Free Space and Inner Space:
A Place for Reconstructing
Self and Other

by

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Abstract

The concept of "free spaces" and their potential for mobilizing individual and collective action for change will be explored as a tool for reconstructing inherited ideologies that shape the experiences of African Diasporic women and men in their daily public and private lives. This analysis includes a discussion of the limitations of the liberal Western feminist approach to social change and justice and proposes the use of the concept of "free space" at the micro, mezzo and macro-levels of society as an African-centered and more specifically an Africana Womanist (Hudson-Weems, 2008) tool for the reconstruction of personhood, gender ideologies, relations, norms, policies and communities.

Keywords: emotion work, Women's Movement, Civil Rights Movement, liberal feminism, Africana Womanism, postmodernist feminism, free space.

Introduction

This paper seeks to answer the question: *Who defines the space in which notions of self and other are constructed and reconstructed for women of African descent in the African Diaspora and globally?*[1] Audrey Lorde's statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, 1984, p. 110), suggests that in the quest to challenge oppression and contest notions of freedom, Africana women must begin by assessing not only the tools but also the space in which they were created, by whom and in whose interest. The master's tools routinely deconstruct and reconstruct the master's house but almost always in the interest of the master, suggesting that it is not the tools that determine the outcome but the consciousness of the builders and the vested interests of those who contract them. For instance, the critique of Eurocentrism has relied almost exclusively on European languages for articulation, disarticulation and re-articulation while simultaneously constructing an independent paradigm and epistemology of Africana resistance, transcendence and triumph. Postmodern feminists have suggested that the use of language as a tool of oppression should be deconstructed as a means to free oppressed minority women from white supremacist male dominance (De Beauvoir, 1974; Tong, 1998; hooks, 1984).

Deconstruction as a method of confronting oppression is an African system of thought that Derrida claimed that he borrowed from African culture for the purpose of challenging Eurocentrism (Derrida, 2008). This paper argues that the dismantling of the white supremacist masculine view of reality must begin with a deconstruction of the space in which the language, the rituals, the religion, the institutions and other tools of the master are created and contested. For as Eric Williams (1997) emphatically stated, Massa Day Done! The day of the master is over and done with, thank God almighty; We are free at last! At least, we are freer than our enslaved ancestors, and we shall be freer still despite the vicious attempts to re-enthrone massa through subtle and overt means in personal, group, communal, national and international spaces, a few examples of which include evening news reports on the realities of reverse racism, Blackface incidents at institutions of higher education from Mississippi and Kansas City to Montreal, and reoccurring images of police brutality against Blacks.

The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss a type of "free space" that encompasses multidimensional aspects of existence. The concept of "free space" rather than being limited to two or three dimensional understandings of physical context, location, and environment, includes the notion of an intentionally created inner space from which new rituals and communities emerge. This concept of free space and the related rituals and communities would not necessarily be bound by physical proximity, but would exist and function to shape and transform constructions of self and other that are increasingly free from the oppressive masculinist worldview. Free space is conceptualized as an ongoing project of resistance to all forms of imperialist domination.

The paper argues that the shared and blended history of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism has functioned to define the space in which various understandings of African Diasporic womanhood have emerged while simultaneously igniting sparks of resistance through which Africana womanism has always exercised autonomy (Hudson-Weems, 2008).[2] This exploration of "free spaces" is conducted in recognition of the fact that western imperialism has never succeeded in completely eliding or erasing in entirety, the resilient Africana originality in social structuration.

The concept of "free spaces" and their potential for mobilizing individual and collective action for change will be explored and applied to the ability of African Diasporic women and women in the mother continent to re-define and address inherited or imposed gender ideologies that perpetuate social problems such as domestic violence, sex trafficking and the increasing criminalization of Black women mainly due to the war on drugs or seek to repress alternative democratic practices of personhood and community not defined by gender imperialism. This analysis concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the Eurocentric liberal feminist approach to social change and justice and encourages the further exploration of the application of the concept of "free spaces" as an African centered, or more specifically an Africana Woman-centered tool for the reconstruction of gender ideologies, relations, norms, policies and communities. The project of going beyond gender-centricity in discourse is also discussed based upon the perspective that gender-specific consciousness is a western European contraption foisted on the global discourse on gender issues (Nzegwu, 2006). Gender-centricity emanating from Eurocentric and masculinist ideology while using the rhetoric of empowerment contributes to persistent divisions and objectifications based upon false, constricting or limited definitions of Self and Other.

The Inherited Space of African Diasporic Women

The origins of an Africanist worldview can be traced to the diverse cultures and traditions of West African ethnic groups (Diop 1984). Through slavery and the partial adulteration of Africanist worldview in the Americas, two processes of acculturation emerged that simultaneously contributed to the evolution of a complex and at times contradictory worldviews for African-Americans. One process led by the colonizers involved the objectification of the African in the Americas toward Eurocentric ideals and away from basic human ideals by seeking to repress the global human tendency to organize in family units from which enslaved Africans were unsuccessfully alienated for centuries. The aim of this process was to sever the African's linkages to their African and human roots of familihood or what Nyerere (1968) called *Ujamaa*, and replace African traditions with hegemonic capitalist ideologies and structures that reinforced their subjugation and justified their political and economic exploitation. No other group of human beings went through centuries of being forcibly denied the right to familihood. The miracle is that Africans survived the holocaust of slavery with a strong sense of family intact! Another process involved the development of a resistance ideology based upon West African humanist traditions:

By retaining and reworking significant elements of these West African cultures, communities of enslaved Africans offered their members explanations for slavery alternative to those advanced by slave holders (Gutman 1976; Webber 1978; Sobel 1979; hooks, 1981). These Africana-derived ideas also laid the foundation for the rules of a distinctive Black American civil society…. While essential to the survival of U.S. Blacks as a group and expressed differently by individual African-Americans, these knowledges remained simultaneously hidden from and suppressed by Whites. Black oppositional knowledges existed to resist injustice, but they also remained subjugated. (Hill-Collins 2000:13).

These two processes merged to create the inherited space from which the identities of African Diasporic women have evolved. One aspect of this space is rooted in a blended history of patriarchy, capitalism and racism and the other the language, religious, family, and community traditions of Africa. The legacy of this inherited space and the necessity to revive resistance ideology toward a new vision of an evolved, developed or "free" society in the 21st century will be discussed with emphasis on the fact that the free space does not belong exclusively to African women but also benefits white women and poor men, contrary to western feminist ideologies of gender separatism.

During slavery, the concept of Black womanhood was strategically crafted to meet the capitalist, social and sexual objectives of the colonizers as Karl Marx emphasized in Volume 1 of *Capital* (Marx, 1887). The African woman, child and man was violently molded into an article of trade, a form of property with a value equal to that of any farm animal. Their terrorized existence was socially and legally sanctioned and consisted of abject physical violence, economic exploitation, social humiliation and sexual persecution (Beckles, 2003). Whether to justify their own pathologies or to implement a strategy deemed most effective in their pursuit of political, sexual, and economic objectives, the slave-holders treated Black women, men and children as less than white, less than woman, less than man, and less than human. The legacy of slavery has shaped all subsequent relationships that Black women, men and children had in their families and communities (Collins, 1990; Paterson, 1987).

Within this inherited space, African Diasporic women have worked to reconstruct their identities and reshape their notions of freedom. The African-based resistance ideology which led to the enslaved African's emancipation from the plantocracy evolved into post-emancipation resistance and rights movements across the African Diaspora and at home in Africa where the new slavery of imperialism reigned (Du Bois, 1935; Nkrumah, 1965; Rodney, 1972). Both the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the Women's Movement that rode on the back of the successes of the Black struggle internationally were necessary benchmarks that defined a period of reconstruction in which the definitions of freedom for Black women and the poor generally in the Americas were transformed to encompass the notions of anti-imperialism, equal opportunity and social justice.

All these movements were based on Eurocentric liberalist ideologies which sought to achieve social justice by increasing social, political economic and legal freedoms, combating discrimination, and insuring equal access to opportunities for education and employment. These social movements have provided models for mobilizing collective action to change institutions, legislation and rigid socialized attitudes that lead to discrimination on the basis of sex and race.

While the significant impact of these social movements as pivotal measures that have helped women and Blacks move toward social justice through equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation cannot be disputed, the question remains whether the outcome of these movements is enough; are Black people, women, and particularly Black women free enough? The problem with describing liberation as a finite point or state of being to be achieved is that it suggests that once one is deemed legally free they are free indeed, and any subjective ideas that counter this claim are subsumed under a socially constructed absolute truth and stifled and sanctioned by supporters with absolute authority ratified by the law.

While representing significant advances away from chattel slavery, the Civil Rights and Women's movements were limited by the liberalist ideology upon which they were based. Liberalist ideology is predicated upon assumptions and norms associated with a Eurocentric, masculinist worldview that values individualism, competition, rationality and economic efficacy in the public sphere and reinforces patriarchy by ignoring the economic, social and political value of the contributions of caregivers in public and in the private sphere. Consequently, liberalism as a basis for a change ideology while adopting the rhetoric of social justice may help to reinforce biases which tend to devalue the contributions to society that are traditionally associated with women and Blacks. Inherent within the liberal approach to social reform is a worldview that fosters social spaces from which the master's tools are naturally reproduced.

While the advances made toward gender equality in the public and private spheres internationally over the last half of the 20th century can primarily be attributed to movement emerging from Africana struggles and liberal feminist thought, the conundrum inherent in liberal feminism is its ties to a Eurocentric and masculinist worldview. Critics of liberal feminism suggest that this approach to freedom from oppression fails to explain structural sources of gender inequality due to its support of the male assumptions, norms, and beliefs in the values of individual achievement, competition, the importance of paid work in public life and the opportunities within it which are traditionally male dominated at the expense of the private domain which is relegated to the responsibility of women (Bryson, 1999; Denis, 2003; Abbott, Wallace, and Tyler, 2005). Liberal feminist approaches fail to question the greater value Westernized societies place on Eurocentric and androcentric norms that favor white males over others and blame Black women or suggest they take personal responsibility for the relative inability of Black men to achieve comparable outcomes in societies structured in race-class-gender dominance (Hall, 1980; Davis, 1982; Agozino, 1997).

Legislative initiatives to increase equal opportunity for education and work, advances in health and reproductive rights and advocacy for combating domestic violence and sexual discrimination can be directly attributed to the Black civil rights movement and the liberal feminist thought. The idealism of the liberal feminist movement has contributed to a freedom defined by increased access to opportunities and the expanded exercise of choice, yet this notion of freedom remains value-laden in support of Eurocentrism and male assumptions and norms without recognizing to what extent it is dependent on the trail-blazing successes of Africana struggles against slavery and for civil and human rights. Despite the advances of the women's movement, Black women continue to be more likely to live in poverty and for longer durations than their white female and male and Black male counterparts while poor Black women continue to raise the next generation of Black people in increasingly single-parent families.

One can similarly argue that the Civil Rights movement with its achieved advancements for Blacks, reinforced a notion of freedom that failed to adequately respond to Black women's problems that stem from the intersection of race, class, and gender (Wallace, 1980; Brown, 1992). To combat the effects of racism, the Civil Rights movement sought to enact legislation to reduce discrimination and increase access to equal opportunities for education and employment. Like the Women's Movement, the liberalist ideology upon which the Civil Rights Movement was based was limited in its notion of freedom. The Civil Rights movement was appropriate but inadequate as a response for the time. Considering the disproportionate representation of Blacks in comparison to whites among those that are imprisoned and unemployed in the United States since the Civil Rights movement, it should not be considered the right response for all time.

Although necessary advances toward mitigating the effects of discrimination have been achieved, the Civil Rights movement in some ways served to reinforce capitalist ideals that suggest one can achieve economic self-actualization through the merit of their contributions to the market (Marable, 1983). In a Capitalist context a result of the liberalist equal opportunity anti-discrimination legislation stemming from the Civil Rights movement is a perception that the legislation has *leveled the playing field,* and therefore individuals and not society should be blamed for their own failures to achieve economic success; furthermore this perspective also suggests that the legislation may have given Blacks an unfair advantage over their white counterparts without acknowledging that white women are the single majority beneficiaries from Affirmative Action.

Poverty was an inherent consequence of slavery for Blacks, yet capitalism, like patriarchy is based upon a Eurocentric and masculinist worldview that values the notions of individual freedom, merit and personal autonomy in the pursuit of wealth, consequently this ideology also assumes that persons who are poor lack a Protestant work ethic and related virtues such as personal responsibility (Wineman, 1997; Piven and Cloward, 1971; Weber, 2002). From this perspective, the impoverished are viewed as lazy, undeserving, unintelligent, morally deficient and ultimately to blame for their own plight, yet working hard was once known as working like a Negro!

W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) debunked the mythology of Black laziness with *Black Reconstruction in America* which presented evidence that Black labor and Black initiative built up America and saved the union too. C.L.R. James (1938) followed a few years later with *The Black Jacobins*, a documentation of the only ever successful revolution by enslaved people. And Eric Williams (1944) capped the trilogy with *Capitalism and Slavery* to finally settle the argument over whether it was spiritualism that produced capitalism as Weber fantasized or whether it was the absolute surplus value of the unpaid labor of millions of enslaved Africans for hundreds of years as Karl Marx (1887) correctly stated in *Das Kapital*. Since the Civil Rights movement, there have been claims that race has declined in significance as a factor influencing social and economic well-being (Wilson, 1980) while Cornel West insists that *Race Matters* (West, 1994).

The belief that classism rather than racism or sexism has come to be the primary factor influencing the gap between the affluent and the poor stems from a growing sentiment that the civil rights legislation worked to achieve its aims. Evidence in support of this belief is illustrated by the election of a Black President in the United States, which could not have happened if the same level or type of racism continued to exist today as it did prior to the Civil Rights movement, proof that Blacks are "free at last," yet, the presence of a token Black face in a high place is not new in racist America and so the election of a Black president could never be enough to solve entrenched institutionalized racism that continues to be manifested in the wealth gaps, educational attainment gaps, unemployment gaps, health disparities and excessive incarceration gaps that continue to afflict Black people.

The concern is about the quality of freedom rather than the quantity and whether this quality achieved is or will be a sufficient response to the experiences of oppression in this current era or the future. This paper argues that the liberalist ideology, which suggests that all that is needed to combat discrimination is a *level playing field* that can be achieved through legislative reform, is an inadequate response to the persistence of structural sources of inequality (male biased and capitalist Eurocentric values) that are embedded within the space from which the resulting legislation was derived. Anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, although necessary, have contributed to a fragmented, inflexible, non-responsive and increasingly punitive State response to poverty and inequality that at best provides a crude safety net as a means to meet the needs of the poor, among whom women and Blacks continue to be disproportionately represented (Wilson, 1990; West, 1994; Levenstein, 2009; Wacquant, 2009).

The ability of liberal initiatives such as the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights movement to create an oppositional consciousness that is free of the values espoused by its underlying ideology is restricted due to their inability to dismantle the very premise upon which they are based. The last half of the 20th century witnessed the educational and economic ascension of some Black women, the development of rhetoric of political correctness in the affairs of women and persons of color, and the further recognition of their political identity.

While all of these achievements may be attributed to the Women's and Civil Rights movements, the ideological structures (Eurocentrism, capitalism, and androcentrism) that shape and constrain the contemporary Black women's experiences of their realities remain relatively the same as they were for their enslaved female ancestors. As a tool to dismantle the master's house, the liberalist approach to freedom functioned to simply pour new wine into old wineskins. Hence Du Bois observed in Black reconstruction that the enslaved emerged from slavery, stood for a moment in the sun and turned round and walked into a new slavery.

By rendering the liberalist notion of freedom absolute through legislative reforms and corresponding policy and programmatic responses, the advances in the economic, social and political status of some Blacks and women would suggest that freedom has been achieved. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons that can be learned from each stage of our human evolution is that one must be ever curious about alternative possibilities and suspicious of finite notions of freedom. Another lesson is that while movement toward freedom or transformation can be iterative and incremental in nature, sometimes freedom needs to be advanced in revolutionary leaps and bounds rather than gradually to intentionally disrupt the false consciousness nurtured by liberal rhetoric that functions to maintain the status quo.

At the dawn of the 21st century, history has positioned each African Diasporic woman at various degrees near the crossroads somewhere between reaping the benefits and feeling the limitations of liberal approaches to freedom. Here at the crossroads, she is becoming increasingly aware of the contradictions that shape her existence. She carefully studies her public and private lives and realizes that while she is *freer* than her enslaved female ancestors the feeling of freedom she *desires* escapes her reality. With a view of the master's house, she contemplates the socially ascribed prescription for the way forward and is confronted with the dilemma of how to align the reality of her emotions with the rhetoric of liberalism. She studies the many tools used to create the master's house and realizes that to dismantle the master's house and to craft the reality that she desires, she must begin by redefining the space from which the tools emerge. Here at the crossroads, she looks to the ways of her ancestors and the process of redefining and reconstructing the space and reigniting movement toward a new freedom begins.

Defining Free Space: An African-centered Context for Nurturing Oppositional Consciousness

Free space can be defined as a social space that emerges as an oppositional response to restrictive and oppressive hegemonic systems of control and power. The revolutionary use of social spaces as a strategy for planning and organizing social protests during the period of American slavery is well documented (Raboteau, 1978; Harding, 1983; Evans, and Boyte, 1986; Morris, 1991). Clandestine meetings in "hush harbors" or secret well-hidden locations provided a democratic space in which Africans could plot, organize and mobilize themselves against colonizers and the plantocracy regime.

Religious meetings also provided a forum for the proselytization of an oppositional consciousness, grounded in a libratory or emancipatory theology that fostered a belief in an entitlement to freedom from slavery. Within this alternative social domain, enslaved Africans ignited a fight for their freedom and that of future generations. Their interpretation of religious doctrine such as the Biblical accounts of Moses' exodus from Egypt, Jonah's prophecy of doom to the people of Nineveh, Jesus' suffering on the Cross and his subsequent resurrection, provided hope and faith in an alternative reality in which they would be free from the institution of slavery. In the case of the San Domingo revolution, CLR James noted that voodoo was the medium for the recruitment of the freedom fighters who had to swear allegiance to the revolution and commit to defeating the planters. Through the use of this libratory social space, Africans on plantations for the enslaved began to strategize and cultivate a shared vision of their right and destiny to obtain victory over their oppressors.

Morris (1991) argues that emerging from the free space, created through religious gatherings by Africans on the plantation, were tools for social protest such as Black religious music and sermons, the Black press and Black oratory. These tools were instrumental in enabling Africans during slavery to dismantle the ideology and socialization processes of the colonizer. As the colonizer socialized the African to accept the fate of the enslaved, the tools sharpened and honed in religious meetings reminded the Africans of their destiny in redemption, resurrection, and a promised land where there would be no more suffering and where they would be restored to kings and queens, but that to receive God's favor they must begin by helping themselves. These tools were not the ones used to build the master's house. The tools that emerged from the free space established through Black religious meetings on the plantation helped to nurture the collective oppositional consciousness necessary to inspire and sustain social protest and achieve emancipation.

Free space is a context in which counter hegemonic ideas and oppositional identities can be nurtured (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). In addition to social spaces (or mezzo-level free spaces) where counter hegemonic ideas can be collectively shared and explored such as religious meetings, free space may also be situated within the inner space or consciousness of each individual at the micro-level. Within the unobstructed awareness that characterizes inner space an understanding of the meaning of freedom can be created and reconstructed to fit or transform reality. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes how Black women have historically drawn upon their legacy of activism to resist injustice and create a liberated ethos:

As mothers, othermothers, teachers and churchwomen in essentially all-Black rural communities and urban neighborhoods, U.S. Black women participated in constructing and reconstructing these oppositional knowledge systems. Through the lived experiences gained within their extended families and communities, individual African-American women fashioned their own ideas about the meaning of Black womanhood. When these ideas found collective expression, Black women's self-definitions enabled them to refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community. These self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported. In all, Black woman's participation in crafting a constantly changing African-American culture fostered distinctively Black and women-centered worldviews. (13)

Free space requires the strategic use of emotional consciousness to spur the development of alternative feelings about interpretations of reality that in turn contribute to the construction of alternative values, ideologies, institutions and communities. The mobilization of emotions is a necessary component of any movement toward collective action and resistance (Aminzade and McAdam, 2001). The use of the term emotion to describe the type of consciousness or awareness that needs to be mobilized may be controversial among critics that value the tools of the Enlightenment Era in which the logic of the scientific, rational and positivist approaches (typically associated with the masculinist worldview) to acquiring and creating knowledge devalued (and condemned practitioners that adhered to) emotional consciousness and intuition as legitimate forms of knowing. Masculinist cultural norms stemming from the Enlightenment Era typically associate the possession of emotional consciousness and emotion work as being reserved for females. This paper argues that a return to or legitimization of emotional consciousness and emotion work for men and women is an essential component of the processes to reframe or reconstruct ideologies and expectations inherited from the dominant culture.

"Emotion work" can be defined as the reconstruction of expectations about how individuals, groups or communities should feel about themselves as well as how they should manage and express feelings about their daily encounters with a dominant group, community or society (Reger, 2004; Hochschild, 1979, 1983). At the micro level, emotion work is necessary for individuals to become conscious or aware of the constraining and enabling factors, both personal and structural, that affect what Berlin (1971) describes as the congruence between one's environment and their ability to exercise their full capacities.

Without engaging in the emotional work that challenges their expectations and acceptance of a hegemonic reality, Black women, through their adherence to ascribed behaviors and internalization of inhibitions that shape their public and private lives, may be at risk of acting to reinforce the same social context that restricts them. Oppression can be defined as *subjective freedom, rendered absolute* (Jackson, 2001).[3]

By rendering absolute a subjective definition of freedom that circumscribes and binds their individual and collective existence, Black women must engage in difficult emotional work required to confront the contradictions between the expanse of their capacity and the limitations of their environment, continually challenge hegemonic ideologies about their existence, and be willing to ask themselves individually the critical question, *to what extent is the oppressor I?*

At the micro level, free space is an inner space within which individuals engage in the emotional work necessary to overcome personal inhibitions and confront dominant ideologies that restrict their ability to bring congruence between their conscious Self and outer environment. This process of challenging internal constructions of Self in response to hegemonic ideologies can be equated to the loss of false consciousness and the engagement of consciousness-raising toward the possibility of an alternative reality (Bart, 1982; Fanon, 1963).

Scholars have also explored the ways in which social movements have used emotion laden cognitive processes to transform social values, generate shared ideologies and mobilize collective action at the mezzo-level of society (Reger, 2004; Summers-Effler, 2002; Taylor, 2000; Epstein, 1991; Hercus, 1999, Leon and Montenegro, 1998). Through the use of free spaces at the mezzo and macro levels of society, groups and communities of people can "actively and collectively re-frame and re-think their beliefs and passions," (Jasper, 1998, p. 421). This type of "emotion work" includes sharing knowledge about their oppositional consciousness, testimonies about their ability to manage notions of their transforming or transformed identities during challenging encounters with hegemonic ideologies, and strategies to mobilize emotions as a means of social change.

The cultivation of free space at the micro and mezzo levels of society can also help individual and collective actors to determine a cultural vision of alternative ways to address practical problems and everyday issues by redefining "assumptions about how the world is made, which problems are relevant, and which methods and standards are appropriate for their solution," (Kern and Nam, 2009, p. 639). The type of free space needed to reignite movement toward an increased sense of liberation for African Diasporic women requires innovation and a cultural vision that not only seeks to raise consciousness to encourage political activism, but also sufficiently addresses the practical everyday concerns of Black women as they negotiate their identities or realities within their homes and places of employment.

Whereas free space is the location or place within which resistance ideology and reconstructed realities begin, it is the emotion work that spurs movement by connecting individuals to a source of power rooted in the ability to give collective voice to the shared realms of what Audre Lorde refers to as unexpressed or unrecognized feeling (1981). The cultivation of free space coupled with emotion work for Black women, could ultimately threaten a reality that has been believed to be a socially and economically functional and a biologically natural way of organizing Western society and its institutions since the dawn of the industrial age (Murdock, 1949).

Establishing the free space needed to facilitate the process of shepherding in a new freedom, particularly in regard to everyday practical issues, ranging from an unequal share of care giving responsibilities to domestic violence for Black women, would require a radical redefinition of gender ideologies. This free space would be defined by a cultural vision of men and women of various hues working together to enhance each other's abilities to negotiate authentic and mutually enabling forms of expression, identity and community within both the public and private spheres. Together they would see themselves (we would see ourselves) as what Alexander (2003) describes as refugees seeking a new reality:

> What it might mean to see ourselves as 'refugees of a world on fire.' What if we declared ourselves perpetual refugees in solidarity with all refugees?' Not citizen. Not naturalized citizen…. But refugees fleeing some terrible atrocity far too threatening to engage, ejected out of the familiar into some unknown still to be revealed. Refugees forced to create out of the raw smithy of fire a shape different than our inheritance. (p. 617)

As a means to usher in the essence of an African-centered free space, the use of the term refugees used in the description above would be replaced by the concept of survivors, which acknowledges the historical and contemporary contributions and legacies of the ancestors toward resisting this atrocity and achieving a transformed and increasingly freer reality.

Conclusion

As Bob Marley wailed, when the rain falls, it won't fall on one man's housetop, and a new paradigm based upon a relational or communitarian context (free space) which fosters the notion of freedom *with* others as opposed to freedom *to* access opportunities or freedom *from* various forms of oppression is recommended. In the relational context the rights to entitlements, personal autonomy, and individual action become secondary to the right to exercise free will toward the acquisition of an intrinsic orientation toward Self and Other, which is distinguished by transcendence beyond socially ascribed limitations, a sense of universal purpose, mutually affirming relationships in the public and private spheres, and the absence of social, economic and political hegemony.

Ideally in this new paradigm of an equitable and freer society, by fostering an intrinsic orientation toward expressing Self, women and men are allowed to explore and *live* unique expressions of an authentic identity that are not bound by historically racist, classist and sexist ideologies and social-constructions. This intrinsic orientation deepens through self-reflection and emotion work that seeks the replacement of hegemonic and oppressive constructions with a mutual liberation ideology.

The connections and interdependence, rather than differences, polarities, and separations between emotion and intellect, the public and the private, and masculine and feminine could be explored.

If one can accept a definition of freedom as the opportunity and intention to continually transcend the limitations of a circumscribed existence within a mutually liberating context or society, then freedom, like the concepts of equity and equality, should be perceived to be a guiding principle rather than an outcome or an absolute (and yet subjective) end to be achieved. The proposed new paradigm builds upon knowledge gained from African indigenous kinship cultures that rely upon interconnectedness and clear and efficacious roles for social actors (Cajete, 2000). Within this alternative context, freedom evolves through emotion work and interconnectedness between social actors that result in an emancipatory spirituality which affirms the equal worth of every human being, regardless of attributes that have historically been used to deny respect (Lerner, 2000). Such alternative spiritualities are characteristic of African traditional religions in which all of humanity and nature are essential elements necessary for perpetuating balance and harmony. Within this alternative context, difference is acknowledged and accepted. Individuals and groups learn to use difference as creative tools for change by acknowledging and learning how to "orchestrate the conflicting aspects of themselves into action behind their beliefs" (Lorde, 2003, p. 536).

This emotion work would seek to challenge inherited ideologies about gender, race and class and systemic pathologies that reproduce identities, empirical realities and contexts that nurture and constrain the experiences of Black women. While acknowledging the benefits of a liberal approach to social justice, this new paradigm seeks to utilize free space as an African-centered and Africana Woman-centered tool to enable individual and collective ongoing evolution and revolution toward freer identities, freer societies, and freer realities.

Throughout history, the definition of a "free" society and notions of emancipation or liberation have evolved. Perhaps the process of redefining and reconstructing Self and Other through the creation and use of free space is a natural and ongoing part of the human evolutionary process, if this is the case, the time has come for a new vision of a "free" society for African Diasporic women. To create this free space, perhaps the first step is to adopt the mantra *I feel, therefore I can be free;* Lorde (2003) explains*:*

> The white fathers have told us, "I think, therefore I am." It is the Black mother within each of us, within each one of us that poet inside whispers in our dreams, "I feel, therefore I can be free." I beg you, learn to use what you feel to move you toward the action you wish to accomplish. Change—personal and political—does not come about in a day, it does not come about in a year, maybe will not even come about in our lifetimes. But it is our own day-to-day decisions, the way each one of us testifies with our lives to these things we believe that empower us. Power is relative, but it is real. And if you do not learn to use it, it will be used against us. (p. 536)

As we contemplate the way forward, new tools can be created to usher in a new reality, ripe with emotions to keep women centered upon what they know to be true about their feelings and to confront incongruence within their everyday, public and personal lives. Perhaps the most essential tool necessary to dismantle the master's house is the affirmation, "We feel, therefore we can be free," yet ultimately we must incorporate feeling and thinking to develop an innate and intimate knowledge of a freedom that acknowledges the need for the constant articulation, disarticulation and re-articulation of the intersectionality of race-class-gender in societies dominated by Eurocentric, Capitalist and androcentric ideologies (Crenshaw, 1991; Hall 1980), and build alliances for the purpose of revolutionizing private and public spaces.

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Endnotes

[1] The term African Diasporic women will be used interchangeably with Black women to describe descendents of Africans that were brought to the Americas during the slavery era. Although Black women across the Diaspora are not a homogenous group and as a result, generalizations about their shared experiences should be cautioned, this paper argues that the shared and blended history of patriarchy, capitalism, and racism has functioned to shape the space in which various understandings of African Diasporic womanhood have been derived.

[2] Of importance is the acknowledgement that patriarchy is a western European contraption that was relatively absent from precolonial Africa as Nzegewu (2006), Oyewumi (1997), and Amadiume (1987) suggest.

[3] See quote from Black Feminist activist Pauli Murray "A system of oppression draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness," in Patricia Hill-Collins, 2000, p. 109.