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Blackness & The Performance of Our Cultural Identity: A Social, Political & Spiritual Exploration of The Racialized Performance

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Blackness & The Performance of Our Cultural Identity: A Social, Political & Spiritual
Exploration of The Racialized Performance

Senior Project Submitted to

The Division of Social Studies

of Bard College

by

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Dedication

This senior project is dedicated to my mother and my father. My parents were my first superheroes, my first educators, my first supporters, and my first (and lasting) inspiration. Without their love, guidance, and their belief in me, I wouldn't have the courage & tenacity to finish this project. I love you so much.

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Lastly, I would like to give the biggest thank you to my Bard family, past & present. Our many conversations about Blackness, identity, love, healing, life, and past traumas over the last four years all helped inform this project. Each of your unique experiences as people in this world helped expand my mind and thus, better inform the content of this project. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Can we perform identity? Growing up, that was a question that I constantly had and ran into. Whether it was geared towards anyone or not, the question always remained. As a young Black person, I witnessed certain behaviors and heard of differing attributes from different types of individuals and always chalked it up to people just being different than one another. However, through my tenure as a student studying sociology, I've realized that a lot of our traits and behaviors are due to the social conditioning one receives while living in a society. In Critical Sociolinguistic Research Methods, it is stated that "we conceptualize and make sense of the world around us through language, and we negotiate our relationships with others through language" (Heller et al, 2018). We are often products of the immediate environment around us, learning and absorbing the values and morals of the dominant culture and our interactions with others are often physically and verbally performing those values and morals.

When thinking about my senior project, I thought about the idea of performance within the framework of race and cultural identity. Every single person, despite common belief, has a cultural identity. Some of those cultural identities are tied to privilege or lack thereof, which informs the way in which those people express themselves and that identity. If we think of the Black American cultural identity -- Black American is in reference to descendants of American chattel slavery -- that identity is intrinsically tied to the oppression that Black people have faced in American society due to white supremacy. Often, the expression of that identity is inherently performative. This performativity is also not assumptive of disingenuity, but rather of actual, live physical performance. Unlike Black people, white people have rarely had to face the brunt of white supremacy. White supremacy has allowed white people to create structures that malign

Black people politically, socially, and economically. From the actual institution of slavery to creation of minstrelsy as a viable and appropriate form of theater and performance to the Black Codes & Jim Crow laws -- these are just a few examples of that discrimination and malignment that have had lasting effects on the world today.

When taking a look at how white people utilized white supremacy to malign Black people during slavery, there's a large emphasis on the severing of communication. There were many reasons for this, but the biggest reason was because "slaveholders limited or prohibited education of enslaved African Americans because they feared it might empower their chattel and inspire or enable emancipatory ambitions" (Brown, 2013). This reasoning, while insidious, helped further the practice of oral traditions within Black American communities to where music and sonic communication has become the preferred way of dialogue between us. Brown further expounds on this idea, where they state:

> African-based oral traditions became the primary means of preserving history, mores, and other cultural information among the people. This was consistent with the griot practices of oral history in many African and other cultures that did not rely on the written word. Many of these cultural elements have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling. The folktales provided African Americans the opportunity to inspire and educate one another.

Acknowledging that, along with the intrinsic differences between how Black people and white people communicate, creating a podcast where majority Black voices are highlighted to speak about the framework of race, cultural identity, and performativity seemed fitting. Because our

main medium historically and socially is through speech, engaging in intellectual conversations about our experiences and our culture where our actual voices are centered is important.

Moreover, I felt the need to combat the sociological ideology that objectivity within writing is at the utmost of importance. While objective writing and sociological work allows us to examine information and social phenomena as just plainly that, it just reinforces the idea that sociology within itself is inherently racist. As a Black person in the Western world, I am often the subject in which white and Black sociologists are writing about. To me, there is no real way to remove the experience of racialized trauma and pain without actually under-stating the importance and validity of that trauma. White people are able to write objectively about racism within sociology not because they don't have racialized trauma (hint hint, they do), but because our society's lack of contention with white supremacy. White people don't actually have to do any of the work because our society benefits from their lack of awareness and the continued oppression of people of color.

Additionally, the podcast functions as a why to make the issues I am discussing accessible to the subjects of the work. Functionally, sociology is the study of people yet most people can't understand it because the language we use is inherently exclusive. Because of slavery and the ripple effects of that trauma, Black people are seldomly allowed to understand ourselves in relation to the white dominator culture[1] in a way that is deeper and nuanced. The podcast format allows us to focus on the framework of race, cultural identity & performativity while also deconstructing the notion of what sociology looks like and helps us effectively center Black, non-academic voices in analytical works surrounding advanced theories of race.

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[1] defined by Wikipedia as " a model of society where fear and force maintain rigid understandings of power and superiority within a hierarchical structure

In order to evaluate this framework, I decided to use Erving Goffman's "The Presentation of Self-Everyday Life" to first understand the performance of social values and how that can be translated to race. From my evaluation, Goffman's theory helps us understand and intellectualize how our cultural interactions and performances are rehearsed and manufactured based on the response we are given. Goffman states this by saying:

> When an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason
> for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is
> in his interests to convey. (Goffman, 1959)

Goffman intellectualizes linguistic and social interactions in order to make a point about our performances within these conversations, physically and colloquially, are a reflection of our own identities and a culmination of learned behavior simultaneously dialoguing with each other to reinforce a message, "impression" or value. Thus, because racial identity is seen as cultural and thus learned behaviors, racial identity within itself can be considered a performance. We are always performing the values, customs, traditions, and language that we grow up with, especially as Black people that exist within the confines of the white dominator culture.

As a result of growing up within a white supremacist culture that reinforces whiteness as the dominant, Black people often grow up internalizing white supremacist rhetoric.

My senior project, using Goffman's theory of performativity and a plethora of works from Black & non-Black sociologists, psychologists, professionals, and activists, aims to explore how Black people perform different cultural aspects of white supremacy, as well as aims to

center healing and restorative work that'll allow Black people to unlearn our social conditioning

from the racialized trauma that is living in the United States while Black.

Chapter 1: Black Men & The Performance of White Male Toxic Masculinity

"What is masculinity without the white gaze?"

- Michael Barriteau, 2021

I. *What Is Masculinity?*

What is masculinity? Well, Wikipedia (as well as most major dictionaries) defines masculinity as "a set of attributes, behaviors, and roles associated with men and boys." Honestly, that's pretty vague. It's not vague in the sense that it doesn't give us a definition, but rather vague in the sense that it doesn't capture any of the nuances that exist within masculinity. While I didn't expect a Webster dictionary definition of "masculinity" to give me an entire bell hooks' soliloquy on the state and failings of the Black masculine man, I was expecting more. For example, the first thing that definition made me think was "How do Black men perform "masculinity"? As a queer Black man myself, I've wondered that often. I can't not wonder that. The definition was in fact muddy for me because throughout my life, I only grew up to know examples of "masculinity" through my brother and my father, two Black men and the male figures in my life. For most of my life, my father was in prison. Whenever I would go on a jail visit to see him, I would inadvertently observe my father's behavior. My father, most likely unknowingly, would often interrupt my mother when she would speak and engage in conversation with her like she was stupid. He would also act and talk towards me when other men in his jailhouse would walk by; his demeanor would become more sly and his presence would become much bigger -- almost like a pimp. At those times, he'd speak to my mother as if she was *his woman* instead of his partner. My brother was very similar, but his masculinity often manifested within competition. My brother would play street basketball in Bojangles Park with

some of the neighborhood kids when we were younger and he would often hurl insults and slur

toward them (f*ggot & dickhead being the most common), which they would return tenfold.

He'd often bring a different girl every time to the park and talk her up, telling her the same lies

and fluff he told to every girl. Of course, his friends would blow his head up, talk excessively

about the girl's attractiveness, and make him feel like the player he was, to which he'd be gleeful

every single time.

Both my brother and father responded to the immediate, overtly toxic masculine

environment around them by doing equally "masculine" behaviors. They bought into the false

praise and freezing warmth of toxic masculinity at the expense of the Black women in their lives.

These behaviors were always behaviors I personally associated with white men -- the yearning

for dominance and power and using women/other marginalized people as a means to get it. To

see Black men engage in these behaviors of dominance and control, behaviors that while

indicative of manhood and masculinity, are not necessarily associated with Blackness, I realized

that this form of masculinity was in fact a performance -- of whiteness. This got me thinking of a

deeper question: is the Black man's performance of toxic masculinity based within racialized

trauma?

When trying to come up with an answer to that question, I first had to define the terms

'toxic masculinity' and 'patriarchy' in order to be able to understand. According to Oxford

Languages, toxic masculinity is defined as "a set of attitudes and ways of behaving

stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on men

and on society as a whole", while patriarchy is defined as "a system of society or government in

which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it". Just like the definition of

"masculinity", these definitions, while correct, don't acknowledge the intersections and layers that are added once we factor in Blackness.

In the particular episode of my podcast entitled "Black Men & Toxic White Male Masculinity", I decided to put the academic knowledge and text into conversation. The point of this was to create an easier, digestible way for everyone, but specifically cisgender, heterosexual Black men to be included within the conversation.

II. ***Defining Black Masculinity & White Male Patriarchy***

When engaging with Imani Perry's text *Prophets of the Hood*, I became intrigued with understanding how Black male patriarchy in itself doesn't work the same way as white male patriarchy. Perry breaks down patriarchy and Black manhood as such:

> As the term *patriarchy* has been adopted for the discussion of sexual politics in the black community, it has become glaringly apparent that it neglects many historical and current realities about class, social power, economic market places, the prison industrial complex, and trauma. I want to excise the assumption of patriarchy from this discussion of black masculinity. The *white male patriarch* describes a powerful and resonant social role. The black male patriarch, where he exists, lives a fragile existence, mediated by his own encounters with white male patriarchy. I want to clarify here that I am not making an argument for or on behalf of a matriarchal black culture. Nor am I making assertions about family structure and intersectionality, or participating in the always fruitless competition about who suffers more oppression, black men or women. Rather, I am looking at black male identity in a given genre, born of particular gender experiences intersecting but not in union with those of white men. In so doing, I attempt to free myself from a term that I believe adds more confusion than clarity. Darrell Dawsey writes the following about the image of black men in *Living to Tell about It: Young Black Men in America Speak Their Piece*: "To be sure we have been the topic of intense debate and discussion in America, by both Blacks and whites. Our humanity has been stripped, restored, attacked, defended, impugned and explained in literature more often than we'd like to recall. We have been hyped and stereotyped, valorized and demonized."[3] Black men as gendered and racial beings occupy a specific, constructed and oppressed role in society, one from which they must be liberated with a sophisticated political understanding of the grounds of their oppression. [2]

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[2] Passage found on Pg. 119 of Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood* (Perry, 2006)

Perry's observation takes note of the racialized dynamics that has created and cultivated the current Black male identity. As Black men, we exist in a gendered space where our gender identity is inherently racialized; our proximity to white & non-Black men dictates the expression of our masculinity as well. The current structure of Black male patriarchy could be seen as a product of white supremacy. The symbiotic and genealogical relationship with whiteness is important to talk about; white supremacy was the creator of Black male patriarchy and toxic masculinity, as well as it continues to feed it and force Black men to perform an identity where trauma and anger often dictate our actions and beliefs.

III. *Black Men, Racialized Abuse & A Yearning for Power*

In the episode, the conversation focused on Black men, specifically cisgender, heterosexual Black men, and their relationship to toxic white masculinity. This conversation was had with a Bard student named Michael, who is a cisgender heterosexual Black man. In our conversation, we first looked at the quote from Imani Perry in order to define white male patriarchy and Black male patriarchy with each other. In dialogue with Michael, he brought up a specific section of the quote where it states:

> "The white male patriarch describes a powerful and resonant social role. The Black male patriarch, where he exists, lives a fragile existence, mediated by his own encounters with white supremacy."

In his initial analysis of the quote, Michael describes this phenomenon as "demeaning". Michael further explains that it's "demeaning" that white men (and at large, white society) refuse to give Black men the space and opportunity to be able to engage in society the same way as they do. His argument points clearly and explicitly at the insidiousness of this relationship, as well as also

pointing to the framework of oppression, in which white ideals of masculinity are weaponized against Black men in order to keep them oppressed. Moreover, Michael further elaborates and mentions Black men as "falling short" economically when compared to white men. When thinking of falling short, I think of a competition. There's a race (no pun intended) between two or more individuals who are ultimately competing for the same prize and/or toward the same goal. Michael's word choice, while not deliberate, shows us a bit into the Black male psyche without having to dig. The inference that there's a sense of "falling short" ignores that there's no race to begin with; a race must be fair in order for one to fall short.

As observed in some of Michael's language, there's an assumption that Black men can compete with white men when in actuality, white supremacy doesn't function this way. There's a deliberate trick that enforces a way of thinking that centers a Black male's masculinity as a measure of his individual power and as a result, the way in which he expresses that illusion of power toward others.

This is further expounded upon when Michael and I discuss Black male standards, where he states that it is reinforced, often by other men and parental figures in the Black community, that you have to be "twice the man" and put in "twice the work" in order to attain what "others" have. These standards are not ones created by Black people originally, as we are merely products of a racialized labor system. With this in mind, the performance of white male patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and ultimately white male supremacy becomes clearer. The standard for Black men, in our society, is white men. Black men are taught to believe that whiteness and white male patriarchy is the definition of "manhood" because of how white men have villainized and queered Blackness and centered themselves. This inference isn't to assume that Black manhood

is completely devoid of original concepts and ideas, but it is to assume that the reference for ideas of privilege and power within Black manhood is merely a performance of white societal norms and values.

In Orlando Patterson's essay "Feast of Blood", Patterson talks about how white men utilized trauma, violence, and racial dynamics in order to subjugate Black men. In this essay, Patterson states:

> The idea of Afro-American men resisting and fighting against the outrages heaped upon them was as much an anathema as was the fantasy of Afro-American men lusting after Euro-American women. Thus the distorting emphasis on the charge of rape and attempted rape accomplished two goals of 'racial' oppression in one fell swoop. It promoted the image of the Afro-American male as a sexual fiend and at the same time it denied all manhood to him. (Patterson, 2006)

Here, Patterson helps us understand that white supremacy and white male patriarchy molded the perception of Black men to be overtly masculine, violent, and predatory. However, the more interesting point here is when Patterson mentions the "white denial" of a Black man's manhood. Could the current archetype of the masculine Black man be a response to that and a performance of that same denigration? To me, the line is clear. White male patriarchy has removed any sense of character agency from Black men by constructing a toxic narrative that forces Black men to feel as if they have to act and maneuver spaces in a certain way. This is actually reinforced by an op-ed article entitled "2020, White Supremacy, Black Male Leadership and Me" by Marcus Littles, in which he states:

Why are Black men especially susceptible? White supremacy proselytizes leadership that

values power more than people. And so, the Black male leader is presented with choices:

to acknowledge weakness and admit he doesn't know, or to perform… White supremacy

tries to convince Black men that patriarchy is a tool that can become them, even as

acceding to its tenets leads to division among Black men and women and reinforces the

system of white supremacy as a whole. (Little, 2020)

Littles' point that white supremacy and white male patriarchy reinforces power is clear, as

evidenced by history. Black men, however, are interacting with the same ideology but at a

different positioning; black men are subordinate to white men in the system of white supremacy,

thus their idea of what manhood actually looks like sits at the crossroad between oppression and

emulating that oppression. It's similar to the cycle of abuse: the abuser enacts violence onto the

abused while also imprinting actions and values onto that person. The abused, which in this case

are Black men, absorb these abusive behaviors, then enact them on others (DuBois-Maahs,

2020). This performance of white supremacist abuse is inherently cyclic and also heavily reliant

on not just the internalization of these ideologies, but also the fear that it produces within Black

men that makes them feel as if they have to engage in this behavior.

When engaging with Michael about this, Michael stated "We have to put ourselves in

positions of power [or what we think of as power] to give us some kind of foundation in society."

This quote from Michael highlighted the positioning of the Black male identity perfectly --

Michael's acknowledgment that there's an inherent struggle for power as a man interacting with

patriarchy actively shows us that Black men are concurrently fighting against whiteness while

also trying to "prove" something to it as well. Many cis straight Black men are working

separately on the goal of racial equality than Black women & queer folks are, simply because their goal of racial equality is contemporarily tied to a minimization of their masculinity. Black men's fight is racial, but it's also patriarchal and thus, this fight often looks like one of self-interest and unhealthy self-actualization. This manifests into destructive patterns of treatment, which often include gendered violence, homophobia, and transphobia.

IV. ***Black Men & Gendered Violence***

Furthermore, In bell hooks' novel *We Real Cool: Black Men & Masculinity*, hooks addresses Black men's relationship to white supremacy, white male patriarchy, and their own sexual and gender identity. In the section entitled "it's a dick thing", hooks talks about how heterosexual Black men engage with and think about women. There's a few lines that demonstrate hooks' theorization, which read "For many black males fantasy is not about what has been lost but what is seen as missing -- as unattainable", followed by, "Individual black males have been more open about the rage and hatred they feel toward females… it reveals the extent to which patriarchal black males [like males in general] see sexuality as a war zone where they must assert dominance (hooks, 2004)." hooks theorizes that Black men perform their masculinity (which is in fact, white male masculinity) and the ways they are disbarred from engaging with that masculinity through their interactions with Black women & queer folks. Because of Black men's rejection from engaging with white male masculinity, a lack of perceived power that manhood "should" entail, and white supremacy not allowing Blackness to actually exist without a constructed narrative, Black men often find themselves in situations where they are enacting violence toward Black women and/or LGBTQ+ people in the community through these forums. Because womanhood and queerness is automatically othered

within patriarchy, cis straight Black men are able to utilize the privilege they don't necessarily

always have because the people they are in proximity with don't have access to that privilege in

white OR Black spaces. Their performances of white supremacy (literal and subjective) further

create a distance between Black men & others in the community.

During the podcast, I presented this quote to Michael and we discussed it more deeply. In

response, Michael said "It's really interesting, the Black male fantasy… that's a first for me to

see, hear, and read. I have never experienced that in my opinion." While initially I passed this

off, I soon thought deeper about how the implications and optics of a racialized and gendered

performance can often vary when the subject is doing the "wrongdoing". When evaluating

Adebayo Oluyawomi's work "The Man-Not and the Inapplicability of the Intersectionality to the

Dilemmas of Black Manhood", I came across a differing ideological perspective to the

conversation of Black men perpetuating white supremacy. This conversation centers Black men

as victims of white supremacy (which they are), yet actively ignores the presence of social

conditioning relational to identity. For instance, Oluyawomi states:

> Feminist theories focusing on intersectional modalities of race, class, and gender also
>
> propagate and perpetuate such "legitimizing myths" about Black males as sexual
>
> predators, patriarchs, and social deviants as the hallmark of gender/Black masculinity
>
> scholarship.

While there is inherently truth to the notion that feminist theory can possibly lead to the further

demonization of Black men, there's also a lack of awareness of how one internalizes the systems

of patriarchy around them. Oluyawomi's ideology, like Michael's, assumes that one is separate

from a sociolinguistic society that creates language and behavior that reflects its values.

Goffman's theory, which assumes that our social actions are just mimicking social values and traditions actively disproves that one can effectively remove themselves from engaging in anti-Black, white supremacist performance.

Furthermore, Oluyawomi actually cites Black feminist theorists in his work in order to prove his argument and solidify his point. He states:

> This idea of "maleness" as a unique identifier of domination is echoed in the writings of other feminist scholars like Mutua (2013), who described Black males as belonging to a "privileged group" because of their "maleness" which makes them guilty of the forms of violence perpetuated by dominant White males. Black feminists and intersectional theorists also refer to Black males as sexual predators using the legitimizing myths of the "super-masculine menial". (Oluyawomi, 2020)

Here, the socio-psyche of the straight cis Black man is inherently exposed and made known; the works of hooks, specifically her 2004 text "We Real Cool" and Mutua both acknowledge that the creation of the patriarchal Black man is one of indoctrination and brainwashing through the vessels of white supremacy. The acknowledgement that Black men can also participate in gendered violence is not fictitious nor is it meant to discriminate against Black men, but rather help Black men become better community members and engage with Black women & queer people more effectively. Oluyawomi and Michael (to certain extent) weren't able to understand that the Black male identity is in fact not separate of white supremacy nor a creation of it, but rather deeply affected by it and how it works. This sort of lack of understanding is actually similar to the concept of "white denial", stated earlier by Patterson. According to Tahmi Perzichilli, a therapist with GoodTherapy, defines white denial as "[an] emotional numbness as

an adverse effect of racism. This numbness may enable white individuals to ignore or perpetuate

a system of racism that benefits them without feeling guilt about others' suffering." While most

Black men can't actively ignore a system of racial oppression, Black men's ignorance toward

issues of gender, sexuality, and privilege mimic white people's ignorance and denial towards

racism. The ability to actively ignore problems of discrimination is indicative of white

supremacy and privilege, considering that these issues can be sidelined because one doesn't feel

they relate to them and thus lack the need to acknowledge them. Black men often perform this

kind of violence because of their proximity to manhood and white supremacy, *not* because they

are Black men. This sort of gaslighting, which is defined by Psychology Today as "a tactic in

which a person or entity, in order to gain more power, makes a victim question their reality"

(Sarkis, 2017) allows Black men to actively ignore conversations around gendered violence and

the performance of white male masculinity while also actively participating in it and benefitting

from a form of privilege within our own community.

When evaluating toxic Black male masculinity in context of Goffman, where the

theoretical inference is that every social interaction we have is in fact a performance of our own

social, cultural, spatial, and political motivations, as well as the norms, motivations, and orient of

those around us, there can be a theoretical inference that toxic Black male masculinity in its

current form is the performance and culmination of white supremacist, psychological

colonization. Through the evaluation of several different perspectives (non-academic,

sociological, and psychological), my observations of these toxic performances allowed me to

deeply understand how racial trauma and indoctrination transcend the scope of racial

discrimination. In fact, whiteness and white patriarchy has created a way of life for Black men

that is inherently destructive and cyclically abusive for the Black community and Black men themselves.

Chapter 2: Non-Black Allies & The Performance of The Black Political Activist Framework

"Everyone is an ally yet no one is asking how to be an ally."

- Teron Byrd, 2021

I. *On The Ground*

June 1st, 2020. South Bronx, New York. I was slowly walking through the street with a sign that read "STOP KILLING US" and a black mask that read "#BLM" on the front. There I was, walking in sweltering heat, chanting the phrase "Black Lives Matter". My body was sticky from sweat, while my mind was heavy from anger. I wasn't alone in that anger though -- there were hundreds and hundreds of people around me. They were as diverse as they come; people of so many races, genders, and backgrounds all united in one common goal: the continued fight for Black people and our freedom.

As I looked around, I was amazed at the sheer amount of bodies. I spoke to many different types of people that day; people who were Black, white, Latinx, Asian and so on and heard their passion for these injustices. While I can now recognize that some of it was performative and inauthentic and some of it was not, I'm curious as to what led all of these non-Black folks to want to engage in this kind of political organization/activism. I thought it was inherently based on their proximity to Black people and while that is still true, I'm not necessarily sure that it's by way of empathy but rather, by way of identity based performance.

With this in mind, how does one think of organizing politically? Is there a conscious viewpoint in which we, as individuals, engage with our personal politics? Personally, I think there is. As individuals, we're often influenced by our own identities and the way in which those identities occupy and interact with our immediate surroundings. Those identities, whatever they

may be, are often politically coexisting and cohabitating with each other. This shared reality, one of political codependence, allows each of us to enter political organization with a nuanced and unique perspective that informs the way in which we physically wind up organizing.

II. *The Black Political Activist Framework*

As Black people, our identity often shapes the way in which we approach political organization and activism. Our identity, which is in direct opposition to white supremacy and the culture of racism, oftens forces us to think about how to abolish these white supremacist structures. This process of thinking could be seen as the Black political activist framework -- which I defined as "abolitionist and intersectional in its true nature; a frame of thinking in which every political decision is informed by the goal of Black freedom from white supremacy and by one's proximities to intersectional Black identity, whether that be class, skin color, gender, education status, etc."

In order to begin to understand the Black political activist framework, we must first define what abolitionist and intersectional mean. Abolitionist's original definition is "a person who wants to stop or abolish slavery; an advocate of abolition" (Merriam-Webster, 2021). However, because this mental framework is contemporarily based and Black oppression operates differently now, the term abolitionist is thus appropriated. In actuality, its modern definition reads:

Abolition, very simply, refers to the practice and preparation for a world in which we prioritize collective care, safety, health, and happiness of every single person and reorient ourselves around this priority. It means creating the conditions for a world in which

police, prisons, and prosecutors cannot exist. It necessitates the dismantling of

imperialist, cis-heteropatriarchal, capitalist extraction, and provides a prefigurative model

for being in our communities in ways that reflect the world we want to build. Modern

abolitionists see it as our mission to provide the models of community safety, security,

mutual aid, and harm reduction that are needed, and to do the political education,

relationship-building, and movement work to bring others into demanding transformative

economic and social change for abolition" (Sathish, 2020).

Most Black people engaging in political activism through the lens of race are abolitionists -- we

are fighting for the transformative economic and social change related to the freedom of Black

people.

The Black political activist framework also assumes that one engaging in it is viewing

themselves as an intersectional individual whose different identities informs their activism.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, can be defined as "the acknowledgment

that within groups of people with a common identity, there exist intragroup differences. In other

words, each individual experiences social structures slightly differently b/c the intersection of

their identities reflects an intersection of overlapping identities" (Crenshaw). While this term is

heavily used in reference to gender and sexual identities in relation to race, its usage and

presence as the framework does not inherently assume that. The framework's also intersectional

just because of how we as Black people occupy politics -- our identities are often in deep

conversation with one another and are thus influencing our decisions.

For instance, during the Civil Rights era, a common debate was what different social and

economic classes of Black people (educated, middle class community leaders vs the uneducated

working class) thought about Black civil rights activism and how the methods of organizing differed depending on their proximity to certain social identities (Scott, 1966). For example, middle class Black community leaders were in favor of a non-violent, less radicalized approach to Black abolition that also prioritized the further embodiment of our community structures, which often opposed the way in which low income, working class Black people viewed Black liberation and abolition.

By naming and acknowledging the mentality in which Black people approach politics, we're able to understand that our abolitionist, anti white supremacist activism is inherently performative. While the inclusion of the term 'performative' infers negativity, my reappropriation of performance in combination with Goffman's theory more so tells us that we're actively performing our social values, norms, and attributes in order to convey a message to others. This message, or more appropriately *the goal*, is Black emancipation and abolition of white supremacy. The social performativity of political engagement is inherently necessary for mobilization, as it works directly in tandem with the framework and informs our political decisions as Black activists.

III. *Allies & The Black Political Activist Framework*

If we're acknowledging this Black framework as valid, what must we assume of non-Black allies? Prior, when I spoke about my experience at the Black Lives Matter protests, I mentioned seeing many different kinds of people from so many different backgrounds there to support our struggle. These people, referred to as allies, are defined as "someone who uses their power and privilege to advocate for others. Allies are not members of marginalized groups.

Allies educate themselves on issues that affect Black & brown minority people (Marinaki, 2020)." As previously stated, while initially I was overwhelmed with emotion and was surprised by the support, my attempt in trying to identify the foundation of Black political ideology has made me wonder if non-Black allies can identify, understand, and participate in the Black Political Activist framework.

Because of the political engagement of non-Black allies in the fight for Black freedom & abolition, there's a proximity that is assumed of them toward Black people. Non-Black allies that organize, support, and engage with Black activists are also interacting with Black people in a politically pedagogical way. In other words, these non-Black individuals are being taught and informed by Black people about the dangers of white supremacy for Black people.

With this in mind, could non-Black allies, in their proximity to Blackness, have learned to perform the Black Political Activist Framework (abolitionist & intersectional in structure)? Is it possible for them to even perform this? Can it be classified as appropriation? In order to investigate this question further, I posed this discussion point on the podcast to Andrew, a non-Black Latinx & Arab cis man, as well as Ryan, a white cis man who both consider themselves non-Black allies. Because of my close proximity to my Blackness, my thoughts and possible answer to this question can only be seen as mere academic and intellectual conjecture.

Before I asked Andrew and Ryan to engage with this literature and sociopolitical theory, I asked them to engage with a quote from the scholar and activist Kia Hall's 'A Transnational Feminist Framework', which reads "Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (Hall, 2016). Here, she is clarifying the idea that intersectionality isn't necessarily just a term to

explain the social phenomena of multi-layered systemic oppression, but rather a result of it. I included Hall because this clarification is vital in truly understanding the framework; because the framework is about a foundational mental state that is moving toward and structuring Black activism and mobilization, removing intersectionality as a concept that is in perpetual stasis and placing it in movement is necessary as it allows us to engage with this concept outside the confines of academia and within its original social context -- activism. The "movement" is also not assumed to just be physical -- the inference is that it's also conversational and political. More tangentially, the point of my senior project is to deconstruct the rigid immovability of white academia and center Black academia as inherently activist and constantly in social & political conversation with Black people and activism. Hall's classification allows us to further that work within the confines of academia without necessarily centering academia.

When first posing the discussion question "could non-Black allies, in their proximity to Blackness, have learned to perform the Black Political Activist Framework (abolitionist & intersectional in origin)? Is it possible for them to even perform this? Can be classified as appropriation?", in combination with the foundational material, the first discussion that came up was the usage of certain word choices. One of the podcast guests, Ryan, raised the point about the word "perform". Around 6:19 into the episode, Ryan states "The word 'perform'... that word has certain connotations with white allies… you are engaging with the framework but… it's performative, for show." Here, Ryan's point is directly speaking to Goffman's theory of performativity -- white allies engage within the performance of anti-racist ideology, whether it be genuine or not. Ryan's point here infers that performative white allies and their mobilization is often motivated by something that isn't natural, but rather something affected. Goffman's theory,

while mainly speaking about actions being influenced by our immediate social environment, infers that the motivations behind one's social and political performance can also be conscious.

After speaking about the connotation of the word "perform", Ryan and Andrew both stated that non-Black allies can't participate in the framework. During the discussion, Ryan stated:

> I don't think there are these kinds of conversations… I'm talking about white folks. Speaking strictly about white people, there is this sense of 'racism is bad, get rid of racism'. End of story, end of conversation. It's not so much thinking about 'well, intersectionality, how do people experience [as Kia Hall states] oppression in different ways and different levels I don't think there are those kinds of conversations among white folk.

At first, when Ryan brought up this point, I initially was confused. Throughout my time at Bard, interacting with politically minded white allies who (over)used terms like intersectionality, capitalism, oppression as well as my constant Twitter browsing made me think that white people thought of intersectionality the same way. However, after re-evaluating the way in which these white allies used these terms, I realized that Ryan's conjecture was valid. Often, white allies that address intersectionality within the confines of themselves address it without the genuine acknowledgment of race and their racial identity. Ryan further makes this point, where he states "Because there isn't the same sort of understanding of intersectionality, there isn't the same sort of understanding of the different parts of one's identity… that's a symptom of white supremacy and of white supremacist culture… that basically says to white people that you don't have to worry about the other parts of their identity." Because white supremacy and whiteness depends

on white people (and as a result, white allies) not truly understanding their identities in relation

to others and the world around them, it would also inherently stop them from truly engaging with

these complex ideas of identity. Could this mean its appropriation then?

IV. *Appropriation or?*

When engaging with the idea of allies and their proximity to the Black political activist

framework, there was a lot of discussion regarding the privilege that white & non-Black allies

hold just by existing. Ryan, around 30:21 into the episode, posed the question "How well can one

who benefits from the systems of oppression engage in this framework". Therein lies the catch:

the relationship is inherently oxymoronic because one who occupies an oppressive position

cannot formulate their way of foundational thinking to one of the oppressed without subjecting

the oppressed to further trauma. This trauma is often expressed either through further labor done

on the part of the Black activist involved or through the decentering of blackness altogether.

Moreover, the centering of one's whiteness immediately disbars one from being able to

engage in this framework, as it relies on the understanding of one's Black, oppressed identity in

relation to white supremacy. This often manifests in many different ways, including when white

people often organize in the same way as Black people, the focus from the Black, political issue

is often redirected. For instance, in the Washington Post article "White people are speaking up at

protests. How do we know they mean what they say?" by Stacey Patton, Patton describes the

phenomenon of white allies and their impact on the course of Black activism. Within the article,

Patton includes the words of Simon Balto, a History & Black Studies professor from the

University of Iowa, who further adds to Patton's intellectualization of white allies. The excerpt reads:

> But Balto, who has written a book on racist policing in Chicago, says white Americans have long been much better at talking than listening when it comes to issues of racism, to the degree that they want to deal with racism at all. He sees the most recent examples of white protesters performing black death as part of that tradition.
>
> "A white person saying 'I can't breathe' at a protest when they are at essentially zero risk of ever enduring a police chokehold is not a particularly meaningful act," says Balto. "It is a centering of the white self that at least partly dislodges focus from the matter at hand — black safety from the police" (Patton, 2020).

The decentering of Blackness from inherently Black issues through the vessel of whiteness is exactly what illuminates the problem: the appropriative nature of white people engaging with the framework just leads to further emotional damage and often, a lack of genuine progress. Balto's point, in tangent with mine, is that the presence of allies who participate in the framework or "black death" (as Balto phrases it) removes all emotional weight to this particular act of organizing that instead creates a spectacle of the "support" and a focus on the ones there to support the cause, rather than the cause itself.

Through the discussion of allies, we were able to talk more in depthly about the state of activism today and how our general culture has led to the introduction of said allies into a Black cultural and political conversational sphere that they hadn't really engaged with as directly before. Andrew's point, first articulated at 36:04 says "It could potentially just be the evolution in our social discourse", followed by "Click obsession… where it just becomes 'how much can I

absorb and how much can I spit back out.' Andrew, in this particular quote, speaks to the way in which we as a collective engage with social media. Because we're so consumed by social media and are actively engaging with so many different types of people, places, events, and ideologies at a constant rate, we're often going to attempt to absorb it all. According to the Global Web Index, people spend an average of 142 minutes a day browsing social media (Metev, 2021). That's 2 hours and 22 minutes -- in a 24 hour day with (presumably) work, sleep, and eating times in between, that's nearly an eighth of our day spent on social media and our phones. The overexposure we have to social media means the overexposure to "trending" topics -- which often include Black Lives Matter demonstrations, infographics & Twitter threads being shared, just two ways in which the framework is being engaged.

Because of this overexposure, allies are often engaging with Black media and ways of thinking more commonly than they would've been pre-social media. This overexposure and constant Black political conversation leads to the culture of slacktivism, defined by the United Nations & NonProfitHub as:

> When people "support a cause by performing simple measures" but "are not truly engaged or devoted to making a change." Slacktivism typically means taking to social media. It encompasses things like retweeting words of hope after a national disaster or liking a charity's Facebook page—as the study implies. However, it can also include non-digital actions like wearing a ribbon on your shirt to bring awareness. (Muslic, 2020)

These empty, *performative* gestures of organizing are often just symptoms of our society at large -- one that encourages political awareness but also doesn't necessarily show people how to

engage and when to engage. Social media often helps Black people unload plethora of racialized

trauma that we are often forced to experience, but because social media is rated E for everyone

and things can be so easily shared, there's no buffer between what should and shouldn't be

engaged with. Allies could just be experiencing the effects of the lack of the buffer, which just

leaves problematic behavior unchecked and further removes the Black body from the issue of

Black death and ultimately, our abolition.

V. *Political Codependency*

Or, could it be political codependence? Much earlier, I mentioned the idea of political

codependence in relation to the way in which Black individuals and our identities interact

together. This interaction is one of need -- an aspect of our identity often works in tandem with

another aspect in order to formulate how we'll enter and engage with our own Black activist

spaces. However, could the idea of political codependency be used to describe white allies and

their engagement (or lack thereof) with the framework?

To understand this political codependency, we must first define what a 'codependent

relationship' is. According to Medical News Today, a codependent relationship is "when one

partner needs the other partner, who in turn, needs to be needed. This circular relationship is the

basis of what experts refer to when they describe the 'cycle' of codependency" (Berry, 2017).

Here, we see that the structure of a codependent relationship relies on both parties needing each

other. If we apply this way of thinking to allies and their engagement with the Black political

activist framework, the political codependency that Black people and allies often have is one that

exists within a realm of forced parasitism and layered racial trauma.

Often, allies become invested within Black politics due to a gateway into the oppression that we face. Whether that be gazing upon the television in the 1960s and seeing Martin Luther King Jr. being beaten up along with other Black people or through the social media activism that Black people engage in, allies are usually only privy to Black oppression when it is illuminated to them and not through their own volition. There's often the racial epiphany, but that epiphany is usually dependent on the labor of a Black person before them (Worley, 2021).

Because of the state of politics and white supremacy, allies are often the way in which Black people are able to advocate for ourselves in non-Black, structurally racist spaces. Black people are found to need allies -- not necessarily because of a natural desire, but because of political necessity. They are often the physical enactors of our rage, our anger, and our disappointment in a political space that we as individuals are barred from. Our need for them stems from their identities being favored and their proximity to privilege. In other words, allies hold privilege that allows them to be heard easily and taken seriously. This fact however, unknowingly perpetuates white supremacy by furthering the presence of non-Black individuals in our own political spaces. While our allies are not necessarily the individuals that we're actively fighting against, the inclusion of non-Black people within Black socio-political spheres further gives legacy and power to non-Black individuals and their ideologies, thus furthering the social norm that whiteness should always be centered. While our Black activism is trying to actively undue this same social norm, we as Black people often find ourselves gaslit into enabling whiteness and problematic ally behaviors because of the privilege that these allies hold.

 Unfortunately, within these allies' privilege also holds ignorance and guilt, which often the Black person that is most approximate to the allies has to deal with and "absolve" from the

white person, whether passively or not. White guilt is defined as "the guilt brought upon by "the recognition of unearned and unfair racial privileges, the acknowledgment of personal racist attitudes or behavior, and/or the sense of responsibility for others' racist attitudes or behavior" (Jagoo). In our podcast episode, Ryan directly spoke to this, where he tells a brief story about how his father got involved with Civil Rights activism by seeing Black people being brutalized by the police. This struck me because it just reminds me of so many stories of allies who list Black trauma -- whether it be Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Freddie Gray or even recently Makhia Bryant -- as their inspiration to finally "wake up". Herein lies the gateway -- Black trauma and white guilt often mobilize an ally to try to participate within the Black political activist framework. However, this mobilization relies on the abuse of Black bodies and the unconscious acknowledgment of one's own racial ignorance, which just further leads to the performance of allyship (whether unconscious or conscious) and also traumatizes Black people in the process.

Chapter 3: Black People & The Spiritual Performance of Racial Healing

I. *Christianity & Me*

"Praise to thy father. Bless you for all that you have done for me and all that you will continue to do for me and my family and my people." Growing up, this was a prayer I often said to myself. It was one that was there for me when I needed it most and when I wanted more. I knew I had to put in the spiritual work, but my belief and thus, my ideology, was strong enough that I'd be okay. I'd be safe. I'd be healed.

When I was younger, I saw that a lot of my family members, friends and neighbors were going to the local Baptist church for service every Sunday. I attended once in a while -- but enough to still believe in God like everyone else. I was actively engaged in believing that Christianity was a deeply trustworthy system and in the Christian God. When growing up, I started noticing that everyone around me was Christian or was spiritually geared toward the Christian god, which made me further investigate my initial way of thinking. When interrogating myself and my thinking, I wondered: why did I leap toward this way of faith? Was this faith actually providing me the healing and therapy that I needed to deal with my immediate and general society?

As I got older, I also questioned my involvement with Christianity as I grew to learn things about my identity; my queerness and my Blackness made the nuance of being Christian deeply more grave. The dangers of homophobia crept inside my social and spiritual consciousness, inhabiting an unbelievable amount of space. My Blackness became increasingly present in my daily life; as I matured into a young Black man, my feelings of who I was and who everyone thought I was became increasingly more political and passionate. My feelings toward

Christianity, a religion that was used against men like me and my greater community, became much more distant and despondent. For example, in Burton's Vox article about African Spirituality, Burton quotes Africana Studies professor Akissi Britton saying:

> During slavery, Christianity was used to justify the horrific practice. As such, the enslaved were often forbidden from practicing their indigenous religions, and other religions like Islam. Even in places like Cuba, Brazil, Haiti, and Trinidad, European colonists and slave masters attempted to obliterate the humanity and autonomy of enslaved Africans, Britton says. Many in the Black Diaspora embraced Christianity, finding a different sort of liberation in a religion meant to oppress them — a radical tradition that continues today, especially in the African American Episcopal Church (AME) (Burton, 2020).

Britton's take perfectly encapsulates the distance I felt and still feel -- there's a deeper recognition of the pain that Christianity has caused. Christianity's use as a tool of white supremacy, defined by the Anti-Defamation League as "to characterize various belief systems central to which are one or more of the following key tenets: 1) whites should have dominance over people of other backgrounds, especially where they may co-exist, 2) whites should live by themselves in a whites-only society, 3) white people have their own "culture" that is superior to other cultures, and 4) white people are genetically superior to other people", was directly weaponized against Black people. My former participation in it, yet the participation of so many others close to me and approximate to me made me wonder, how do we, as Black people, heal?

That pondering thought informed my thesis for this chapter. How do Black people spiritually perform the practice of racial healing? Why do we as Black people still engage with

Christianity and perform its values if it has origins in white supremacy? How can one's

performance of African/African Diasporic spirituality and its practices potentially help in racial

healing?

II. ***Black Christianity, White Indoctrination & The Performativity of Racial Healing***

To investigate my thesis, I decided to use my podcast format to help with the intellectual

pondering. On the podast, I featured Alex, a 19 year old Black queer woman from Philaldelphia,

who practices African Diasporic Spirituality, which are "spirituality practices that originate in

Africa and/or through the African Diaspora. The Yoruba, Lucumi & Santeria traditions are some

examples. "Most of these traditions revolve around <u>Orisha</u> (sometimes referred to as Orisa, or

Òrìṣà in the Yoruba language, or Orixá in Latin America), a group of spirits from the Yoruba

religion that provide guidance (Burton, 2020)." Alex specifically practices Hoodoo, which is an

African American spirituality form that evolved from African traditional practices and adopted

elements of Indigenous American botany (Wikipedia, 2021).

In our podcast discussion of the thesis question, Alex and I first interrogated the concept

of racial healing. What is racial healing? According to the American Library Association, racial

healing can be defined as " the need to acknowledge and tell the truth about past wrongs created

by individual and systemic racism and address the present consequences." It acts as the

emotional, physical, mental & spiritual work that leads to healing from white supremacy. When

first evaluating healing in reference to the practice of Christianity, Alex, starting at 3:14, said "in

Christianity, healing is seen as the end goal… [Healing] is cyclic… you're constantly healing,

it's not just a destination." Racial healing, the healing done when reconciling with white

supremacy, is an emotional and spiritual journey that is never ending. White supremacy constantly molds and reconfigures, in spiritually different ways - evidenced by cultural phenomena like Christianity being forced onto Africans by their White slave owners and oppressors to the practice and embrace of Christianity being integral to the culture of Black people and our identity. The work to unlearn white supremacy and heal from anti-Black racism is one of constant strife, mental evaluation, and takes an understanding of our collective past in order to acknowledge the present and correct the future.

Through our conversation of racial healing and its involvement with Christianity, we began to see that the healing process for Black Christians is perhaps one of a constant oppressive state. Black Christians understand that being "a good Christian", meaning internalizing the Bible, its teachings and the targeted goal of healing, will allow you to access a sort of privilege and holiness. However, this privilege and holiness is deeply entrenched in whiteness -- the privilege of one's own body and soul being connected to God is one that implies ownership of your physical and spiritual state of being. Black people occupied a space of forced servitude and violent oppression, meaning their access into Christianity was filtered through the lens of whiteness and obedience rather than one of their own spiritual autonomy.

White slave-owners enforced the idea that embracing Christianity was a part of the Black identity by not allowing their Black slaves to read other literature besides the Christian Bible. This allowed White slave-owners to not have to worry about Black slaves deeply understanding the legalities of slavery and their own state of being while also using the Bible to justify Black statehood. If you examine The Bible's positioning of slavery, Christianity conceives slavery as necessary and a respected structure, where in Ephesians 6:5-8 of the Bible, it states:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just

as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on

you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly,

as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward

each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. (Biblica, 2011)

Other statements that refer to slaves being subservient and embracing slavery are also found in

some excerpts like Timothy 6:1-2 or Titus 2:9-10. Further evaluating the violent indoctrination of

Black people into the Christian way of life by their white slave-owners, there was also the

constant reminder that their Black slaves were solely and wholeheartedly property. Alex states

this when at 5:40, she says "We were property. We were 'a thing'... that's something we're still

fighting today… which is why people are so quick to conform to Christianity… that's what will

make us seem like people." When examining the modern sect of Black people that practice

Christianity, the committment is generational -- it's the embodiment of years and years of belief

that is culturally static because of the legacy of slavery.

Continuing to examine Black Christians and the performance of racial healing, we can

start to understand that the engagement within Christianity is one of indoctrination and

ignorance. Because the majority of white slave-owners deliberately erased Black people's culture

and punished folks who tried to practice their ancestral African religions, the conscious practice

of these religions became one of subconscious veneration. During our conversation, Alex

brought up a point about how the usage of religious and spiritual indoctrination still wasn't able

to stop Black people from engaging with our traditions subconsciously. Starting at 17:30, Alex

states:

One of my favorite things to think about… is how much of African traditional religions have been synchronized in the way Black people practice Christianity. Communion? That's witchcraft. We're 'metaphorically' drinking [Jesus'] this man's blood and eating his body. And then you think about all the church ladies cooking while the sermon is going on and they can hear it over the speaker in the church. You're speaking intentions over the food. Then there's praise dancing & miming which is masquerade and ritual taking place… We don't honor that.

Herein lies the connection between our spiritual past and our spiritual present. Because of the way in which our culture was stolen from us and we were forced to engage with an oppressive culture that wasn't ours, Black people often aren't able to consciously reconcile the ancestral practices of our people with aspects of contemporary Black American culture. As Black people, Black Christians are victims of white indoctrination and the conscious erasure of African identity, meaning that the acknowledgement of these ancestral roots and of Black Christianity as spiritually antithetical and harmful to the Black social mind is seen as "un-Christian" . Often, Black Christians negatively refer to the conscious practice of African/African Diasporic religions as "voodoo" or "witchcraft", but concurrently don't realize that those are merely demonstrations of our spiritual history and ancestral lineage.

Evaluating this, I don't think the spiritual performance of racial healing for Black people can be found within Christianity. Like previously stated, racial healing infers that one is conscious of the ways in which past actions of racial discrimination have had present consequences and aims to acknowledge them. While Christianity for Black people does offer the presence of community and temporary solstice, the parameters in which Black people started

practicing Christianity and the internalization of white supremacist ideologies within Christianity conveys that corrective racial healing that acknowledges the harm done from white supremacy cannot be expected from Christianity. As I stated within the podcast discussion, "We're actively trying to fight white supremacy by further perpetuating white supremacy. It's this cycle of non-healing."

III. *African/African Diasporic Spiritual Practice, Lineage & Centering Blackness*

When understanding the need for racial healing, we have to understand that white supremacy has permeated multiple areas of life within the United States and consequently American culture, thus our attempts at healing will be working within the confines of white supremacy. Whether it's trying to navigate the mental healthcare system that is often discriminatory in policies and practice toward Black people (Cohut, 2020) or it's Christianity and its nuanced, yet oppressive relationship with Black people, there will always be white supremacist roadblocks in the process of racial healing. As Black people, we're subjected to white supremacist institutions and frameworks whether we have acknowledged it or not and whether we can tell the structure is white supremacist or not.

For Black Christians, Christianity has provided solstice and warmth to them during times of need. Even within the Black community, the Christian Church is often at the center providing a form of comfortability from white supremacy. It's often the gathering place for hundreds and hundreds of Black people, spanning decades and generations, to find a semblance of healing. The experience of the Black church and accepting God & Christian values into our lives is meant to be one that is transformative, restorative, and gratifying, but we understand that that isn't really

the case when the context of race illuminates Christianity's intrinsic relationship to white supremacy, indoctrination, and violence. However, when acknowledging our ancestral history, we're able to understand the layers of ourselves that we weren't previously allowed to. While Christianity is often a part of our history within the United States, it's not a part of our spiritual and ancestral history.

When examining the relevance of African/African Diasporic Spiritual Practices in relation to the concept of racial healing, we can observe that there's a chance for connection to one's lineage and background. As Black Americans who have been racially oppressed and separated from our origins, the active practicing of African spiritual practices within our community could allow for spiritual interaction with continental African communities. While there is no tangible way to rectify white supremacy's damage on erasing the lineage of Black Americans, being able to practice in connection with our ancestral and spiritual relatives allows us a connection to our past that could better inform our present and future. Whether this is found in sharing actual ritual practices, exchanging customary traditions, reading spiritual texts — there'd be a plethora of paths to create spiritual connection across the diaspora. This idea is found in Burton's article, where she explains:

> Ruqaiyyah Beatty, who grew up practicing Christianity, Islam, and other other African religions, is a now practitioner of Ifá, a Yoruba religion and system of divination. She says that through her practice, she was able to find healing through connection. "I was able to connect to Nigeria, it gave me a global network of spirituality, divine guidance, family, and love, and I was able to create and sustain a great relationship to god," she says.

This train of thought, one that is focusing on the spiritual unification of Black/African cultures, is one that could be seen specifically as pan-Africanist. While Pan-Africanism, defined as a belief and a social movement that aims to unify people of African descent across the African Diaspora due to shared cultural interests/values (Araia, 2006), has its own problems with acknowledging cultural differences that are intrinsically connected to creed, taking a pan-Africanist approach to spiritual racial healing allows Black Americans to actually contend with white supremacy without having to work within the confines of white supremacist structures. It allows for Black Americans to engage with a spiritual framework that is ancestrally ours and actually decenters whiteness from our journey of spiritual racial healing by centering Blackness.

During our conversation, Alex actually references the idea of centering the Black individual within spirituality that Christianity just doesn't do. Starting at 24:53, Alex says "When we find community that isn't based in a God that is frightening… it's centering." Here, centering takes on multiple meanings — first that the Black person doing the spiritual healing is prioritized and second, the Black person involved is able to feel emotionally stable. Within Christianity, the focus is often on the Christian individual living in fear of God and operating their own lives with the idea of trying to "enter" Heaven by following the rules. Compounding this with Christianity's racial history, the Black Christian's spiritual sanctity is never actually recognized independently of serving the desires of God (or, a spiritual master). In other words, a Black Christian's emotional state is not examined on its own accord with a deeper acknowledgement of racialized trauma, but rather, it's examined through the lens of God and the desires of the Christian Church. Because Christianity and the Christian Church is inherently a

socio-religious institution that relies on the submission of others as a method of reinforcing its values, the submission of Black Christians also occurs within that process.

IV. *Spiritual Autonomy*

Throughout our conversation, Alex and I spoke about Black Christians and their willingness to engage in white supremacy being based within the idea of indoctrination. We examined the connection that Christianity had to slavery and it's oppression of Black people in America. We both wondered "why" many times, especially considering the history of this religious practice, its values, and our community. However, something else that came up in reference to Black Christians was the idea of spiritual autonomy. Autonomy is defined as "the quality or state of being self-governing" (Merriam-Webster, 2021), so spiritual autonomy can be inferred to mean the state of being spiritually self-governing and actualizing. In other words, people have the ability to choose what spiritual/religious practices they engage in and how they want to engage within it.

Taking this into consideration, maybe Black Christians are practicing their form of spiritual autonomy when they choose to practice Christianity? While racial healing is often spiritually corrective and must be done with the acknowledgment of white supremacy, Black Christians have also found a way to enjoy spiritual comfortability within white supremacist structures. When I think of Black Christians during the Civil Rights Movement and how they created a safe space for Black people to go back to and take refuge from the terrors of our white surpremacist, dominator culture, I think of how that provided a momentary form of racial healing and protection for those Black people.

While the religion and practice of Christianity is one tied directly to white supremacy and arguably fails in actually rectifying our racialized trauma, Black people are also entitled to do whatever we choose to do. For centuries, the implication and expectation has been that we must follow white supremacist structures in order to live our lives. A part of racial healing is to contend with the consequences of white supremacy -- that being said, a consequence of white supremacy is the removal of personal agency from Black people.

As Black people, getting to choose what religion or spiritual practice we engage in and being able to discuss why those are or aren't beneficial illustrates a certain autonomy that we weren't afforded before. This spiritual autonomy, whether or not beneficial to the concept of racial healing as a conscious process, represents a deeper, subconscious understanding of one's self as an individual that is contending with the concepts of anti-Blackness and white supremacist structures while also decentering whiteness from our Black state of mind and our Black spiritual consciousness.

Conclusion

When I was young, my mother told me "everything happens for a reason." Growing up, that became my motto for when bad things happened to me. It was an acknowledgement that things in life always had a meaning or a backstory to them, no matter what I thought about it. As I started to work through my senior project, I initially wanted to focus on cultural appropriation and that form of performativity. I read through some theories and some books, but I wasn't necessarily challenged by what I was engaging with. I wasn't tempted to write anything and I stalled for weeks, months even. Soon, I realized that I wanted to explore the idea of performativity, but through Black people, our social behavior and cultural values. Because of this, I started to think about how Black identity lives in opposition to white supremacy and that our culture is a performance of that separated identity. To me, I realized that my initial "boredom" and new interest happened for a reason -- focusing on the concept of "racialized performance" and centering Blackness allowed me explore more nuanced social and racial dynamics.

Because my project focused on the framework of performance as a mode of social interaction, I decided to use an audio podcast format to further discuss Blackness and performance. My aim for this was to originally highlight and center non-traditional, non-academic voices who all had differing perspectives that further contextualized the topic outside of the literature. This would allow me to use a medium that I felt comfortable with (speech & performance), while also allowing me to include others and their thoughts into this intellectual journey.

In my senior project, I focused on several things. First, from my conversation with Michael about Black male masculinity and the performance of white toxic masculinity, we were able to further contextualize the effects white supremacy have had on Black men. In this section, we defined masculinity and conceived how masculinity for Black men and white men often manifests in different ways. From this, Michael and I discussed the influence Black men have on each other to "be men" and how that culture of masculinity is just manifesting white toxic masculinity. We also focused on how certain pathologies that Black men engage in (i.e. violence against women) are just learned performances of white toxic masculinity. This conversation (and chapter) aimed to show how Black toxic masculinity has a direct relationship with white toxic masculinity that relies on the performance of Black men to perpetuate it.

Furthermore, I focused on evaluating the relationship non-Black allies have with the Black Political Activist Framework. The Black Political Activist Framework is defined as "abolitionist and intersectional in its true nature; a frame of thinking in which every political decision is informed by the goal of Black freedom from white supremacy and by one's proximities to intersectional Black identity, whether that be class, skin color, gender, education status, etc." To do this, I spoke with two non-Black allies Ryan and Andrew, where we discussed the framework and how non-Black allies can often engage in the appropriation of this framework. We also explored how Black people & non-Black allies are in a politically codependent dynamic; a codependency that comes from Black people needing non-Black allyship and its privilege for Black liberation while non-Black allies often taking up space with their performance of this framework.

Lastly, I decided to explore the concept of Black people, racial healing, and spiritualism as performance. I had a conversation with Alex, a Black woman and Hoodoo practitioner, where we explored why Christianity's history with the Black community complicates its ability to help in racial healing. We did this by defining racial healing (the need to acknowledge and tell the truth about past wrongs created by individual and systemic racism and address the present consequences), then examining Christianity and white supremacy's long relationship together. Further, I explored how traditional African/African Diasporic Spiritual Practices can potentially offer racial healing through spiritual connection and embracing lineage. The idea of spiritual autonomy and the exploration of religious freedom allowed us to understand the process of racial healing as one that is individualized.

Throughout my project, I pondered the idea of social, political & spiritual performance through the lens of Blackness. Using Goffman's Theory of Performativity, which is the theory that our social interactions are often performances of our social values and norms, I investigated the concept of Black people performing aspects of white supremacy. My belief is that understanding race and the concept of cultural identity through the framework of performance allows us to explore the different manifestations of the Black cultural mind and how that mind is affected by the trauma of white supremacy and the white dominator culture.

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