. At a moment when our nation was on a postracial high, I found myself slung low in the depths of despair. When Senator Barack Obama began campaigning for the Democratic presidential nomination, the excitement of millions of Americans was tangible. I too got chills at the possibility of having a president of color and I too cried tears of joy at his inauguration, and yet my anger, at the absence of Shirley Chisholm's memory, has yet to subside. As the first Black woman elected to Congress in 1968 and the first woman and African American to campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1972 (Chisholm, 1970; Lynch & Sissel, 2004), where was her name on our national lips? Most often I heard the mention of Jesse Jackson's campaigns in 1984 and 1988, although he too had followed in the footsteps of Chisholm. Once again, the inspiring labor of Black women rendered infuriatingly obsolete.

Placing my own formal education on my angry line, I was never academically inspired by the works of women who looked like me in school because they were not brought into my classrooms. With the exception of a few doctoral courses that I took near the end of more than 20 years as a student, Black women were largely absent in my studies. I was not required to learn their life stories or admire their accomplishments the way that I was taught about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln as early presidents of the United States, Elizabeth Cady Stanton as a suffragette, or Louisa May Alcott as the author of *Little Women*. You can imagine my wrath when I learned about Henrietta Lacks for the first time when I was 29. She was a poor Black woman born in the segregated South who became one of the most important people in the history of medical science (Skloot, 2010). Her cells, harvested unethically in the 1950s before and after she died from cervical cancer, were the first human cells to grow outside of the human body. Known as HeLa cells, they have been used in more than 60,000 experiments and to develop treatments for

diseases ranging from basic influenza to ghastly forms of cancer (Cohen, 2011; Skloot, 2010). The questions that call my anger front and center are: What if I did not have the resources to educate myself? What if I had never earned a PhD? Let us not forget that most women who look like me never walk the halls of the ivory tower. This grim reality necessitates another question: Why aren't more Black women positioned to write our lives into multiple levels of formal education? Moreover, why are the works of those who have written themselves into our histories typically not assigned by teachers?⁵

I AM Angry. I am angry at the absurdity of our absence.

I AM Angry. I am angry at my silence and yours; at my complicity and yours; at my world and ours.

I AM Angry.

My Body Is Not Your Mediated Playground

Turning toward a contemporary killing ground for the Black female body, the media is like an execution squad from which there is no escape. Everywhere I turn as a "Black feminist spectator" (Madison, 1995; hooks, 1992), I see images of my body held hostage as Other; entrapped in the controlling imagery of the mammy, jezebel, sapphire, matriarch, and the more contemporary welfare queen, hoodrat, freak, crazy Black bitch, superwoman, or some combination thereof (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1989, 1992; Hull et al., 1982; Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001; Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). In the trenches of "Black sexual politics" (Collins, 2005) that inform who I understand myself to be and how I am perceived and treated by others, I find myself constantly struggling for liberation in the airwaves, on television and the silver screen, in the classroom, and on the sidewalk. Reflecting on the time and energy that this struggle requires, my rage manifests in waves of unfairness. The body that I cherish and the mind that I have worked hard to cultivate are continually maimed in song after song, image after image, and plot after plot.

I am angry at every fan who buys any album that refers to any Black woman as a bitch, a ho, or a trick. Who I am is up to no one other than me, regardless of what I say or how I look, and yet these stereotypes are scrawled upon the backs (and across the asses) of women who look like me day after day. I am also angry at *The Princess and the Frog* being celebrated as a sign of societal progress when Disney created the first Black princess character 72 years after the first White princess, Snow White, debuted. Yes, little Black girls can love her, and yes, the film can be entertaining, but let us not forget that the exclusion of a Black princess was not accidental. Perhaps even more telling is that Princess Tiana spent more time on screen as a green amphibian than she did as a Black princess.⁶ An equal source of dismay, Tyra Banks makes me furious for not understanding why having an entire episode of *America's Next Top Model* with models appearing in Blackface is demeaning and problematic. In response to my frustration, mirrored by the negative criticism she received in the media, Ms. Banks offered:

I want to be very clear: I, in no way, put my "Top Models" in blackface . . . I'm a black woman. I am proud. I love my people and the struggle that we have gone through continues and the last thing that I would

ever do is be a part of something that degraded my race. I'm sorry to anybody that watched "Top Model" and was offended by the pictures because they didn't understand the real story behind them or even if you did see the whole episode and you were still offended, I truly apologize because that is not my intention My intention is to spread beauty and break down barriers. (Access Hollywood, 2009)

In response, I can accept her apology, and yet all I can think to say in a tone that discloses my angry temper is: Given the historical degradation of Blackface performances (Patton, 2008), how in the hell does painting light and White women dark help "spread beauty" and "break down barriers"?

Not quite finished with media moguls, I am also angry at Tyler Perry for not using his talent to represent Black women as strong, talented women in love with themselves for who they are and what they have to offer, as opposed to the cascade of controlling imagery that unfolds in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, the series of *Madea* films, and recently released *For Colored Girls*. Of particular disgust are the pervasive stereotypes in his screenplay adaptation *For Colored Girls* based upon Shange's (1975) revolutionary text *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. Her original work, celebrated as a "black feminist bible" (Tillet, 2010), was revived by Perry only to be invaded by his patriarchal privilege. Rightly celebrated as the highest paid man in the entertainment business and the first Black owner of a major film studio (Aitken, 2011; Segal, 2009), I am angry at him for not aspiring to positive and progressive representations of Black womanhood.

Intellectually, I know the media labors to take Black female bodies down because if they did not chuck us into the spoils of inferiority and exile then someone would have to explain the lack of positive representations of Black women. I also know that those in media do not want to explain themselves to my sorrowful rage; no one wants to answer to Black female disgust fueled by centuries of indignation—and no one will, because no one makes them. I can hear the inklings of "Rachel, calm down. It's only entertainment." In a one-word response: No. No, I will not calm down, take it back a notch, or sweep the cancerous mass of controlling imagery under the proverbial rug. It matters; media representation matters! Like Collins (2005), I am not arguing that media representations determine behavior or treatment; however, media does have the power to shape, influence, and suggest who people are and subsequently how they can acceptably be treated (Collins, 2005; Madison, 2005). For Black women, this reality is bleak, hence even in the absence of ourselves in popular culture we are defined against dominant notions of White femininity and the characteristics that we are hegemonically presumed not to have: innocence, beauty, worth, and virtue.⁷ This relentless assault of negative media representations on our humanity is consequential (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1992; Jordan-Zachery, 2009); such practices continually foreclose the possibilities of being known and understood beyond the pretense of controlling imagery that promotes dehumanizing, and for Black women in particular internalized, understandings of Black women as inferior, unintelligent, dependent, idle, and undeserving (Atwater, 2009; Boylorn, 2008; Joseph, 2009; Madison, 1995, 2009).

In moments of recoil, my anger morphs into a bottomless ache for justice in media representation. I want to turn on the television and see my radiant self reflected back to me. I want to see an intellectual Black woman who is not figuratively or literally screwing her way to the top, as if her mind cannot get her there. I

want to see the courage, strength, and wisdom of Black women applauded and admired. I want to see a Black woman prized for her cunning smarts without being ridiculed. Rocking to an inner melody of desperation, I want someone, some show, or some song to choose to tell me that I matter and make millions!

I AM Angry. I am angry at the repressive presence of Black women in the media.

I AM Angry. I am angry that the media has frowned upon my biracial Black female body my entire life. To those who oversee the institutionalized degradation of Black women in the media, you have just been served. Take note: my body is no longer your playground.

I AM Angry.

Remembering Our Interdependence and Saying My Prayers

I do not identify with organized religion, and yet I do say my prayers often. I pray for mutual recognition, reciprocal appreciation, and joint resistance. I want people to gaze at one another with a wistful sense of hope that guides their bruised hands and broken fingers, crushed by others before, to reach out across their differences again. Speaking to our struggle steeped in the politics of coexistence and voice, bell hooks told us long ago, “Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (hooks, 1989, p. 6). In essence, Black women need to flood the airways with our pride, pain, and anger, and to do so we need unconditional love and support from those who look like us and those who do not. While our voices will sound different at the intersections of our identities and be negotiated by the privilege (if any) we have access to, we have got to speak up at home, work, town-hall meetings, church, parent/teacher conferences, bus stops, conferences, clinics, gyms, and in the media—everywhere, all the time.

We need to get used to the sound of our own voices demanding space and respect because each one of us deserves it, and we must understand that we are all worthy of the energy of another. In this moment, I am reminded of the astute insight of Maria Stewart when she said, “You can but die if you make the attempt; and we shall certainly die if you do not” (qtd. in Richardson, 1987, p. 38). Her outspokenness strengthens my belief that our interdependent futures are clearly written on the oppressive walls of our times unless we erase, rebuild, and rewrite them ourselves. Maintaining faith in humanity, Black women have got to resist, imagine, and insist upon a different world.

If your tongue tingles with fear at the notion of holding your resistant voice and your ears cringe anticipating the words they will hear in response, I want you to know that mine do too. If your stomach feels ill at the thought of publicly ranting, I want you to know that mine does too. I have cried until I felt cold inside trying to find my way home to myself, and my cold tears have turned my cheeks hot trying to find my way home to you. Moving closer to my angry truth, I really just want people to see ourselves in one another. A new sense of accountability to self and other rocks my soul when I understand myself as every Black woman who has been abused, forgotten, and demoralized. I am every Black woman who craves to be cherished,

protected, and loved only to be systemically scorned while praying to the high heavens that her mind, body, and spirit can withstand another brutal blow. Embracing the interconnectedness of shared humanity, I am part of her and you are part of me. My call for people to see ourselves in one another is not meant to minimize the significance of our unique individuality at the intersections. Yet despite our differences, I am hopeful that we can and will choose to do more for each other.

I AM Angry that the world remains locked in scornful gaze upon Black women.

I AM Angry that marginalized populations remain entrapped in divisive politics that mask the potential of building coalitions in the midst of our differences.

I AM Angry. Not a hysterical, ill, harebrained, eccentric, nutty, foolish, childish, juvenile, wild, savage, primitive, uncivilized, boorish, crude, inept, asinine, screwy, loony, cracking up, or crazy sapphire but justly and justifiably angry.

We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain; we have been knowers, but we have not been known. (Braxton, 1989, p. 1)

A Momentary End

Exhausted as I near the end of my endless Black feminist autoethnographic reflections, my rage is accompanied by the realization that what I want is for people to acknowledge with a sense of urgency that Black women—all Black women—matter. Collectively, I want us to remember that Sarah Baartman was dissected and displayed in the name of scientific knowledge (Fausto-Sterling, 1995) and Margaret Garner killed her daughter to spare her from the horrors of slavery (Mintz, 2009). I want us to imagine the price paid by Angela Davis when she was forced to run from a country that was supposed to be her home (Davis, 1974)⁸ and Anita Hill when she was sacrificed at the stoop of White patriarchy for testifying, at the call of federal subpoena, against Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment (Morrison, 1992).⁹ I want us to respect Desiree Washington for her courage to name Mike Tyson, the youngest heavyweight champion of the world in 1986, as her rapist (ABC News, 1992).¹⁰ Combined with my desire that we enlighten our collective memory, I want us to acknowledge the struggle that systems of oppression necessitate for women of color to endure, succeed, and even just breathe.

While BFA cannot rectify the repeated failures of dominant society to respect the humanity of Black women nor eradicate the harm that Black women have already and continue to endure, what BFA can do is mark our determined presence and rich contributions within and beyond the academy; document our strength amid the grind of imposed struggles; serve as an emotive release; and perhaps most important, preserve the collective wisdom of our lived experiences. In this vein, BFA emerges as a conduit to resistant voice and situates Black women as not only knowers, who read dominant culture as a means to survive, but also as known through our own words and expressions.

While I am convinced of the power of BFA to flourish as an academic means to highlight and challenge the oppressive forces that Black women encounter in their

daily lives, both its potential and power will be undermined if it is not used to build humanizing alliances at the intersections of marginalization and privilege. Reminding us of the complexity of such work, Anzaldúa (1990) says:

Alliance work is the attempt to shift positions, change positions, reposition ourselves regarding our individual and collective identities. In alliance we are confronted with the problem of how we share or don't share space, how we can position ourselves with individuals or groups who are different from and at odds with each other, how can we reconcile one's love for diverse groups when members of these groups do not love each other, cannot relate to each other, and don't know how to work together. (p. 219)

Picking her words up off the page, I understand alliance building as difficult, daring, and indispensable. This is not to say that certain identities cannot be rendered more or less salient, identity-based issues cannot be positioned as more or less significant, or people must ideologically agree to come together; but it is to say that if systems of oppression work in unison, then so should those who are targeted by oppressive forces. Emphasizing our vested interest in listening, feeling, and taking seriously the autoethnographic reflections of multiple Others, Lorde (1983), targeted simultaneously by racism, sexism, and heterosexism, tells us:

I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long until they appear to destroy you. (p. 9)

In this vein, it becomes essential to understand BFA not only as a means of resistance but also as instrumental to building community. In short, the stories we tell about our lives matter. Stories can inspire self-reflexivity, expose the intricate workings of power, and bring complicity and complacency with domination to light; they can also behold "resistive power and liberatory potential" (Flores, 2000, p. 692) and spark the possibility of identification and trust between and among different identities and interests.

Having spoken through BFA, I need time to rest and heal. My body as a bridge between private and public/personal and academic/self and other (Anzaldúa, 1990; hooks, 1989; Ono, 1997) feels bruised and battered. My fingertips feel injured from punching the keyboard, and my head hurts from racing to keep up with my heart. I feel drained to the max but remain committed now more than ever to seeing my anger through to praxis.

I want to see the day when bodies in all colors and shapes and sizes and textures are regarded as precious rather than projects to be worked on, up, and over.

I want to see the day when people hold themselves and each other accountable for thriving upon the pain of others.

I want all women of all colors to come together to speak for ourselves, to bear witness to the damage we have done, and to brace one another for the struggles that remain.

I AM an Angry Black Woman.

I AM an Angry Black Woman who feels hopeful, sees promise, and desires progress.

Notes

1. I choose to identify as a biracial Black woman to mark both avowal and ascription in regard to identity performance. Hence, I identify myself as biracial to mark both my Black and White cultural roots. However, my body is often read solely as Black. I mark this as a political choice that I recognize can be read as offensive. For example, I am often asked, "Why can't you just be Black?" which I interpret as a request, from White and Black folks alike, for me to be "Black Period"—as in easily stamped "understood." While I understand the desire for simplicity that I interpret backing such requests, in alignment with Collins (2009), who calls attention to the rich diversity among Black women, I prefer to acknowledge all of who I am as opposed to picking and choosing among binary oppositions.
2. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education* ("The Profession," 2011) Almanac Issue (reporting on the most recent statistics available), in the fall of 2009 in the United States 4.7% of full, 6.6% of associate, and 7.9% of assistant professors identified as Black and female.
3. While "Other stories" (Calafell & Moreman, 2009) written by women of color in the academy remain rare, especially in national communication journals, there are a number of powerful, edited collections that address this topic. For examples, see Berry and Mizelle (2006); James and Farmer (1993); and Niles and Gordon (2011).
4. The use of "formal conceptualization" here is done so intentionally to mark that Black female activists and scholars such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, Maria Stewart, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Zora Neale Hurston, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, June Jordan, Angela Davis, Michelle Wallace, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Barbara Ransby, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Patricia Hill Collins, and innumerable others have been engaged in the art of rhetoric, narrative, and autoethnographic writing for years without the use of formal academic labels. This list of Black feminist activists is by no means complete. For compilations of Black feminist works, see Bambara (2005); Guy-Sheftall (1995); Hull, Scott, and Smith (1982); Lerner (1972); and Smith (2000).
5. For eye-opening discussions of the lack of academic works by and about the lived experiences of Black women and critiques of how systems of oppression constrain the visibility of the works that have been published, particularly in the field of communication, see Allen (2002); Davis (1998, 1999); and Houston and Davis (2002).
6. For popular and academic discussions of the celebration and controversy surrounding *The Princess and the Frog*, see Barnes (2009); Jones (2009); and Lester (2010).
7. See Madison (1995) for a rich Black feminist critique of the ways that the representation of Vivian, the White female main character in *Pretty Woman*, reproduces dominant notions of Black female inferiority despite the absence of a Black female main character.
8. Angela Davis was a political activist when she was named as an accomplice in a mass shooting that occurred in August 1970; she was accused because some of the guns used were registered in her name (Davis, 1974; James, 1998). Believing that the charges were unjust and based on her association with the Communist and Black Panther parties, coupled with her fear of the U.S. government's inhumane practices, she went on the run for two months and was listed as one of the FBI's Most Wanted. Captured in 1970, she was arraigned on charges of conspiracy, kidnapping, and murder and then fully acquitted in 1972 (James, 1998).
9. Anita Hill was summoned by the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee, as a survivor of sexual harassment, to testify against her perpetrator, Clarence Thomas, when he was nominated to the Supreme Court in 1991. Forced to testify at hearings called to determine whether

Thomas would be confirmed as the 106th Supreme Court Justice, Hill's testimony was aired worldwide via the media, which resulted in racist and sexist criticism being directed at Hill despite her position as a survivor of gender violence. Despite her credible and graphic testimony, Hill was ostracized as a traitorous sapphire while Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court. Illustrating the ongoing nature of violence against Black women, Hill was recently contacted by Virginia Thomas, the wife of Clarence Thomas: Virginia Thomas left a phone message in October 2010 requesting an apology from Hill and an explanation for "why you did what you did with my husband" (Savage, 2010). For popular and academic discussion of the significance of the hearings, see Bell (2004); Gibbs (1991); Morrison (1992); and Smolowe (1991).

10. On the heels of the Thomas–Hill hearings, Desiree Washington testified against Tyson for raping her in his hotel room in 1991 in *State of Indiana v. Michael G. Tyson*. She did so despite prolific threats, accusations that she was lying, and being stereotyped as a gold-digging jezebel. Tyson was sentenced to six years, served only three, and was then welcomed back to his Southington, Ohio, home by fans and a parade, led by Reverend Al Sharpton, in Harlem, New York (Coleman, 1995; Simms, 1995). For popular and academic discussion of the significance of this case, see Brown (1999); Roberts and Garrison (1994); Rosenfeld (1992); Steptoe (1992); and White (1999).

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