

Gugu Mkhulisi

WGST 399 - Autoethnography.



Separated by an ocean.



Audience:

This paper is intended for other black women, especially those who are not American. It is for black people who were born outside of the US - to help us all realise our prejudice towards African American men and hopefully help us build strong bonds with them.

My first vivid memory of black men - and by black, I mean African American men, was in the movie, *For Colored Girls*. My mother kept this movie away from us and of course the first time she left the house, we watched it - out of curiosity and just the thrill of going against the rules. I was raised in a house where violence was unacceptable - not even at the slightest. In a country that believed in, "spare the rod and spoil the child," but in a house where the children were not beaten up because violence was heavily discouraged. In a country where a businessman was shot to death in January 2018 and everyone was more shocked by the fact that someone had a gun in Swaziland over anything. In, *New Black Man*, Mark Anthony Neal mentions that, "this particular example of male brutality and Shange's general presentation of males throughout the play leave audience members seeing for colored girls as little more than another black feminist's ruthless and unjustified attack on all black men." This validates my feelings towards black men - feelings of anger, confusion and most of all, fear towards black men - even though I still find them gorgeous.

On one part, we were being protected from accepting violence as a norm but also we were being shielded from what is really out there. The movie portrayed the lives

of women whose lives are bound together by their experiences with men - the source of all problems that women face. The one image that stuck with me was when Crystal's abusive husband threw her children off the balcony of her apartment to meet their untimely deaths. The pain and anguish that she felt in that moment stuck with me.

My fear of black men stems from how the media portrays them because before coming to the U.S, the only way I could interact and form an opinion on how they were. There is a clear problem with how black men are portrayed in the media, the few times that they are seen as active characters. An article on *The Opportunity Agenda*, breaks down the way in which the media portrays black men and why this is so. It outlines that black men are portrayed in distorted patterns where they are unnamed or lack a family life. This means that they are presented to the audience as an "other" who has no ties to family or any relations to other people - an isolated character. The only time women's issues seem to matter to a lot of men is when you make them imagine that those things were happening to their daughters or mothers for them to be sensitized to the issues at hand. Similarly, if the media depicts black men as individuals with no family ties, it is difficult to feel any empathy towards them when they face problems. In addition, there are many negative associations in the media about black men ; criminality, threats, inferiority, aggression and poverty. Anyone who belongs to a group that is not black men, will find it hard to view them in any way because these images are repeated in multiple forms of media. Lastly, they are portrayed as physical threats rather than for their intellectual contributions which makes them a threat to women, children as well as society, at large. The article further provides reasons why this is so, audiences prefer to see black men in

this light. Sponsors are usually white men who would rather have their opinions projected onto other people rather than publicly challenged so it only makes sense that negative stereotypes of black men are re-enacted in multiple films than challenged.

The first time I actually witnessed violence was when I was five years old with our neighbour and her husband. Every time he got drunk, he got violent with his wife but this one day was different because we woke up to a street that was decorated with braids and hair. It was on a Friday night and the streets were loud from the bar up the road and the one street over and the other one down the road. Music from these different places merged into loud chaos. Some shouting and yelling drunk people, cars driving by - this was the order for any weekend really so we slept through it. This night was different, we were woken up by wailing and screams for help. You could sense the pain in her voice. She shouted. She screamed. She yelled. She wailed. Nobody helped her. That's what happens when someone prominent commits a crime, nobody helps out because he was a lawyer and she was just a housewife. They didn't help her because, "let them be, they'll be back together by dawn," and they were back together by dawn, except her hair was like plants in a desert - barely there and sparse. This image still haunts me and this is where I realized that I had no tolerance for violence, myself.

Even though I still have this image in my head, for some reason, an image that haunts me more is that of Rihanna after Chris Brown hit her. Rihanna is an icon and for someone to get away with harming her in that way, my skin still shudders. The difference between my neighbour and Chris Brown is that I saw my neighbour hit his wife but I did not see Chris Brown hit Rihanna but Chris Brown is still cancelled. A

potential reason for this is that within the black community, there are different distinct groups that do not understand each other: Africans, African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans. Juliette Storr, in *Décalage: A Thematic Interpretation of Cultural Differences in the African Diaspora. Journal of Black Studies*, the differences and tensions in the relationships within these three groups. She uncovers that, “the tension is created by the need to be different and the same,” (page 670) which means that even though there are many similarities between the groups, we still have the need to distinguish ourselves from the other groups that we do not belong to. This is made evident by a statement by one Marcia, who is interviewed by Storr. She says, “I am different... I don’t want to be labeled as African American, not because there is anything wrong with that...” On one part, she is just stating that she is African Caribbean and that she does not want that part of her to be removed but stating that there is nothing wrong with being African American shows a slight sense of undermining African Americans. The stereotypes that we are fed by the media on African Americans impact our perceptions of them and even deter how we interact with them - as outsiders in America. In the same article, another respondent, Gary who is an African American student sums up the relationship between the three groups. He says, “I think there is competition between the groups and it has to do with history; Black people in America feel we have endured all the problems and other people from other places come and reap the benefits.” The assumption that people from other places come and reap benefits and take opportunities from you is the reason why we even see xenophobia in countries like South Africa. The irony in this is that most of the people who feel as

though opportunities are being taken from them are usually unqualified anyway. You have high school graduates complaining that people leave their home countries to come and be doctors in foreign countries and the question is how would a high school graduate practice medicine?

My part in stereotyping or even coming to terms with the fact that the media has instilled a fear of black men in me happened on April 8th of 2019. I texted my best friend, "dude, I almost died today," which might have been a bit dramatic of me but I actually almost died of a heart attack or these guys would have killed me - yes, just me in a group of 18 people. I attended Minnesota's Day at the Capitol for my Social Work class. I am not a social work major so the most exciting part of my day was the fact that I got to ride a train for the first time from one place that I don't know the name of to the Capitol (it was actually the light rail but same difference.) I sat on a double seat by myself and there were people standing which would have bothered me a few years ago but this is America and nobody wants to sit next to the black girl in the class and that's that.

Before attending the ACTUAL rally at the Capitol building, we were scheduled to meet with Northfield representative Todd Lippert to pick his brain on a few issues that we had learnt about - particularly MFIP. Our group huddled together in a circle with the professor in the middle for a quick briefing on the afternoon program, 17 white women and then, me - the chocolate chip that accidentally fell into the vanilla dough. Yes, I do feel the color of my skin in these settings and just being outside of St Olaf reminds me that I really am a bit of an anomaly in Minnesota. And yes, I find myself looking around

me - A LOT- because you never know what will hit you between a bullet, ten bullets, a bomb or just bird poop - which signifies luck in the Swazi culture.

In my looking around, I saw a black man come towards our huddle from behind me. Something between his unkempt hair, his clothes and the load that he had on him made me uncomfortable with this situation. My first instinct was to move my phone from my back pocket into my bag, clutch onto my bag really tight and avoid eye contact - it always works. As he got closer, I realized that he reeked of cheap alcohol so I already knew we had an unemployed, possibly homeless man to deal with. To my right, two more black guys, much older than he was came looking very angry and surged towards him. They were now all exchanging slurs and I, I was literally shaking in my boots because I did not come to America to die like this. I could not ascertain whether they were yelling at us, sending signals about who they would rob first or exactly what was happening but I was certain about one thing though- that I was the weakest link. If/when black men attack, they will attack the black girl first because they will face the least repercussions from the law if they target me over all the white women around me. If they figured out that I was African, they would go harder because I am probably in the way of their greatness. Secondly, AMERICANS HAVE GUNS and I DID NOT come to America to die, I'm here for my degree and I will be gone!

The two men got closer and they equally reeked of cheap alcohol - truly disgusting and irresponsible for 1 P.M. on a Monday. The closer they got, the closer the first man got to our group and by now, it became obvious that he was using our group to hide. Again, Americans HAVE GUNS and I was close to tears at this time because my

mother did not work so hard raising me for me to be killed in America but also frustrated that everyone - including the professor - was calm about this situation. The words became clearer, the two men were chasing after this one to beat him up because he assaulted a woman and “real men don’t beat women up,” as one of them said repeatedly. On one part, I was so glad that this man was going to be assaulted for hitting a woman. I cannot begin to describe the satisfaction that I got from this. On the contrary, I realized that he was using our group to hide because it was majority white women and his counterparts would not come too close because we all know what happens to black men who dare touch white women. But overall, what dawned on me was that my reaction to this feeds off the stereotype that African American men are violent because even though these men were being violent, I was not even the target.

I have no idea how this ended after we walked to meet Rep. Lippert but I just know that I have mixed emotions about the experience. I feel like a traitor for feeling like this about African American men, I blame *For Colored Girls Only* for embedding this idea in my head but I also feel like as an African woman, my feelings are valid because of how black men treat us, black women. I also feel bad for African American men because they should spend their whole lives trying to look non-threatening and make people comfortable in a country where they could soon be endangered species. An article by Mark Wright contains advice from a black, policeman from Charlotte, North Carolina for black people who get stopped by the police. He says, “Don’t argue. Don’t go back and forth with them. Make them feel safe...” This just shows that there is no place for black men to be human and show any emotion because that might get them

killed. He also mentions that when he lets black drivers go after a traffic stop, instead of, "Have a great day," he says, "Be safe!" Because him letting them go does not guarantee that they are safe in a country that is working to eliminate black men.

Method:

In the creation of this work. I first wrote out the story about my experience at the Capitol paying much detail to my emotions and why I reacted or felt the way that I did - in the moment. I also went back to some of my classmates to ask them about what actually happened because human beings tend to alter the events of a traumatic experience in their brains. I then went on to find different sources which correlated with areas that I found to be vital in the story that I wrote. I initially wanted to find articles that elaborated on black women's fear of black men in public spaces - which I did not find. I found, instead, articles on the general fear of black men by society - as a whole.

I also went on to find scholarly articles about the interactions or relationships between Africans and African Americans in the US. I found one article that was relevant to my paper.

A surprising moment occurred when I created the cover of the paper. I searched for African American men on Google and I found many pictures and articles about them being incarcerated. When I searched for African men, I found images of shirtless men, professional men in suits or warrior looking men. The contrast between these images

showed that even Google perpetrates the stereotypes associated with African American men.

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