

Resist + Reimagine: Decolonizing The Young, Black Mind

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Abstract

This research project examines the Black child's educational and cultural experience mediated through the lens of America's "imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" ideology as defined by cultural critic bell hooks (hooks 2013). Through auto ethnography and selected case studies reported in the media, I will discuss the role of acts of resistance as a means of survival for young, Black Americans. Questions of interest are: (1) Why must we resist? (2) Why must we reimagine? (3) What role does (re)imagination play in the movement for Black lives?

Keywords: imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, decolonization, politics of blame, politics of accountability, acts of resistance, reimagining

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I don't remember the first time I heard the phrase "Knowledge is power," but I do remember wholeheartedly believing it. When I was no older than five years of age, I remember my two older sisters coming home from school chanting, "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Their cheerful mnemonic devices settled into my young, susceptible brain, and at the time I was a willing host.

The only stable aspect of my childhood was instability. The acquisition of knowledge was my earliest survival mechanism. I desperately needed to be grounded in something, anything to make it out of childhood alive. I chose to learn to forget. From a young age, knowledge colonized my mind and embedded itself deep into the core of my being.

When my Southern education taught me that the enslavement of my ancestors was both natural and necessary, I believed it. When Black History Month taught me that the fight for our rights ended with the ratification of the 24th amendment, I believed it. I was one of the first ones in class to memorize the Pledge of Allegiance, "...One nation, under God, indivisible, and liberty and justice for all." I felt each one of those words in my chest as my heart pumped red, White, and blue for America every morning. When my music teacher forced the words of the American National Anthem down my throat, I regurgitated each verse as if the words were my own, "Oh, say does that star spangled banner yet wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

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Background

When I reimagine my childhood, I visualize a pre-six-year-old version of myself. I remember her just as she appears in a series of photographs I inherited from my maternal grandmother after her mother passed away my sophomore year of undergrad at University of Rochester. A 1996 photograph of my father, mother, two older sisters, myself, and my younger brother now exists in an old, simple wooden frame on the bottom shelf of the tv stand in my cozy 350-square-foot apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It's the only professional studio portrait we've ever taken together.

My father stands tall in the right third of the frame behind my family in his clean, black Sunday's best suit and tie. The rest of us huddle around my baby brother, Jonathan. Let it be known that my mother radiates the purest form of beauty in this photograph. Sitting on a stool in front of my father with Jonathan cradled in her right arm, she's wearing gold earrings and red lipstick. I stand to her right with my left arm subtly resting on Jonathan's shoulder. Jonathan and I are the only ones sporting bright colors. He's dressed in predominantly blue and White, and I'm wearing a pastel colored flower patterned dress, the kind with the White, poofy, ruffles and decorative bow tie. My oldest sister, Rayanna, and my second oldest sister, Joella, stand awkwardly behind my mother, Jonathan, and me. Joella is holding in a laugh – probably something the

photographer said, - and Rayanna proudly flaunts her bucked teeth. All three of us girls are young enough to have plaits and barrettes in our hair.

I enjoy reflecting on that moment in time and space, because I long for that untainted innocence. I long for a time before watching the brutally violent murders of black and brown bodies on my Facebook News Feed was the everyday norm. I long for a time before the school to prison pipeline, before the Dakota Access Pipeline. I long for a time before our judicial system rewarded killer cops with paid vacation leave. I long for a time before racism, before Islamophobia, before transphobia, before gentrification, before genocide, before colonization; I long for a time before the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. I long for those fields of flowers and White poofy clouds in the blue sky.

Simultaneously, I vehemently dislike reflecting on that moment in time and space. I hate confronting racism's grip around the throats of my family and Black families worldwide. I hate confronting racial discrimination in the workplace and its negative effects on the financial security of Black folks. I hate confronting the systemic imprisonment and killings of our black community role models. I hate confronting racist educational institutions and the war on the young, black mind. I hate confronting the dismantling of the Black family by the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. I hate confronting the fact that the happy, stable family depicted in this photograph is just as fabricated as the American education system's dominate narrative of slavery.

For years I obsessed over this photograph and my conflicting sentiments towards it. I was consumed by the idea of returning to a state of childlike innocence. I knew ignorance wasn't the answer, but I couldn't imagine myself leading a happy, stable life if

I continued carrying around all of this baggage. I couldn't imagine myself leading a happy, stable life under the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. I was stuck. I was stuck on the innocent young, Black girl in the photograph; The young, Black girl in the photograph was stuck on being freed. I was a victim, and I wanted to be freed.

My victimhood ended Summer 2015. When 21-year-old White-supremacist, terrorist Dylann Roof walked away with his life after gunning down and killing nine Black people at a prayer service at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015, I realized innocence wasn't the answer. When Sandra Bland was unlawfully detained and hatefully murdered by Officer Brian Encinia in Waller County, Texas on July 13, 2015, I realized that waiting to be freed wasn't the answer. During my first semester of graduate school, I chose to decolonize my mind. I chose to unlearn everything the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy told me to believe. Everything. I left behind my vision of passive innocence and victimhood, and I chose to save myself. I will return to my personal narrative of resistance later in this paper.

Methodology

The first author I read in this process of unlearning was bell hooks. I was never the same again. In *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*, hooks discusses the fatal flaws of Black-and-White, either-or thinking. She states "Holding onto binary thinking actually keeps dominator culture in place, for one aspect of that culture is the projection outward onto an enemy, an "other," whenever things go wrong. And this casting of blame in turn helps to promote a culture of victimization," (hooks 2013). In a culture of victimization, Black folks are *always* the oppressed, and White folks are

always the oppressor. A culture of victimization does not leave room for Black folks to transcend victimhood, trapping us in a constant state of suffering. It upholds and reinforces oppression as an unchanging *reality*.

If we are to transcend victimhood, hooks suggests “moving past the ideology of blame to a politics of accountability,” (hooks 2013). In the world of injustice, the victim’s terminal, yet passive responsibility is to place blame. Once placed, blame demands no action from the wrongdoer. The act of blaming is a one-and-done construction of good and bad, White and Black, oppressor and oppressed. Blame’s purpose is to categorize and label that which is good and that which is bad; Conversation halts the moment blame is located. Dylann Roof murdered nine churchgoers on June 17, 2015. Police and media outlets identified him, blamed him, and put him away. That blame did absolutely nothing to prevent Sandra Bland’s murder by the hands of Officer Brian Encinia less than one month later only five states away.

On the other hand, accountability provides space for discourse and critique. It changes the conversation from a stagnant state of permanence to a living web of cultural contracts. The act is no longer performed and perpetuated by a victim. Instead, it is *lived* and upheld by an individual or an arrangement of two or more individuals and/or groups. Accountability asks questions such as “Who am I accountable to and why?” and “What are my responsibilities in each of my cultural contracts?” These questions expand our thinking beyond the binary and into the complexity of overarching systemic issues. According to hooks, “a politics of accountability” could apply singular issues to larger contexts. For example, Dylann Roof’s act of terrorism against the Black community emphasizes “that all White people benefit from the privileges accrued from

racist exploitation past and present and therefore are accountable for changing and transforming White supremacy and racism,” (hooks, 2013). This is not to say that holding the system accountable in this particular act of terrorism would have prevented Sandra Bland’s death. It is only to say that adopting a politics of accountability is necessary in understanding and dismantling oppressive systems at large.

Before we can apply a politics of accountability, we must first pinpoint and define the overarching systems, or ideologies, which govern and permeate every facet of American society. Ideology “consists of broad mental and moral frameworks, or ‘grids,’ that social groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right and wrong, true or false, important or unimportant,” (Ferber, 2014). In her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks coins the term ‘imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy’ to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of American politics in particular (hooks, 2005). “Meaningful resistance to dominator culture demands of all of us a willingness to accurately identify the various systems that work together to promote injustice, exploitation, and oppression,” Hook proclaims. “To name interlocking systems of domination is one way to disrupt our wrong-minded reliance on dualistic thinking,” (hooks, 2005).

Below is the definition for each interwoven political system hooks identifies in dominator culture as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

- 1) Imperialism – the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas.

- 2) White Supremacy – the belief that the White race is inherently superior to other races and that White people should have control over people of other races.
- 3) Capitalism – an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.
- 4) Patriarchy - social organization marked by the control by men of a disproportionately large share of power.

These interlaced systems are riddled with the complexities of identity fluidity, victimhood, and accountability. They render “it impossible for any of us to claim that we are absolutely and always victims, calling attention to the reality of our accountability, however relative. When we are accountable, we eschew the role of victim and are able to claim the space of our individual and collective agency,” (hooks, 2013). With this agency, we begin to resist and dismantle the old, while reimagining and enacting new systems of existing and coexisting.

Now, I will return to the American education system’s curriculum on colonization through the eyes of the young, Black student. hooks also addresses America’s affinity for Christopher Columbus’ voyage from Spain across the Atlantic Ocean to present day North and South America. “If this version of diversity, the center of imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy as it has been constructed by the dominator culture remains unchanged; the addition of differences does not alter the construction of the center,” (hooks, 2013). If American ideology has the ability to taint and destroy even the

most seemingly innocent children's' poems, imagine what power it has over the intricate workings of our education system at large.

Not only does this beloved childhood poem normalize imperialism, but it also leaves no room for the narrative of colonization as told by the non-White settler. It erases the "other" altogether in favor of a falsely fabricated notion of cross-cultural unity between the Indigenous peoples of this land, Black folks, and the White settler. The "knowledge" gained from these teachings is not rooted in truth. Instead, this "knowledge" is yet one example of our imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy's use of fabricated history needed enforce and maintain its power structures.

The American education system has also fabricated "knowledge" about the role and contribution of Black folks in the development of the United States. hooks reminds us of the racist biases which shape historical scholarship as a means by which to form and reform systems of power. She states, "Information about African explorers who came to the Americas before Columbus was suppressed along with elementary knowledge of the Black folks who came as explorers and immigrants who were never slaves," (hooks, 2013). Not only does America's slave narrative normalize racism, but similar to the narrative of colonialism, it also leaves no room for the narrative of slavery as experienced by the non-White settler. It erases the "other" altogether to make room for the narrative of the White savior. Similar to the White saviors who "rescued" my "weak" ancestors from Africa's primitivism, self-destruction, and disease, Abraham Lincoln and the White, male Union soldier "rescued" my "weak" ancestors from wicked White slave owner of the South. If W.E.B. DuBois' essays on the Union's greed for economic control over the South appeared alongside to the "saving grace" of the

Emancipation Proclamation in mainstream history textbooks, the narrative of the White savior simply would not hold up. Without the modern day White savior, America's imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy has nothing to offer Black America. If dominant cultures weren't valued or needed anymore by Black America, they would lose their power over us and their ability to singlehandedly control the narrative.

Black dominant culture is not just a victim in America's fabrication of history. It's also a culprit. This is why hooks stresses the importance of adopting a politics of accountability. If we simply reimagined history based on race, we would neglect to recognize the powerful, falsifying effects of other manmade identity constructs and hierarchies on the collective formation and retelling of history. Neglecting to acknowledge *every* system of domination further strengthens the interlocking network of oppression. The Black elitist narrative does just this. hooks uses President Barack Obama's 2008 election into the White House as the first Black President of the United States of America as an example. She writes, "Many of the decisions sanctioned by this black president seemed no different than those of a liberal Christian White president. Indeed, much of the success of this presidency has been due to the fact that his dreaded difference has not really been that different." She continues, "To those who know better it can only be seen as a veneer of different making a change when the center stays the same," (hooks, 2013).

How can this be? How can a Black person not represent and speak to the experience of all Black people? What happens when Black dominant culture tells us that racism no longer exists? For answers, we return to Hook's conception of the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. White supremacist ideology cannot be viewed

exclusively away from the imperialist capitalist patriarchy and vice versa. Let's return back to POTUS Barack Obama. His Blackness does not stop him from contributing to, perpetuating, or embodying an imperialist, capitalist, patriarchy. At the end of the day, black or not, Barack Obama is still the President of one of the world's largest and most powerful imperial countries. At the end of the day, black or not, he is still an upper class male. And at the end of the day, the same great nation that "allows" a Black man to benefit from an imperialist capitalist patriarchy is the same great nation that is built upon the blood, sweat, and tears of enslaved Black folks.

Additionally, not even the Black dominant narrative is *always* pro-Black. "A commonly accepted expression of internalized racism that most black folks passively accept is the assumption that anyone who has fair skin and females who have long straight hair have more value and worth and are more likely to succeed." Statistics support these findings. Looking through all the Jet magazines published in 2011, hooks counts the number of black females who have short hair and or natural hair. The answer is less than ten (hooks, 2013).

Again, I ask how can this be? How can a Black person not represent and speak to the experience of all Black people? What happens when the Black dominant culture doesn't accept all Black people? In the Black dominate narrative, no one satisfies the objective requirement for whiteness, but that doesn't eliminate the category of race from America's imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy (as we see in the case of President Barack Obama). The question then transforms from "Who is White?" to "Who is the *Whitest*?" Identity and power relations change from that which is fixed to that which is fluid. It changes from that which is good to that which is best. It's no longer

about cultural unity and power, but rather individual advancement and survival. This is a goal of the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy. hooks writes, “After years of collective struggle, by the end of the sixties liberal individualism had become more the norm for black folks, particularly the black bourgeoisie, more so than the previous politics of communalism, which emphasized racial uplift and sharing resources,” (hooks, 2000).

The number one goal of the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy is to create narratives that maintain its power. It does this systemically and strategically through fabrication of knowledge, normalization of oppression, erasure of non-dominant narrative, creation of false idols, implementation of categories, vision of democracy, deceit of exceptionalism, and division of like-minded peoples. This is precisely what we must resist. We must decolonize our minds. We must acknowledge the omnipresence of these systems and strategies throughout the world in which we wish to change. We must use a politics of accountability as the means to the end. Finally, we must reimagine what freedom should look, sound, and feel like for us.

Findings + Discussion

On a daily basis, young, Black warriors from all walks of life resist the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy and reimagine new systems and strategies of living freely. Admittedly, my fascination with *young*, Black warriors in particular starts with my personal identification as a *young*, Black warrior. Additionally, hooks writes, “[The] process of radicalization often began in early childhood. It often began with questioning why such an inspiring vision of democracy was not being fully realized,” (hooks, 2013). It is important to note that my use of the word “young” is not necessarily

age limiting. I'm more so interested in those who adopt a spirit of youthfulness. However, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on three individuals (including myself) below age 30. It should go without saying, but I will also note that my use of the word "Black" is not interchangeable with "African-American." My personal politics of solidarity places my perspective on a global scale for the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy is not an American system, but rather a global system. Lastly, I define warrior as one who actively resists and reimagines.

Late August 2016, a group of young, Black warriors protesting Pretoria High School for Girl's racially discriminatory hair policies took the internet by storm. Black girls were not allowed to wear their natural hair at this South African high school. After days of occupying the halls and school grounds in protest, images of these young, black warriors went viral. This viralness prompted people worldwide to stand in solidarity with these students by signing an online petition demanding the removal of such blatantly racist language and policy from this particular section of the school's rules and regulations. Within a few days' time, the petition garnered negative, unwanted media attention, which forced administration to suspend the racist policies and investigate student reports of racial injustice and prejudice.

Located approximately 60 kilometers north of Johannesburg, South Africa, Pretoria High School for Girls was integrated from a state of apartheid alongside South Africa's other elite institutions a little over 20 years ago. Pretoria High School for Girls High refused to acknowledge and adjust discriminatory ideology from its school policies written in 1902. This directly reflects South Africa's attachment to its imperialist White

supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The young, Black warriors who protested these policies chose to resist.

The most iconic image from these protests features 13-year-old Zulaikha Patel directly confronting a White, male authority figure with her afro on fleek and her hands up and fashioned into a (Malcolm) 'X.' Her fierceness radiates off the monitor screen and illuminates South Africa's dark past of terrorism against the Black body. The expression on her face is that of unrest and resistance. Warrior Zulaikha does not stand alone. Protests erupted on campuses countrywide, and results followed. One example is Parktown High School for Girls and its decision to change its hair policies before the spotlight turned on them. These young, Black warriors reimaged a school where their beautiful, Black bodies were no longer policed, and they achieved it.

Also in Late Summer 2016, NFL quarterback, Colin Kaepernick, began the football season sitting down in protest against the American National Anthem. Fed up with racism and police brutality in America, this young, Black warrior's refusal to stand for the Star Spangled Banner visually and symbolically counters mainstream America's refusal to stand up and fight in solidarity with oppressed Black and Brown peoples. Quickly gaining momentum, Colin is joined by thousands of young, Black warriors nationwide both on and off the football field in this ongoing act of resistance.

We must also recognize and accredit the thousands of Americans who refused to learn, recite, or even acknowledge the Anthem before the start of Colin's protest (myself included). This is undoubtedly an aesthetically pleasing, metaphorically resonant act of resistance by whoever chooses to do it. It's the perfect way to interrupt the dominant narrative on the fly. What I wish to emphasize in Warrior Colin's situation in particular is

his status as a highly visible athlete with “everything” to lose. Every time he chooses not to stand for the National Anthem, he risks losing multi-million dollar sponsorships towards the advancement of his career as a professional athlete. Despite this game changing fact, he still chooses to resist. Not only is Colin resisting the system, but he is also enacting a reimagined hierarchy of values.

Finally, I return to my own path of resistance and the decolonization of my young, black mind. At a very young age, America’s imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy taught me that money equals happiness. Knowing this, I blamed my parents for my dark history with depression. As the head of the household, it was their job to support my siblings and me. It was their job to earn enough money to provide a happy home, and they failed. Once blame was placed, nothing changed. No dialogue was opened and no solutions were found. At the end of the day, my depression still ran rampant I was stuck in a state of victimhood, and I could not perceive of any possibility of ever being freed.

When I left behind a politics of blame and adopted a politics of accountability, it became possible to resist the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy and reimagine exactly what happiness should look, sound, and feel like for me. The imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy wasn’t constructed in favor of the poor, Black child, so I rejected its claim that money equals happiness. After freeing myself from this fabricated truth, I began finding value in the immaterial. I found value in positive relationships with others. I found value in my family. I found value in my parents, *not blame*. I found value in what money *can’t* buy. This is not to say that a politics of accountability cured my depression or improved my family’s financial situation

by any means. It is only to say that adopting a politics of accountability was necessary for me to understand and dismantle the overarching, oppressive systems at large which trapped me in victimhood in the first place. It gave me the empowerment and hope I need in my fight against depression, which was my goal all along.

Conclusion

Decolonization is not a metaphor; decolonization is action. Decolonization is not an unrealized, idealized concept. Decolonization does not belong to only academia and its imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchal institutions. Decolonization is not shedding tears, feeling distraught, and sharing a few #blacklivesmatter 🍌 articles from time to time on Facebook. Decolonization is so much more than that. Decolonization is action. Decolonization is the active resistance against imperialist White supremacist patriarchal ideologies. Decolonization is an all day, everyday reconfiguration of reimagined mental and physical relationships of power. Decolonization is the only way to resist and reimagine if we are to win the ongoing war on Black people, Black bodies, Black minds, and Black culture.

We must resist, because quite frankly, Black folks are being murdered. Black folks are being murdered, and their killers are walking free. Black folks are being murdered, and no system is being held accountable. Black folks are being murdered, and America's President Elect is the false idol of the imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy, himself. Black folks are being murdered, and Black folks will continue being murdered unless we come together and collectively shout, "NO JUSTICE, NO PEACE!" through the voice of strategic acts of resistance. We can no longer resist *like* our lives depend on it. We must resist *because* our lives depend on it.

We must reimagine what happiness looks, sounds, and feels like for us by us. We must reimagine, because this imperialist White supremacist capitalist patriarchy was never intended for those who fall outside of the dominant narrative. We must reimagine, because that is where we find the hope needed to overcome. We must reimagine, because we refuse to adopt a state of victimhood.

I must reimagine, because I can no longer obsess over the three-year-old version of myself in my childhood photograph staring back at me dreaming of freedom. Instead, I must embrace images like that of Warrior Zulaikha Patel. Instead, I must embrace images of Warrior Colin Kaepernick. Instead, I must embrace images of Black resistance, Black joy, Black love, Black families, Black communities, and Black culture. Instead, I must reimagine a world where Black folks don't merely *dream* of freedom, but actually one day *achieve* freedom.

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