

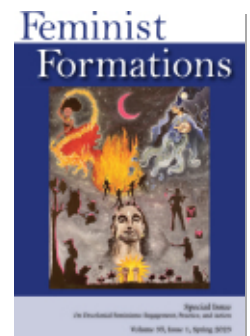


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Resistance

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Small Revolutions: Methodologies of Black Feminist Consciousness-Raising and the Politics of Ordinary Resistance

Harleen Kaur, Katie Byrd, Nadia R. Davis, and Taylor M. Williams

While small, midwestern towns across the United States have become the center of the battle against Critical Race Theory and identity politics in education over the past several years, one small town in Michigan became the launching pad for a grassroots gender-consciousness program grounded firmly in the experiences of young Black women. The Gender Consciousness Project (GCP) has flourished into a program co-facilitated by previous participants across several schools in the metro Detroit area, all while national- and state-level discourse became increasingly hostile towards any material or theoretical support of Black women's lives. In this paper, we—the three pilot participants of GCP and one co-facilitator—return to the recordings of the first iteration of GCP to examine how exactly a small-town consciousness-raising project took root amidst these circumstances. We explore how the project cultivated, and how its primary facilitator and founder conceptualized, a Black feminist consciousness-raising methodology which centered the agency and capacity for consciousness of young Black women, or Black girls, specifically. Through this analysis, we offer that one such Black feminist consciousness-raising methodology is to spark small revolutions through the everyday possibilities for resistance and refusal of cooptation.

Keywords: Agency / Beauty / Belonging / Black feminisms / Dialogical learning / Self-reflexivity

If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency.

—bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*

I'm not promising you happiness, but I'm promising you agency.

—Dr. Nesha Z. Haniff,
creator of the Gender Consciousness Project

If agency is the power to validate one's experience as worthy in and of themselves, radical feminist praxis must consider how the simultaneously peripheral and oppressed can also realize their self-defining capacities. The Gender Consciousness Project (GCP) is one such dialogical intervention, which began by offering a taste of agency to three young Black women in a small, blue-collar town in Michigan. In this paper, we—the project's three pilot participants and one co-facilitator—explore how it did so. Analyzing the recordings of the pilot program, we identify the methodology and consciousness-raising strategies employed to “promise agency” through gender consciousness. We explore how Black feminist consciousness-raising methodologies can be simultaneously precise and flexible, move non-linearly and yet with direction, and function independently of any one individual facilitator or research project – or, through the agency of the participants. Through these methods, GCP contributes to decolonial feminist praxis by grounding itself in storytelling, relational learning, and lived experience as its sites of knowledge production.

First, we highlight the intentions behind GCP through an engagement with scholarship on Black and decolonial feminisms, consciousness-raising, and dialogical learning. We also include background around the project's location, Belleville, Michigan. Then, we offer our analysis of the project through three instances of consciousness-raising focused on primary themes of beauty, belonging, safety, and morality. We are inspired by Jennifer C. Nash's conceptualization of Black feminisms as an approach that “centers analyses of racialized sexism and homophobia, and that foregrounds black women as intellectual producers, as creative agents, as political subjects, and as ‘freedom dreamers’ even as the content and contours of those dreams vary” (2018, 5). Through this analytical frame, we examine GCP as a non-hierarchical project of learning, community, and consciousness-raising by way of its method: centering the validity of small (i.e., ordinary) experiences to develop big (i.e., global) theory and analysis.

Origins: Dialogical Learning and Black Feminist Consciousness-Raising

I tapped into parts of my brain that weren't tapped into before.

It was really good that I could actually have a deep conversation about things that matter, and it wasn't so one-sided.

Usually when I talk to people my age, it's me talking and them saying, 'oh, okay,' about something that I want to talk about. But here, everybody listened, and I wasn't the only one

talking . . . it's important that other girls get the same experience as we did to prepare them for the future. —*Nadia, age 16*

It helped me broaden my horizons and think more deeply about topics that I wouldn't have thought about—at least as deeply as we did—on my own. —*Taylor, age 15*

These conversations forced me to take off my blinders. Because it's really easy to ignore things and be like, oh, I can't do anything about it, so why even [think] about it? It put me in a place where I have the ability to make change and not just watch the world pass me by. —*Katie, age 16*

The Gender Consciousness Project began with a story . . . three stories to be precise. Each participant entered the program sharing a story of a woman in their life, one after the other. These narratives intertwined into a collective yet nuanced space, one in which something as seemingly simple as a story—filled with contradictions, unfulfilled hopes, and still unyielding dreams—became the foundation to theorize about the construction of our worlds. However, this foundation cannot be built through storytelling alone. In his introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Donald Macedo highlights the dangerous tendency of liberal pedagogical discourse to turn dialogical learning into a risk-free exercise of self-empowerment:

By overindulging in the legacy and importance of their respective voices and experiences, [US-based] educators often fail to move beyond a notion of difference structured in polarizing binarisms and uncritical appeals to the discourse of experience. I believe that it is for this reason that some of these educators invoke a romantic pedagogical mode that “exoticizes” discussing lived experiences as a process of coming to voice. . . . This creates . . . the transformation of dialogical teaching into a method invoking conversation that provides participants with a group-therapy space for stating their grievances. (Freire 2000, 17–18)

The failure to move beyond identarian categories in academic discussions of lived experience has been criticized elsewhere as the “still-existing structure of settler colonization” (Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill 2013, 9). More specifically, these scholars critique an absence of a decolonial feminism, which rejects a singular, composite “re-presentation of Woman by hegemonic discourses” for “women—real, material subjects of their collective histories” (Mohanty 1988, 62). Rather than using one's experience as a heuristic for all possible subjectivities, a decolonial feminisms approach to dialogical learning reorients subjectivity from a fixed, categorical experience of power to a continuous project of (re)situating oneself within local *and* global relations of power.

In bell hooks' writing on consciousness-raising, she further clarifies Macedo's concern regarding therapeutic support versus political transformation:

Early on in contemporary feminist movement, consciousness-raising groups often became settings where women simply unleashed pent-up hostility and rage about being victimized, with little or no focus on strategies of intervention and transformation. On a basic level many hurt and exploited women used the consciousness-raising group therapeutically. It was the site where they uncovered and openly revealed the depths of their intimate wounds. This confessional aspect served as a healing ritual. Through consciousness-raising women gained the strength to challenge patriarchal forces at work and at home. (2000, 7–8)

Thus, while therapeutic dialogue can certainly validate one's agency as an oppressed subject, it must also heal wounds of oppression to then allow for "strategies of intervention and transformation." Chandra Mohanty (1988) similarly marks the discursive as significant, for it still reflects realities, or even desires, regarding the material. Likewise, we can recognize storytelling's power in generating agency through Black diasporic feminist writing (Hua 2013), or offering reflexive relationality in academic spaces, which otherwise produce a sense of rootlessness critical to upholding settler-colonialism (Fernández, Hisatake, and Nguyen 2020). In articulating storytelling as a decolonial feminist praxis, scholars note: "being with others challenges individualizing, ahistorical, and apolitical assumptions underlying the colonial difference, rooted in structures that cement the coloniality of power, barring our bodies and silencing our experiences" (13). Thus, it is through *relationality* that decolonial feminist consciousness-raising transforms apolitical conversations into radical dialogue, in that it effectively connects what one may experience as an individual issue to structural causation and implementation. Dialogical learning allows participants to reflect on their differential experiences within the same space to understand how said difference is constructed through unequal distributions of power, safety, and belonging (not inherent categorical distinctions). When rooted in Black and decolonial feminisms, then, the joint process of consciousness-raising and dialogical learning encourages an epistemology focused on radical politics of restructuring social and political relations through our collective and inherent agency.

GCP also emerged from the necessity for dialogical learning and consciousness-raising grounded in the experiences of *young* Black women, less remarked upon than the importance of consciousness-raising for adults (Owens et al. 2017). In choosing to work with teenagers, GCP intervenes early in the cooptation that occurs through patriarchal violence by going into high schools where young Black women are normally criminalized, policed, and punished (Morris 2016). Storytelling in school also functions as decolonial pedagogy; Devika Chawla (2018) asserts storytelling in midwestern US-based education spaces upends whiteness as the normative embodied relationship to power, a tactic she

calls “autobiographical disruption.” Considering Freirean praxis, which calls for placing full trust in the people to think and act critically, working with young Black women serves as an egalitarian marker that each person, regardless of their status, can be conscientized. Drawing from Ruth Nicole Brown’s (2009) notion of Black girlhood celebration, the Gender Consciousness Project centers these young Black women as storytellers, knowledge-producers, and experts on their own lives. Mirroring original consciousness-raising tactics, the storytelling forces GCP participants *and* facilitators to “confront their internalized sexism, their allegiance to patriarchal thinking and action, and their commitment to feminist conversion” (hooks 2000, 12). In this way, GCP makes strategic and accessible connections to systemic oppression through personal experiences, resisting the cooptation of Black women’s experiences into a single Black woman’s narrative devoid of material implications (Collins 1996).

GCP, Year Zero: Welcome to Belleville, Michigan

In June 2016, Dr. Haniff and Harleen Kaur entered Belleville High School to begin the Gender Consciousness Project with three young Black women—Katie Byrd, Nadia Davis, and Taylor Williams—just after their sophomore year. The one-month program aimed to shift participants’ consciousness on gender, to notice its presence in all aspects of their lives, such as social media, education, and music. The goal was for participants to leave the program with a better understanding of how gender is actively constructed through social and political forces to restrict their full humanity, as well as demonstrate how it is linked to daily actions and thought processes that they perhaps did not already see as gendered. The setting of Belleville, Michigan, and its proximity to the University of Michigan, was crucial to GCP’s development in these initial years.

Belleville is twenty miles southwest of Detroit, Michigan, with a population just shy of 4,000. From 2000 to 2010, Belleville’s Black population nearly doubled from 7.55 to 14.1 percent (US Census Bureau 2010). Less than thirty minutes away, the University of Michigan has faced increasing criticism for its declining Black student population—just 4.4 percent in 2018, the year all three pilot participants started college (Hiyama and Basha 2018). In part, the decision to establish GCP in Belleville was a deliberate choice to leave the shadow of the University. While closer to Ann Arbor than Detroit, Belleville’s social and political location is drastically different from the University’s. Most high school graduates from Belleville attend community college or vocational school. Basing a university-funded project in a community largely forgotten by the University became an active way to reallocate institutional funds and resources to benefit the community, rather than Black communities serving the University’s research desires. The distance from the University to Belleville also meant that the University students facilitating the program could not do so at their convenience, as many experiential learning projects allow, but

were required to tangibly center the community throughout their participation (Haniff 2022).

Many Black families in Belleville work in the auto industry but were forced to relocate away from areas proximate to industry plants as they gentrified. Despite the forced migration, Katie emphasized, “To most people in Belleville, going to the plant is a good job—you can support an entire family on that salary. People in Belleville understand that hard work does give you what you need.” As a result, many of Belleville’s Black residents continue to thrive on industrial, blue-collar work. Still, racism and classism deeply structured social groups and teacher-student dynamics for the participants, during their high school years especially. Katie and Nadia reflected upon their experiences as two of the few Black students in the Gifted & Talented program. They recalled anti-Black remarks made about Black students in the school and how the parents of Black G&T children became very close as a protective mechanism. Exacerbated by the lack of Black educators in their schools, these dynamics meant a dismissive, at best, and punitive, at worst, scholarly environment for Black students. Nadia shared how she not only begged teachers to write her college recommendation letters, but, in one instance, wrote the letter herself on behalf of her white male teacher. Katie noted certain teachers, advisors, and administrators seemed viscerally uncomfortable with the increasing population of Black students in the district. This became most apparent in the transition from middle to high school, when a disproportionate number of suspensions were doled out to Black students, and pre-college support was lacking, if not entirely absent.

Still, all three women said growing up in Belleville gave them a sense of identity, purpose, and community which continues to inspire and shape them today. Recent scholarship is changing the perception of small town, blue-collar communities to show how places like Belleville are home to Black communities deeply invested in the wellbeing and education of their youth (Brown 2018). Taylor noted that growing up in a tight-knit Black community, alongside the support of her mother, allowed her to value education more than her cousins who did not relocate to Belleville. Nadia shared that growing up in a nearly all-Black neighborhood, where most adults had blue-collar, industrial jobs like her own parents, often felt like an incubator; however, it was these “positive Black influences in my life over time made me into the person I am today, who was able to be self-sufficient” and push for better opportunities and resources throughout her educational experience. Katie called growing up in Belleville “sacred,” as the small-town environment meant she could bike from one end of town to the other and never feel out of place. It was a safety and physical freedom she did not appreciate until she became older.

Data and Methods

Our data consists of 720 hours of audio recordings from the pilot program, which ran from June 21 through July 21, 2016. Participants and facilitators met a total of eight times: twice a week for ninety minutes except the week of July 4. We first listened to the recordings to summarize the content of each meeting. Next, we highlighted key types of dialogue that demonstrated the process and methodology of transformation through gender consciousness. We then re-analyzed the meetings using the identified themes as codes and selected quotes to determine overlapping conversations between the meetings. These excerpts functioned as scaffolding for the detailed analysis of consciousness-raising offered below.

Sparking Small Revolutions: Three Glimpses into Gender Consciousness-Raising

In our analysis, we found that GCP's methodology was predicated on three overlapping tools of dialogical pedagogy: 1.) narrative storytelling to name social and political location, 2.) real examples of women to demonstrate how gender functions as an experience of relative power, and 3.) the tool of "self-grading," where participants determined the diligence of their analyses on gender. Rather than using grading to diminish the participants' capacity for intellect or critical thinking, grading was reconceptualized as a signifier of the extent to which participants were situating their own experiences in their analysis. By validating lived experience as epistemology and allowing the participants to determine their own stage in the consciousness-raising process through self-grading, participants' theories of gender constructed from individual experience (the local) was not diminished in relation to the consciousness-raising process (the global); both were established as significant locations of knowledge production.

Out of our analyses, we selected three instances of consciousness-raising which we found particularly compelling and indicative of the program and our experiences of it. In analyzing the meetings for evidence of methodology, we noted that consciousness-raising is not linear. Rather, gender consciousness developed out of a continuous attempt towards rootedness in one's social and political location through community (perhaps, another type of decolonial feminism). While later meetings certainly built upon previous ones, the goal was not a comprehensive or finite understanding of all social and political issues. Instead, by developing critical tools for raising consciousness each meeting, participants were able to build upon the techniques for analysis they had previously learned and been "graded" on. These tools of analysis furthered a comprehension that gender consciousness was an experience of internalizing one's inherent value in the world and, to develop consciousness, one must work to identify these modes of internalization in every social relation they experience.

I. The Politics of Beauty through Skin Color and Hair Texture

Throughout the different iterations of GCP, the question of “am I beautiful?” or “how beautiful am I?” comes up in some version or another. Various social media platforms, and entertainment media itself, continuously add fuel to this anxious attachment to one’s beauty, particularly for Black women who are commodified, sexualized, and villainized simultaneously through popular culture (Halliday 2018). Thus, complicating the question of beauty also became a measure of how much participants could retain against the bombardment of media content. Here, we think through constructions of beauty that emerge through skin color, hair, and behavior. For the participants, skin color predicted perceptions of character and personality, while hair was something to craft and construct in relation to beauty norms that were always magnetized towards whiteness—or at least a digestible form of Blackness (Rowe 2022). Each participant recognizing that they were making choices to craft their behavior and self-image in response to reactions to their hair type and skin color was crucial to identifying their unique experiences as Black women. It clarified that experiences of belonging in the Black community are not solely constructed based on racial ideologies, but gendered and classed ones, too.

In the first few meetings, the topics of beauty, objectification, and self-confidence were interwoven into most conversations as the participants shared stories of their grandmothers and mothers and reflected on their own experiences in various school districts, neighborhoods, and family gatherings. In meeting two, much of the conversation came after Nadia shared the story of her paternal grandmother, who “grew up in the 1950s, very fair but African American, which was not very much appreciated. She was too light for Black kids and too Black for the white kids, which left her secluded and gave her self-confidence issues.” This notion of wanting to be recognized as Black, and also not recognizing the privileges of having a lighter skin tone, extended into the present as participants analyzed the pressure to act “more Black” in school, particularly when non-Black students were present.

Nadia: Oh, it’s not just about the skin color anymore. You gotta actually fit in.

Dr. Haniff: Well how do you fit in to be more black?

Taylor: Ghetto.

Dr. Haniff: So, you have to talk a certain way.

Taylor: Ignorant.

Katie: You have to be loud. Gotta be from Detroit.

Taylor: Yeah. I mean, just because I am, I don’t go around and flaunt it.

Nadia: Gotta be hood rich.

Katie: It’s just too much because they expect you to be this big flamboyant person out there. And then when you act sort of like, you know, classy, like you have manners, you’re polite. You can speak, well, you can speak intelligently . . .

Taylor: Then they say you act white.

In this meeting, all three participants largely focused on the construction of Blackness through behavior and how behavior predicted one's level of belonging. Here, many of the stereotypes being ascribed to them were based on racist and classist tropes of how lower-income Black people *should* behave. Participants identified these tropes as partly constructed through media; in the story of her grandmother, Nadia identified her grandmother's low self-confidence about her body because "she didn't look like the women on TV." As a result, moving past negative self-image was largely about individual self-confidence and affirming one's appearance in relation to beauty standards.

Dr. Haniff: What's wrong with your hair?

Taylor: Well, my hair doesn't look like Nadia's when it's natural, but I mean, nothing's really wrong with it. I just don't have the confidence to wear it.

Dr. Haniff: But I keep hearing this word confidence.

Taylor: My self-esteem can shrink sometimes.

Dr. Haniff: If you wear your hair differently.

Taylor: Just in general. So then like little things like that, I'm like—I'm good.

Nadia: You got to find that go-to style.

Katie: Yeah. I think you look cute with it when your hair is natural.

In the following meeting, the participants were asked to reflect directly on their own skin color and hair and how it related to the level of attractiveness they were assigned. Taylor did identify that her skin color, as "caramel," was "ideal in the Black community," but she also did not claim to have "experienced privilege from being my color." Nadia, who is mixed, shared her thoughts next.

Nadia: I might have [light skin privilege] unconsciously, like I had some guy's attention over a dark skin woman or something like that. But to me, at the same time, [being light skin] does dissociate me from my own community. It also kind of puts a target on my back to the white community and they have this, *what are you* question all the time. Even though they don't know what I am, they just know I'm not white. But I have a resistance to talk about this because I don't feel those same things that another woman of darker color would. So, who am I to judge other people? Because I have the privilege, but at the same time, it's like the rest of the world doesn't think— the majority doesn't think I have the privilege.

Katie, the darkest in skin tone of the three, shared last. She started by detailing her journey with hair and why she started wearing her hair natural from a young(er) age. Many chemicals and treatments caused her hair to fall out, so she wore braids in between that phase and going natural.

Katie: People started mistaking me for like a guy . . . until this year when I came to the conclusion that my hair isn't made to be an accessory. It's more made to be like a—it's like an afterthought sort of like, it's like an accent, you

know? It's made for efficiency, not decoration like it is for most people. I feel like my hair, for me, is sort of like a reflection of my attitude. Like I'm business first and hair later, you know, it's, for me, it helps me concentrate. I don't have to worry about, what am I going to do with my hair tomorrow? What is it going to look like on Tuesday? Like, no, it is what it is and I'm going to do my work. I can focus on other things. And it's just for productivity. Mostly for me, it's more like a functional thing now.

Dr. Haniff prompted Katie to share further about her experience with skin color.

Katie: It's hard to put into words. Like I know I'm kind of towards the darker end of the spectrum. Automatically, I don't get the cute factor that most light-skinned girls get. And my hair is for efficiency, not for decoration, so I'm not the most attractive person. I understand that too.

Nadia: That's not true, Katie.

Dr. Haniff: No, but she's being honest about how she feels.

Katie: It makes my personality have to be bigger than for most people. And, due to my color, I do find myself trying to shrink it a little bit when I meet new people, especially people that don't really know me.

Dr. Haniff: Cause you think the Blackness terrorizes them?

Katie: It does. Yeah, it does. It freaks people out. They don't know what to expect when they see you. I could tell people, hey, you could talk to me any time you want to, but then they—like I have to explain myself before I show them my true self. So the people that would say that I'm mean, or whatever, they don't know me. Like they haven't spoken to me. But they see me and they see the braids and they say, she must be mean, or she must be loud.

This dialogue is indicative of two primary refusals of consciousness that were common towards the beginning of GCP: the fear of solidly locating one's social and political exclusion in the construction of Blackness as terror ("I'm kind of towards the darker end of the spectrum") and the intersection of gendered, racialized, and classed locations of power which insist a particular reconstruction of behavior to become more palatable ("I do find myself trying to shrink" and, earlier, "My self-esteem can shrink sometimes"). The specific identification of Blackness as the source of terror by Dr. Haniff both addresses the former and sets up Katie to, eventually, realize the latter.

At the end of the meeting, about 30 minutes later, Dr. Haniff asked the participants for their reaction to that meeting's conversation. Nadia and Taylor had notably different reflections than what they shared earlier.

Taylor: I think it was informative. I thought about my own views because I didn't even realize I got—I never really paid attention to privileges and stuff until I started having to think about it for this and—it's just brought some stuff to my attention that I would have never thought about.

Nadia: It kinda made me realize how much I didn't know about what it feels like to be secluded from, you know, humankind. Like when Katie was talking about people saying she's intimidating. Like I know Katie personally, she's the least intimidating person I know. So, it kind of made me realize how unconsciously, how many privileges I have just being light-skinned and having curly hair. I guess we all have curly hair, but a different type of curly hair. And how I thought how much I thought I knew, but I didn't actually know, and they opened my eyes.

Here, the possibilities of dialogical learning are immediate. Participants translated the nuances in their narrative into greater consciousness by identifying variations in social and political locations through their relationships to beauty. As participants recognized that they made choices (i.e., enacted agency) in navigating these social perceptions, it elucidated their social and political responsibility to also acknowledge relative privilege. Rather than reifying the categories of Black, woman, or blue-collar as such, decolonial feminist consciousness-raising troubles these categories and the ways in which they close off recognizing our relationships to others and our unique experiences of power.

II. "Are You Black or Are You a Woman?":

#BlackLivesMatter and Choosing Race Over Gender

The week of July 4, GCP took a break to account for family travel and events during the federal holiday. For the break, the participants each selected a social media platform to analyze for popular messaging that related to gender roles. However, during the week away, social media was largely consumed by two live videos which captured the police murders of Black men: Alton Sterling, killed by Baton Rouge police on July 5, and Philando Castile, killed by St. Anthony (Minnesota) police on July 6. Returning to meetings on July 12, the main topic of conversation was the new wave of protests led by the Movement for Black Lives. In her analysis of Instagram, Taylor shared, "We've been free for how many years now? But [police brutality] is still a problem in 2016. And then the other point I thought of was all lives matter and some people take it the wrong way. Some people are like, oh, that's racist, Black Lives Matter is racist—all lives matter. But the ones you see in the media are the black people who are getting killed."

The discussion continued:

Dr. Haniff: What do you think about the contradiction between saying all lives matter and then Black lives matter?

Taylor: I can see both sides of it. I agree with like, yeah, all lives do matter. I'm not taking anything away from that because they do, we're supposed to be one big human race, you know, but then Black lives matter because those are the ones you see on TV recently that have been getting killed by all these cops and all these other people like Trayvon Martin and stuff. Those are the

lives you keep seeing over and over in the media that are being taken. So something needs to happen there too.

Katie: I feel like since it's people getting killed by the authorities, I think that's what's mainly the problem. If it was just people just killing other random people, that's life, you can't stop that. But when it's the authorities, people that are supposed to protect you and then are killing and seem to be killing one specific race of people all the time, it gets to be a lot of pressure.

Dr. Haniff: There's this whole discussion that to say all lives matter is to sort of undermine the idea of Black lives matter.

Nadia: I totally agree.

Katie: That's what some people believe.

Dr. Haniff: Why do you totally agree?

Nadia: I totally agree because saying all lives matter was a reaction to Black lives matter. Basically the people who came out with all lives matter are trying to undermine the oppression of Black lives. Yeah, obviously all lives matter, but at the same time, they obviously don't if Black people are getting killed because they're Black! And then when you see the people that are saying all lives matter, all lives matter, all lives matter, they're mainly white people and they're like, oh, well, yeah, police use excessive force all the time. But you're not being killed cause you're white is the thing. I understand that being a police officer can get to your head and you just start running around town doing what you want to do. But you never see a white person getting killed because they're white. You see a Black person getting killed almost every two weeks because they're Black.

Dr. Haniff: Why do you think it's mostly white people who say all lives matter?

Katie: I think they're trying to differentiate. They're trying to say that it's not just Black people being oppressed. It's everyone being oppressed, and that Black people are just having their little microscope moment and they're not looking at the big picture and that everybody is created the same. No one's being prejudiced against. It's just the authorities going against everybody. And for Black people, that's not true because you see people that look like you all the time, you know, getting slayed basically. For a person that isn't of the same ethnicity, it can be hard to connect with that type of thing. You can kind of detach yourself from the situation because it's not as relevant to you. Yes, they're a person just like you, and yes, that could have been you, but it's not, they don't even look like you. To me, it just depends on who you ask.

Dr. Haniff: Do you think that when people say white lives matter, you think that's racist?

Nadia: I don't think it's racist. I think it's an attack on Black lives matter. I guess in a way you could say it's racist, but that specific term is not racist. It's not like saying the N-word and you're white. It's a racial attack on Black people. I think if you can differentiate the two, I guess you can, but I don't know.

Dr. Haniff: You know, your generation was raised with the reality that you have to be really careful and you have to be really cautious about saying something is racist.

Katie: Yeah.

Dr. Haniff: How do you feel about that? Why do you think— who's telling you that you should be careful?

Taylor: Some people are really openly sensitive, I think.

Nadia: Yeah. Cause I mean, obviously our parents tell us like right from wrong, but when you go out into school and you say something . . . like, if you're white and all your friends are Black and they're saying the N-word, so you think it's okay to say the N-word too, and then you go to another group of Black people and you start saying the N-word and then you get beat up. Then it's like, okay, what did I do? I think it's society, I guess, because now with people starting to say, okay, you're white, don't say that around me. You know, then you have white people saying, okay, then don't call me a cracker. You can't call me a cracker. So, I think it's just kind of retaliating against each other.

Dr. Haniff: Are black people racist?

Nadia: Yeah. **Katie:** Yes. **Taylor:** They can be.

Dr. Haniff: What score do you think I'm going to give you on that, from one to ten?

Katie: Let's just call it a one.

Dr. Haniff: The answer to that question is zero.

Katie: Oh, see, I was close. [laughter]

Dr. Haniff: Well, let me explain why Black people cannot be racist. Because racism is about power. Exercising power over somebody . . . if you don't have that power, you can be prejudiced, but you cannot be racist because racism is the power of one race to exercise power over another race. You can be prejudiced against somebody, but even though you're prejudiced, do you have the power to make that prejudice real? A white police officer has the power to make his prejudice real in that he could shoot somebody and get away because the system condones that, although the system would never openly say it condones that, but it does.

Although no further discussion on power and prejudice took place in this meeting, the seed was planted. The following meeting, the conversation transitioned to discussing ideas for the final digital project, which allowed participants to become active shapers of media dialogue rather than passive consumers—a critical transformation in young Black women recognizing their agency in the process of subjectivity-formation (McPherson 2019).

Dr. Haniff: What's your focus [for the website]? Are you focusing on race, gender?

Nadia: Well, we were saying, of course we would maximize race because it is a problem. But at the same time, we would have to include other things because,

since the majority of the population is white, we can't have like, oh yeah, this doesn't include me, blah, blah, blah, blah. So we could have women's issues . . . and race issues and . . . mainly, what we talked about were women and race issues, but we can expand on that too.

Dr. Haniff: Would you say that, if you look at it, when you're looking at gender and race, are you prioritizing race?

Katie: I think we might accidentally end up doing that . . .

Nadia: Even if we didn't want to.

Dr. Haniff: Why do you think that is?

Nadia: Because we're all so passionate about racial issues, it's a lot of things going on and a lot of misconceptions that are being led on people.

Dr. Haniff: Why do you think I'm asking you this question, whether you're prioritizing race over gender?

Taylor: Because it's still a big issue, like we were talking about last time, like Black lives matter. It's not just Black men lives matter, Black women lives matter. It's all of them.

Dr. Haniff: When you think about Black Lives Matter, does it read to you that Black men's lives matter?

Taylor and Katie: Yeah.

Nadia: For me, it goes that way sometimes, but other times it goes another way. Like I think it includes women if you think about it.

Katie: I feel like it sort of started off with guys though, I don't know. Cause there were a bunch of like Black women that suffered from police brutality too. And they weren't mentioned in a lot of cases.

Dr. Haniff: Well, I just want to say these are important things I want you to think about because Black Lives Matter is predominantly a male-focused movement [despite being started by three Black women]. And it's not different from the civil rights movement, which was where women were very heavily involved, but it always ended up to be males at the top getting them the majority of the attention. I'm not saying that race is not important, but you can be subsumed by race in a way in which you really marginalize the really, really important issue—because you can't separate being a woman from being black.

Ozi [guest attendee]: All this conversation reminds me . . . I was in the car with Dr. Haniff and there were mostly Black gay men in the car. And someone had mentioned how it's really sexist that Beyoncé has an all women band. So then I got into it and somebody asked me “well, Ozi, are you Black or are you a woman?” And Dr. Haniff, who is next to me is like, don't answer that. Don't say anything. I just remember [thinking], this feels like hell right now. And then getting out of the car and crying, because I just . . . I've never been asked that before. All to say that . . . learning the lesson that I can't separate gender from race—and how dare somebody even ask me that!

Dr. Haniff: Well people don't ask that; they act on it all the time because they exclude women all the time. When I asked the question, why are you

prioritizing race? I think it happens a lot too. . . . Since you're all 15 going on 16, I think you should change it by what you say. I don't know if you'll change the world, but change a little piece of it.

The salience and necessity of GCP is made clear at this moment—despite the group's focus and name even declaring the centrality of gender, gender had to be reiterated as a requirement of analysis at each step of the process. Through this, Dr. Haniff ensured that the significance of gender is not lost in the dialogue. Dr. Haniff returned to the digital project and including gender.

Dr. Haniff: I want you to think about this when you're thinking of your blogs and how you're gonna make sure you don't forget to include gender issues. I'm not saying don't talk about race, but gender issues as a Black woman those are important things to think about as well when you're talking about what are the realities of Black girls your age in school? We don't have a lot of those voices at your age at all. Now that you've listened to this, do you have some topics that you think that you would want to sort of discuss that would be relevant to young girls in school?

Katie: I guess you could talk about like, basically, like the aesthetic and like tonal appearance. Like, I've noticed, you can be the smartest person in the room but if you are a black woman you can still be seen as intimidating. I went to a conference where we had to ask patients questions and I was often told that my tone was very aggressive, and that I should be more empathetic with the way I talk.

Slowly, the dots started connecting—behavior is not a subconscious response but an active reaction to misogynist and racist policing. Participants were reminded that they, too, had agency to craft the narrative around Blackness and girlhood.

III. *“Don't Exempt Yourself from the Analysis”: Being Raised as Good Black Girls*

While storytelling was a crucial part of GCP's methodology of consciousness-raising, equally important was engaging with the daily realities of the participants, particularly the content and interactions which shaped their everyday lives. Earlier, we addressed social media; here, we will focus on popular music and its role in constructing ideologies of gender, moral policing, and the right type of woman. For meeting four, participants selected and analyzed the lyrics for a few popular songs they felt relied upon gendered stereotypes. In the excerpt below, participants had just finished a line-by-line analysis of the lyrics of Fetty Wap's 2015 song “Trap Queen.” While the participant who selected this song only listened to church music, she still knew “the song was really popular, and a lot of people listened to this song.” Indeed, “Trap Queen” sold over 10 million copies and generated the most on-demand streams in 2015. Thus, even the

participant most un-attuned to popular culture was aware of the song's impact on the trope of a loyal Black woman.

Dr. Haniff: In terms of this song, why did you think he's talking about money when he's talking about women? How are they connected?

Nadia: I guess that's what he wants and what he's after.

Dr. Haniff: Why do you think they're connected?

Nadia: I think that, in his context, the more money you have, the more females come to you. Like gold diggers are super pretty, I guess. Probably good at doing other things with the men because they're older.

Dr. Haniff: You mean like sexual?

Nadia: Yeah.

Dr. Haniff: Is that true? Is there some truth to that?

Nadia: Some truth. Yeah.

Taylor: Some women are just after men with money, they don't care about his character.

Katie: I feel like now, in the present day, girls are more attracted to having things than necessarily emotional connections. If he can provide for you, that's basically the same thing as love to them.

At this point in the conversation, Dr. Haniff starts telling a story about her friend, an 84-year-old woman who identifies a good man as someone who comes over, asks if she has groceries, and gives her \$20 to put gas in her car.

Dr. Haniff: Is she a gold digger?

All: No.

Taylor: I think [in the song], he was just talking about like, looking good and having matching Lambos and stuff. I think, in terms of her case, it's more along the lines of stuff she needs versus wants, and he's more taking care of her in a way.

Nadia: Yeah. I think that there's a difference between taking care of somebody who's older and needs to go get groceries and put gas in her car versus like here's a brand-new car and a new house. Here's all these clothes in return for your sexual favors.

Katie: I don't know what to say on this . . .

Nadia: I mean, cause we're not like that. I mean, I know people that are like that. My dad does, but I don't personally, so I don't have much experience.

Dr. Haniff tells another story about her friends who were married, and the husband took on caretaking responsibilities while the wife worked an office job. After about ten years of marriage, the wife asked for a divorce because she could no longer deal with her husband not having a job. To this, the participants offer:

Katie: I guess she felt like he wasn't going to do the job as a male.

Nadia: I think it's the stereotypical version of man and woman being together. Like the man is supposed to be the breadwinner. I think that some women are just used to that. Like, I don't want to be the breadwinner. You be the breadwinner.

Taylor: Usually traditional values, like how you were saying, the man is supposed to bring home the most money.

This time, Dr. Haniff shares that she is giving the participants a B- for their analysis.

Dr. Haniff: The construction of masculinity, the way men are supposed to be constructed, is that they must provide. And guess who buys into that most of all?

All participants, quietly: Women.

Dr. Haniff: Women. And if they don't provide—if they don't do what, in people's heads, they think that men should do, then they're not really men who are respected. You could all think of your own dads, all the things he does to take care of his family. That's really, profoundly, important to him and to his partner.

So, it comes to a sort of point when men believe that the more money you have, then the more you will do well with women. Because women believe—and they say this openly, or sometimes not openly—*does he have a job?* Does he have a job is a question about resources and money, particularly if you come from a poor community. Politically, if you are a powerless person, particularly if you don't have any agency in the world, who you hook up with becomes very important. I'm sure none of you want to hook up with a man who don't have a job. You don't. Okay. Don't *exempt* yourself from the analysis. Okay. That's the first error of a lot of analysis that you do with women is that you exempt yourself from it. You *have* to put yourself into it all the time.

This moment was transformational for participants to identify how their analysis was falling short: they failed to include their own experiences of girlhood, Blackness, and blue-collar life into their understanding of the world around them. By making their quotidian small in relation to feminist theory, they denied their own agency as storytellers and creators. After looking at a few more song lyrics which more explicitly Orientalized and objectified non-white women (e.g., “Don't Mind” by Kent Jones), Dr. Haniff moved to close the discussion by asking the implications of listening to this music overall. The following truncated interaction, primarily between Dr. Haniff and Nadia, demonstrates the transformation in including oneself in the analysis, especially for Nadia who listened to this music the most.

Dr. Haniff: What do you think of this [song]?

Nadia: I think it's disrespectful, but you wouldn't think it was disrespectful just hearing it. You would have to actually read the lyrics to find the meaning of the song. Obviously, this guy doesn't really have much respect for women.

Dr. Haniff: Do you think that when [women] hear the words, they understand that it's disrespectful?

Nadia: I feel like they understand that it's disrespectful, but they feel like, well, it's not towards me personally, so I can say it.

Dr. Haniff: That's a good point. What do you think about that? Do you think that when you hear a song, which you all listened to, that you can separate yourself from the song?

Nadia: Yeah, I guess because it's just like, I think that's just a natural thing. Well, I don't do that. So obviously this isn't about me, but like at the same time, it's still degrading our own species.

Dr. Haniff: Do you think that you participate in the degradation of women by listening to this music?

Nadia: Honestly, yeah. Unconsciously . . . every day we do.

Taylor: Not purposefully, but I guess thinking of it like that. Yeah. I guess we do . . .

Katie: We never turned on the radio and [think], let me just talk about how horrible women are.

Taylor: The more popular it gets, then the more widespread the messaging becomes.

Dr. Haniff: What do you think is wrong with that?

Nadia: I think it's too normal for women to say, oh, it's just that other girl. Cause it promotes the activity of saying that this stuff is okay. So you have girls saying that, oh, okay, this is what guys like, so I'm going to do this. And then you have other girls that are kind of like, just separate themselves. I'm not that girl, when really we should be helping each other. [Saying], no, don't do that.

Dr. Haniff: Wow. This is a hard one. Why do you think this is a hard one?

Nadia: We all participate in it every day.

Harleen: Where do you think you get the initial reaction to say, oh that's not me, that's somebody else?

Nadia: I think a lot of it comes from our parents kind of giving us a lot of—I don't want to say self-confidence and permission to dissociate yourself—but like how we might think that we're too good. Like we're better than that, or too good for the rest of the population of women. Like, I'm above every other woman that this is about, so I get to listen to it. I think that's where that unconscious decision comes from. You know how you get to that point, where you listen to the song so much that you know all the words without even having to know all the words?

Dr. Haniff: So there's a large level of unconsciousness, even though you're saying the word you're not clicking in your head, this is disrespectful to me.

Nadia: I didn't really realize how disrespectful this was until I actually read the lyrics and was kind of dissecting the song for myself. And I think a lot of the radio really does that to you and like the music business, they make it to where it plays with your mind and you don't realize it.

Dr. Haniff: You must be aware that we participate in our own oppression all the time. And by listening to it, you are doing exactly that. And so you may think that you're better, but there are a lot of people who actually believe it's okay. We have to go from unconscious to conscious because we are colluding in our own demise every single day. This one moment of rising up—just one second and rising up—is, to me, revolutionary.

By the end of the ninety-minute meeting, participants were fully transformed by the message of not exempting oneself from their analysis of gendered experiences of power. Rather than placing themselves on a moral high ground because of their upbringing, participants could recognize the subliminal, or overt, messaging about the degradation of women they unknowingly consented to by participating in and engaging with popular media. Although they could not change the entire music industry, by acknowledging their complicity in absorbing and promoting misogynistic messaging, they could recognize their agency in rejecting mainstream stories of Black girlhood and creating new ones out of their daily lives in Belleville.

The Ongoing Story of GCP

Through the liberatory power of self-reflexive narrative and dialogue, the Gender Consciousness Project expanded to four schools across metro Detroit over the last five years. Starting with a story from each participant about a woman in their life, the narratives launched a dialogical methodology that calls each woman into the transformation of consciousness and recognition of agency through the words of her own story. In the final meeting of the pilot program, Dr. Haniff revealed this methodology to the surprise of the participants:

Dr. Haniff: What was the first thing I asked you to do, do you remember?

Nadia: We had to write a story about the women.

Dr. Haniff: Right. And why do you think I asked you to write that story?

Nadia: Because in some way she relates to us. In some way her struggles, not necessarily pass down, but—

Taylor: They're struggles we're aware of.

Dr. Haniff: Well, I asked you to write the stories because all of the questions that we discussed came from those stories.

Nadia: Oh, for real?

Katie: I see what you did there. That's sneaky!

Dr. Haniff: Do you remember we talked about color? We talked about hair, remember? And the things you said, how color made you feel like you were a

threat? All of those discussions came from your stories. These are all things that are happening in your life. The stories didn't come from me. The stories were coming from you. That's the signal of the methodology, is that the stories must start with you. If we go to another group of girls, they might have different stories. The cleverness is to pick out what the subject is that is relevant to that person's life.

By developing an analytical framework rooted in individual experience and a Black feminist epistemology, GCP allows participants' consciousness and understanding of their agency to continue developing in the years after the program. Katie and Taylor, who have not participated in GCP since the pilot, shared the following about its ongoing impact:

Katie: GCP taught me the importance of speaking with my own voice and how beneficial thinking freely can be for my own success. It's not easy, but I find peace in knowing that I am now my own woman and I can't be generalized or put into a box. I am myself, it's not for anyone else to decide.

Taylor: The Gender Consciousness Project has helped me to both develop what I want to do in my future career and grow as an individual. I not only had the opportunity to learn more about what it means to be a young woman of color in this country, but also the opportunity to open my eyes to the world around me. Through this process, I was able to find my voice, and within that, find my purpose. I now have a sense of agency, and I believe that with the knowledge that I have gained through this project, I can accomplish anything that I put my mind to.

Thus, increased consciousness meant realizing that the narratives we accept about ourselves are crafted. A rejection of complacency and complicity for a recognition of our agency meant understanding we have the power to craft it ourselves. Nadia and Harleen, who continued to engage with GCP as co-facilitators, felt the impact on their critical thinking and how they conceptualize working alongside community to develop consciousness and recognize agency. More specifically, the ongoing internalization of GCP's methodology meant recognizing when resistance should be a large effort or when it should be small, albeit still significant.

Nadia: Since I have remained involved since the pilot program, the project has been able to challenge me and mold me on how to work with the community. Working in the community can be unpredictable and forces you to constantly be innovative, which has prepared me more for life after college than any other job. Also, in my personal life, GCP constantly forces me to learn new perspectives about being a woman of color. This knowledge is not from the classroom, but from working with the students. Every time I engage with the media, I am constantly thinking about how this engagement furthers my own oppression. In this way, I have been able to think critically

about all the nuances of my life, and make knowledgeable decisions about what I choose to engage with.

Harleen: When I think about my own transformation, I think it was one of self-worth—that even if I do not believe the system can be changed, I know it’s all a project of power and social control that is meant to convince me I am less than. So, even when I am experiencing those moments, I can understand why I am experiencing them and how to separate my inherent worth from it and resist.

For Harleen, who observed Dr. Haniff during the pilot program, the choice of letting participants speak on their own, engaging, or disrupting was very instructive. In witnessing this, Harleen realized it is necessary for an individual navigate through their own internalized notions of gender before introducing new ideas, allowing them to recognize the possibility for refined analysis and consciousness through their own logic and voice. This method centered the Freirean notion of co-intentional education, placing the narratives, experiences, and capacity of the participants at the center.

While the pilot GCP used storytelling as a launchpad for grounded analysis, in training new facilitators, Dr. Haniff noticed this method left the project vulnerable to gaps in each facilitator’s self-reflexivity. Thus, the current version of the project begins instead with an open dialogue in which participants identify issues of concern in their own lives, such as colorism in the beauty industry and romantic relationship pressures. Through this, GCP still leaves the power to structure the project to the participants and, rather than relying on a formal narrative structure in which participants share a written story, creates an informal mechanism of storytelling through collective dialogue. In this, GCP returns to the Freirean dialogical method, in which the “educator must have political clarity . . . to intervene not only pedagogically but also ethically” (Freire 2000, 20), while the participants’ experiences, as co-constructors of knowledge, can lead the transformational dialogue. This adaptation still centers the quotidian to develop consciousness, in that “[u]nderstanding the way male domination and sexism was expressed in everyday life created awareness in women of the ways [they] were victimized, exploited, and, in worst case scenarios, oppressed” (hooks 2000, 7). By offering young women the tools to consciously engage with everyday situations, rather than engaging in feminism as an intellectual thought experiment, this project develops a path to employ critical thinking about the ordinary as a tool for consciousness.

In moving towards informal narrative as a starting point, GCP still makes clear the possibilities—ideologically, academically, and theoretically—of doing small versus large work. The ongoing impact of GCP represents the value of small work—here, raising the consciousness of a handful of young women over a few months—which is not encouraged or supported in academia or traditional research spaces. Yet, this is what frontline work must entail. While significant

effort and funding continues to be invested in conversations on the oppressed and their experiences of violence and victimization, there is significantly less invested in how to extricate these same people from that oppression. To intervene in the cooptation of violent and oppressive systems, slow and small work is necessary so that these conversations can shift from solely theoretical and academic to one of praxis. A decolonial feminist praxis centers these intentions, as well, where the value of agency does not increase with quantifiable results, but through an ever-increasing commitment to collective, relational, and infinite liberation.

Methods like the Gender Consciousness Project allow participants to acknowledge their individual stories and how they connect to—and can change!—the structural whole. While consciousness-raising groups utilize gendered experiences as a tool to engage and come together, the consciousness-raising process is only successful if it takes individual, structural, and relational components into account to become a process focused on transformation. Once an individual, particularly one who has historically been told that their voice is insignificant, is given a platform to share their narrative, they will take full responsibility for re-shaping their own story (i.e., recognize their agency). The radical act of fearlessly sharing one's experiences takes hold, producing new worldviews and the power to push these individuals and communities forward. A small revolution, indeed.

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