

In the Fight of their Lives: Mothers of the Movement and the Pursuit of Reproductive Justice

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ABSTRACT

Reproductive justice is an all-encompassing theoretical approach for solving community needs associated with the right to have children, the right to health care, and the right to safe environments for children and families. My work as an RJ activist addresses the need for safe environments that are free of gun violence, police brutality, and access to support systems that nurture Black mothers with pre-and post-natal care. As such, my tool kit is for scholars whose primary focus is on using rhetoric to effect change in the school system as well as in maternal health.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

I am a Black, Muslim woman who wears a hijab and a variety of head coverings that signify to people I am a Muslim. I use the terms Black and African-American to describe my ethnicity and use both of these terms to described people of African descent who were brought to America as part of the system of chattel slavery. **They were not slaves.** They were enslaved and there is a difference. As such the convergence of my African- American and Muslim identities affect my world view and response to the systemic racist polices that affect Black, Brown and Muslim communities across America and internationally. In addition I earned my education at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) and two different Predominately White Institutions (PWI)—one in the Midwest and one in the South, so my approach to teaching is rooted in those experiences—some good and some bad. Finally, I am a mother who experienced birth trauma and did not have access to resources to assist me with my trauma and ensuing postpartum depression. Consequently, I am deeply committed to working on behalf of Black women and their maternal health needs.

TAKEAWAYS

Scholars who engage in community-based RJ work need the following:

- A firm understanding of the life cycle of a social movement. Understanding this can help activists position their work. Jeff Goodwin and James Jasper have a solid introduction to this topic in their text *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts*.
- Anti-racist methods/tools to assist with unpacking the privilege of white institutions, white supremacy and white privilege. Robin DiAngelo's book *White Fragility* and Carol Anderson's book *White Rage* are excellent resources.
- A clear understanding of how language affects our LGBTQ communities and the new language that people of color are using. For example, the use of pronouns matter for the LGBTQ community or how BIPOC is now being used to describe brown and Black people. My students are teaching me this every semester.

CHALLENGES

Rhetorical scholars come from a number of perspectives and that makes for a rich constellation of opinions, experiences, and actions. However, this also presents as a problem because the narrative of what's scholarship turns into a monolith that can't be challenged or even added too—from traditionally marginalized people. I believe there are two challenges and they closely related to silence and erasure.

Challenge 1: Requesting that people prove racism or health conditions exist as a means to silence women. I talk about this a lot, but as a society we need to move away from people having to prove racism exists or share their trauma in order to gain access to help. If a mother tells a doctor “something is amiss,” or “she doesn't feel right,” she shouldn't have to prove it to a doctor in order to get assistance.

Challenge 2: Silencing the people that we are helping. In other words, rather than asking what they need, activist and scholars tell people what they need without any real consideration of the group's desired outcome for their own community. For example, telling Black women that if they have a doula it will improve their birth outcome. Well that is true, but not all Black women want a doula as a form of birth support (this is just an over simplified example).

ADDITIONAL LINKS

- [BLM Organization](#)
- Gholdy Muhammad's book *Cultivating Genius*
- [The Trayvon Martin Foundation](#)
- [Life Camp](#)
- [SisterSong](#)
- [Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality \(WISE\)](#)
- [Believers Bail Out](#)