

# Introduction

*I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one.  
I am the whore and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin. I am the  
barren one and many are my daughters. I am the silence that you cannot  
understand. I am the utterance of my name.*

—Julie Dash (2006, p. 92), from an ancient gnostic verse,  
“The Thunder, Perfect Mind” (see Gnostic Society Library, n.d.)

Since 2006, social media feeds have been flooded with the hashtag #MeToo, a campaign founded by African American social activist Tarana Burke to help survivors of sexual violence realize they are not alone. #MeToo was further ignited by actress Alyssa Milano in 2017 with the tweet, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet,” and it quickly turned into a movement. In a show of solidarity, many women—and some men—have shared their experiences of sexual assault, rape, harassment, and other forms of sexual abuse.

The onslaught of divulgences led me to ask the questions “What if there was a #MeToo mental health movement for Women of Color with mental illness and emotional distress? And how would America represent this hashtag for Women of Color?” These questions moved me to exhale (ahhh), not forgetting to BREATHE (balance, reflection, energy, association, transparency, healing, empowerment), as so eloquently constructed by my colleagues Evans, Bell, and Burton (2017) in *Black Women’s Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability*. The BREATHE model highlights processes that encourage Women of Color to practice mental health wellness.

## 2 Reenvisioning Therapy with Women of Color

Conversely, Women of Color know that our mental health suffers when we are not able to BREATHE through the brunt of racism, sexism, other forms of oppression, and the daily pressures of familial and societal responsibility. In the United States, approximately 7.5 million Women of Color have a diagnosed mental health disorder, and as many as 7.5 million more may be similarly affected but not have been diagnosed (K. Davis, 2005). In addition, Women of Color experience substantial individual, interpersonal, and socioeconomic stressors at a higher rate than do their White counterparts (Alegría et al., 2002; L. C. Jackson & Greene, 2000). Compared with their White peers, Women of Color are more likely to be single parents, be overworked and underpaid, possess fewer financial resources, live in impoverished communities, and experience intimate partner and community violence (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2008; McKinnon, 2003). Moreover, Women of Color experience substantial barriers to receiving mental health and substance abuse services, and the services they do receive often lack cultural and ethnic awareness (Borum, 2012; T. A. Davis & Ancis, 2012; Institute of Medicine, Committee on Understanding and Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care, 2003). These are the oppressive psychological and social realities faced by many Women of Color in the United States.

As a Black feminist therapist-scholar, I have prioritized my commitment to the psychosocial wellness of Women of Color in our struggle for liberation. I understand our collective pain, rage, sadness, and loneliness, along with our brilliance, determination, collective experience, creativity, power, and sisterhood. I have worked thoughtfully to develop culturally relevant therapeutic strategies and interventions to assist in healing our minds, souls, and physical selves. I use Black feminist therapy to help women cope with, and resolve, work and family problems, negative behavioral patterns, conflicting beliefs and feelings, and related physical symptoms. I have come to see the therapeutic process as an approach through which to view, understand, acknowledge, and intervene without judgment and through which to engage in informed, explicit discussions about women's life stories and how they survive and thrive as Women of Color. In addition, I offer my whole self in the therapeutic process, acknowledging my privileges and struggles and recognizing my intersecting oppressions.

To facilitate this journey toward the utilization of culturally relevant therapeutic perspectives, I challenge the homogeneous (that is, White, middle class, male), hierarchical, and dualistic limitations of traditional feminist therapy to be more inclusive of race, class, and sexual orientation in the development and utilization of Black feminist perspectives (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Greene, 1997; L. C. Jackson & Greene, 2000; C. B. Williams, 2000). Such a culturally relevant feminist model of understanding and treating mental health issues addresses all forms of marginalization and discrimination simultaneously rather than privileging gender issues alone. This process of cultural relevance involves enhancing the understanding of Women of Color in context, developing a power-balanced relationship with them, and adapting a healing

approach geared to the client's needs. Therapists adopting such a perspective are not required to abandon their theoretical and practice approaches to therapy but rather to adopt a lens through which to better understand, acknowledge, and intervene that is based on the client's life experiences in a cultural, ethnic, and economic context while simultaneously integrating diverse and pluralistic healing approaches into techniques and interventions.

## DEFINING WOMEN OF COLOR

Although the term “Women of Color” is used to represent various cultural and ethnic groups of women, I use the term throughout this book to represent women in the United States who are of the African diaspora—some of whom may consider themselves Black and others who may consider themselves Latina—whose shared experiences of marginalization and oppression can lead to negative social, economic, and psychological consequences. This term is used in solidarity with women of African, African American, Caribbean (West Indian), Indigenous, and Latin descent as a commitment to develop interventions and processes specific to their context. To be clear, this definition of Women of Color does not include women of European or Asian descent.

I also believe that it is important for me to provide a brief commentary about my choice to capitalize and not capitalize adjectives or words that refer to women's identities (for example, White, Black, Women of Color). In general, I follow the lead of previous contributors to Black feminist theory and feminist therapy. For example, many influential Black scholars and Black feminist authors have capitalized “Black” because it refers to a specific form of theory and identity within feminisms. Thus, I chose to capitalize all references to specific identities such as Black, White, Latin, and Women of Color.

Language is an essential element in understanding the psychosocial, economic, and political struggle of most non-White women in the United States. Shifts in the words we use to describe each other and groups of people (that is, “others”) often reflect our collective progress toward a world in which all women feel respected and included. Ethnicity is a neglected dimension of the heterogeneity among people of African and Latin descent (D. R. Williams et al., 2007). Although there are important commonalities in the experiences of persons of African and Latin descent, there is also ethnic variation within this population. Approximately 6 percent of the U.S. Black population is foreign born, and 10 percent of the Black population (3.4 million) is of foreign parentage (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There are more Black and Latino immigrants in the United States than there are Indian, Chinese, or Japanese immigrants (Barnes & Bennett, 2002; Grieco & Cassidy, 2001; Guzmán, 2001). In fact, Latinos and Blacks from the Caribbean constitute the largest subgroup of U.S. immigrants of persons of African descent (D. R. Williams et al., 2007).

#### 4 Reenvisioning Therapy with Women of Color

The term “Women of Color” surfaced in the late 1970s to encompass all women experiencing multiple layers of oppression with race and ethnicity as a commonality. As explained by Loretta Ross,

Y’all know where the term “women of color” came from? Who can say that? See, we’re bad at transmitting history. In 1977, a group of Black women from Washington, DC, went to the National Women’s Conference, that [former President] Jimmy Carter gave \$5 million to have as part of the World Decade for Women. There was a conference in Houston, TX. This group of Black women carried into that conference something called “The Black Women’s Agenda” because the organizers of the conference—Bella Abzug, Ellie Smeal, and what have you—had put together a three-page “Minority Women’s Plank” in a 200-page document that these Black women thought was somewhat inadequate. (Giggles in background) So they actually formed a group called Black Women’s Agenda to come [sic] to Houston with a Black women’s plan of action that they wanted the delegates to vote to substitute for the “Minority Women’s Plank” that was in the proposed plan of action. Well, a funny thing happened in Houston: when they took the Black Women’s Agenda to Houston, then all the rest of the “minority” women of color wanted to be included in the “Black Women’s Agenda.” Okay? Well, [the Black women] agreed . . . but you could no longer call it the “Black Women’s Agenda.” And it was in those negotiations in Houston [that] the term “women of color” was created. (as cited in Wade, 2011, para. 4)

Of equal or more importance was the new way in which Black women saw themselves. No longer isolated in the United States, they saw themselves as part of a global movement of Black and Brown people united in struggle against the colonial, imperialist, and capitalist domination of the West.

In recent years, the term “Women of Color” has been questioned by many ethnic and racial minority women because the word “color” is not the primary issue for many women who share ethnicity and race. I acknowledge these concerns. The primary focus of this book is intended to transcend terminology and embrace shades of Brown and Black skin color, uniting those of us with shared experiences in the United States.

### **BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT**

Analyses of psychological, social, and economic conditions are often generalized because they do not consider the ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality, and other facets of identity intersect and produce power dynamics (Collins, 2000; Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves, 2007). Black feminism scrutinizes

these intersecting conditions and creates spaces from which historically conquered knowledges are unveiled, legitimated, and liberated (Collins, 2000; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 2000). As such, Black feminist thought provides more complex understandings of interlocking systems of oppression, producing new imaginaries for exposing matrices of power while creating spaces for resistance and possibilities for change.

Black feminist thought and activism has withstood the test of time and continues to be an impressive scholarly and practice paradigm. Women of Color's multilayered activism gives meaning to feminist theory. The first wave of Women of Color's engagement in feminist thought and activism emerged out of the abolitionist movement and culminated with the Suffragists' successful passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Shirley Yee (1992) detailed how, between 1830 and the 1860s, Black and Native female abolitionists developed a collective feminist consciousness that reflected their particular experiences as Women of Color, as well as the aspects of sexism they shared with White women (p. 151). In particular, free and enslaved African American women created numerous strategies and tactics to resist slavery as a legal institution and racially gendered sexual abuse.

Whether it be Sojourner Truth's much-quoted speech "Ain't I a Woman?" ("Sojourner's Speech," 1851), Anna Julia Cooper's (1892) *A Voice From the South: By a Black Woman of the South*, or Beverly Guy-Sheftall's (1995) prolific Black feminist scholarship *Words of Fire*, Women of Color have aggressively shaped feminist theory and praxis to include issues unique to them. Holding on to Black feminism is a way of protecting a progressive agenda.

Historically, Women of Color have not perceived feminism as relevant to their specific concerns. However, during the first wave of feminism at the turn of the 20th century, Sojourner Truth and a few other African American native women expressed feminist consciousness for Women of Color. Truth (1853/1972), a former slave and abolitionist of the 19th century, spoke out in 1853 in support of the rights of all women: "I've been lookin' round and watchin' things and I know a little mite 'bout Woman's Rights, too. I come to . . . keep the scales a-movin'."

White women involved in the women's movement saw themselves as an oppressed group, which did not lead to the involvement of oppressed Women of Color. One interpretation of this is that the inherent racism of privileged White women prevented them from forming allegiances with Women of Color. It has been the challenge of the modern feminist movement to integrate issues of race, culture, and class into feminist philosophy and feminist therapy practice. Although the feminist movement appeared to exclude men, Women of Color have viewed Men of Color not only as allies but also as leaders in the eradication of oppression (Espín, 1990). White women in the feminist movement also attempted to liken sexism to racism, which caused some resentment among Women of Color (Espín, 1990).

## 6 Reenvisioning Therapy with Women of Color

Stone (1979) identified five factors or concerns that contributed to the absence of feminist consciousness and involvement of Women of Color during the mid-20th century: (1) the belief that a focus on sexism would divide the strength of Communities of Color, (2) blatant racism on the part of White women, (3) Black male liberation, (4) the myth of the Black matriarch, and (5) the influence of the Black church to focus on racism rather than sexism. It is important to note that traces of these factors were evident in early and mid-20th-century feminist philosophy and practice and are still observable in current feminist philosophy and practice.

Many of the factors outlined by Stone (1979) continue to provide an understanding of why Women of Color are still skeptical of feminism. In fact, Women of Color are responsible for the multicultural feminist theories that have evolved. Despite diverse concerns and multiple intellectual perspectives, multicultural theories share an emphasis on race as a force in understanding the complexity of gender. The centrality of race, of institutionalized racism, and of struggles against racial oppression is what links the various feminist perspectives within the framework of multiculturalism. In response to challenges from Women of Color, these multicultural theories have begun to be incorporated into the current feminist model (Comas-Díaz, 2015). Although the multicultural approaches are recent additions, Black feminists follow a long-standing approach.

The Black Feminist Movement grew out of, and in response to, the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. The Black Feminist Movement was formed in an effort to meet the needs of Black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the Women's Movement and sexually oppressed in the Black Liberation Movement (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). All too often, "Black" was equated with Black men and "women" was equated with White women. As a result, Black women were an invisible group whose existence and needs were ignored. The purpose of the movement was to develop theory that could adequately address the way in which race, gender, and class were interconnected in their lives and to take action to stop racist, sexist, and classist discrimination. This separation from the Women's Movement and Black Liberation Movement was an impetus for consciousness raising toward liberation and eventual healing.

The advancement of Black feminism in the United States developed not only out of Black women's antagonistic and dialectical engagement with White women but also out of their need to ameliorate conditions for empowerment on their own terms. Contributions from Black feminist thinkers and activists such as Francis Beale, Cheryl Clarke, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith have been foundational in the development of contemporary Black feminist thought. Guy-Sheftall's (1986, 1995) work on Black feminist thought informs a Black feminist approach to therapy and mental health services. The argument that Black women confront both

a “woman question and a race problem” (Cooper, 1892, p. 134) captured the essence of Black feminist thought in the 19th century and has reverberated for generations among intellectuals, journalists, activists, writers, educators, artists, and community leaders, both male and female (Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Although feminist perspectives have been persistent and important components of the African American literary and intellectual traditions, scholars have focused primarily on their racial overtones. This tendency to ignore long years of political struggle aimed at eradicating the multiple oppressions experienced by Women of Color resulted in erroneous notions about the relevance of feminism to the Black community during the second wave of the women’s movement. Rewriting the history of Women of Color using gender as one category of analysis should render obsolete the notion that feminist thinking is alien to Women of Color or that they have been misguided imitators of White women. An analysis of the feminist activism of Women of Color also suggests the necessity of reconceptualizing women’s issues to include sexuality, poverty, racism, imperialism, physical and sexual violence, economic exploitation, decent housing, and a host of other concerns foregrounded by generations of Women of Color.

According to Guy-Sheftall (1995), although Black feminism is not a monolithic or static ideology, and although there is diversity among African American feminists, there are certain constant premises:

- Women of Color experience a particular kind of oppression and suffering in the United States, one that is racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist because of their multiple identities and their limited access to economic resources.
- This multiple jeopardy has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of Women of Color differ in many ways from those of both White women and Men of Color.
- Women of Color must struggle for racial liberation and gender equality simultaneously.
- There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism, as well as the other “isms” that plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism.
- Women of Color’s commitment to the liberation of People of Color and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a group of mainly Black lesbian feminists, including Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Margaret Sloan, and Barbara Smith, released a statement that attempted to define Black feminism as they saw it. The collective’s work was grounded in a feminist perspective, addressed homophobia, and called for sisterhood among Black women of diverse sexual orientations (Combahee River Collective, 1986). A fundamental



belief of theirs was that “Black women are inherently valuable and that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else but because of our need as human persons for autonomy” (Combahee River Collective, 1986, p. 2). Moreover, they argued that sexual politics is as pervasive in the lives of Black women and other Women of Color as are the politics of class and race, and because race, class, and sex oppression often operate simultaneously in their lives, it is often difficult to separate them. They felt linked to Men of Color in their common struggle against racism and underscored their affinity to them. However, they felt that Black women often struggle with Black men over the issue of sexism.

Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) landmark *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* identified the fusion of activism and theory as Black feminism’s distinguishing characteristic and analyzed its three core themes: (1) the interlocking of race, class, and gender oppression in Women of Color’s personal, domestic, and work lives; (2) the necessity of re-creating positive self-definitions and rejecting denigrating, stereotypical, and externally imposed controlling images (mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, whore), both within and outside of Communities of Color; and (3) the need for active struggle to resist oppression and realize individual and group empowerment (Collins, 2000). The Collins text would further establish, along with Toni Cade Bambara’s (1970) *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, bell hooks’s (1981) *Ain’t I a Woman?*, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s (1995) *Words of Fire* and (1979) *Sturdy Black Bridges*, a continuous Black feminist intellectual tradition going back to the publication of Anna Julia Cooper’s (1892) *A Voice from the South* 100 years earlier. It is both refreshing and enlightening in this most depressing of times to have a historical perspective on an issue that has been with us since slavery.

## ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Postmodern feminisms have warned against creating bipolar categories and remind us of the fluidity of boundaries and the tentative nature of truth. In keeping with this principle, I ask readers to view my structure as a tentative framework that is open to modification and change as new advances in theory, research, and application continue to emerge. To encourage feminist therapists to think comprehensively about the frameworks that inform their work, my goal is to show that coherent connections between specific feminist theories and feminist practices can be drawn. However, individual readers’ specific academic and personal experiences influence the organizational framework that is most meaningful to them. I encourage readers to maintain a flexible and open frame of mind as they think about the most useful intersections between feminist theory and feminist therapy that can inform their work.



This book is organized around themes, beginning with an illustration of the mental health experiences of Women of Color, followed by a discussion of recurrent topics and issues that emerge in therapy. Because there is so little evidence of the thoughts and ideas of Women of Color who have been affected by mental illness and of Black feminists—both therapists and thinkers—I use the words of these two groups, taken from interviews, wherever possible to illustrate their experiences and insights.

I have used a “best-fit” approach and embedded the discussion of specific therapeutic approaches at points at which the linkages seemed most logical. Another author with a different set of assumptions and life and clinical experiences may organize these connections in a different manner. For example, some of the Black feminist therapy components that I discuss in the chapters on Black feminist therapy may be relevant to a variety of other chapters and integrative approaches to theory and therapy. Each chapter underscores the necessity of using Black feminist principles in clinical practice with Women of Color.

Chapter 1, “Women of Color’s Mental Health Matters: *Mujeres de Color, en la Lucha* (Women of Color, in the Struggle),” locates current psychosocial and behavioral health patterns of Women of Color in the wider historical context of their history of oppression in the United States and their common struggles along with the current social and political atmosphere of oppression. Using the lens of Black feminist analysis, I then provide an overview of the health and mental health conditions of Women of Color and review current economic and social conditions, as well as outcomes.

Chapter 2, “Developing a Black Feminist Analysis for Mental Health Practice: From Theory to Praxis,” provides a brief overview of Black feminist philosophies and how they can be translated into healing, wellness, and power in therapeutic services for Women of Color. This chapter also presents the foundational strategies for developing and utilizing Black feminist perspectives in social work practice.

In Chapter 3, “Culturally Responsive Services,” I first summarize the empirical literature on Women of Color’s mental health service needs, access and utilization issues, and treatment outcomes. Second, I define the concept of culturally responsive services in mental health treatment. Third, I review feminist therapy paradigms and practice principles and their contributions to women’s psychology. Moreover, I summarize the evolution of Black feminist therapy, which developed from feminist therapy, and in response to it, in an effort to meet the unique mental health needs of Women of Color. Last, I contend that Black feminist perspectives provide an ideal framework for therapy and counseling services that are aligned with the values, experiences, and worldviews of Women of Color.

Chapter 4, “Understanding Power and Powerlessness in Therapy with Women of Color,” acknowledges power as a key concept in Black feminist therapy with many Women of Color. In this chapter, I seek to assist therapists

## 10 Reenvisioning Therapy with Women of Color

in understanding the many oppressive challenges faced by Women of Color that may add a layer of complexity to their ability to function competently and that often have negative psychosocial consequences (for example, depression, anxiety, strained resources, poverty, poor health outcomes, exposure to violence, and drug addiction). Knowledge of empowerment strategies to enhance psychosocial competence provides a foundation for students or professionals to begin thinking about interventions for this population. For example, empowerment-based perspectives draw on psychosocial competence rather than pathological or maladaptive behaviors (L. V. Jones & Warner, 2011). Thus, interventions in the mental health field should aim to help Women of Color sort out the personal from the contextual by assisting them to recognize how the internalization of socially constructed identities has contributed to their depressive symptoms (C. B. Williams, 2005).

Chapter 5, “Applying Black Feminist Therapy Approaches to Women of Color in Therapy,” draws from the practice literature on therapeutic approaches for Women of Color, focus group data I have collected, and my 25-plus years of mental health practice experience. In this chapter, I explore recurrent themes in therapeutic practice with Women of Color, including issues of racism and sexism, guilt and shame, sexual identity and sexual orientation, and economic pressures. Case studies and qualitative data are used to demonstrate how practitioners can fully integrate Black feminist strategies in the engagement, assessment, intervention, and termination stages of the treatment process.

Chapter 6, “Case Illustrations,” provides therapeutic practice examples based on my clinical experience, using individual, group, and family modalities that highlight the basic components of Black feminist therapy outlined in Chapter 2. These case illustrations can be used to facilitate clinical supervision, class discussion, role-plays, or other small-group exercises.

Chapter 7, “Claiming Your Connections: An Evidence-Based Psychosocial Competence Group Intervention Grounded in Black Feminism,” describes the Claiming Your Connections (CYC) evidence-based group intervention model. The CYC intervention is designed to expand opportunities for Women of Color in mental health therapy to engage in culturally congruent, therapeutic interventions. It hones in on the outcomes of decreasing external locus of control and increasing active coping from a culturally relevant perspective on the basis of the needs and experiences of Women of Color.

Chapter 8, “Black Feminist Therapy: A 21st-Century Imperative,” summarizes the findings and insights presented in the book. It provides a concluding discussion to assist practitioners in identifying the benefits and constraints of incorporating Black feminist perspectives into mental health treatment. Moreover, this chapter encourages therapists to re-envision wellness versus illness for Women of Color and engage in radical and transformative mental health practices at the micro, macro, and policy levels of practice.

Non-White women will be the majority of all women in the United States by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). We all have multiple identities that affect our life experiences, how we perceive the world around us, and how we are perceived by others. Our gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality intersect to shape the opportunities and challenges we face at school, work, and home and in the community. Acknowledging and addressing this reality is key for therapists seeking to engage in Black women's wellness work. It requires us as practitioners to systematically analyze Black women's oppressions and liberation processes from a Black feminist perspective.

I conclude with a discussion of key terminology to support readers as they navigate the book.