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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How to Build a Black Girl Traphouse:

A Meditation and Manual for Black Feminist Survival in and Beyond the Academy

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Abstract

By design, the university is a colonizing, racializing, and classed space, built through unequal structures that perpetuate systemic violence (Peña, 2022). When many marginalized folks enter any university setting, they are marred by projections, judgments, assumptions, and assaults by those who question their worth, ability, and competence (y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). Discriminatory actions and attitudes endured by Black women in academia often make us severely angry as well as mentally and physically ill. Many of us are so traumatized that we choose to leave and/or are pushed out of our jobs. Those of us who choose to stay are then saddled with the disproportionate labor of navigating varying levels of madness often magnified by the harms inflicted on our persons and ways of knowing while also creating alternative ways to be, create, live, and succeed through our work. In this article, we draw on the wisdom of Black feminist writers and activists to break out of the dehumanizing boxes within which academic institutions try to confine us. We explore how, in constructing a sanctuary for ourselves–the Black Girl Traphouse–we challenge conventional understandings of respectability and embrace a praxis of ratchetness that leads us towards care and community. This piece is intentionally crafted as a multivocal meditation on the ways academia has tried us and our responses to cling to one another in acts of radical resistance. Through our collective voices, we memorialize the critical components we have used in our care work for ourselves and one another. By centering our journey as Black women in higher education and the social work profession, our analysis offers a new vision for maddening the academy. It is our sincere hope that other Black women and femmes reading this work will have a blueprint to begin building their own 'trap houses' as well.

Keywords

Black Feminisms, Racism, Carework, Respectability, Ratchet Imaginaries, Black Geographies

History

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Biography

The Black Girl Traphouse (BGTH) includes JaLisa Williams, Janae Peters, Loren Cahill, Brandyn-Dior McKinley, and Arianne Napier-White. We are a crew of Black feminists, social workers, educators, scholars, mothers, and artists. The Black Girl Traphouse is our insurgent space for creating new possibilities within/outside/in spite of the academy. We are each deeply committed to being mad question-asking (The Notorious B.I.G., 1994) stewards of love and care who spend our time divining with all that this life has to offer.

"You got the light, count it all joy
You got the right to be mad
But when you carry it alone, you find it only getting in the way
They say you gotta let it go

I ran into this girl, I said, "I'm tired of explaining"
*Man, this sh*t is draining*
But I'm not really allowed to be mad"
- Solange Knowles, Mad

Finding Our Way to One Another (in a Place Not Built for Us)

How We Found Each Other

We got our seats at the table. To achieve this, we each have had to be the best–the best in our classes, the best in our families, the best in our communities to pursue graduate study and land jobs in higher education. We recognize that the table itself is not neutral. It is built upon institutional logics that often demand our assimilation while denying our full humanity. Finding our way to each other has not been about merely earning these seats, but has been about questioning the architecture of the room itself and imagining other places where we might gather differently. We each have had to navigate varying levels of madness[1]- righteous anger, mental distress, and unmasked neurodiversity - along the way. We all have experienced our words being distorted, our contributions being undervalued, our work being invisibilized and co-opted by others, and our identities being weaponized against us. We have long-needed spaces and squads for care, respite, and support. Each of our heads and hearts was heavy before we became professors at a predominantly white

[1]In our working definition for Black women, madness refers not only to mental distress/illness but also righteous anger and neurodivergent burnout exacerbated by the multiple manifestations of anti-blackness (i.e. ideological/discursive, interpersonal, structural) that pervade academic institutions (Doharty, 2024)

school of social work (PWSSW)[2]. Prior to our employment, there was a laggard representation of Black faculty and students. Demands made by student activists and Black adjunct faculty pressured our institution to undertake a diversity cluster hire. Although we have been able to enter the school with a concentrated mass of new faculty, we were met by a culture and system with no current Black senior faculty or administrators.[3] We each have struggled, been harmed, and made the intentional commitment to cling to one another for comfort and care. For instance, shortly after we were hired, several different institutional stakeholders began to make comments on our closeness. We encountered frequent remarks about us placing our offices next to one another and sitting next to one another at meetings. Folks seemed especially fascinated that our connection to one another was not bound by our "official" rank/role in the system. While to some, these comments and queries might appear harmless, they were anything but, and actually epitomize the ways Black women and femmes are "othered" in academic and social service organizations when we do not prioritize whiteness over our authentic selves. Crucially, though, the comment that stayed with us the most was a statement made by one of our students that we are like a "Black Girl Traphouse" (BGTH) (Aming & Braithwaite, 2022, personal communication). She knew we were providing a force field around one another to stay insulated from the many harms waiting for us in meetings, emails, and classrooms. This was the inception of our namesake and our beginning to grapple with the question of what else could our subaltern community provide us.

We adopted BGTH because it named something we already knew but had not yet articulated. In choosing BGTH, we intentionally reclaimed language often associated with danger, disposability, and deviance and transformed it into a vocabulary for Black feminist care, protection, fugitivity, and world-making. Naming ourselves became one of our first acts of theorizing. Before we ever wrote this article, we had already begun refusing the terms through which the academy and the broader culture might seek to define us.

Making a Collective 'We'

A special community like ours is a project of protection, care, and freedom. By staying close, we not only have strength in our numbers but can stay protected against folks' attempts to divide and conquer us. Next, our traditionally undervalued labor of caring for ourselves and one another represents our unique form of "political warfare" (Lorde, 1984). Finally, our daring that defies the current dominant reason to take and make freedom in the ivory tower is a steadfast commitment and unwavering trust in our own power (Dotson, 2013). We understand that moving as a unit is a rebellious act of building community and

[2] We use this language/acronym to contextualize our experience and reveal the particular ways that gendered anti-blackness functions within white-dominated academic spaces (see Jackson et al., 2022)

[3] This is not a trivial fact. Research has shown that the absence of Black women faculty is linked to inequities in graduate degree completion for Black women doctoral students as well as promotion of Black faculty, curricular choices, and institutional policies and practices (Jackson et al., 2022, p. 567).

practicing care; it is also what allows us to stay employed by the university and keep our minds and bodies intact. Care, as we understand it, is a political and relational practice that allows us to remain intelligible to ourselves inside institutions organized around our fragmentation. Care is strategy and infrastructure: a refusal of isolation and a practice of imagining more liberatory futures together.

Imagining the House Together

In this article, we center our collective experience as Black women in academia and the social work profession. Rather than treating madness as an individual pathology, we understand it as a social, historical, and institutional condition that calls for collective responses. BGTH emerged as a Black feminist geography of care that allows us to survive, resist, imagine, and create otherwise within and through our constructed "homeplace" (hooks, 1993). The care work of BGTH sits in conversation with Black feminist scholars, writers, poets, like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and bell hooks that demand we honor the fullness of our humanity, lest we choose to be complicit in our dehumanization.

To understand how BGTH came into being, we first trace the histories and traditions that make such spaces necessary. We then draw upon grounded theory and our own archival practices, including letters, text messages, recorded conversations, journal entries, and collective reflections, to identify the practices that sustain our community and to develop a conceptual model of BGTH (see Figure 1). What follows is not simply an account of our experiences but a meditation and a manual: an invitation for other Black women and femmes to imagine, cultivate, and protect insurgent spaces of care in and beyond the academy.

Tracing the Ground Beneath Us

> "*You cannot theorize America, its literature, or any aspect of its culture without taking into account how the existence of Black women at the matrix of oppression shifts every narrative that we use to understand what America is and does.*"
>
> Alexis Pauline Gumbs (in Asim, 2016)

Telling Our Stories, On Our Terms[4]

We are Black women. Black women: scholars, educators, clinicians, artists, mothers, community organizers, musicians, radical thinkers, space holders, light bringers, truth tellers, day dreamers, and holistic healers. We have learned just as much from Black feminist writers, intellectuals, scholars, creatives, activists, and revolutionaries as we have from our moms, aunties, grandmoms, sisters, play/girl cousins, and partners. We have

[4] We sampled from the poem "Black Feminism and Respectability Politics" in *The Unboxing of a Black Girl* by Angela Shanté (2024) to determine the rhythm and flow of the first paragraph in this section.

learned just as much from Solange, Beyoncé, Lauryn Hill, Cardi B, Megan Thee Stallion, GloRilla, Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu, Jilly from Philly, and Cleo Sol as we have from one another and other Black women academics. Just as our histories, experiences, identities, and authentic selves cannot be contained within the dehumanizing boxes created for us, our stories and the sense *we* make of our existence "at the matrix of oppression" (Collins, 2002) cannot be fitted neatly into any one concept, paradigm, or canon. "Period" (City Girls, 2018).

Black women have been and continue to be trailblazers in the social work profession, though, despite our incalculable contributions, our experience as Black women scholars and educators receives little attention in most academic works (Jackson et al., 2022). Too often, "Black women function as an intellectual plantation within institutions; we are the primary producers, conceptualizers, and creators within social service organizations and academia" (Younger, 2024, p. 5) only to have our accomplishments weaponized against us as soon as our success, brilliance, and creativity threaten to upend the dominant power structure. Having to constantly endure this particular form of gaslighting - which demands that we tiptoe, suss out, overexplain, and mind-read - is beyond exhausting. Maddeningly so.[5]

Taking our cue from Alexis Pauline Gumbs, as Black women professors in PWSSW, we not only shift the hegemonic narrative on academia but we disrupt it, which requires a different approach to contextualizing our experiences. Just like the Black women who came before us, we cannot rely on standardized recipes to hold our truths and honor our souls. We must improvise. And so, here, in this paper, our conversation spans multiple disciplines, allowing us to converse with major concepts and themes from Affect Theory, Mad Studies, Hip-Hop Studies, Black Geographies, and Black Feminisms. We draw on these broad range of theories to invite spaciousness in how we theorize about our care ethic, to honor our expansiveness, and to hone in on unique sensibilities that must be explored through creative methods. You could say, it's our "Remix."

Naming the Madness

Mad (adjective): delusional; paranoid; irrational; "mentally disturbed"

Mad (adjective/noun): angry; anger

Mad (adverb): "extra"; "very"; "above and beyond"

As Black women, we are deeply familiar with the myriad meanings attached to the terms "mad" and madness.[6] We also recognize that disclosures of "mental-ill health experiences

[5] This sentence is quoted verbatim from the Introduction "What's Good?" in *Black Madness :: Mad Blackness* by Therí Alyce Pickens (2019, p. 5). As one author said: "when I read it, it gave me chills."

[6] Madness is a key concept in Mad Studies. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to trace the history of Mad Studies as well as the tensions/criticisms that animate current debates within the field (see Beresford, 2020; LeFrançois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013), we have referred to the Mad Studies paradigm throughout the

or histories" (Doharty, 2024) have unequal consequences for marginalized folks, and most especially distressed Black folks, within higher education institutions (Gorman, 2013). As we know from our history, psychiatric (i.e. diagnostic categories) and discursive (i.e. "sane" versus "insane") constructions of madness have always been linked to race-making projects and colonialism (Redikopp, 2021). Dorothy Roberts (2016) has documented how ideologies of race-based, heritable conditions were "essential to justifying the enslavement of Africans in a nation founded on a radical commitment to liberty, equality, and natural rights" (p. 104). In 1851, Dr. Samuel Cartwright introduced the term "drapetomania" to describe a type of insanity (i.e. mental illness) that compelled enslaved Africans to run away (Willoughby, 2018). In this way, *drapetomania* named the desire for freedom as pathology, and in so doing, "framed black fugitivity as madness" (Bruce, 2017, p. 305).

Bruce (2017) insists that "mad is a place" and not merely a condition lodged in individual minds. To think of madness spatially is to ask what it means to be assigned to that place, and also what it means to build something there. In *How To Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, Bruce (2021a) takes up the second question, reading madness not only as an accusation of insanity leveled at Black people but as a resource Black artists and thinkers have worked with generatively as a mode of creativity rather than a deficit to be corrected. Together these texts help us name what BGTH is. It began as refusal, unplanned, inside an academy that polices how we show up for one another and calls that rigor. Our practices are inheritances. Drapetomania named the wanting of freedom as a sickness and prescribed surveillance and violence as its cure. That logic did not end; it was retooled. We feel its vestiges every time correction arrives dressed as care, every time we are asked what is wrong with us instead of what has been done to us. If those who ran were called mad for wanting a life beyond the plantation's terms, then we know what our madness is: not our pathology but their indictment.

What outlasted *drapetomania* as a diagnosis was its grammar: the presumption that Black refusal is evidence of disorder in the person rather than in the arrangement. That grammar is portable, and it travels into every institution built on the plantation's proposition about who counts as human. Squire et al. (2018) write,

> "The maintenance of universities as slave plantations may be construed as an illogical conceptual leap. What is needed to reframe a slave plantation into a college campus? At its core, it requires a fundamental set of frames that argues that no matter which laws exist, Black people are inhuman and are worth less than white people. It comes to bear that the (il)logics by which universities were founded, the same logics that exist today, carried across time." (pp. 5-6)

course of this project because it provides a frame within which to understand how socio-political conditions influence experiences of distress and to challenge ideologies and material structures that promote and uphold sanism (Doharty, 2024).

Such hostile work conditions within the "academic industrial complex" (Bruce in Hannabach, 2021) - replete with its anti-Blackness, misogynoir, and ableism - are the reason Black women's survivance praxes and healing rituals often take subversive forms as we process, protect, and provide for ourselves. If madness names the conditions we inherit, then respectability names one of the primary strategies we are taught to survive them.

Refusing Respectability

Respectability promises protection it has never been able to provide. Black feminist thinkers have long named this arrangement, and the question they keep returning to is not how to perform it better but what becomes possible when we stop. This movement between registers is not a contemporary invention but a long-practiced inheritance. Saidiya Hartman (2019) recovers the lives of young Black women in the early twentieth century who quit jobs, wandered cities, loved whom they wanted, and declined the terms of a social order that had never intended their flourishing. She names these refusals waywardness and reads their improvised lives not as failures of character but as beautiful experiments, attempts at a way of living that no institution had authorized and no archive was built to hold. Waywardness, in her account, is not aimlessness. Angela Davis (1998) hears a parallel refusal in the blues, finding in Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday a working-class Black feminist consciousness that sang plainly of desire, violence, travel, and leaving and did so precisely when club women were staking Black women's claim to citizenship on modesty and restraint. The blues women were not waiting to be found respectable. They sang what they knew in the register they knew it in, and they made of that singing a space where Black women's interior lives could be told without apology or alibi. Ratchet, hood, trap: each is a contemporary name for a practice our foremothers were already refining, and each carries the same understanding that a life worth having has rarely been available on the terms we were offered.

In Brittney Cooper's (2012) essay, "(Un)Clutching My Mother's Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability," she theorizes on the ways Black women's bodies are policed and surveilled. She asks: "Are any of us winning in a scenario where respectable and ratchet are the only two options?" Cooper's question opens up a space for Black women and femmes to not only reclaim but also reimagine the narrow and superficial binaries of Black womanhood that complicate our personal and professional choices. While respectability may grant Black women entry into academe, sometimes being "good" and "respectable" (i.e. "the exceptional Black") is still not enough to shield us from the material effects and psychic assaults of institutional violence. Mikki Kendall (2020) widens this discourse by positing that Hood Feminism, grounded in the "everyday" experiences of marginalized women, lays bare "how race and gender and class all affect [our] ability to be educated, receive medical care, gain and keep employment, as well as how those things can sway authority figures in their treatment of [us]" (p. xiii). Through the lens of Hood Feminism, Kendall attempts to level the verticality of privilege around the theory-making,

praxis, and discourse that happens in/outside of elite academic spaces. Kendall's message is directed most pointedly at mainstream feminists (i.e. white middle-class women), but her critique also creates a space for us, as Black women in the academy, who are her professional contemporaries, to meditate on how lessons from the hood might offer better instructions for care than our formal training can.

Further, the question is not only whether we refuse respectability but who gets to. In *The Sociology of Cardi B: A Trap Feminist Approach*, Green et al. (2024) make accessibility the test of a radical praxis, suggesting that

> "[i]f our Black feminist praxis does not center girl fighters, hood chicks, and ghetto girls then our feminism is not radical enough. Black feminism can be used as a tool to dismantle the patriarchy and racism, but if that feminism is not accessible to women who live on the margin of society, then our feminist praxis is not ratchet enough. By liberating us from respectability politics and white-centric standards of beauty and social norms while employing and embracing ratchet politics, hood politics, trap feminism extends the power of marginalized black women. [It] gives Black women permission to talk, dress, speak, and behave however we like in both public and private spaces."

Black feminist traditions contain important generational differences, and while Cooper, Kendall, and Green et al. foreground hip-hop culture and hood/trap politics, Montinique Denise McEachern (2017) suggests that the liberatory power of ratchet feminism is that "[r]atchet is a cultural knowledge, performance, and awareness of an anti-respectability that can be shared across Black communities and is not bound by geography, social class, or level of traditional education" (p. 79). Ratchetness is not just about what we do but is also a way of being who we are (p. 80). Ratchet is what encourages us to create communal space where we can bring our whole selves, including the survival skills and many projects of freedom, imagination, and love that can be found in (and indeed, some of us bring from) the hood. By embracing the gifts, creativity, resiliency, protection, and possibilities that stem from strategic movement between respectability and ratchetness, we are better equipped to fight the battles facing us as Black femme professors. Yet survival requires more than refusing respectability; it also requires somewhere to go.

Creating Fugitive Space

Our student recognized our collective as a "trap house" rather than a "home" or even a "crew." We intentionally adopted that description because it refuses respectability politics. It names the realities of racialized abandonment while also honoring Black traditions of making sanctuary, strategy, and joy within spaces others dismiss or fear. Traphouses appear in music about hustling and in creative reclamations of spaces taken from Black communities. These cultural relics also name the work of making life, beauty, strategy, and care within conditions designed to deny all four. Dominant understandings of the traphouse

often reduce it to a site of criminality, abandonment, social disorder, or pathology. Yet we are interested in what such spaces have also come to represent within Black communities: places forged under conditions of structural neglect where ingenuity, kinship, protection, and survival emerge. We do not romanticize the material conditions that produce trap houses. Rather, we reclaim the metaphor to name a Black feminist practice of creating refuge and possibility within institutions and landscapes that were never designed for our flourishing. In this sense, the Black Girl Traphouse is less of a physical location and more of a relational geography of care.

Dr. Katherine McKittrick (2006) defines Black geographies as "subaltern or alternative geographic patterns that work alongside and beyond traditional geographies." The social identity of one's body can operate as a spatial indicator. Race and gender shape where and how we live/house ourselves as Black people negotiating places and spaces of denial and resistance. Blackness is, of course, vast. Our geographical, social, political, racial, ecological, cultural, and economic processes and spatial patterns that constitute Black life are also limitless. Across national contexts, and especially within institutions of higher education, the ways Black women and femmes refuse and redefine Blackness, gender, and sexuality deserves deeper study and citation. The lens of Black feminist geographies allows us to rethink possibilities and decide what place and space mean to us as both individuals and as a collective.

The lore of the Black 'trap house' as fugitive space runs the gamut from being at its worst solely a place for nefarious activities to at its best being a hideout, secret respite, or undercommons (Harney & Moten, 2013). In this paper and through our praxis, we have chosen the latter to inform our working definition and orientation. We find that people are often threatened when we gather because of how we might channel our anger, madness, upset, and excellence while together. Although we are all Black, we have many different presentations and orientations towards our Blackness as well as varying performances of our profession. Our school community has often been confused by our genuine and authentic care and rapport with one another. This often led to increased surveillance and suspicion of us. We quickly realized that it only felt safe to cultivate our friendships and strategize in Black private spheres to protect our processes and practices geared towards greater liberation and healing. When we chose to adopt the language of BGTH gifted to us by one of our students, we became more autonomous in deciding when, where, how, and to whom we opened our sacred spaces.

Harvesting Homeplace

Home is where you tend to your wounds. Home is where you care for yourself. Home is where you take off masks. bell hooks (1993) defines homeplace as a site of resistance, "where Black people can construct a safe place to affirm one another and by doing so heal many of the wounds of racist domination. The opportunity to grow, develop, and nurture

our spirits allows us to make a home for a community of resistance, political solidarity, and new commitments." hooks theorizes from a social location resonant with our own. Often in contention and at odds with her academic homes, she knew all too well the importance of creating and fortifying alternative spaces that offered her necessary protection, praise, and grace (DuBois, 2019). We took our cue from her. In an institution that does not know how to be a home to us, we extended safety, trust, and protection with one another through conversations, meals, co-housing, and counsel.

Too often, we have to instruct this institution on how to best care for us. The past five years have taught us how to best triage institutional harm. Whether the play is that of ratchetness or respectability, our goal is to survive and keep our souls intact. We have used the lens of Black feminist geographies to co-construct amorphous homeplaces for us to mitigate the madness and anger we are holding. We often find that when we return to one another we no longer feel resigned to defeat but are imbued with the requisite energy and strategy necessary to keep fighting.

Cultivating the Trap

Manual | Model

The BGTH is an insurgent space for creating new possibilities within, outside, and in spite of the academy. Using a critical grounded theory approach and Black feminist epistemological standpoint, we created a BGTH theoretical model. The model reflects how "imagination and vision" (Younger, 2024, p. 5) supported our resistance and how our lived experience/ knowledge/ praxis reveals the whiteness, gendered anti-Blackness, and ableism (including, *sanism*) embedded in academic institutions, including schools of social work. We identified BGTH's distinguishing characteristics through an analysis of source materials documenting our experience and approach to care work. At times, our collective experience felt heavy and thick with grief, anger, and fear. It revealed "feelings of frustration, exhaustion, sadness, disappointment, and even numbness" (Jackson et al., 2022, p. 569). Such themes are similar to those found in previous narratives about Black women's experiences in the social work academy. While there is existing literature that discusses the psychosocial stress reactions and coping strategies of Black women in academia, BGTH as both a social experience and a community-building and freedom-making project allowed us to uncover and interrogate the systemic conditions in which Black women's feelings/emotions and resistance practices often are misunderstood and pathologized. We found that "madness"[7] provided the conceptual latitude we needed to describe aspects of our racialized experiences in academia. In this way, our analysis attended to how Black women are treated by predominantly white academic and social service institutions as well as how the social

[7] We draw on understandings of madness, particularly those that come out of the Black studies tradition, that are inclusive of phenomena that have been termed "mental health issues" as well as emotions/feelings such as anger (Lorde, 1984; Moore, 2023; hooks, 1993).

relations of power embedded within these spaces perpetuate psychological and epistemic violence and take an emotional toll on Black women, and negatively affect our wellbeing.

As we searched for a "space" in which to process our emotions and experiences, one of our dear comrades, Keshia Williams, gifted us with the idea of letter writing as being a powerful medium to begin a grounded theory project. Letter writing became one of our first architectures of care. We came to write these pieces to one another because we were mad, hurting, sad and angry. We spent very little time in physical space with one another, so writing letters allowed us to reach out to one another across time and space to offer care and love. Although the writing process offered us the space to memorialize and celebrate the community of care we built together, we also contended with the pain that often envelops these buried stories. Because BGTH includes varied neurologies and because flexibility is itself a form of care, we expanded letter writing to include personal narratives, audio essays, and other forms. We discussed the trials and tribulations we faced at our institution and exchanged advice on how to best troubleshoot the issues we were facing. We wrote across exhaustion, across office walls, across silence, across states and time. Sometimes a letter held strategy, sometimes a letter held grief, and sometimes a letter offered nothing more than the reminder: "I'm still here." Letter-writing was a specific method and resource of care, relation, and a source of knowledge production for us. In addition to these letters, we reviewed our group text messages, recorded conversations,

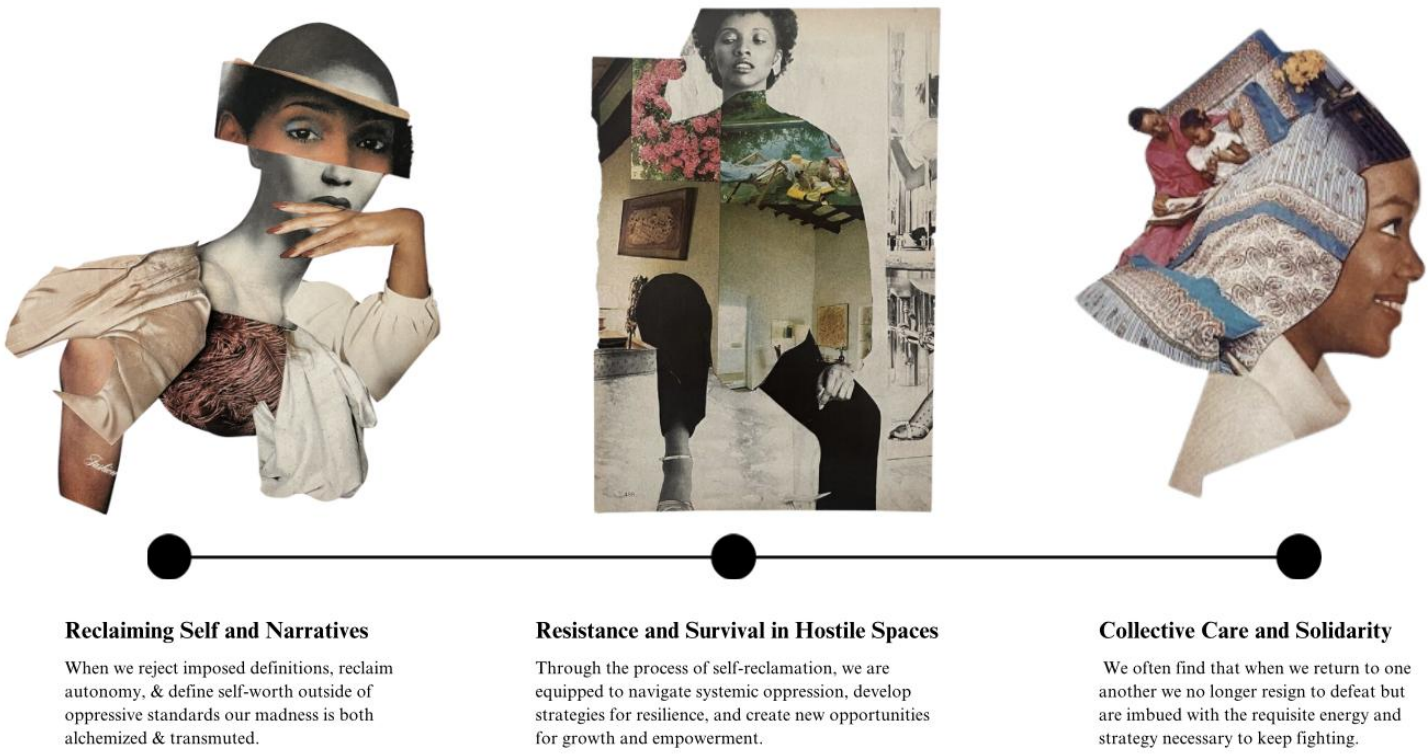


Figure 1: The Black Girl Traphouse Model

journal entries, and reflective memos to identify the practices that made possible the small miracles of mirroring and caring for one another. We highlighted thick descriptions existing within these archival materials and completed thematic coding and narrative analysis (Boylorn, 2017) to inform our discussion.

Our relationships constituted the methodology itself. The practices through which we cared for each other–writing, listening, witnessing, grieving, laughing, walking, eating, strategizing, singing–were simultaneously how we survived and how we came to know.

Learning What Care Makes Possible

> *"We are each other's harvest. We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond."* - Gwendolyn Brooks

In the following section, we expand on three components that comprise our Black Girl Traphouse model. When we centered our community's needs, genius, and protection, this is what we learned from our time spent together. It is important to note that none of these sections are mutually exclusive. Each category informs and spills into the others. In addition, while depicted linearly above (for ease of reading), we view this process as multidirectional and fractal. We hope the bonds that you have formed–or have yet to form–fortify and fulfill you in similar ways.

Reclaiming Ourselves and Our Narratives

> *"She had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of reality, she may well have invented herself."* - Toni Morrison, What a Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib

Self-reclamation, in our opinion, is the unending process of unlearning mistruths and imposed definitions enforced by dominant structures. Relatedly, authoring a counternarrative begins with believing in the strengths and assets inside of oneself and/or their community not just for a fleeting moment, but sustaining these beliefs through repeated praxis. In academia, too often, your success, security, and mobility are based on tacit standards steeped in procedures and processes that benefit whiteness, elitism, and antiquity. It can be truly maddening to be assessed by standards that do not begin or even try to capture your true gifts, wisdoms, and know-how. Teaching and performance evaluations determine whether or not your contract is extended, and invitations to return to our institution wholly depend on how we measure up in the esteem of students, all community stakeholders, and those who behave as gatekeepers determined to maintain the institution's status quo. The counternarrative that we find ourselves constantly returning to is that the deficits exist in the systems that employ us. We are not deficient, incapable, or inept. On the contrary, our creativity, honesty, and intellectual production radically transform what they touch.

For BGTH, reclamation has largely meant not giving up on ideas rooted in structural dreaming that offer opportunities for greater equity, intentionality, or respect that may be deemed unrealistic or unnecessary to others. Specifically, our counternarrative practices included reimagining hiring processes to decrease barriers for all members of the community and consisted of undulating between and sharing with one another life-affirming tools such as meditating, journaling, memes, videos, and books that remind us that the rooms we stand in are crooked (Harris-Perry, 2011), not our minds or bodies. In one journal entry, one of us wrote,

> "In our own ways, we have to be in the practice of exploring our histories, our behaviors, our core values, our motivators, our challenges, our pains, all while staying curious about the collective ask and collective purpose of the lives we are creating. When we access that capacity, we reject and resist structural relationships not built to serve and support us."

Like many Black women before us, we've engaged in a practice of self-reliance as a primary survival strategy (Cooper, 2000) and chosen to do this individually and collectively. We have very individualized and specific, yet collective practices of giving our contexts and whys to reduce the potential for someone else to place their frame and context on our efforts and energy in these academic spaces. We suggest that you begin to build your own toolkit with readily available texts, multimedia, meditations, words of affirmation, creative writing, and art practices that allow you to (re)invent yourself and remind you of your inherent worth and value.

Resistance and Survival in Hostile Spaces

> *"Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled. It is important to share how I know survival is survival and not just a walk through the rain. Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me."* - Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider

In academia, resistance refers to actively challenging and disrupting oppressive systems, norms, and practices, whereas survivance means navigating spaces designed to exclude or diminish Black bodies and minds while maintaining dignity, selfhood, and professional integrity. For Black women professors, this dual process requires constant negotiation between performing our roles as scholars, instructors, and administrators while pushing back against the racist, sexist, and often misogynoir elements embedded in academic structures through anti-Black racism, implicit bias, micro/macroaggressions, and the perpetual invisibility of our contributions to knowledge and culture.

Within the context of BGTH, we often allow one another to vent or process aloud the feelings that arise from our teaching and interpersonal interactions on campus. We then often ask the person seeking support if they need us to hold space, offer safety, strategy,

advocacy, or future allyship. Holding space and creating safety might mean a small gift, a meal, a love note, an affirmation, an excursion, a walk, or an intentional conversation. One such love note included the following advice,

> "breathe and turn down the volume of the words spoken to you by those who refuse to find a language to love you or eyes to see you. A calming cue to your nervous system that those standing for truth and justice will always be met with resistance wherever they may find themselves. A soft nudge for you to know that you can reclaim and build new homes for your work when it has been squandered by its receivers… Run far and fast away from people who are committed to their/your first draft. If you find you are not in a position to run, FIGHT, in the best way you know how in the way only you uniquely can, and know that somewhere I am fighting, plotting, and paving a way for our freedom too."

Enacting this strategy looks like discussing strategies for creating more ease, boundaries, protection, and/or support in our interactions with supervisors, staff, and students. Advocacy or allyship might mean requesting another person to speak on our behalf during a meeting or in a one-on-one conversation to articulate the issue as not being isolated but systemic and affecting others. We also invite you to begin relationship-building with folks in your professional spaces who make you feel like you can try out being your authentic self around. Start small with convening over a tea or a meal. See how you feel when you share vulnerable information with them. Adjust according to their response. If you find yourself in a space where it feels impossible to try with others, try out this invitation for yourself and with people outside of your institution who can share in these sacred special experiences. Survival is never our final destination. BGTH does not only exist so that we can endure institutional violence indefinitely. Survival creates the conditions from which imagination, refusal, joy, and collective transformation become possible. Find people who love and care for you, and with them dream, create, and build freedom projects within, outside, and beyond the places that pay you.

Practicing Collective Care and Solidarity

> *"We have to decolonize organizing by starting with the group chat. Start with you and the homies right now. The love and care we offer one another is also organizing. When we share resources, tools, and information we are doing important work. That too is our activism."* - EbonyJanice

Collective care is a reciprocal relational practice through which we nurture one another and cultivate and ritualize regular practices of nurturing ourselves. Likewise, we understand solidarity as being a united front not just in one's espoused words and commitments but also in shared risk and collective action. The academy runs on elitism and production. Care in any form is rarely valued, readily offered, or institutionally prioritized. For Black women,

humanity can be hard to come by in academia, as we are often disrespected, mistrusted, undervalued, and unacknowledged. We are then faced with the challenge of collectively caring for ourselves so fiercely that we do not resign ourselves to defeat.

In the BGTH, our collective care of each other is rooted in a Black feminist liberatory consciousness–cultivated from a wellspring of ratchetness (McEachern, 2017) –which gives us limitless opportunities for humanizing each other and creating possibilities for us to be our whole selves. Although the institution encourages us to strip away parts of ourselves, perform respectability, and compete with each other, we have opted to lean in and toward each other, to encourage each other to be expansive and take up space. In another text, one of us wrote,

> "we have generated new ways of being in our institution and I would argue, for our students, challenged what's possible/professional/acceptable for Black women. Our very presence feels disruptive to the whiteness in our spaces, this is especially true when we sit together. We intentionally work together to fill each other's cup, to give us ease, to create more space for our humanity."

Beginning with a simple group chat, our ratchet analysis has now expanded to an unyielding politic that has helped keep us whole in this institution as it demands that we refuse to conform to the white hegemonic system around us. There is freedom in our embodied ratchet politics, as we try to make choices, create curriculum, and create classroom spaces that center and celebrate us. We center our stories and how we love on each other because we know how transformative Black love and care can be. Our students have shared that the impact of how we show up has been invaluable. Because of Black ratchet imagination, we have realized moments in a maddening institution to be in deeper solidarity with each other. How might your authentic and unapologetic self show up in both private and public spaces? How might it deepen your relationships, organizing, and movements? What would a maddening practice look like for you, in your community, with your specific social and geographic histories? We invite Black feminist readers who may be looking for guidance to become curious about your relationship to ratchetness and madness. Developing a politic of ratchetness and madness may offer protection and support while enabling you to become a space of freedom and healing for others. We fantasize about a transnational diasporic gathering of friends, scholars, and academic homies that want to sharpen their tongues to adopt a mad politic and methodology to survive and thrive that exists beyond empire.

Leaving the Door Open

We hope that this article has made Black women readers excited to make their own maps of "home" and perhaps to build your own trap house with your closest trusted peers and colleagues. We do not imagine BGTH as something that can be replicated exactly, as every community has different conditions and every geography carries its own histories. We offer permission to believe your people, to write one another letters, to build rooms where your

full selves are legible, to refuse isolation, and to continue to imagine otherwise. If madness is produced collectively through institutions, then liberation, too, must be cultivated collectively. Like all living communities, BGTH continues to evolve. We offer the model as a living archive of collective care, shaped through movement, contradiction, revision, and becoming. We hope you take inspiration from both the Black women who walked the halls before you and those content in the hood and whose knowledge flourishes beyond those doors. Bring the fullness of anything and everything from your lived experience to the choices you make and to the freedom manuals you build with and for others–manuals for surviving, refusing, imagining, and living otherwise. We close this paper with a final meditation for you to return to as many times as needed. The invitation is open and has no expiration.

Take a moment to settle into your body,
grounding yourself in the energy of this space—a sanctuary of belonging.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable.
Feel the support beneath you, holding you as we journey inward.

Breathe in deeply, feeling your presence expand.
Exhale slowly, releasing the weight of expectations not meant for you.

Imagine yourself creating your own Black Girl Traphouse,
a space built by your hands,
where every corner honors your survival, your joy, and your power.

Feel the air hum with the energy of those who came before you,
their strength woven into the walls.
Here, your anger transforms into righteous resistance,
your madness into freedom's map.
Your care becomes a revolutionary act.

With each inhale, draw in the truth of your worthiness:
I am brilliant. I am creative. I am rooted in love.
With each exhale, release the narratives that seek to confine you:
I am not too much. I am more than enough.

Sit in this space of possibility,
letting the energy of collective care and radical belonging surround you.
When you are ready, gently bring yourself back,
carrying this sanctuary with you wherever you go.

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We begin with gratitude for the Black women and femmes whose lives, labor, intellectual traditions, creative practices, and radical imaginations have made our own ways of being,

knowing, and caring possible. In our writing we honor an ethic that citations are political and use citations to honor the expansive methods of building knowledge. Our work stands in conversation with and in the lineage of those who have insisted that Black women's experiences are worthy of study, that our relationships are sites of knowledge production, and that our survival and flourishing require more than accommodation within institutions not designed for us.

We extend particular gratitude to Keshia Williams, whose invitation into letter-writing helped shape both our methodological approach and our understanding of what it means to make meaning, offer care, and witness one another across time and space. We also acknowledge Brittany Brathwaite and Chynna Aming, whose naming of our collective as the Black Girl Traphouse offered language for something we were already living and creating together. Their recognition reminded us that our ways of gathering, caring, and protecting one another were visible, meaningful, and generative beyond ourselves.

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Finally, we acknowledge one another because this work is possible because we have chosen, repeatedly and intentionally, to remain in relationship, to make room for our contradictions, complexities, and needs, and to practice care as both a personal commitment and a collective political act. The Black Girl Traphouse is an ongoing practice of love, resistance, imagination, and shared becoming throughout space and time.

Integrity Statement

This article emerges from the authors' collective lived experiences, relationships, and reflective practices. Grounded in Black feminist epistemologies, our approach recognizes lived experience, relational knowledge, and collective meaning-making as legitimate and valuable sources of knowledge. Because this work draws from our own experiences rather than research involving external human subjects, it falls outside the institution's human-subjects review requirements.

Throughout the development of this manuscript, we engaged in ongoing conversations about what we wished to share, how our experiences would be represented, and the

responsibilities we held to ourselves and one another in telling our stories. All five authors had meaningful opportunities to revisit, revise, or withdraw personal material throughout the writing process. These opportunities were integral to our collective approach, ensuring that each author retained agency over the representation of her experiences while participating in the development of our shared analysis.

We understand research integrity not simply as adherence to procedural requirements, but as an ongoing practice of reflexivity, mutual accountability, care, and respect for individual and collective agency. Our commitment has been to represent our experiences faithfully while honoring the relationships and conditions through which this knowledge was created.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors are affiliated with Smith College School for Social Work, the institutional context from which the relationships, experiences, and analyses presented in this article emerged. Our shared institutional affiliation, professional relationships, and participation in the Black Girl Traphouse collective are central to the development of this work and are explicitly situated within the manuscript. We recognize that our relationships to one another and to the institution are not neutral; rather, they inform our positionalities, interpretive practices, and commitments to Black feminist scholarship and collective care.

At the same time, each of us brings experiences from other workplaces, professional roles, institutions, and communities that have informed our understanding of the conditions we examine. Throughout our collective reflection and theorizing, we have worked intentionally to consider the ways our experiences reflect broader institutional structures, practices, and patterns rather than circumstances unique to any one academic setting. In developing the Black Girl Traphouse model, we sought to translate insights from our particular experiences into a conceptual framework and set of practices that might support others in imagining, cultivating, and sustaining communities of care, resistance, and possibility within, across, and despite their own academic and professional contexts.

We have approached this work with attention to transparency, reflexivity, and our responsibilities to one another and to the communities represented in our analysis. The authors declare no financial or other competing interests that would constitute a conflict of interest in the publication of this article, subject to confirmation by all coauthors.

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