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THE EMANCIPATION OF A BEAUTIFUL LIFE: HERSTORY

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Author

Khalfani, Jahmila A

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THE EMANCIPATION OF A BEAUTIFUL LIFE: HERSTORY

By

Jahmila Asha Khalfani

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APPROVED

Dr. Crystal Mun-hye Baik
Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair
University Honors

ABSTRACT

Research has indicated the development of identity under gendered racist oppression in Black women in the United States is unique due to the intersection of their dual marginalized social status and the resulting unique multifaceted approach to assimilating and combating normative narratives of prototypical ideas on race and gender (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Cooley et. al, 2018). The inherent contradictions between racialized stereotypes of Blackness and that of womanhood effectively others Black American women and this othering is exacerbated within the confines of the racial (and patriarchal) American Competitive Capitalism (Marsh, 2015; Fletcher Jr, 2020; Albee & Perry, 1998; Bernard, 2016; Brown, 1975; Wills, 2018; Schwartz, 2007). This research builds upon the idea that the intersection of racism and sexism (this author argues capitalism as well) has a particular, unparalleled influence on the development of Black female identity. Understanding of the oppression of Black women in white normative Western spaces has seminal policy implications on disparities in medical care, mental health, professional opportunity, natural hair acceptance, etc. This creative research project seeks to create an original visual representation of the development of gendered racial identity and gendered racial ideologies used to navigate the construction of individual identities in Black women as a result of their tri categoric systemic oppression. Nuanced and diverse representation of Black women in visual arts media serves to provide Black American women social space to be three dimensional beings despite their non prototypical nature in Western, white normative, capitalist societies (and the media subsequently created in such societies).

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Introduction

Gendered Racial Oppression

Gendered racism is a form of convergent oppression resulting from the intersection of one's gender and racial identity. Gendered racism appears differently in men of color than it does in women of color, as the latter occupy a dually marginalized status. Black women in the United States have a specifically unique relationship with gendered racism as their racial identity and the social realities associated with Blackness are incongruent with both racial and gender standards (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Cooley et. al, 2018). The insidiousness of white normativity, patriarchy, and racist patriarchal capitalism in the US creates a distinctive tri categorical interdependent model of oppression imposed upon Black American women (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022; Benard, 2016; Wills, 2018; Albee & Perry, 1998). Gendered racism in Black American women presents multifaceted gendered racial realities for them in regard to physiological and psychological health, social perceptions and structural implications, relationships with professional opportunity, and natural hair acceptance (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Nelson, 2021; Epstein et al., 2017; Hammonds et al., 2023; Evans, 1991).

Public Health Implications

Disparities in health and healthcare and the disproportionate impacts on Black women have been supported by numerous studies (Belgrave and Abrams 2016; Braveman et al. 2011; Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010; Jee-Lyn García and Sharif 2015; as cited in Nelson et al., 2021). Likewise, research on the gendered racism experienced by Black American women demonstrates the negative effects of this complex discrimination on Black womens' health (Moradi & Subich, 2003; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016; Thomas et al., 2008; as cited in Moody et al., 2022). For

example, greater experiences with gendered racism have been found to be related to higher levels of psychological distress (Lewis and Neville 2015; Thomas, Witherspoon, and Speight 2008; as cited in Nelson, 2021). Moreover, social isolation, a byproduct of gendered racialized stress and gendered racism, increases risk for cardiovascular disease, stress and depression (Grant, Hamer, and Steptoe 2009; Shankar et al. 2011; Targosz et al. 2003; as cited in Nelson, 2021). Stress resulting from racism is also associated with headaches, trembling, chronic pain, and suppressed immunity for people of color (Smith et al., 2007; as cited in Nelson et al., 2021). Furthermore, myths perpetuated by gendered racism such as the strong, the hyper independent, and the Mammy caricature of Black women create social perceptions and expectations that can lead Black women to further underutilize and avoid seeking care for the stress associated with interacting with and internalizing such restrictive interpretations of their identities (Nelson et al., 2021; Moody et al., 2022). When the restrictive archetypes aforementioned are combined with false medical interpretations such as Black patients feeling less pain the implications on the state of public health in the United States in response to gendered racism are disconcerting to say the least (Hardeman et al., 2016; as cited in Nelson et al., 2021).

Age Compression, Social Perceptions, and Structural Implications

In addition to the mental and physiological health ramifications of gendered racism the structural implications of such paradigms are staggering as well. The adultification of Black children across multiple spheres including education and the criminal justice system place Black children in a particularly unique space of structural discrimination (Goff et al., 2014; as cited Epstein et al., 2017). Black girlhood can be superficially defined as the period of pre-adolescence and into adolescence in Black females. The contemporary phenomenon of age compression, in which Black adolescents are more likely to be perceived as older and more capable of

criminality, echoes the same historical stereotypes that invalidated Black childhood during slavery and subjected Black youth to atrocities far beyond their cognitive capacity. Age compression had and continues to have a distinct effect on the perceptions of young Black girls, in which dominant culture assumes that there is an innate hypersexuality and maliciousness within them. Equally importantly, age compression conflates Black girlhood with Black womanhood, stripping Black children of their inherent innocence and ultimately dehumanizing Black bodies, yet again (Goff et al., 2014; as cited Epstein et al., 2017). Black girls are more likely to be disciplined for infractions as well as perceived as “needing less protection and nurturing than white girls, and... to know more about adult topics and are more knowledgeable about sex” than their white counterparts as early as 5 years old (Epstein et al., 2017). Social perceptions of Black girls as more adult than their white counterparts and the inherent lack of authority attributed to adolescence leaves Black girls particularly vulnerable to the negative attributes ascribed unto them as a result of the unique gendered racism associate with the Black female experience, especially within scholastic and juvenile justice spaces (Epstein et al., 2017).

Professional Opportunity and Natural Hair Acceptance

Black women under gendered racism are still “navigating fraught prejudicial and discriminatory encounters in professional environments that are detrimental to their overall health and well-being” (Hammonds et al., 2023). As previously stated, the medical consequences of gendered racism are far reaching and extend throughout the mesosystem of personal, professional, and leisure spaces. Black American women as recently as the 1990s were the most underpaid and underemployed adults in America and needed higher qualifications than their white peers when vying for the same positions. There are mixed results regarding the level of aspirations in Black female professionals but substantial empirical evidence of their aggregate

low expectations of fulfilling their aspirations (Dillard, 1980; Teahan, 1974; as cited in Evans & Herr, 1990). Black American women's projection of career opportunity is heavily influenced by the intersection of their race and sex (Smith, 1981; Turner & Turner, 1975; as cited in Evans & Herr, 1990). Research has indicated that Black American women professionals are inclined to lower or make modifications of personal career goals and professional opportunities to potentially extricate themselves from working in environments that can potentially subject them to persistent gendered racism (Gurin & Gaylord, 1976; Savage, Stearns, & Friedman, 1979; as cited in Evans & Herr, 1990). Being forced to adopt a coping mechanism that may negate or contradict professional aspirations and ability to advance is indicative of ubiquity of gendered racism compromising professional environments marketed as equal and equitable.

One of the most salient forms of gendered racism imposed upon Black American women in the United States is the policing and devaluation of natural hair. Microaggressions surrounding Black women's natural, curly, coily, and/or kinky textured hair uphold assertions about what is considered prototypical in terms of standards of femininity and beauty as well as underlying racial devaluation in holding other hair textures as superior (Moody et al., 2022). Natural in Black women is defined as hair in its natural state without thermal/chemical straightening or manipulation (Johnson & Bankhead, 2013). The oppression of Black hair in the United States like many other forms of repression on Black bodies begin with slavery. During the enslavement of Black Africans European and White slave owners shaved the heads of the enslaved upon entry to the New World. Throughout multiple African cultures hair was a means of communication of marital status, hierarchical status, as well as overall cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic significance (Johnson & Bankhead, 2013). Removal of the hair of enslaved Africans is parallel to the same cultural atrocity inflicted on Indigenous Americans, who were also forced to cut their hair in

favor of Euro-American styles in boarding and residential schools. Hair as a form of control in subordinated populations can be found in multiple parallels across Indigenous colonization and Black enslavement. The forced migration of Black Africans through brutal enslavement into a fledgling White normative society meant that every specter of Blackness was open to condemnation both systematically and individually. Such opprobrium extended to the point of Black hair being offensive to masters and Whiteness as a whole, resulting in Black women consistently covering their hair or trying to emulate White hairstyles in the hopes of gaining the privileges of White likeness (Johnson & Bankhead, 2013). Such hair repression exists to this day which constituted the foundation of the Crown Act in 2019 which “ensure[s] protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools” (The Crown Act, 2023). In fact the CROWN Workplace Study (2023) found that Black women’s hair is 2.5 times more likely to be perceived as unprofessional. While the Dove CROWN Research Study for Girls (2021) states that hair discrimination to begins as early as 5 years old.

Gendered Racial Identity (GRI) and Gendered Racial Identity Development (GRID) : An Intersectional Framework

In order to truly ascertain the uniqueness of gendered racial identity development (GRID) in Black American women it is imperative to understand the overarching structures that contribute to gendered racism and thus influence GRID. In addition to the aforementioned medical implications of gendered racism, the persistence of gendered racism from Black girlhood into adulthood through dually discriminatory social cultural values is central to the stages and processes of GRID. In order to properly contextualize the intersectionality of GRID

one must grasp the foundational concept of ethnic-racial identity (ERI). ERI is, “a multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic–racial group memberships, as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time”(Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, p. 23; as cited in Mims & Williams, 2020). Mims & Williams’ (2020) longitudinal, mixed methods study with more than 200 middle school participants in the Southern United States discusses the importance of microsystems (i.e. schools, classrooms, and peers) in addition to individual home environment in influencing the social and psychological development of young adolescents. The microsystems aforementioned are not perceived as existing in vacuums, and are often interrelated resulting in a ‘mesosystem’ in which attitudes and beliefs from one sphere can influence and impact that of other spaces (Phelan et al., 1991; as cited in Mims & Williams, 2020). Ethnic racial identity (ERI) encompasses individual interest and effort in self educating on one’s ethnic/racial identification, overall feelings of security and belonging, and perceptions of outside acceptance of their ethnic/racial identity, self labeling, personally ascribed significance of ethnic/racial group membership and resolution therein (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014, Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Sellers et al., 1998, Nishina et al., 2010, Sellers et al., 1998, Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004; as cited in Mims & Williams, 2020). Thus, ERI in Black girls is developed in part as a response to the existence of stereotypes and biased messaging (such as associating Blackness with slavery and violent tendencies and impacts of colorism on romantic desirability) within their microsystems and throughout their mesosystems. Meaning that within the multiple spheres of influence creating understandings of race amongst Black girls it was often found that they perpetuate biased messages about black identity to Black girls, influencing their development of their ERI. The research suggests that including destigmatized historical

analyses of Black American enslavement (focusing on the pursuit of freedom in the face of systemic oppression, familial love, and literacy in enslaved populations instead of just physical bondage) and Black American achievement outside of the historical enslavement may create microsystems that are less likely to reproduce the very stereotypical and biased rhetoric they claim to be fighting against. Here we see how nuanced representations within historical contexts surrounding Black identities can positively impact the overall development of ethnic racial identity in Black girls.

Similarly to ERI, gendered racial identity (GRI) is heavily affected by and affects the interpersonal and intrapersonal realities of societal ascription of black and female status. Such responses to existing stereotypes serve as a partial foundation of identity development, persisting from Black girlhood and into Black womanhood. The concept of gendered racial identity (GRI) is defined as “the simultaneous membership of an individual’s marginalized race and gender” (Thomas et al., 2011, as cited in Williams & Lewis, 2021). The research of Williams & Lewis (2021) extends the previous definition to mean “the process of making meaning of an individual’s marginalized identity at the intersection of race and gender”. A cross sectional study conducted by Buckley & Carter (2005) with 200 Black high school girl participants in New York City self reported feelings about racial, gender and overall self esteem majorly found that within their sample, “racial identity and gender role are related to ego development, wherein development in one arena (e.g., race) is linked to development in another arena (e.g., gender)”. Such a finding cements the importance of both research and individual approach in understanding the development of identity in Black women being intersectional by design. This in principle is what cements GRID as seminal in the field of researching the psychological development process of Black women as dual ‘minoritized’ persons.

Stages in GRID Process and Associated Ideologies

Williams and Lewis' process of meaning making is not linear nor necessarily continuous as individuals may navigate through the stages and ideologies of GRID in different ways, directly or indirectly responding to their environmental and personal realities. They found that the development of gendered racial identity in Black American women “[utilizes] aspects of their gendered racial identity in ways to protect themselves from gendered racism and intersectional oppression”. This can be best summarized with the ideological themes of “strength” and “resilience” noted in their study and how the ubiquity of those ideologies throughout the multiple microsystems teaches Black women to acknowledge and navigate hardships resulting from the social realities of their racial and gender identities only through the characteristics of strength and resilience. Superficially the heavy importance placed on the values of strength and resilience present positive implications for self efficacy but inherently problematic internalizations that as Black women, they should be “independent, assertive, nurturing, overcome adversity, and have constricted emotionality” (Williams & Lewis, 2021). Such constricted emotionality forms the basis of the independent, angry, Sapphire-esque stereotype that plagues Black women in popular media (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Epstein et al., 2017). Through this example we can clearly see the complex relationship between gendered racism and the resulting ideologies stemming from that convergent oppression on GRID. The developmental framework established by Williams and Lewis' (2021) constructivist grounded, semi-structured interview study consists of four phases in the GRID process and six supplemental gendered racial ideologies that were commonly occurring among their participants.

The phases of GRID are as follows (Williams & Lewis, 2021)*:

“Hyperawareness: Black women become more aware of their intersecting identities and the negative perceptions that others have of Black women. This causes them to feel like they are “hyperaware” and like they need to watch how they portray themselves in front of other people.

Reflection: Black women reflect on how they fit or do not fit Black woman stereotypes and socialization messages they have received by asking themselves critical questions about their identity and what it means to them.

Rejection: Black women reject parts of Black woman stereotypes and socialization messages that do not fit for them or do not fit into their view of Black womanhood.

Navigation: Black women navigate in various environments through temporary ways of switching and shifting aspects of their Black woman identity in order to survive and co-exist in oppressive environments.” (Williams & Lewis, 2021 p.6)

The gendered racial ideologies of GRID are as follows (Williams & Lewis, 2021)*:

“Assimilation: Alters oneself to assimilate to Eurocentric standards of beauty and characteristics (i.e., straightening one’s hair, avoiding the use of Ebonics/African American English)

Defiance: Engages in behavior to counter negative stereotypes in order to change other people’s perceptions of Black women (i.e., being very friendly to disconfirm stereotypes that Black women are angry and unapproachable)

Humanist: Manages identity by choosing not to label oneself based on gender and race to avoid being limited to labels. Views oneself more in terms of being a human.

Strength: Restricts emotions and remains strong to overcome gendered racial oppression.

Strength defined by societal standards (i.e., Black women should exhibit strength at all times; should not cry or ask for help).

Pride: Feels pride in being a Black woman with an identity meaning that is less confined by societal standards and expectations of traditional Black womanhood.

Empowerment: Feels a sense of empowerment in being a Black woman; believes that Black women should empower other Black women and engage in social justice activism.”

(Williams & Lewis, 2021 p.6)

*The aforementioned phases and ideologies associated with GRID are directly from the work of Williams and Lewis (2021). Their research is a part of the underlying framework of this project. This author does NOT make any claims of ownership, rights, or intellectual origination of the conceptual framework for Gendered Racial Identity Development.

Conflicting stereotypes, Identity incongruence, and Contemporary Representations

Because the nature of the relationship between gendered racism and GRID is one of cyclical reflection, the stages and ideologies within the GRID framework mirror the conflicting stereotypes, identity incongruence, and contemporary representations of Black women present in gendered racism. This is shown in the conceptual divergence of the multiple stages and ideologies of GRID (rejection v. navigation; assimilation v. defiance and empowerment). One of the most difficult aspects of the GRID process is confronting the conflicting stereotypes between racializations of Blackness and the sexism imposed on woman identifying persons. The gendered racism imposed on Black women conjures a prototypical person, who satisfies both the racial and patriarchal standards of identity, of which Black women satisfy none. Under the patriarchy of the United States womanhood and femininity take on stereotypical characteristics such as

warmth, nurture, passiveness, submissiveness etc (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Cooley et al., 2018; Jacobs, 2016). Cooley et al.'s (2018) experimental study on increasing the salience of Black women's gender identity found that smiling in Black women produces more positive social evaluations of Black women compared to that of their White counterparts. This increased positive social evaluation is due to the fact that smiling Black women photos registered more readily in participants' minds as women rather than as Black. The study's hypothesis was correct in that by increasing the salience of femininity in Black women through smiling participants social perceptions of the Black women became more positive (Cooley et al., 2018). This author argues that such a result is not particularly beneficial and is a perfect representation of the conflicting narratives assigned to Blackness and femininity. For Black women, being perceived as more feminine through smiling showed more positive expectations of interactions for participants and canceled out the aggressiveness or threat associated with Blackness. Aside from the racialized perceptions of Blackness, Black women having to smile (more so than their White counterparts) to be positively perceived by strangers is inherently problematic and perceptions of participants in the study could encourage the restrictive emotionality coping mechanism in Black women. If smiling is necessary to improve social perceptions on the existence of a Black woman then a Black woman is not afforded the full range of emotions inherent to being human. Such findings may explain why the need for Black women to appear strong and constrict their emotionality is so prevalent across studies on Black women's identities. Ironically, the "strong Black woman stereotype" is in contradiction with the stereotypes applied to restrictive femininity under patriarchal paradigms causing identity incongruence. In the face of this oppressive conceptual incongruence, Black American women forsake their femininity (as defined by the patriarchal societal view) in order to cope with the social realities associated with Blackness and

Black identity through their strength and resilience (see previous section). The sacrifice of this restrictive femininity and therefore patriarchal value as a woman can then lead to further internalization of societal othering through hyper-independence and mesosystemic pressure to overcome adversity through even more emotional restriction (Williams & Lewis, 2021; Cooley et al., 2018; Jacobs, 2016; Mims & Williams 2020; Moody et al., 2022).

The “Strong Black Woman” stereotype is one of many restrictive contemporary archetypes imposed on Black women through media and societal perceptions. Such other stereotypes perpetuated in American culture include the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire which characterize Black women as aggressive, hypersexual, wild, combative, self-sacrificing, or subservient (Jacobs, 2016; Harris-Perry, 2013; as cited in Hammonds et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2004; as cited in Moody et al., 2022; Epstein et al.). It is interesting to note that despite the contradictory nature of these three main archetypes all of them serve the same underlying purpose, to devalue and dehumanize the needs of Black women as individuals and center their identity around their ability to be an instrument for white systemic gain, through selfless service, sexuality, and insubordination that justifies abuse. The conflicting nature and inherent incongruence that results from synthesizing both racial and feminine standards warrant a collective shift away from GRI that is so heavily influenced by the negative social realities of dual marginalization and toward empowering, nuanced, self definitions of our personal identities.

Developing New Narratives

The erasure of Black girlhood through its cultural synonymy to Black womanhood requires that we clearly define and increase salience of Black girlhood. Brown’s (2013) definition of Black girlhood takes new aim in regard to the development of Black female youth, in which it can be redefined as the cultivation of “agency, creativity, and resistance [in] Black

girls” (as cited in Jacobs, 2016). Under this definition, Black girlhood becomes more than a phase in biological maturation and takes on new social, political, and individual meaning in the development of positive self-identification in Black girls. A key component to realizing Brown’s definition of Black girl hood is the development of “oppositional gaze”. Oppositional gaze, a concept pioneered by author bell hooks is: “site of resistance for colonized black people globally... In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating “awareness” politicizes “looking” relations” (bell hooks, 1992; as cited in Jacobs, 2016). Through hook’s oppositional gaze subjugated populations can defy the systemic order by refusing to internalize and positively engage with the propaganda underlying their socio systemic marginalization. The politicization of gaze is emblematic of the politicization of thought, which serves as a direct form of defiance of the pervasive psychosocial paradigm, encourages individualized critical thinking, and most importantly provides central agency to oneself in the fight for individual and collective liberation.

The importance of developing and expanding oppositional gaze throughout maturation cannot be overstated as GRID is influenced by interactions with societal perceptions about the nature of one’s simultaneous gender and racial identity. The medical ramifications of gendered racism are the result of constant interaction with and internalization of gendered racist themes, discrimination, and oppression. In developing an oppositional gaze we establish “a way for people in subordinate positions to resist the dominant images and messages that communicate their devalued status”, specifically fostering critical understanding of the systematic “othering” of Black women and creating frameworks to dismantle such social structures (bell hooks, 1992, p.116; as cited in Jacobs, 2016). Building oppositional gaze in both Black girls and Black women

is a central theme to the development of positive self-defined GRI and combating conflicting stereotypes and identity incongruence.

Threat Multipliers

In order to truly ascertain the uniqueness of gendered racial identity development (GRID) in Black American women it is imperative to understand the overarching structures that contribute to gendered racism and thus influence GRID. These factors are what this author titles “threat multipliers”, inspired by the work of Klare in his book “All Hell Breaking Loose” (Klare, 2019). A threat multiplier is not the central issue but rather a confounding variable with the ability to exacerbate the severity of challenges presented by primary issues of importance. The greatest obstacle facing the development of self-defined GRI is gendered racism, the complex intertwining of sexism and racism into one “hybrid phenomenon” (Essed, 1991; as cited in Nelson et al., 2021; Jacobs, 2016; Williams). The racism denoted in gendered racism is typically in reference to an overt discrimination or bias that seeks to directly devalue Blackness (Jacobs, 2016). However, this author argues that it is not only an overt systemic devaluation of Blackness that contributes to gendered racism but a sneakier arguably more pervasive threat multiplier in the midst. This threat multiplier would be the prevailing concept of white normativity or white centrality in American social culture. Likewise, the extensive pernicious breadth of patriarchy within the United States is goaded by the particularities of American Competitive Capitalism (ACC) (Schwartz, 2007; Benard; 2016; Wills, 2018; Fletcher Jr., 2020).

Deconstructing White Normativity

If the aim is to increase salience of gendered racism and GRID in Black American women the ERI of White individuals must be examined equally as carefully. Though it may seem initially counterintuitive, the understanding of ERI in White children and individuals allows us to

better dissect the prevailing racial structures that construct the racial realities of all Americans. To be clear, addressing and analyzing Whiteness as a construct is not the same as centering Whiteness in discussions on the identity developments in people of color. This author is not aiming to center Whiteness but to actually deconstruct it by understanding the development of White identity and subsequent White normative ideologies. One of the most interesting findings in the ERI study of Midwestern White American children by Hazelbaker and Mistry (2022) was that the majority of child participants self-identified as American. The conflation of their racial identity with their nationality not only presents problematic foundational ideas about racial and minority inclusivity but more importantly it highlights the lack of racial salience in White childrens' development. Conversely, Black children have been found to understand their race and basic social realities surrounding their racial identity in very early stages of development (Epstein et al., 2017; Williams & Lewis, 2021). Both White children and children of color navigate their ERI as a process of maturation (Williams et al., 2020; as cited in Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022), however the existence of systemic racism makes the exploration of ERI quite divergent in these populations.

The invisibility of Whiteness among most White children is indicative of the universal nature of White normativity in the United States. Moreover, the self reported justifications of their self defined ERI showed that White children within their homes and other microsystems are being instructed on the basis of colorblind rhetoric, under which everyone is equal and race does not matter (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022). It is out of white normativity and colorblind social culture that white privilege is sociopolitically protected and cemented and through which White supremacy thrives in our contemporary society. Bonilla-Silva (2001) defines White supremacy as

“the macro-cultural script that positions White people as superior in the racial hierarchy and Whiteness as normative” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; as cited in Hazelbaker & Mistry 2022).

White normativity also has tangible consequences in the context of feminine identity as well as stated by Deliovsky (2016), “for in a culture that places value on women’s physicality, hair and other physical markers represent a powerful political aesthetic that belies the salience of race for gender normativity”. Through this quote we can understand that the concept of Whiteness in White normative societies is inextricably linked to gender normativity as well. In white normative spaces where whiteness is the standard, individuals that cannot effectively emulate whiteness cannot be afforded even mediocre social value and praise. As whiteness is a construct that has changed since the beginnings of racial pseudoscience to fit the narrative necessary to maintain hierarchical superiority, Blackness too is an abstract construct in which its meaning initially served to be nothing but a socially inferior antithetical concept to Whiteness. For without Blackness the exclusivity of whiteness and its associated privileges cannot be properly defined or selectively distributed across the population under the American racial binary. Collins (2009) noted, as a socialized other, “Black girls historically and currently possess a “status as outsiders [that] becomes the point from which other groups define their normality” (Collins, 2009; as cited in Jacobs, 2016). This point is further honed in the ethnographic study by Perry (2002) which found that one of the three strategies White high school students use to understand their White racial identity was by “describ[ing] Whiteness in terms of what it is not (e.g., not Black)” (Perry, 2002; as cited in Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022). In these ways, White normativity actively others Blackness while simultaneously centering the conceptual superiority of Whiteness and erasing the tangibility of race for the racially privileged. Only in demystifying the racial identity of White individuals and White normativity can we begin to deconstruct their

prevalence in our current society. When the ERI in White individuals can be developed from holistic historical and empirical analyses of race relations and racism (both individually and structurally perpetuated) we can foster an environment in which Whites can form “alternative narratives” and nonwhites can strengthen oppositional gaze (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022; Jacobs, 2016).

Navigating GRID in American Competitive Capitalism (ACC)

The work of Wills (2018) perfectly summarizes the role of capitalism as a threat multiplier in American society, stating “a correct understanding of the relationships among capitalism, racism, and sexism only further highlights how central the struggle against each is to the struggles”. This proposed tri-intersectionality follows in line with the intersectional foundations of the research explored in this project. Specifically in regard to GRID gendered racism is indeed the primary influencer but just as we cannot extricate the systems of power created by racism and sexism, for class and capitalism too, it would be unwise to try and isolate their importance as overarching structures. Wills (2018) continues to contextualize the nature of capitalism in the Americas by highlighting the parallels between capitalism and racism, both as paradigms that seek to categorically determine innate fixed hierarchy in systems that govern both social and material life. She goes on to note that the cementation of racial hierarchy and race based pseudoscience, claiming to hold genetic evidence of the inferiority of nonwhites, “occurred in tandem with the rise of capitalism as the dominant economic mode of production, and with the emergence and growth of the trans-Atlantic slave trade” (Wills, 2018). Benard (2016) writes that patriarchal capitalism and colonialism differ very little in structure...Both are systems of White patriarchy. Both systems are violent and exploitative. Both rely on “ownership” of brown and Black bodies”. Indeed, the social realities of overt racism and the

capitalist dependence on the labor of brutalized Black African slaves worked as an ideological and material network cyclically justifying and perpetuating the exploitation of Black Americans back and forth.

What typically characterizes the nature of capitalism is competition and scarcity. The work of Fletcher Jr. (2020) argues that in regard to the abolitionist/pro-enslavement sentiments of the pre-Civil War era were dichotomized on more than just personal moral interests but also interests in the implications of emancipation on free labor. The dominant question remained on whether continuation of slavery would be a detriment to free labor or if the abolition of slavery would produce a workforce in direct competition with free labor. Fletcher Jr. (2020) suggests that such a “inclusionist/exclusionist framework” is present in all capitalist nations per the nature of capitalism, and race is a supplemental variable of stratification roped into the equation. In spite of the hefty, encouraged, and persistent economic exploitation of nonwhites the United States remained politically and philosophically a White settler state, in which the very presence of nonwhites was a definitive contradiction of the foundation of this nation (Fletcher, 2000). Just as “modern racism maintains that [a] supposedly “natural” hierarchy justifies—demands, even—a corresponding social hierarchy of the races” so too does the inclusionist/exclusionist framework embedded within capitalism create a strict hierarchy of the haves and have nots that reflects the tightly intertwined racialized and economic histories of this nation (Wills, 2018).

The inclusionist/exclusionist framework defined by Fletcher Jr. (2000) echoes the many cultural values associated with American Competitive Capitalism (ACC). ACC is a unique type of capitalism, in which market competition is the primary source of coordination, occupying a polarity on the spectrum of capitalisms (Hall and Gingerich, 2004; Schwartz, 2007). The various types of capitalism can be dissected in a multitude of ways, for this research focus will be on the

range of strategic cooperation and competition across capitalist states. Competitive coordination states that societal benefit is derived through production of the highest quality and quantity of goods and services motivated by competition and pursuit of self interests by all engaging actors. Conversely, strategic cooperation coordination posits that collaborative action among actors within the economy produces optimal outcomes and the formation of “credible commitments” is central to realizing this philosophy (Schwartz, 2007). ACC, much like its name suggests, is the most severe form of competitive capitalism measured by the Hall and Gingerich competition to strategic cooperation index (Schwartz, 2007). The analysis of the relations between capitalism and national culture by Schwartz (2007) found that ACC in comparison to 20 other capitalist countries scored higher for mastery (second highest), hierarchy (second highest), and embeddedness (highest). Mastery follows the idea that groups and individuals should control and alter the social and natural environment through self assertion. Schawrtz (2007) further expounds his orientation of mastery by applying Kasser et al.’s (2007) assertion that “exploitation of resources in the interests of progress and change takes precedence over preserving natural resources and protecting the immediate welfare of people whose interests conflict with one’s own” (as cited in Schwartz, 2007). Additionally, the value of hierarchy centers the importance of the structure of allocation of resources and authority and acceptance of “external social control” (Schwartz, 2007). The value of hierarchy is entrenched in social culture as the orientation of embeddedness emphasizes the importance of group identity and alignment with group goals as well as maintaining collective traditions, solidarity, and restricting disobedience (Schwartz, 2007).

This author contends that the nature of capitalist societies (like ACC) high in the values of mastery, hierarchy, and embeddedness are more apt to continue structures of oppression that

reinforce existing imbalances in power, wealth, and perceived human worth. Benard (2016) holds that the hegemonic colonial paradigms of American history still continue to influence social relations and realities thus rendering terms, “like “neo-” and “post-” colonial [as] false concepts”. The breadth of gendered racism, White normativity as a cousin to White supremacy, and patriarchy in contemporary American society serves to prove Benard correct. A society in which the liberal competitive market demands that one: exact their self interests regardless of other’s interests (mastery); maintain social and material constructs of authority with humility (hierarchy); and identify with group goals, maintain traditions, and restrain insubordination, absolutely cannot be anti-racist and anti-sexist. Combating gendered racism and exploitation in such societies would be directly oppositional to the dual economic and social functions of culture. “Capitalism’s exaltation of the pursuit of private accumulation, of profit, as the highest human value”, this author avows, cements the established social oppressive order while trivializing the ubiquitous presence of intersectional injustice (Wills, 2018). One of the initiatives outlined in Marxism by Marx is to elevate the status of women as more than “mere instruments of production” in the capitalist system that Albee & Perry (1998) declare “singles out [women] as objects of prejudice, as sources of cheap labor, as less worthy of education and training, as sex objects, sources of temptation and vessels for reproduction” (Marx and Engels, The Communist Manifesto; Albee & Perry, 1998). As the Black American population has been subjugated to enslavement, sharecropping, domestic servitude, and labor market discrimination the realities of Black women as vessels for exploitative labor, denied education and literacy, sexual objectification, and reproduction are too clear and recent to bear. Schwartz (2007) finally encapsulates the nature of ACC saying, “through such practices, ACC promotes responsiveness to external expectations and deprives people of opportunities to cultivate their own interests.” In

other words, the cultural values perpetuated by ACC are wholly antithetical to the development of oppositional gaze, which is the foundation of self-defined GRID.

Present Creative Project

This creative project aims to increase the salience of the effects of gendered racism on GRID as well as provide a foundation for the continued development of oppositional gaze in Black women in the United States. Increasing the salience of convergent oppression and the resulting process and ideologies that contribute to GRID creates greater opportunities for collective critical analysis and dissection of present social structures that perpetuate inequality. By fostering the foundational development of oppositional gaze we allow Black women to critically assess the nature of their oppression and re-evaluate and redetermine their identities based on new found personally relevant perspectives rather than restrictive norms that uphold white normative, patriarchal capitalist purview.

In review of the framework for understanding the nature and process of GRID in Black women established by Williams & Lewis (2021), multiple original paintings were commissioned to reflect the complexities of such frameworks as well as provide nuanced representations of GRID that can combat historical and contemporary constraining gendered racist narrative on Black women. This research's niche in connecting media made by a Black woman for the liberation of Black women is a direct reflection of the use of oppositional gaze for challenging social cultural norms and creating social space for the centering of Black women's voices, experiences, and expertise.

Furthermore, this creative project sought to highlight the existence of the two threat multipliers as constructs that are more pervasive and lend to the continuation of gendered racism towards Black American women. As gendered racism, white normativity, and American

Competitive Capitalism (ACC) continue to make up the social and cultural fabric of this nation, the emancipation of dual minority wielding persons cannot be achieved. This author argues that emancipation is not simply physical freedom but rather in accordance with Myers et al. (2000) definition of wellness: “a way of life oriented toward optimal health and well-being in which body, mind, and spirit are integrated by the individual to live more fully within the human natural community” (as cited in Hammonds et al., 2023). Such were the motivations and inspirations in naming this creative work: “The Emancipation of a Beautiful Life: Herstory”. The “Beautiful Life” in question is in reference to the author whose legal name meaning translates to “Beautiful Life Destined to Rule”. In seeking the emancipation of Black women in the United States and the development of oppositional gaze to critique and dismantle oppressive paradigms the author is simultaneously supporting her own emancipation. As GRID and oppositional gaze are rooted in the tenets of Black feminism the author posits that the use of her agency through creative academic research to support the liberation of Black female bodies and personage is to support the liberation and equity of all female bodies.

Original Works

Painting One: Tiny Little Deaths

This painting represents the stage of navigation and the ideology of assimilation. Navigation is when Black women temporarily change aspects of themselves to fit into a restrictive environment. Navigation in this painting is presented by the compass on what would be the subject's face and the true north of that compass points towards “W” which symbolizes White normative femininity. The subject in the painting has straight hair as a way to assimilate in Eurocentric beauty standards but we find at the ends of her hair are little hanging Black bodies.

Those hanging bodies represent all the versions of herself that she has to kill or alter in order to navigate herself to the destination of White normative acceptance.

Painting Two: My Glass is Full

The stage of development that inspired this is the stage of reflection and the humanist ideology. Reflection is the stage in which Black women decide whether they fit, or reflect the stereotypes that others perpetuate about them through gendered racism. In the reflection of the mirror there are three glass boxes. The top one represents Blackness, the second represents Femininity, and the bottom one represents Humanist ideology. As Black women reflect on whether they match the stereotypes of Blackness and femininity they tend to choose to identify themselves as human rather than by their GRI. The glass box labeled human is overflowing with water to reflect this choice, as Black women often identify in this way to extricate themselves from the social realities of their GRI.

Painting Three: Spiral

This painting was inspired by the stage of hyper awareness in which Black women become more aware of their intersecting identities and the negative perceptions and social realities brought about by their GRI. The blue splatters represent the chaos or hecticness that can be associated with being hyper aware of your actions and others' perceptions of you. The word denotes common stereotypes forced upon Black women in regard to physical appearance, conduct, and intellectual capacity. The painting was meant to embody the scattered thought process as one spirals with the weight of social judgment and fear of rejection.

Painting Four: Bearing Fruit

This painting is a rather simple way to symbolize the ideology of empowerment. The painting is of a couple of tree branches with a few pink blossoming flowers which represents the

gradual growth of GRID. Often when discussing concepts such as equity and social justice themes surrounding trees are used to explain the two concepts. ‘Bearing Fruit’ is to represent how the development of oppositional gaze and positive, self-defined GRI can make trees grown in the harshest soil bear fruit.

Discussion

Increased Oppositional Gaze in Black girls

There is, however, a growing body of research that has recorded consistent levels of self esteem among Black adolescent girls. High levels of androgyny in black adolescent girls found in Buckley & Carter’s 2005 study of 200 Black high school girls in New York City is not simply just a result of stereotype incongruence (in both individual and cultural ways) but is representative of the zealous perpetuation of a restrictive gender binary in which vague human characteristics are dichotomized as masculine or feminine. Under pervasive heteropatriarchy and white supremacy and normativity constructs one’s entire being is defined by preconceived racially and sexually exclusionary metrics, which seek to define not to understand, but rather to arbitrarily assign or revoke the worth of a person or persons. The inclination for participating Black girls to exhibit androgyny in self reports, evidence of possessing stereotypically masculine and feminine characteristics, can historically be attributed to the functions of the enslavement of Black Africans in the United States (Buckley & Carter, 2005). As Black bodies were property existing solely for capitalistic gain Black women were required to operate in the same ways as Black men. Both Black men and women were not afforded the right to be human and therefore were not subject under the same cultural definitions of gender and dichotomous gender roles as their White counterparts. This brutal history serves largely as the basis for androgyny in greater Black culture to this day as Black women have always simultaneously been expected to nurture

as well as provide for the Black family and community. In the study androgynous Black girls significantly outscored all other gender categories participants in total self esteem as well as pro-Black and pro-all racial groups identifying Black girls also showing high scores for total self esteem and self esteem subscales.

Additionally, contemporary research suggests that Black girls self-report positive feelings about their physical appearance more than their racial/ethnic counterparts (Ekrut et al., 1996; as cited in Buckley & Carter, 2005). The adoption of androgynous self defined gender roles as well as resistance to white normative patriarchal beauty standards is proof of the growing development of oppositional gaze in Black girls in New York. Despite the dark history surrounding the culturally dominant understanding of gender within Black American communities, such understanding, outside of white normative gender dichotomies, may actually benefit the esteem, life satisfaction, and psychology of young Black girls (Buckley & Carter, 2005). Similarly, as Black girls increasingly regard mainstream beauty standards as personally irrelevant they strengthen their self esteem through (this author posits) growth in oppositional gaze and curation of self-defined beauty standards (Chin & McConnel, 2003; Duke, 2002; as cited in Buckley & Carter, 2005; Jacobs, 2016). The effectiveness of adopting androgynous and stereotypically masculine attributes in increasing total self esteem further iterates the insidious nature of the dichotomous patriarchy in the United States as well as the need to develop oppositional gaze in all marginalized communities.

Limitations and future work exploring gendered racism and GRID

Limitations of this research stem from its creative interpretations of the phases in GRID as art is a subjective and potentially normative medium compared to qualitative and quantitative data collection. However, the subjective and personal nature of art can also serve to accentuate

the purpose and goals of the creative project, which is to increase salience of gendered racism, GRID, and promote foundational development of oppositional gaze. Particularly in regard to oppositional gaze the individuality and subjectivity of this work is compliant with the development of self-defined understandings of GRI. Moreover, the subjectivity of artistic representation allows this creative project to not only create space for the centering of Black womens' specific oppression and GRID but also establishes a platform for critique and conversation about divergent interpretations of such themes.

Gendered racial oppression is particularly unique in Black women in the United States as a group that occupies two marginalized statuses simultaneously. However, it is also worthwhile to study the impacts of gendered racism in men of color, specifically in how that plays into displays of heteropatriarchal definitions of masculinity in Black and Asian American men. Especially in how the gendered racial oppression of Black American men can exacerbate the gendered racial oppression of Black American women through themes such as control and romantic desirability in white normative spaces (Jacobs, 2016). Additionally the racial triangulation in which Asian Americans are entrapped serves to make Asian American men an excellent study group as their ascribe proximity to whiteness (white likeness) through being the "model minority" is in direct contradiction to their perceived lack of masculinity in white normative patriarchal spaces. Here too we find a slowly increasing body of work focusing on the unique manifestations of gendered racism in men of color in the United States. This author also argues that deeper research into the gendered racism and resulting GRID in Afro-Latino American women is especially necessary as Afro-Latinas hold racial, ethnic, and gender minority status under a white normative, patriarchal, capitalist social culture. The trifold minority status of Afro-latina identifying women would allow us to increase salience of the varying ethnic

identities present amongst Black women and allow for even more diverse oppositional gaze to be established, deconstructing white normativity and traditionally anti-Black and anti-Indigenous sentiments present in Latino social culture.

Conclusion

Gendered racism and the associated health, systemic, and social effects in isolation and aggregate contexts present serious real world implications for Black women and other dual minority holding persons (Belgrave and Abrams 2016; Braveman et al. 2011; Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2010; Jee-Lyn García and Sharif 2015; as cited in Nelson et al., 2021; Goff et al., 2014; as cited Epstein et al., 2017). The threat multipliers of White normativity and ACC exacerbate the pervasiveness of gendered racism by decreasing the salience of race and establishing a competitive social culture that rewards preservation of existing hierarchies and punishing disobedience (Hazelbaker & Mistry, 2022; Deliovsky, 2016; Wills, 2018; Schwartz, 2007). Using the work of William and Lewis (2021), Jacobs (2016) and bell hooks (1992) this creative project aimed to increase the salience of the effects of gendered racism on GRID as well as provide a foundation for the continued development of oppositional gaze in Black women in the United States. Oppositional gaze is a critical tool to cultivate for marginalized groups in societies where stratification based repression is persistent throughout an individual's micro and mesosystems. In encouraging oppositional gaze in Black women we are providing the foundations of their social, psychological, and individual liberation, emancipating the often forgotten victims of gendered racism in America.

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