Antidote

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Remaining silent about sexual violence does not benefit Black women in any way. There is an epidemic of intra-racial sexual abuse against Black women and girls that results in unaddressed generational trauma. Historically, Black women have had to prioritize race over gender. The Black community has effectively upheld a pathology of sexual abuse by denying its existence and silencing victims. I am aware that it’s beyond the scope of my senior project to abolish the sociocultural factors that enable this sexual violence. Consequently, I decided to research Womanist (Black Feminist) history to find methods of communal healing.
INTRODUCTION

Due to my Caribbean American upbringing, I've grown up with that belief that tea can be an antidote for any ailment. Following Womanist traditions of healing through community building and sisterhood, I hosted a series of themed tea parties in my apartment for fellow survivors. Each tea party revolved around different topics and tea brews. I crafted teas to counteract the emotions I associate with each topic. Through these tea parties, I created a safe space for Black women to discuss socio-cultural taboos and celebrate our resilience. At the conclusion of each tea party, I gave my guests party bags—which I liked to call self care packages. The tea parties were documented through photography and the photos are accompanied by text on the website I created to store my senior project.

My own experiences drew me to challenge the intra-racial sexual violence against Black women. I began my research by investigating interpersonal violence, Womanism, cultural betrayal trauma theory¹ and Ubuntu². In order to identify and understand the causes of denial and silencing of survivors by the Black community, I had to develop a deep understanding of Black sexual politics and gender. For so long I felt like the abuse I endured was a personal, rare and unfortunate series of circumstances. Through discussions with the Black women in my life over the years I realized that only a few of the Black women I know have not experienced sexual abuse. I embarked on an endeavor to get to the root of this phenomenon through my senior project.

¹ Cultural betrayal trauma is interpersonal trauma that is perpetrated by presumed in-group member(s) of minority groups.
² Ubuntu is an African philosophy on how human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations from the moment they are born.
PART ONE

Lemon
I named the first tea party *Lemon* and the theme was healing. I made Assam Black tea with lemon and ginger because it’s the tea I make most often to heal myself. The self care package contained: a cucumber face mask, loose leaf Assam Black tea and empty tea bags. After explaining the intention of my project to my guests we had an organic discussion about the history of sexual violence in our community, predominantly from male offenders. Where did Black men learn to assert dominance over Black women through sexual violence? The earliest occurrence that I found through my research was an overturned case from 1859:

The legal system did not punish intra-racial rape. In 1859, a Mississippi judge overturned the conviction of an older slave who had raped a slave girl who was under the age of 10. The defense attorney argued:

The crime of rape does not exist in this State between African slaves...their intercourse is promiscuous.” Embedded in this court decision, and embraced by the larger culture for more than 500 years, was the belief that Black women’s innate hypersexuality made them “unrapeable” and undeserving of protection or sympathy.¹

The absence of neither accountability nor concern surrounding this case serves as a cruel example of how Black women and girls are not afforded the luxury of being victims due to gendered and racial stereotypes surrounding Black women’s sexuality. Such stereotypes “lead women to not conceptualize their experiences as sexual assault and/or the knowledge that others uphold these stereotypes may create mistrust/doubt that systems will recognize them as legitimate victims of sexual violence.”²

The discussion was followed by a screening of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*. When *Lemonade* premiered in 2016 it was game changing for Black women. Beyoncé used poetry, music and filmography to express her grievances, but it went deeper than marital conflicts. She showed Black women expressing emotions that we’re not allowed to have—such as anger, hurt and sorrow. In our community we’re not supposed to “air our dirty laundry”, but such notions prevent survivors from speaking up and/or seeking social support. With Black women experiencing “higher rates of intimate partner violence such as rape (21%) and psychological aggression (53%)”³ it’s evident that our silence serves us no purpose. With *Lemonade*, Beyoncé showed Black women hurting as well as healing.

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For this reason, I showed *Lemonade* at the first tea party. I wanted to reignite the feeling of strength in solidarity and vulnerability that so many Black women felt the day *Lemonade* premiered.
PART TWO

Rose
I named the second tea party *Rose* and the theme was anger. I made a blend of Rosehip and Chamomile tea due to their soothing properties. The self care package contained: Play-Doh, loose Chamomile and Rosehip tea and empty tea bags. We watched videos of Black women speaking about sisterhood and trauma. We then read Audre Lorde’s *The Uses of Anger* aloud and discussed the complex relationship Black women have with anger. We are presumed to be “angry Black women” all the time, but we’re never actually allowed to be angry.

Anger is often dismissed as a destructive, useless emotion—especially in the Black community. However, Audre Lorde argues that, “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act.”¹ When we are not taught how to acknowledge or process our anger it often turns into silent rage. While silent rage can be “a space of reflection”² it can also become destructive to our mental health and well being.

I believe another reason why Black women are reluctant to acknowledge our anger is because of a cultural expectation to be strong and stoic at all times:

> One traditional element of Black female socialization that has taken on mythical proportions is the slave legacy of the black super woman. Many Black women and girls are socialized to view themselves as spiritually and mentally indomitable and capable of overcoming any obstacles placed before them.³

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve noticed a resistance to the “Black superwoman” narrative. Black women have become vocal about the state of our mental and emotional health. As a collective we have realized that we must prioritize our health above all else—but this is easier said than done. Similar to sex abuse, there is a stigma surrounding mental health in the Black community. This stigma hinders Black women from seeking and using mental health services. We are often shunned into silence when we call attention to our battles with mental illness. I went through it myself when I began therapy in 2013. Six years later, I can confidently say that the benefits of therapy far outweigh the social judgment. Through therapy I have learned how to identify and talk about my emotions. At the conclusion of Rose, I provided my guests with writing tools, prompts and asked them to free write about their anger. Before departing we shared some of the angers we wrote about.

My silences had not protected me. Your silence spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak. I had made contact with other women while we all believed, bridging our differences.
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Black women are often depicted as needing help and are likely to take advantage of support services.

Furthermore, the privileging of Black men's suffering ignores the fact that Black women are raped by Black men.

However, the allegation that Black men are being targeted for special opprobrium in the legal system ignores the implicit notion that African American women are exempt from special opprobrium and invisibility. The invisibility renders the suffering of Black women invisible.

Any Black feminicides realize that simply throwing Black men in these prisons does not address the issue. The conditions in these prisons only further develop the criminal mind and one's sense of alienation. The violence of punishment and rehabilitation only increases the chances of Black women being targeted and suffered from the harm.
PART THREE

Honey
I named the third and final tea party *Honey* and the theme was forgiveness. I made a blend of Honeybush and Rosehip tea because I find them to be subtle but sweet and refreshing. The self care package contained: collagen eye masks, loose Honeybush and Rosehip tea and empty tea bags.

For this tea party, like the others, we watched videos before beginning our discussion. But this gathering was conversation based, in fact, I asked each guest to bring a friend. I felt a responsibility to spread the conversation beyond Black women that I personally knew because the core principle of Ubuntu is enriching the community:

Ubuntu is a philosophy on how human beings are intertwined in a world of ethical relations from the moment they are born. Fundamentally, this inscription is part of our finitude. We are born into a language, a kinship group, a tribe, a nation, and a family. We come into a world obligated to others, and those others are obligated to us. We are mutually obligated to support each other on our respective paths to becoming unique and singular persons.¹

Through encouraging and spreading dialogue throughout the Black community, we plant the seeds of change.

We spoke a lot about the Black women who raised us. Through sharing family histories of struggle, strength and abuse we found commonalities. We realized that no matter how different our stories were, they shared a common thread—we were all raised by broken Black women who refused to talk about their hardships. We noticed that previous generations have sought peace by not acknowledging their pain. But silence does not grant peace.

We spoke in great detail about the politics of forgiveness and its subjectivity in relation to trauma. Just because we have been encouraged to “turn the other cheek” doesn’t mean we’re not allowed to make that decision for ourselves. We can make peace with our experiences without granting anyone forgiveness. We came to the conclusion that forgiveness is a personal process and no abuser is owed it.

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Old English forgif "give, grant, allow; remit is debt, pardon (an offense)," also "give up" and "give in marriage" (past tense forgis, past participle forgis). From this, the probably "completely," a given "to give" from PIE root *gheidh-: "to give or receive.

The sense of "to give up desire or power to punish" (late Old English) is from use of such a compound in a Germanic loan-translation of Vulgar Latin "negligere" (Old Saxon negihan, Dutch negeren, German negeren) "to forgive," Gothic nefedian "to grant," and see gaudin (n. 3).
The process of completing my senior project was arduous yet exciting every step of the way. As I delved into research I found fascinating topics—such as: Black sexual politics, Black gender politics and cultural betrayal trauma theory—that were of interest to myself and my project. I even found myself having to pull back and save certain topics for outside of my project—such as Black pimps in human sex trafficking, Black sex work, Black women’s “outsider within status”, Black rape depictions in film, how trauma is depicted in the fine arts, Black gender socialization, Black masculinity in relationships, Black sexuality socialization, Black child socialization and disclosure patterns in Black women.

While readings accounted for the majority of my research, I also looked to documentaries, music, and digital media platforms from Black women that spoke about interpersonal violence as well as sexual violence. But most of all, this project made me look within myself. In my senior year of high school, I founded ‘Young Feminist Club’. I felt the need to create a safe space in my Catholic school for girls to discuss feminist theory and the obstacles we face. I knew that if I needed a safe space, other girls did too. Young Feminist Club was and still is a success. Before I graduated from high school, we held a bake sale and raised $400 for a local women’s shelter. A few years later, in my second semester of college, I created two sculptures about my trauma for my 3D Processes class. Now, in my senior year of college, I’ve come full circle and dedicated my senior project to creating a safe space for Black women.

After months of research and brainstorming, I began planning the events. Because I wanted the tea parties to be small and intimate, I reached out via word of mouth to Black women on campus to find out if anyone was interested in participating. Although I knew not to expect every person to commit, I was surprised by the positive reception. Even women who opted not to participate told me that they loved my idea and felt that it was needed.
I looked at a lot of tea party decor for inspiration once I had my group of women, I started preparing. I bought the necessary tea paraphernalia, dining decor and a projector. I enlisted the help of my friend Samantha Brinkley to photograph the events. With the help of my friends, support of my family and guidance of my project advisor I hosted 3 themed tea parties. After narrowing down the photos and censoring participant faces (for confidentiality), I created a website\textsuperscript{1} to serve as a time capsule for these photos and writings.

In completing my senior project I have developed skills to apply rationale and vocabulary to the trauma that I have endured and observed within my community. I’ve learned that my experience is far from being an anomaly. I can better articulate my thoughts and feelings about the shared experiences of Black women as concrete and worthy of its own vocabulary—rather than being an abstract concept. I see no other way to begin to break our silence than to seek and cultivate language surrounding intra-racial sexual violence.

\textsuperscript{1} \url{https://brittneyfr.wixsite.com/antidote}
Through completing my senior project, I have acquired a diverse knowledge of the causes and effects of sexual violence in the Black community. With this knowledge I’ve developed a greater understanding of our experiences and trauma. I came to the conclusion that I owed it to myself and my community to create a safe space for Black women on campus to discuss our trauma and heal together. I hosted tea parties as a vehicle for conversation and healing. Sexual violence within the Black community is and will remain a complex issue. It is my hope that by creating an environment for dialogue and healing, I have at least inspired the Black women in my life to break their silence.


