

**The Contours of Anti-Black Racism:
Engaging Anti-Oppression from Embodied Spaces**

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Abstract

We reflect on our embodied experiences of living out the various layers of anti-Black racism in our daily lives. Our starting point is our powerful gut reaction to the experiences of Black youth in a research study exploring youth violence and healing in Canada. We were awed by the intensity of anti-Black racism that youth wrestle with and their creative strategies of healing from its violence. As researchers, we were stunned into reflexive realization that we were inextricably woven into the tangled webs of anti-Black racism even as we were struggling to disentangle ourselves and break free. We were astounded by how the tensions that grip Black youth were our own tensions as well. In this paper, we ground ourselves in these tensions that we harbour deep within our bodies as we explore the theoretical contours of anti-oppression. The stories we tell emerge from our stepping back in critical self-reflection and following our powerful gut feelings to their cultural and structural roots. We seek to critically engage our own anti-oppressive practices in order to open up transformative possibilities for ourselves and those we work with.

Keywords: Anti-Black racism, oppression, anti-oppressive practice, youth violence

Semantically, the term anti-Black racism (ABR) is intriguing. Its meaning is multilayered and, configured differently, it could mean several things. We discern at least three understandings in our own anti-oppressive practices (AOP). First, as anti-Black racism (A-BR), it means the type of racism directed against Black peoples. Second, as anti Black-racism (AB-R), it means against the type of racism that Black peoples perpetuate. Third, as anti-Black-racism (A-B-R), it means both the struggle against anti-Black racism and the struggle against the racism perpetuated by Blacks. In this paper, we move beyond the semantics and delve into our lived realities of these embodied discourses. We reflexively and critically explore how we live out all three layers of ABR intimately and inseparably in our individual and collective bodies.

The authors of this paper are four Black individuals in an Ontario university – two of us students in the doctoral program and two of us faculty. We are all Africans from the continent who came to Canada with our families as immigrants or refugees. We have all lived the realities of anti-Black racism with different intensities. We have all been deeply involved in our communities' struggles against anti-Black racism as community leaders, activists or ordinary members. What brought us together in this paper is our involvement in one local site of a multisite research project on youth in various capacities – one as a Principal Investigator, one as a Research Assistant and two as consultants. The youth study was designed against the backdrop of the youth violence ravaging Toronto in the mid-2000s and it explored the issues of Self and

Other in the healing practices of racialized minority youth in Canada.¹ We were stunned that the youth violence we were analyzing in this study was not just out there but also deeply and intimately woven into our own bodies. We each stepped back from the experiences of youth and critically examined the violence of anti-Black racism in our bodies. This paper is the result of our reflexive wrestling.

We organize our discussion into four parts. In the first part, we reflect on our embodied relations with anti-Black racism (A-BR) as manifested in our anti-oppressive practices. In the second part, we tease out various layers of anti-Black racism, highlighting Anti-Black-African racism (A-B-AR) as the type directed against Africans from the continent. In the third part, we reflect on anti Black-racism (AB-R), a deeply internalized mirror image of anti-Black racism (A-BR). We discuss the challenges and rewards of our deepest anti-oppressive struggles embedded in our simultaneous positioning as both victims and perpetrators. In the fourth part, anti-Black-racism (A-B-R), we reflect on the inextricable link between A-BR, AB-R and all other forms of oppression. We place ABR in the tangled web of global-local relations of power in ways that critically engage both our embodied tensions and broader social relations. Throughout the paper, we slip in and out of our first person plural voice “we” as we go back and forth between our multiplicities and singularities. We present the “I” of our unique individual voices in *italics*.

Anti-Black Racism (A-BR)

First, what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of ‘multiculturalism’ cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target.

This widely quoted statement is from the Steven Lewis (June 9, 1992, p. 2) report for the then Ontario Premier Bob Rae. Lewis was writing in June 1992 in the aftermath of the “Toronto

¹ This paper stems from a SSHRC-funded multi-site national project titled: The Self-Other Issue in the Healing Practices of Racialized Minority Youth. The data were generated in 2009 in four research sites located in three of the major immigration cities of English Canada (one site in Kitchener-Waterloo, two in Toronto, and one in Vancouver). The study was designed and carried out against the background of the so-called escalating youth violence in major Western cities where the said violence disproportionately affects racialized minority youth. It aimed to explore the healing practices of these youth in the face of youth violence. A reflexive approach and innovative methodology were used where data were generated by combining evocative activities around image, performance, and symbolic objects carried out in small conversation groups. Overarching findings indicate that violence and healing are inseparably intertwined, are multilayered, glocal, and mutually reinforcing. This paper is based on the activities and conversations carried out in one local site in Kitchener-Waterloo.

Riots” of May 1992 when multi-racial youth went on a rampage protesting against the police murder of a Black youth in Toronto and the acquittal of police officers in the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles. Eight Black youths had been murdered by Toronto police in the previous four years. The wounds in Toronto’s Black communities were raw. Although Lewis forwarded comprehensive recommendations, anti-Black racism and the vulnerability of Black communities continued unabated (Benjamin, 2011; 2014; Harney, 1996). Youth violence in the Black communities had since become rampant and, fifteen years later, almost to the date, another Ontario Premier, Dalton McGuinty, launched another high profile review process to “get to the roots of youth violence” (Premier’s Office, June 11, 2007). The 2008 report of the review commission affirmed, in no uncertain terms, what Lewis described in 1992 (McMurtry & Curling, 2008).

Over twenty years later, today, anti-Black racism still stares us in the eye. The findings of our current study on youth violence and healing validate the findings of both reports (Lewis, 1992; McMurtry & Curling, 2008). Black youths are at the bottommost rungs of the racialized hierarchy of oppression, taking the brunt of racial violence front and centre. Sadly, this also reinforces what a member of the then Urban Alliance on Race Relations told Lewis in 1992: “The Blacks are out front, and we are all lined up behind them” (p. 3). After talking with members of the various communities, Lewis (p. 3) reported that the discussions had a deeply visceral impact on him. That was 1992. Forward to 2014, twenty-two years later, we hear voices of Black youth in the current study and have deep visceral reactions. Lewis reports about the palpable emotions of raw fear on the part of Black mothers where a woman said: “Mothers see their sons walk out the door; they never sleep until their sons walk back in.” (p. 3). Today, in 2014, this palpable fear is not confined to Toronto. Even in smaller cities, Black mothers still live it within their own bodies.

Funke’s Story: I am a Black Mother!

I am your colleague, your peer, your student, your teacher, your neighbor. You see me every day. You tell me you don’t see a Black woman; you just see a woman. I don’t want to ruin the party or puncture anyone’s innocence. It’s really hard to be a killjoy (Ahmed, 2009) but it’s much harder not to feel true. So here it is! Hear it! This is my Black boy. You say you don’t see a Black boy; you just see a cute human being. Well, until he slips and his hidden blackness shows. My eyes dash to your face and I see it; I hear it. And the womb that cuddled my boy trembles at the end of your words -- because I am a Black woman, the mother of a Black boy. And this is what I teach him when we get home, every day. I cannot afford to forget; because he’s dead if I forget:

*These people are sincere; they’re well meaning
They call you cute; they love you and they smile
But be meek, my son, lest they get angry
When you see the lion’s teeth
Don’t think he is smiling
Run for dear life, my love
And come home safe for your Mama*

*When you're stopped by the police...
 Listen carefully, Son
 I'm saying when, not if, because you will be stopped
 Say "yes sir!" when you're stopped
 Look humble and gentle
 Make sure your hands are visible
 Make sure you give them no reason to see the violent Black boy
 Don't make them feel intimidated.
 Your very Black body is intimidating
 Even though they have the powers and the guns
 And you are just a small unarmed Black boy
 Still it is your duty to make sure they don't feel threatened
 Read their minds and act as you have to
 And come home for Mama alive, my love*

I teach him how to dissemble, how to be unBlack. When he comes home broken hearted at the end of the day, with tears, I help him put himself back together as Black. As bell hooks notes, "for many Black people, integration has required that they give their hearts to whiteness – and they have returned home broken hearted" (2003, p. 10). If I forget to teach my boy, he will not even come home broken-hearted; he will be another bloody corpse of a Black boy in the street. That is the raw terror I live every day. My friends, that's why I cannot afford to be as naïve as you because my naiveté would be dangerous to the Black child I brought to this world. He did not ask to be born, much less born a Black child. Yes this blackness is more yours than his or mine. But if I forget to teach him, I fail him and all other Black youth. When you see my Black boy as unBlack, you amputate him (Fanon, 1967). You amputate and make his body a dis-ability in a society that creates dis-ability to celebrate only its able-bodied ones. When I see this haemorrhaging, I sweat and groan inwardly until I speak. Then I become marked. But to not speak is to die daily, to also be amputated and left by the wayside, dis-abled and bleeding.

Anti-Black-African Racism

We tell our stories of anti-Black racism as a way of healing and performing our anti-oppressive practice that prompts action for social justice (Razack, 1993). One of the strategies of healing we learned from youth research participants in the study of youth violence and healing is "telling our stories as we live them". Indeed storytelling is a path to profound healing in many oppressed and marginalized communities (Leseho, 2005; Rosenthal, 2003). Storytelling is particularly poignant for Black Africans from deep-rooted rich oral cultures because it connects them to places of dignity and communities of belonging at the same time as it also links them to profound healing resources and prompts them to action for social justice (Kumsa, 2013). For us, and for the youth research participants in the African focus groups, however, these healing stories are also laced with the dominant discourses about Africa.

The anti-Black racism we experience daily is sharply inflected by the fact that we are Blacks from Africa as opposed to Whites and Browns also from Africa. We notice the deference accorded to Brown Africans of Asian descent in relation to Black Africans. Fanon (1967) articulates how Black Africa conjures up fantastic imaginaries of backwardness and the land of

uncivilized savages, tom toms, zombies, and cannibals. While Fanon wrote this over 60 years ago, Dei (2010) expounds on the forms in which this distorted Eurocentric view of Africans continues to this day. Africa is still Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Africans the children of darkness plagued by ignorance, disease and backwardness. The social Darwinist images of Tarzan movies continue to position Africans at the far end of evolution – not fully evolved into humans, not completely out of their jungles and perhaps even with dangling tails. Even today when the old-fashioned biological racism is recognized as ignorance; these images of Africa continue in subtle ways deeply embedded in institutional norms and practices (Harper, 2012). The culture and knowledge base of institutions are steeped in these distorted images as Africans are re-colonized within Western countries (Dei, 2010).

While racism permeates all Canadian institutions and its adverse impacts hit hard on all First Nations and visible minorities (Henry & Tator, 2010), the added layer from the bestial images of Africa unfold in myriad ways with dire consequences for Black Africans. In the first place, the entire continent of Black Africa is seen as one small village and the experience of Black Africans is homogenized. This flattens out their rich diversity, the incredibly vast range of their cultural expressions, and the stunning number of languages spoken even within one small country. With such degradation of Africa, everyone except the individual Black African knows how an African should live and act and respond to situations. Africans do not exist outside these stereotypic images. If they dare break out of these moulds, they become threats and all the socio-cultural and state institutions are out in full force to smash them. Caught in a sort of Catch-22, Black Africans suffer both within and outside the mould of anti-Black-African racism. They experience subtle and blatant exclusion and marginalization in employment, health care, and social settings and are left in wariness, mistrust and misunderstanding (Tinsley-Jones, 2003; Benjamin, 2003). Black Africans in higher academic institutions face daunting challenges in having their knowledge recognized, their research funded and their works published (Baffoe, Asimeng-Boahene & Ogbuagu, 2014). Invisible institutional hands estrange and push out Black African youths from schools in alarming rates (Dei, 2010), thus destroying their Canadian dreams.

Anti-Black racism does not affect all Blacks in the same way. Just as blackness itself is hotly contested, the vile practice of anti-Black racism is also an uneven territory with varying contours. Lewis (1992) exposed that Toronto's youth violence wears the face of the Black youth as the primary target of racism. As James (2002) contends, however, just below the surface of this generic Black youth sits the Jamaicanization of crime. The discourse about the generic Black criminal in effect points to the Jamaican as the criminal. Likewise, other studies contest the homogenization of Blacks, highlighting how each Black group experiences and responds to violence differently (Walcott et al., 2008; Wortley, 2002). This also speaks to the uniqueness of how Black African youth experience anti-Black racism. As globalization and free market economy create a new underclass of marginalized and 'disposable' youth (Brooks 2002; Giroux 2010), the latest arrivals from Black Africa become the bottommost underdogs and take the brunt of anti-Black racism inflected by distorted Eurocentric images of Africans (Dei, 2010). As we witness the shift from the Jamaicanization to Africanization of crime, we realize that anti-African-Black racism is also a space marked by heterogeneity. Each African group experiences it differently. The newest face is the Somalization of crime.

Sadia's Story: Nomads in the White Desert

I call this piece "nomads in the white desert" to reflect on the discourse constructing Somali-Canadian youth in the youth violence bleeding my community. It is in contrast to the Canadian peacekeepers in the brown deserts of Somalia (Razack, 2000). I can't help but wonder if the current youth violence is connected to issues of back then.

Youth violence is not something out there that I sit back in self-composure and analyze in this research. The voices of youth that I hear in the focus groups are not simply from out there. These voices scream from deep within my own body! They are my voices! Anti-Black racism is not an external reality outside of my body that I reach out and deal with. It is what makes me want to scream out of my skin! I live youth violence in my own body. It is my everyday reality as a mother of Somali youth.

Anti-Black racism comes to me in different threads as anti-Black-African racism, as anti-Somali racism, as anti-Black-Muslim racism, as anti-Black-woman racism, and as anti-Black-Muslim-Hijabi-woman racism, among others, but all intimately interwoven and inseparably interlaced. In just one glance of racism, people see all this in me. This violence is not mine to begin with but it is now mine to deal with. It comes gushing out from the inside although it did not originate in there. This puts my life in a constant tension threatening to dismantle me. When I hear the youth research participants tell their stories of healing, I feel inspired. Like them, I do what I can to change things. I don't just sit and moan. I strive to change oppressive relations.

I am a grassroots community organizer and leader. I have been engaged in anti-oppressive practice from when I arrived in Canada in 1993, I have organized community groups to attend to the needs in immigrant communities. Most of us in the Somali community came from a war-torn country surviving the brutality of untold violence. We had run away from violence and we wanted no more violence in our lives. Despite all the challenges of settlement and integration, we raised our children according to the good rules of our new society. We did everything right, everything in our capacity. But we could not do much about structural barriers and systemic racism.

Despite our efforts, now Somali youth wear the face of the new criminal in Canada. We came here to raise healthy generations in peace but our children are hunted down and killed in cold blood. Members of our communities are crying out against such senseless killings (Aluakh, 2012). Right now we are dealing with 50 unresolved slaying of Somali youth (Getachew & Colle, 2013) and more young people are meeting their deaths. The end is not yet. Why are these 'disposable' youths (Giroux, 2010) and not precious humans? These kids are not involved in gangs and drugs or live in low-income housing projects. These are decent kids raised in decent middle-class families. Now don't get me wrong! I don't mean kids from lower class are bad kids. I just want to say that the violence of anti-Somali racism does not discriminate by class.

My heart is broken and my soul burns every time we bury a young Somali, every time I have to comfort Somali mothers with trembling hearts, every time I have to console the inconsolably injured spirits of youth. The light in me goes out every time we mourn the loss of another bright light put out and the hope of our future dashed. It breaks my heart when I see media discourses

steeped with how Somalis import the violence from Somalia to Canada. We ran away from violence. If we wanted violence we would stay where it is! Why don't they compare yesterday's Jamaican to today's Somali and find the root cause in the system rather than in Black groups?

I am shattered to pieces when Somali youth have to run from province to province in search of a decent life but end up dead, when they run away from alienation in search of belonging but find the ultimate alienation from life itself, and when they run to escape poverty and discrimination but meet their ugly death instead. Pain shoots right through my body when people talk about our youth as Somali nomads of the brown sandy deserts trying to continue their nomadic life by roaming the snowy white deserts of Canada. These kids do not even know Somalia! They were born and bred here in Canada! Some came very young. These youth are Canadian products! They are a loss to Canada too! Why not look at Canada for a change? Forget the whiteness of the snowy geography. What about the real socio-cultural and political whiteness of Canada? What about the poverty and discrimination that batters our youth constantly, the search for belonging that fires them? What about the doors of opportunity slammed shut in their faces? Why are we not talking about that violence?

Anti Black-Racism (AB-R)

As if the anti-Black racism we struggle with from “out there” was not harsh enough, we have to wage our anti-oppressive struggle against our own Black racism as well. Although naming this as anti Black-racism looks awkward, it speaks well to our embodied struggle. It signifies our anti-oppressive struggle against the internalized mirror-image of anti-Black racism. It has several layers and can be directed at many locations, including one's age, citizenship, class, dis-ability, education, ethnicity, gender, health, mental health, nationality, religion, and sexuality to name but a few. While we acknowledge all these layers, here we focus on Black-on-Black racism.

When it comes to internalized racism, we find no theorist who has theorized its pathology as thoroughly and incisively as Fanon (1967). Fanon looks deep into how the violence of racism is internalized and how it distorts the self-consciousness and self-image of both victims and perpetrators, distorting the humanity of both the Self and the Other. As Black Africans from the continent of varied colonial experiences, Fanon's theories also make good sense to us in the context of internalizing colonial violence by colonized Others (Fanon, 1963). Here also both the colonized and the colonizer internalize colonialism and come to embody false-consciousness. These theories speak to our embodied experiences of living out internalized racism, colonialism, and our contemporary re-colonization.

Others expand Fanon's theorizing (1963, 1967) into broader areas of social theory. Paulo Freire (2007) developed it into internalized oppression in education and Black feminists expounded it in the areas of class, gender, race, and sexuality (hooks, 2003; Lorde, 1984). They all note how oppressed people are bombarded daily with their oppressors' negative images of themselves, internalize these images and start understanding them as their own images. The consequence is self-deprecation, self-hatred, and self-loathing. Further, the oppressed project this self-loathing onto other similarly oppressed people, resulting in what Freire (2007) calls the lateralization of violence. This means that the violence coming vertically down from the

oppressor spreads outward laterally to target other oppressed people instead of rebounding back to the oppressor.

We understand this process of internalization to be similar to the embodiment of social norms and other forms of symbolic violence in the context of power relations and the formation of our subjectivities and identities (Bourdieu, 1977; Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1979). Our understanding is that in this theorizing, there is no such thing as “true” or “false” consciousness but processes through which subjectivities and identities are formed and lived out. However, the pain involved in such processes of embodiment and in the living out of oppression and inequities is well articulated, for example, in Bourdieu’s notion of social suffering (1999). Internalization of racism, inequity and oppression has also been studied with a focus on loss and social suffering (Charlesworth, 2005; Frost & Hogget, 2008). These studies give rich details of double suffering where oppressed and marginalized groups forget the source of their suffering and tear at each other mercilessly. The violence of inequity and oppression constitutes the first suffering. When the violence is normalized and invisibilized but the wounds remains dissociated, marginalized groups tear at each other to ease the pain and this constitutes the second suffering.

However, these studies also contend that, no matter how intense the suffering, human agency cannot be stopped from imagining and performing new possibilities of healing and liberation. For us, then, the aim of anti-oppression and indeed anti Black-racism is engaging in an ongoing process of liberation to re-humanize our identities and subjectivities that have been denigrated and dehumanized, to cut through the thick discursive mist that coalesces to invisibilize the violence. It is to uncover the source of our suffering, stop tearing each other down and start lifting each other up. Engaging these theories of depth at the cognitive level is hard but living them out and working through anti Black-racism is a different ball game altogether.

Magnus’ Story: I am Torn Down and Lifted up

When I was invited to consult on the mental health issues manifest in the data of this project on youth violence and healing, I came in with confidence to contribute my bit. My area of research is in mental health and I knew the impact of anti-Black racism on Black youth. For instance, I knew it would make the youth feel inferior, inadequate and unappreciated in everyday spaces like bus stops, classrooms, grocery stores or restaurants (Essed, 1990).

I knew that these complexities of oppression and discrimination would make Black youth vulnerable to mental health issues and that the physical and mental health of Blacks would be assessed in health care systems built for the needs of dominant groups (Thompson & Feagin, 2003). I knew that, in systems alien to their needs, Blacks are more often diagnosed with schizophrenia, mental “disorders” are more widespread among Blacks than Whites, and options for treatment are usually influenced by race and socio-economic disparity (Manseau & Case, 2013).

From the Black side also, I knew that, more often than not, Black Africans do not go to hospitals for fear of misdiagnosis or for fear of being misunderstood due to lack of English proficiency. I knew that, when they do go to hospitals it is déjà vu; more Black folks with mental health issues are mis-diagnosed, mistreated and overmedicated. I was aware that, as a result of such

discriminatory experiences, Black folks mistrust the health system (Bhui & Sashidharan, 2003; Bughra & Bhui, 1999; McKenzie & Bhui, 2007). Listening to the voices of the youth in this research and hearing how much they fear and mistrust the health system only validated my own findings.

Little did I know, however, that my knowledge of anti-Black racism did not readily translate to the mental health issues plaguing my community. I was oblivious to the reality that these issues could be my issues and that, through listening to the cries of youth participants, I was listening to my own cries for help deep inside. As I went away and immersed myself in critical self-reflection, I realized that nothing had prepared me for the intensity of this pain -- not the theories I learnt, not the experiences others shared, not Fanon, not Freire, not bell hooks, no one. I had to go through the depth of my own experience and live the hurts and pains to find out for myself. Living the intense tensions and contradictions in the territories of anti Black-racism tore me down but it also lifted me up.

When the opportunity to work with another Black colleague in academia came my way, I grabbed it with joy and excitement. It was like a dream come true for me because there weren't many of us around and just the thought of working with one of very few filled my heart with delight. We could make our work the site of mutual encouragement and growing together. We could create an oasis of trust and respect in the desolate desert of academic anti-Black racism filled with mistrust and disrespect of Blacks. Unlike our selected silences in White spaces, here we could talk about racism openly, share experiences and support each other. We could both challenge and inspire each other, I thought. The work itself would give us a valid reason to meet; so we would not attract those what-are-they-up-to glances and suspicious raised eyebrows like other times when people are threatened by the mere meeting of Black bodies.

The first few months went very well. It felt like the within-group sanctuary that Watts-Jones (2002) says is the space of healing from the wounds of internalized racism for people of African descent. I did not disregard possibilities of conflict in my enthusiasm. What I had not anticipated was the intensity of what I believe was self-loathing that would turn the oasis into a place of hurts and pains. Messages of my inadequacy and ignorance came at me from without but soon they were also coming from within me. Was I feeling inadequate? Could I actually carry an intelligent learned conversation? Self-doubt and mistrust ate at my guts. Self-loath tore me down, though I thought I was tearing down the roots of self-hatred as hooks (2003) advised.

It did not take long for the dream to turn into a nightmare. I could hear others calling it déjà vu and I suspect they were even celebrating our failure. It was almost like a self-fulfilling prophesy. Was I being blamed for the failure? Was the other person also putting the blame on me for their own failure? Were they thinking I was not good enough as a Black academic? Were they taking me for granted? It hurt so much and I felt torn down for as long as I pointed these questions towards the other person. It was not until I started putting these very questions to myself in a reflexive move that I felt the awe of being gracefully lifted up from where I was torn down. My anti-oppressive struggle is directed outwards that I had not readied myself for the much harder internal struggle where we are both oppressors and oppressed. In this tension we harbour deep within our souls, we support each other at the same time as we tear at each other, we dehumanize at the same time as we re-humanize each other.

Indeed the youth mistrust and inadequacies are now mine. I am the mad one. Now I know how we create madness and mad people as a society (Foucault, 1963; Poole et al., 2012; Poole & Ward, 2013). I know why some are not only reclaiming but also taking pride in madness (LeFrancois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013; Poole et al., 2013) I know why some say insanity is a sane response to an insane world although society does not acknowledge social factors as responsible for sanism. It points it back to the individual mind. Indeed, even at the global level, the Western world does not acknowledge the psychiatrization of the majority of the world as Mills (2014) argues. Social construction is deeply hidden to the extent that people internalize sanism so deeply (Poole et al., 2012) that they feel fear and disgust towards people with mental health issues. At some of my conference presentations I ask people how they feel about people diagnosed with ailments like cancer and the usual response is sympathy. I ask the same question for schizophrenia and the overwhelming response is fear and disgust in an incredible intensity of sanism. Think of Black Africans whose bodies already evoke fear, anxiety and disgust and add sanism to the mix. They are in deep peril.

Anti-Black-Racism (A-B-R)

Here we engage the combined effects of anti-Black racism and anti Black-racism as manifested in our reflections on the study of youth violence and healing. ABR is both internal and external, conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional, personal and social-political, global and local. That means, although the two facets of ABR are mirror images, they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are mutually constitutive and mutually reinforcing. Indeed, they are so inextricably linked that we cannot explore one without the other. For example, when youth tear at each other in double suffering, they are living out the combined effects of both facets simultaneously (Charlesworth, 2005; Frost & Hogget, 2008). In this, ABR is similar to broader forms of racism and to all other forms of oppression. We need to explore race not in isolation from but in inseparable relationship with all forms of oppression and anti-oppressive practices (Benjamin, 2003; 2011). Singling out one form or homogenizing all forms is a fatal failure for anti-oppressive practice. Antiracist, feminist and class struggles offer good examples of insightful failures to learn from.

Moreover, like the two facets of ABR, global and local processes of oppression also reinforce each other mutually in creating and maintaining inequity and the structural marginalization of youth (Brown et al., 2013). Therefore, we cannot explore the contours of ABR in isolation from its constitutive context. We need to position it within the tangled webs of global-local relations of power that displace and emplace youth in sites of both vulnerability and relative power and privilege simultaneously. In an increasingly and inequitably interconnected world, we need a fair understanding of how all global and local forms of oppression interweave to create and maintain Western domination in the contemporary empire of a neo-liberal world system (Liu and Mills, 2006; Razack, 2005). We particularly need to understand the processes by which the neo-liberal global system is maintained by pitting marginalized groups against one another (Wise, 2008).

To explore race in this tangled web, then, we need to discern the particular type of racism and examine it in its global-local dynamic and in its intimate interconnection with all other forms

of oppression. For example, globally, antiracist voices have documented how Canadian racism is intimately linked to the global neo-liberal agenda (Razack, 2000; 2005). Within Canada, the antiracist struggle has been critiqued for excluding class (Benjamin, 2003; 2011; Harney, 1996) and issues of First Nations colonization (Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Simpson & Yun, 2011; Thobani, 2000; 2007). On the other hand, initiatives like state multiculturalism or other multi-issue coalitions water down the intensity of racism to the extent that race disappears from open discourse only to carve a stronghold in covert cultural and institutional forms (Liu & Mills, 2006). We need anti-oppressive practices that honour all experiences without homogenizing them, honour differences without isolating them into separate cocoons, and reclaim the “we” of our multiplicity without collapsing it into the “I” of our individuality or vice-versa (Ahmed, 2000; 2009).

How, then, do we creatively engage such tension between the multiplicity and singularity of issues in our everyday practices of anti-oppression? Indeed, how do we engage the tensions between the singularity and multiplicity of our own identities and subjectivities? And how do we do that without disregarding the tension between hierarchy and no hierarchy of oppression? Indeed this is precisely the challenge we encounter in the study of youth violence and healing. How do we engage racism in relation to all other forms of oppression without watering down the intensity of race? Racism itself takes multiple forms when interwoven with all these forms of oppression. In the words of a young Black African research participant: “racism has many faces; it changes its color like a chameleon and lashes out its tentacles in many directions like an octopus.” This speaks both to the insidiousness and multifariousness of racism. How then do we engage racism in all its forms and manifestations?

This means anti-oppressive practices must explore the chameleon in all the colours it takes. For example how does racism interweave with gender, sexuality, mental health, and social class? Might we explore the lived experiences of a young Black transgendered woman on social assistance who is also with a diagnosis of a mental health “disorder”? What does it look like when race interweaves with issues of colonization and First Nations land rights? How does antiracist anti-oppressive practice engage this tension? Might Somali kids and Black African refugees be positioned as privileged and oppressors even though they are displaced, dispossessed and suffer the worst kind of marginalization and human degradation (Thobani, 2000; 2007)? Might we look at them as privileged colonial settlers in relation to First Nations peoples? Might this end up homogenizing oppression and neutralizing anti-oppressive practice? And how do we foster collaboration among oppressed groups and creatively engage the reality of competition that they are set up for? These are the challenges we encounter.

Kuwee’s Story: I am Gaararraa!

I love the young research participant’s metaphors for racism -- chameleon and octopus. Octopus, I did not know until I was in school. But chameleon represented a terrible insult I internalized from childhood. Chameleon is gaararraa in my mother tongue. I was fascinated by how the little lizard changed its colors but I hated what it stood for in my culture – with passion! If anyone called me gaararraa I was up in arms! It meant I was wishy-washy, a flip-flop with no character, no integrity. I thought I had character. I was a person with solid integrity.

The first time it dawned on me that I had actually become what I hated, was in my early years in Canada. I sat myself down in self-talk and repeated the insult to myself a million times, tears streaming down my cheeks. I looked at my bleeding wounded self in the mirror and called myself gaararraa, gaararraa, gaararraa... until I became it...until what society rubbed in and embodied as insult wore off and I embraced gaararraa as my gift of grace.

That was when I took an oath of allegiance to the Queen to become Canadian. Yes I celebrated it with family and friends. No more stateless! I had a country! Deep inside, blood dripped from my heart. It felt like a terrible betrayal of my people. "I love my people! God knows I love my people," I cried! Guilt was twisting my guts. It was like a lance tearing right through my heart. I was bleeding in silence. Talking meant betraying the people who cared enough to bring me to Canada; silence meant betraying my people. I was deeply divided, really torn apart.

Arriving in Canada in the aftermath of the Oka Crisis, I knew I was reliving the crisis of my own people's colonization but I did not know how to connect the two faces of colonialism. Was I becoming the colonizer, the capitalist, the oppressor I hated with so much passion? I remained confused until years later when I viscerally reacted to Patricia Monture-Angus (1995), may she rest in peace. She said that "visible minorities" want in(clusion) but First Nations want out. I heard myself screaming in defence, "No! That's not fair! You don't understand at all! I want out too! I want out not just of this one nation but out of the entire global family of nations!"

When I sat down with the thunder lashing out of her soul, however, I agreed with her. Yes I wanted in! Of course no one forced me (hush... forget the invisible hands). Unlike her, I chose to apply for citizenship and took the oath. I could have refused like her. She actually went to court to refuse the oath! Oh how I wished I had her courage! But why did I accept my gaararraa self as a gift of grace? Did I shed those tears to cleanse my colonialist self? Well, I am a settler, a colonizer. I may have fled the land of my people (no, thrown out!) but I am not up in the air; I have settled on a land stolen from other indigenous peoples. Yes I am recolonized in this new world but I am also a colonizer. Now I am beginning to feel empathy for all the colonizers and capitalists I hated for far too long. Oh no! Is this right? Is the chameleon changing colors again?

Yes I am gaararraa through and through! And I want my anti-oppressive practice to be my chameleon practice, my embodied gaararraa practice. Like my sister Funke, I am a Black mother (now a grandmother of four!). I taught my son to be unBlack and took up the Black fight for myself. Like my sister Sadia, youth violence is not something out there that I deal with. It shatters me to pieces. I live the wound of youth violence deep within my own body and within the body of my ravaged Toronto community. I shed red tears every time we lose a brilliant young life to murder or prison. And, like my brother Magnus, self-doubt and mistrust eat at my guts. Like him, I am torn down but lifted up with grace. Like them all, I do storytelling for personal healing and social change (Razack, 1993). It is my embodied chameleon anti-oppressive practice.

I am increasingly troubled by anti forms of reactive politics and oppositional struggles, including anti-colonialism, anti-racism and anti-oppression. They feel like a choking iron straitjacket on my constantly growing and changing gaararraa self. But the post struggles do not give me comfort either. They simply replace one form of struggle by another without leading to a qualitative difference in my personal liberation or in the transformation of societies. Living

through two revolutions and an ongoing anticolonial-postcolonial national liberation struggle has left me disillusioned. But I'm searching as always, searching but finding no clear answers. Perhaps questioning and searching is an answer, albeit tentative.

My little birth town at the other edge of the world was as much global as my current global location is local. So, I call myself glocal. My youthful heroes were glocal too: Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Ho Chi Minh (Uncle Ho!). I chanted them with peer university students as we marched in the streets. Che's is still my most favourite quote: "Always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone anywhere in the world." I now have a matching quote from Martin Luther King Jr. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Although our world marks one as violent and the other as peaceful, both are my heroes. MLK speaks more to my head and Che seeps deep into my guts and viscera. I dismiss the mind/body split and claim them both for my embodied anti-oppressive gaararraa practice. My head is as much a part of my body as my guts and viscera.

Now as sit in my privileged academic position and write, colonialism is ravaging my homeland. Land grabbing wears the newest face of colonialism (Borras et. al, 2011; Bulcha, 2011). States and transnational companies are displacing my people and grabbing their farmlands. Because Europe wants fresh-cut flowers on its dining table, investors are growing flowers where people used to grow their staple crops. People starve. Toxic chemicals poison the drinking water wells and rivers. A part of me that enjoys a slice of the privilege pie is complicit in all this while my other part is in spiritual misery. I prop up this brutal global-local system because my very survival hinges on its functioning. I'm a houseless person thrown into the streets the moment my paycheck is frozen. But a part of me that follows Che in feeling deeply with the suffering people and makes up for their loss in my hard earned sweat and blood is in rage. I am enraged by the bloodletting that happens in the entire world. My gaararraa laughs with the joyful and hurts with the suffering.

Yes we are all chameleons caught in the global-local system and yes we are all both oppressed and oppressors, colonized and colonizers. Without homogenizing our experiences, though, how do we sit down and work together? I stress together because we cannot do much alone in a relational world where we all contribute to the functioning of the system. We all need to work together to change it. That's why my anti-oppressive gaararraa feels with the oppressor too. It is enraged by injustice whether from within or from out there. My chameleon changes its colors when it is enraged – to ready it for action. My best moment is when another person feels my pain deeply enough to get up in rage and act on my behalf, when they see the issues of their Others as issues of their own Self. When they are able to care for Others as they would for Self.

Connecting the Dots, Refashioning AOP?

In this paper, we attempted to map out the evolution of our anti-oppressive practices pertaining to our experiences of embodied anti-Black racism. We discussed the various layers of anti-Black racism as we lived them intimately. Dividing our discussion into four parts, we started from the societal racism directed against Blacks, teased out the layer that particularly targets Blacks from Africa, discussed the deeply internalized mirror-image, and finally positioned anti-Black racism itself within the tangled web of global and local power relations. We gave

examples of embodied personal experiences in each of the four parts. These examples are meant only to illustrate each layer of anti-Black racism; therefore, they do not correspond to our personal practices of anti-oppression. However, all four of us told the stories by using storytelling as our strategy of anti-oppressive practice of evoking actions for social justice.

In conclusion, we want to get across our shared understanding that anti-oppressive practice is unique to each person and group and that we told our stories to demonstrate the multiplicity of ways in which people engage anti-oppression and participate in the overall transformation of our communities and our entire world. However, we do not offer our stories as prescriptions for the right ways of doing AOP but as possibilities and paths that people may choose to tread. Imposing what we consider the right way is self-defeating for a team who does not wish others to impose their ways on us. We offer these stories for each reader to connect the dots, refashion their own AOP style if they find helpful hints, and most important of all, find their own paths in practice.

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