Using Storying Telling and African Centered Social Work to Amplify a Black Man's Voice!

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Abstract

The First Amendment provides the freedom of speech in the United States of America (USA). "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances" (US Const. amend. I). Does everyone have the same First Amendment rights? Does everyone have that freedom equally? When you're a Black man in America, and Double Consciousness still exists, how do you navigate racism and oppression? This paper is an auto-ethnographic experience of a Black man's denial of their First Amendment right, telling the story, journey through Double Consciousness, racial trauma, and the healing using Narrative Therapy.

Keywords: racial trauma; story telling; authoethnograpy; double consciousness; & narrative therapy

Introduction

Black social work pioneers have used the art of storytelling to This article uses storytelling to counter the dominant narratives perpetuating the Black experience's marginalization. As social workers, we are responsible for advocating for all individuals' rights and promoting social justice. This includes advocating for the protection of freedom of speech while recognizing the potential harm that can result from unregulated speech. We must balance the need for robust debate and discussion with the responsibility to ensure that all voices are heard and that marginalized individuals are protected from harm. Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right that is essential for the protection of democratic values. As social workers, we must advocate for protecting this right while recognizing the potential harm that can result from unregulated speech.

As African-American social work professors, we recognize the importance of amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, particularly Black men who have historically been silenced and oppressed. The power of speaking up and sharing one's experiences can bring about change, challenge dominant narratives, and promote social justice. Research has shown that the decision to speak or remain silent can be influenced by various factors, including cultural values, personal beliefs, and societal pressures (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lerner, 1980). For some individuals, speaking out may be a form of resistance or advocacy, while for others, remaining silent may be a form of self-protection or survival (Manning & Fusco, 2017). Studies have shown that Black men may face unique barriers to speaking up, such as fears of being perceived as angry or aggressive, concerns about jeopardizing employment or other opportunities, and experiences of discrimination and racism (Franklin &

Boyd-Franklin, 2001; Watkins, Hunt, & Diemer, 2015). However, speaking out has numerous benefits, including increased self-esteem, improved mental health outcomes, and the ability to shape public discourse and policy (Watkins et al., 2015). Black men should have a safe and supportive environment to speak and share their experiences. This includes recognizing and addressing the systemic barriers that have historically silenced our voices and perpetuated inequalities (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2001). Encouraging and supporting Black men to speak up can help shift power dynamics and promote social change. As Audre Lorde famously said, "Your silence will not protect you" (Lorde, 1984, p. 40). The importance of Black men speaking up cannot be overstated. As social workers and professionals, it is our responsibility to create a safe and supportive environment for Black men to share their experiences and to work towards dismantling systemic barriers that have silenced their voices

Reflection

On the day after my birthday, July 13, 2022, on a little celebration trip with my best friend, I wanted to take a historical trip. I love traveling, learning, and seeing historical facts, so the city of choice for the birthday trip was a historic southern city. It was a short road trip from my hometown to this historic southern city. The two scholars took the five-hour drive full of discussion and reflection on undergraduate days. Toward the end of the drive, it began to get late, and the summer rains started as the two scholars barely made it to their hotel before it became unbearable to drive. We pulled under the hotel shelter to check into the hotel, not knowing they were about to have a life-altering experience. As the individual who had booked the room, I checked in as the front desk lady had small talk, asking

if I had visited the hotel before, and my response was, "No, this was my first time in the historic southern city." After receiving the key cards I shared with my friend, let's drop off our bags and run and get some food before restaurants and stores shut down for the day. The two scholars took the elevator to their room only to discover an unprepared room. As I walked into the room and placed my bag on one of the beds, my best friend asked, "Did you request a special type of bed?" I responded, "No, I don't understand what you mean." She stated, "Look at the difference in the beds." I replied, "Why is the bed on the floor?" As I explored, I noticed that one of the beds was missing an entire box spring and frame. My friend said, "Take pictures, and let's go to the front desk and inform the clerk." We took the pictures and proceeded to the front desk of the hotel. I rang the bell, and the front desk lady appeared. I asked if she knew our room was missing a frame, and she replied no and let her grab her husband, the hotel manager. The manager asked what the problem was, and I responded that the bed lacked a frame. It's just two mattresses on the floor, and I requested a new room. The manager replied that the hotel was full and could not move us to another room. So my friend responded, "Can you provide a discount or perks?" He replied, "No, there is no discount." She asked if we could have a refund. He responded that he could not issue a refund because we booked through a third party. So my friend asked why we were given a room with two mattresses on the floor, and the manager responded in a loud voice I don't have to answer that, my friend responded why and the manager responded why are you being hostile? I then interjected into the conversation and stated that since my card is the one registered, could you provide me with some alternatives? I could feel my friend getting agitated, so I wanted to try to keep things calm. So I responded to him in a relaxed, low voice, asking about the process of retaining a refund, and the manager provided a number to call. So I asked the manager to give me a minute to consult on my decision, and the manager responded in frustration, stating you make up your mind right now I said sir, please allow me time. He said no, your reservation is canceled which upset me, and I asked why he responded with a cancellation I am not going to say. So, I answered we would get our stuff, and you could refund the stay. He said, "No, you have used the room, and I have to charge you." I responded, "Sir, we were in the room less than five minutes." The manager said, "No, I don't know why you people do this," I said, "Excuse me, what do you mean?" The manager said you have to go, and I responded I am not going anywhere without my bag. He then told us he was going to call the police. I replied, "Please do," and my friend was asking questions, which he dismissed and responded with a negative comment about our race. The manager called the police in front of us, stating that he had two Black people being volatile in the hotel. The manager continues to speak negatively toward us very loudly. So we decided to wait for the police in the lobby, and the manager walked to the back. The police arrived at the scene in less than 10 minutes with three cars, and the first cop walked in with his hand on his gun looking. I said mister officer, you are looking for us he looked puzzled. I knew then that I must speak slowly and calmly because my life depended on it. My friend knew that she had to speak for me for us to be safe. As a Black male with braids, traveling in joggers and a hoodie, I was not in the best position. The officer asked for the manager, and we responded he was in the back. The officer asked for the manager to come to the lobby. By the time the manager made his way, two more officers walked in, and one was an African American who began to ask us questions. The white officer who had his hand on his gun the entire time while in the lobby said nothing much was there, so he and another white officer left. The African-American officer took the lead on the case and mediated the conversation between us and the manager. We were then escorted to our room with the officer and the manager to retrieve our bags. The manager tried conversing with us the entire elevator ride until the officer interjected. After recovering our bags, I asked the officer for a refund, and he consulted with the manager. He returned to explain that we were charged for one day and were not allowed a refund due to a third-party payer. Also, we were issued a citation not to come within 30 feet of the property. The officer explained that this area always has these types of complaints with African Americans and pointed us to a better place to stay for the evening. After settling in a new hotel space, we ventured out for food, chatted, and reflected on the experience. Discussing the experience brought chills up my spine, and I instantly began to rejoice that we survived a situation that could have gone

left and possibly ended in a headline. My voice as a paying customer was not acknowledged during the entire time. Furthermore, I had to conform and wear a mask to stay alive and tell this story. In the whole experience, I had no voice, and choosing to speak freely in my natural voice and vernacular was not an option because my values were to live. That should not be the case in the land of the free and home of the brave. Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right enshrined in international human rights law and a constitutional right in the USA. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and expression" (Article 19), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights specifies that "everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds" (Article 19). In the USA, the 1st and 14th Amendments declare freedom of speech.It seems that these articles should be universal, but as we see in the headlines for African-American men, that is not the case. Check the stories of Sean Bell (Queens, NY), George Floyd (Minneapolis, MN), Walter Scott (Charleston, SC), and Ahmaud Arbery (Brunswick, GA), just to name a few; do Black men have the same freedoms? In the United States, the First Amendment to the Constitution protects freedom of speech as a core principle of American democracy. However, the issue of freedom of speech is complex and contentious regarding race and gender. While freedom of speech is essential to protect democratic ideals, it can also be used to perpetuate harm and discrimination. Hate speech, for example, can be used to target marginalized communities and create a culture of fear and intolerance. In my experience, fear prohibited my freedom of speech, and I did not have an equal platform to express my rightful opinion.

Racism

Reconstruction declared slavery illegal but allowed enslavement and servitude of African Americans for criminal punishment. Black codes, laws that restricted Black people's right to own property, conduct business, buy and lease land, and move freely through public spaces, were adopted across the country. The passage of these laws quickly, as intended, created the mass incarceration of Black men that still prevails to this day. However, what would happen if we applied a Critical Race Theory lens to this experience? All of these are examples of racism. "Racism is a broad term describing the combination of race-based prejudice and power. Without the power differential (one person/group/institution has more power than another), "racism" is just prejudice and carries less weight and fewer consequences" (MHA, n.d, para. 5). It is clear that the aforementioned can be defined as an experience of racism. When we think of racism, we often think of "interpersonal racism, which is racism that happens between individual people. When individual beliefs or prejudices become actions toward others" (MHA, n.d., para.7). While many autoethnographic accounts displayed interpersonal racism, this account displayed systemic racism also known as structural racism. "Systemic/Structural racism has three components: history, culture, and institutions/policy. Historical racism provides the framework for current racism. Any structure built on a foundation (history) of racism will be a racist structure. Culture, which is ever-present in our day-to-day lives, is what allows racism to be accepted, normalized, and perpetuated. Institutions and policies make up the fundamental relationships and rules across society, which reinforces racism and gives it societal legitimacy (which makes it so hard to dismantle)" (MHA, n.d. para. 6). This historical city has both a past and present racist framework. This city has countless interpersonal, systemic, structural, and institutional racist events that have been in the news and social media. It also has a legacy of flags and monuments that speak to the past presence of Black Codes, Jim Crow, and other racist undertones. Racism has been accepted and normalized by many of the residents of this city, from those who are victims of it as well as those who utilize this practice. The visitors of this city were required to leave the premises, ordered not to come within 30 feet of the property, and given information about other places to stay because this happens a lot to African Americans who come to this establishment. Nothing had been done to prevent this from happening to another person from the African Diaspora. It is clear that there is an unwritten policy to put African Americans in less desirable rooms, call the police on them when they complain, and not provide a monetary refund despite not utilizing the

lodging.We must also cite that this incident would also meet the criteria for institutional racism. "Institutional racism occurs within and between institutions. Institutional racism is discriminatory treatment, unfair policies, and inequitable opportunities and impacts based on race produced and perpetuated by institutions (schools, mass media, etc.). Individuals within institutions take on the power of the institution when they act in ways that advantage and disadvantage people, based on race" (MHA, n.d., para. 8). The hotel as an institution utilized the police to assist with their discriminatory treatment towards African Americans, unfair refund policy, and inequitable lodging based on race. Any African American who did not want to stay in the undesirable room had to leave the premises, were issued a restraining order, not given a refund, and must pay to stay elsewhere, giving the hospitality business in this southern city more revenue. It is clear when reading this encounter that these visitors experienced racial trauma. Racial trauma "results from experiencing racism in any of its many forms. Importantly, this doesn't have to be one major isolated event. Still, rather it can result from an accumulation of experiences like daily subtle acts of discrimination or microaggressions" (MHA, n.d., para. 10). Racial trauma can result in both physical and mental health disorders. According to the University of Georgia Department of Psychology (n.d.), "the negative effects of racial discrimination and the unfair or prejudicial treatment of individuals based on race on Black Americans are well documented. Experiences with racial discrimination are associated with negative mental (e.g., depression, anxiety, hopelessness, violent behavior) and physical (e.g., hypertension, thickening and calcification of the arteries, and heart rate variability) health outcomes. These detrimental effects on health are found independent of socioeconomic status, age, and gender". The visitors of this city can be susceptible to mental health or physical health disorders based on this racially traumatic experience.

Theoretical Frameworks

Double Binded Consciousness

The concept of double binded consciousness refers to the experience of black men navigating two conflicting identities and sets of expectations in society (Carter & Welner, 2023). On one hand, they face the pressures and expectations of being black, which includes dealing with racism, discrimination, and societal stereotypes. On the other hand, they are also expected to conform to societal norms and expectations of masculinity. This double bind often places black men in a challenging position, as they must navigate between the expectations of their racial identity and the expectations of their gender identity (Carter & Welner, 2023). This can create a conflicting and complex internal experience, as black men may feel the need to suppress aspects of their identity or perform a "mask" of masculinity in order to navigate societal expectations (Carter & Welner, 2023). In the above narrative it is clear that while the storyteller was angered by the misjustice that occurred he also had to be aware of his identity to be sure that the event did not escalate into a life or death matter. This double binded consciousness can lead to feelings of alienation, internal conflict, and a constant struggle to find a sense of self-authenticity.This struggle is further exacerbated by the presence of negative stereotypes and misconceptions about black men, perpetuated both by society at large and in media representations. In this rural area the hotel manager and police did not know the storyteller personally; moreover, what they thought they knew of him came from stereotypes, the media, and previous experiences. The double bind that black men face, as they not only have to navigate societal expectations but also combat the negative stereotypes and biases that are imposed upon them.The impact of this double binded consciousness extends beyond individual experiences and can have broader implications for the well-being of black men as a whole (Carter & Welner, 2023). It can contribute to higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among black men, as they constantly navigate these conflicting expectations and stereotypes (Carter & Welner, 2023). Furthermore, the pressure to conform to societal norms of masculinity can lead to a lack of emotional expression and vulnerability, inhibiting healthy emotional processing and communication. It's essential to recognize and address the intersectionality of race and gender in understanding the experiences of black men. By acknowledging the complexities of their lived experiences and challenging societal norms and stereotypes, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for black men. This involves advocating for equitable opportunities and treatment and fostering open conversations about the impact of double binded consciousness on mental health and well-being of Black men. Promoting empathy, understanding, and empowerment within communities and institutions can help mitigate the effects of double binded consciousness and cultivate a more affirming environment where black men can authentically express themselves and thrive.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) "is a perspective that asserts race matters in the maintenance of USA policies and practices that immobilize target populations—thereby providing an almost unwavering advantage to white people. CRT counters discourse that situates discrimination and disparities within individual behaviors or psychological deficits" (Sule, 2020). Racism is seen for what it is—a willful, institutionalized, and dehumanizing way of being that is pervasive and ingrained in the cultural, social, and structural fabric of society. Though racism prevailed as the quintessential problem of the 20th century, the 21st century revealed that the color line remains remarkably undisturbed. Four tenets of CRT can apply to the aforementioned encounter. According to Lantz (2021), "Tenet 1: Race is a social construction – the way that race is defined and experienced is the result of social and political thought and actions that change over time". In this narrative, it is clear that the hotel administration and management's social view of race consisted of discriminatory and stereotypical thoughts of African Americans.

Lantz (2021) states, "Tenet 2: Although individuals can indeed be racist, racism and its outcomes are perpetuated in society through social processes above and beyond individual actions, including cultural norms, institutional rules, and laws and regulations. Rather than focus on racism as primarily being a problem of person-to-person racism… CRT elucidates how institutions, systems, and policies can be designed to reinforce, codify, and perpetuate exposures, risks, and opportunities that differ across socioeconomic and racial groups". The city, law enforcement, and hotel staff would benefit from designing policies affirming those of the African Diaspora. There also should be policies that discuss ways to deal with both risks and exposure to racism. In this narrative, the hotel staff and police both perpetuated systematic racism.

Lantz (2021) found "Tenet 3: Because the differential treatment of individuals based upon racial classification is embedded within social systems and institutions—including public policy and law—racism is commonplace. Understanding structural racism within our systems and policies related to education, income, housing, food, criminal justice, the environment, and health care matters". Policies are needed to educate those about structural racism, as well as policies to assist businesses and law enforcement individuals from participating in this discriminatory practice. Finally, Lantz (2021) stated, "Tenet 4: While racism is perpetuated at the structural/macro level in society, listening to and understanding the lived experiences of individuals is essential for understanding how racism works to create inequities in individual outcomes, including health. Moving beyond descriptive research that simply documents racial disparities in health outcomes, CRT rightly asserts that there is a need to better represent in research, the media, and policy advocacy/reform work how racism in all of its manifestations is experienced by people in ways that matter, including for physical/mental health". It is clear that this incident affected both the physical and mental health of those who experienced racism. African Americans who experience racism: "Racism is a mental health issue because racism causes trauma. And trauma paints a direct line to mental illnesses, which need to be taken seriously" (MHA, n.d., para.1). No one checked on these visitors to make sure they were okay. They were made to feel this racial incident was a regular occurrence. From Florida's Stop WOKE Act bill that criminalizes learning about Black history in public education to banning books like "Life is So Good" (2000) by George Dawson and Richard from the Dallas school district, who named a school after Dawson decades prior. Dawson, a Black man and descendant of an enslaved person, racism continues to manifest overtly and covertly in society. From fundamental human rights to equal protection under the law, racial disparities and inequities exist to the disadvantage of racially marginalized people. Through the use of counter storytelling, a tenant of

CRT, sharing experiences of marginalized people is validating and magnifying truth. The experience of the two scholars is a story told by far too many who ventured to Charlestown, South Carolina, one of America's oldest and most beautiful towns that paradoxically has a racially violent history that earned Charlestown a label of being a sundown town. Sundown towns are white, homogenous municipalities in the United States that use discriminatory local laws, intimidation, or violence to maintain this status quo (Morris, 2022). Charlestown, a place that donned a monument of slavery advocate and former US Vice President John C. Calhoun (Hannah-Jones, Roper, Silverman, & Silverstein, 2021), as Hull reported by CNN reporter Hull (2020), remains a place that "reckons with slavery and racism." The experience of the two scholars further exemplifies how racism continues to manifest in society.

Narrative Therapy

In this section, we will delve into the process of embracing personal narratives as a tool for self-discovery and healing. It is essential for Black men to recognize the power and significance of their own stories. Through reflective exercises and introspective journaling, individuals can begin to deconstruct the narratives that have been imposed upon them and reconstruct a narrative that aligns with their values, aspirations, and strengths. By engaging in this process, Black men can reclaim agency over their own stories and redefine their identities in a way that fosters resilience and empowerment. Narrative therapy is an approach to therapy that focuses on exploring one's personal narrative or storytelling as a way to understand and address problems or difficulties in life. This approach views individuals as the experts of their own lives and believes that by externalizing problems and focusing on the strengths and resources within the individual, positive change can occur (White & Epston, 1990).One key aspect of narrative therapy is the use of externalizing language, which helps individuals separate themselves from the problems they are facing. By speaking about problems as if they are separate from themselves, individuals can gain a new perspective and begin to see themselves as capable of overcoming these challenges (White, 2007). Another important technique in narrative therapy is the use of re-authoring. This involves helping individuals rewrite their personal narratives in a way that reflects their preferred identities and values. By changing the stories they tell about themselves, individuals can create new meanings and possibilities for themselves (White & Epston, 1990). Research has shown that narrative therapy can be effective in helping individuals address a variety of mental health concerns, including depression, anxiety, trauma, and relationship issues (O'Connell, Ahmed, Linton, Yarok, & Taylor, 2020). Studies have shown that narrative therapy can help individuals develop a greater sense of agency and empowerment, as well as improve their relationships and overall well-being (Gonçalves & Matos, 2012). ack men to harness their own narratives as a tool for healing and growth. By examining the power of storytelling within the context of cultural and systemic challenges, this chapter aims to provide a roadmap for Black men to reclaim their voices and reshape their narratives in a way that fosters resilience and empowerment. Through examples and guided exercises, readers will be equipped with the tools to begin this transformative journey towards self-discovery and healing. In the following sections, we will explore specific narrative therapy techniques that can be implemented in daily life. These techniques will focus on empowering Black men to deconstruct and reconstruct their personal narratives in a way that aligns with their values, strengths, and aspirations. By engaging in reflective exercises and conversations, readers will have the opportunity to explore alternative perspectives and challenge dominant narratives that may limit their sense of agency and potential. Furthermore, we will discuss the role of community support and connection in the process of narrative transformation, highlighting the importance of creating spaces where Black men can share their stories and find validation and solidarity. Other Black men with similar racial trauma experiences can find support in sharing their experiences through storytelling. As a Black man navigating the complexities and challenges of everyday life, it's important to acknowledge the impact of racial trauma. The use of narrative therapy offers a powerful approach to processing and healing from these experiences. By creating a space for individuals to tell their stories, reflect on their experiences, and re-author their narratives, narrative therapy can

be a valuable tool for addressing the psychological and emotional effects of racial trauma. Through this process, Black men can explore the ways in which systemic racism has affected their lives, challenge negative beliefs about themselves, and ultimately find strength and resilience in their own narratives. In doing so, they can reclaim agency over their experiences and reclaim their sense of self-worth and identity in the face of racial trauma.

Implications

"American racism has produced systems of oppression that continue to impact Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) in the United States. Critical race theory (CRT) asserts that racism is a longstanding, pervasive, and permanent component of social structure. Perceptions of and concepts relating to race are used to manipulate societal conditions to add value to and benefit the dominant white population. CRT can be used as a lens to (a) understand current social and economic conditions, (b) analyze policies, including municipal, state, and federal laws, regulations, and court decisions, and (c) develop and implement policies and programs that increase racial justice. For social work administrators, CRT provides a framework for identifying and assessing implicit and explicit racism in internal and external organizational policies, structures, and practices. In community work, CRT places race and racism at the center of localized patterns of disempowerment and inequality." On a micro level, more access, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) training is needed for law enforcement to help break stereotypical barriers. Training that incorporates assimilations so officers have the opportunity to apply and demonstrate their knowledge. On a mezzo-level policy, South Carolina needs to change what business owners must produce before a citation is granted. Also, individuals should be allowed to refuse or request a court date instead of being forced to sign a citation without fully knowing the ramifications. From a macro point of view, the government should have more robust policies on third-party reservation companies for customer service training and refund policies. Overall, ADEI training is needed for hotel management and police officers. It is imperative that those in helping professions use counter-narratives when working with individuals, groups, families, couples, and communities who experience racism. Counter Narratives are a combination of three forms of storytelling. "(1) critical storytelling, (2) counterstory(ies), and (3) counter-narrative(s). These three approaches arose in the mid-to-late 1990s but in different disciplines, with the first serious use of "critical storytelling" appearing in social work (Cooper, 1994), of "counterstories" in Latino/a Studies (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Villenas et al., 1999), and of counter-narratives in critical pedagogy (Lather, 1998). All three approaches were quickly adopted in education (Yosso, 2006). Although the approaches have minor differences, they are all grounded in a combination of critical theory and discourse theory, particularly CRT, critical feminism, and narrative inquiry. As such, we use counter-narrative as a covering term for all three approaches in our writing" (Miller, Liu, & Ball, 2022, para. 3). These counter-narratives ensure that the experiences of those over and underlooked by society are shared and told. This encounter is not only an autoethnographic experience but also a counter-narrative. "Counter-narrative has recently emerged in education research as a promising tool to stimulate educational equity in our increasingly diverse schools and communities. Grounded in critical race theory and approaches to discourse study including narrative inquiry, life history, and autoethnography, counter-narratives have found a home in multicultural education, culturally sensitive pedagogy, and other approaches to teaching for diversity" (Miller, Liu, & Ball, 2022, para. 1). In this encounter these visitors have turned their experience into a counter-narrative case study that can be used to teach about cultural sensitivity, cultural competency, and equity.

Summary

In summary, the life of a Black male is a challenge and causes individuals to be on constant alert when in some public areas. This is partly due to social disempowerment and inequality because of existing laws and learned behavior passed on through tradition and generation interactions. Which, in some instances, allows space for history to repeat itself. Individuals mustn't be silent on injustices around Black men but speak out and support Black men when they are placed in these vulnerable situations. Bringing attention to injustices is no easy task; you are stronger in

numbers. As well as individuals may feel safe when a witness is around, creating a sense of support and encouragement. All in all, shifting the immature thinking of some individuals will take time and interest, and that is something that won't be done overnight as this country has endured decades of racism and inequality. Still, we must try because if we don't stand for something, we will fall to anything, and that anything just might be injustice. Utilizing narrative therapy, Black men can engage in a healing process that focuses on their unique experiences and understanding of racial trauma.

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