Linda Jean Hall

GIFTING RESILIENCE

A pandemic study of Black female resistance

Black Studies

Collection Editor
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Abstract

Through reflections on her own life, anthropologist Dr Linda Jean Hall PhD draws on traditions of African storytelling to explore the question of how systemic fear affects the twentieth- and twenty-first-century Afro American experience. By using the framing of pandemic waves—a concept all too familiar in the wake of COVID-19—Hall employs a personal lens to parse out the implications of different "waves of fear" through impactful stages of her life, allowing readers to examine the shifting relationships that define Blackness and survival.

Keywords

Preface

Within the pages of this work, there is a combined communication from several marginalized generations that only slowly came to life over a period of years. The writing project ebbed and flowed while the challenge remained constant—to give existential meaning to a multi-decade lived experience that was destined to be forgotten. Too frequently, I found countless excuses to avoid any engagement with a manuscript that brought me so much pain. This is finally a published work because friends and family refused to accept even valid excuses that I offered to justify its incompleteness. The ceaseless reminders and a pandemic-driven awareness of social distance and impending death resulted in the conversion of an autoethnography—a personal analysis—to a message in a bottle for future generations.

A note on language

Regarding the capitalization of "Black", I concur with Mike Laws (2020), a copy editor with the *Columbia Journalism Review*, who argues that "we capitalize Black, and not white, when referring to groups in racial, ethnic, or cultural terms. For many people, Black reflects a shared sense of identity and community. White carries a different set of meanings; capitalizing the word in this context risks following the lead of white supremacists." The capitalization of the people's group Black is also standard practice at leading style guides including *The Chicago Manual of Styles* and *The Diversity Style Guide*. In this book, capitalizing "Black" serves as an act of empowerment and a demand for universal recognition of the systematic displacement of ethnic identities associated with the enslavement of peoples of the African Diaspora.

The storytelling approach of this work employs a common Afro American vernacular when referring to particular ethnic groups as "Blacks" and "whites", as opposed to using one of the heavily debated descriptive terms for collectives in the social sciences such as "Black people"; "Black communities"; "white people"; and so on.

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Part IX Master's nightmares and doctoral dreams

Introduction

I don't know why I'm so scared all the time. I just wish I could say that this is a new feeling. Or is it? The only thing that I do know is that the pandemic didn't help. I am now genuinely afraid of anyone with whom I suspect that I don't share a political viewpoint. At the top of my list are those unmasked millions and their unvaccinated cousins. Both have proven through their actions—or lack of caring—that they are my mortal enemies. I pay a heavy price each day to be able to carry this much hate and suspicion. It has made me content to be alone, and cautious about doing just about anything that will require me to have contact with anyone I do not know. I am the antithesis of my former self, the brave world traveler. Instead, I am now devoid of any desire to extend my life beyond a 12-mile radius of my apartment.

Accompanying my fear of others is what I know from former experiences to be the sense that I'm slowly developing some form of mental illness. In the past, during my "unwanted" childhood and as an adult member of a historically marginalized minority, I only responded with positivity to the countless confrontations I had with very hurtful people. Then, the immersion into despondency that came from these confrontations only served to rejuvenate my spirit. In this book, I revisit some of these events to ask why it is imperative that I liberate myself from the COVID-19 legacy of distrustfulness and partisanship.

Motivation: An intersection of the personal and professional

Any analysis must begin with a close look at the present; in this case, who I am today. Professionally, I am an optimistic anthropologist who focuses on positive outcomes to gaining knowledge through daily events such as success. The foundation of my work builds on a strong argument by fellow anthropologist Setha Low (2009). I share her opinion, and research and teach from the standpoint that truthful language and actions produce a "lived experience, and as a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world" (p. 26). Low opened the door for me to embrace and study acts of compassion and veracity. For the first two months of 2020, the direction of my career as an independent researcher was solidly grounded in Low's erudite counsel to place emphasis on positive outcomes. When the epidemic created a culturally ubiquitous event—a coming-to-hatred moment—I was in the initial stages of developing a project to explore the retention of minority students at the University of California Riverside and California Polytechnic University Pomona.

The advancement of this organization was halted when the virtual atmosphere of social separation prevented a necessary evolution of the central committee's cohesiveness. At the time of writing it is 2022, and for the past two years, societal uncertainty and division continue to be factors that define a coupling of unpredictability of the coronavirus with a pre-existing and more intensified climate of political anxiety. The prevailing milieu, marked by the reconstitution of primal social inequities and the associated increase in avarice, dictated detachment from and

the rampant politicization of a plethora of issues that continue to shape our daily lives. Too many of us are overwhelmed by the struggle to identify which side we are on. When I read posts on social media, I realize that I'm like so many of my fellow pandemic survivors; my spirit is broken in a way I have never experienced before. Each day, the lack of socialization requires that I deconstruct my former life while asking what precipitating events facilitated the formation of my new hate-centric identity. The best place to begin a search for an answer to this question is to identify several key events that shaped my youth and early adult years.

Two days after my birth, my natural parents, who considered my arrival an inauspicious moment, left me at the hospital. I define this phase of my life as the almost-adoption stage. Parental abandonment was followed by 14 years of being an almost-daughter in the sometimes supportive, yet severely broken, household of a third cousin. The second period began shortly after my 15th birthday when I became a ward of the Allegheny County Court. During this time of estrangement from the only parents I had ever known, I completed high school while living among violent strangers in a juvenile home for wayward girls. Beginning at the age of 16 and until I reached my early 20s, I was without any familiar connections and support. During these four-plus years of darkness, I began a conscious effort to survive adversity that would extend a lifetime. As the nation struggled to deal with the Civil Rights movement and an escalating war in Vietnam, I made a deliberate decision to internalize uncertainty and to normalize the fear that accompanies involuntary solitude. Although this internal struggle left me feeling hungry for atten-

tion and desperate to belong, I simultaneously decided to channel all my energy in a positive direction by focusing on education and post-graduation employment. This book will explore several encounters that happened during this timeframe, with individuals who instilled in me a desire to value and promote what I now feel incapable of consistently exercising: compassion. The introspective work of writing is a mission to revitalize my ability to practice mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

I am apprehensive, in 2022, about launching a redux of a book project that began in 2013 with my first memoir. Eight years ago, both time and space were far less nebulous. At that time, I was a one-time divorcee living independently in California while separated from my second husband. Left alone and over 2,000 miles from a home I had built with my spouse, I began to want to know more about my own identity. Was my decision to leave the second marriage cruel? What kind of wife just walks out the door knowing good and well the likelihood they will ever come back is at best a remote possibility? After two years spent walking the beaches in Santa Barbara without finding any answers, I published my first book *Three Rivers Crossed* (2011), which focuses on the precarious and often hilarious first and second periods of my life. But things are very different now. As a social scientist, I recognize that my continued search will reveal ways in which my self-imposed societal estrangement is directly related to the lived experiences of women of color in the neoliberal, misogynistic, and hegemonic systems that define private industry and academia. My deepest hope is that this book, about my post-COVID-19 state of mental unrest and the construction of a positive path forward, will serve to help

other pandemic survivors to rededicate themselves to being practitioners of human kindness.

Pursuing achievement and truth in academia

From an anthropological point of view, I define the practice of hatred as a characteristic that directly relates to the inequitable distribution of power. This book identifies, demoralizes, and thereby attempts to unseat the duplicitous, misogynistic, and racist practices that undergird hatred. These robust praxes are just some of the resistant forces that Black females confront as they strive to claim personal, professional, and academic achievement. As part of the early twentieth century great wave of migrant Afro Americans from the Deep South to the northeastern states, my almost-adoptive cousins instilled in me the belief that sanguine forms of power reside in historically disadvantaged places. In this text, I refer to my guardians as mother and father, because I benefited greatly from the time and love they invested in me for 15 years. One lesson they repeatedly shared was that the way I could socially advance was to "Get an education. It's the only thing they can't take away from you." Scholars note that this idiom, spoken in many languages, was globally used by countless parents of marginalized populations to inspire their children. The saying serves two purposes. It established a pathway to achievement that is tempered by a shot of reality—the benefits of education will always be under threat. An accompanying lesson, regarding success, was that the acquisition of tangible and virtual achievements is too often a struggle to distinguish between deceitfulness and truthfulness.

As an example of this struggle, a wide acceptance of blatant untruths and the adoption of a counter-revolution to resurrect veracity have intersected to globally influence previously conservative and very diverse social institutions. This conflict can be seen in the actions they have taken—or not taken—to respond to the onslaught of a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. Although political, economic, and cultural differences would dictate the individual national response to COVID-19, universal changes in the field of education were produced by social distancing and mixed messages about how to combat the disease. Repeatedly, US educational administrators during the pandemic embraced superstitions and often-cruel ideas. In the early days of the coronavirus, these actors politicized and advocated the continued utilization of facilities, and a return to the classroom, without much consideration for the potential to do irrevocable harm. The unionized and non-collective voices of the students, faculty, and staff who would be forced to occupy those spaces seemed to have little influence. Only the rage of the disease itself halted the institutionalization of these carelessly conceived notions. Public health experts prioritized the preservation of my senior generation, and this act left us with the responsibility of needing to quickly come to terms with existential questions such as how we accurately document and promote a return to honesty.

Exploring the role of truth in anthropology requires a holistic approach. For this reason, it is not enough to recall the impact of COVID-19 without taking into consideration a parallel crisis: the senseless death of an endless list of men of color. The need to seek a comprehensive viewpoint was the topic of a particular class in

which the advice of a student became the impetus for completing this volume: during one of the online teaching sessions, a class member literally told me why I should write this book. On that day, I was consumed with guilt when the authorities announced that my generation would be given priority to receive the first of a series of two vaccinations to combat the novel coronavirus. I felt this was an unfair and unethical decision. With tears in my eyes, I asked the class, "How can I accept a shot that should be given to my child or grandchildren? I've already experienced a full life. Stepping in line ahead of you—the generation that is now globally walking in the streets in defense of human rights." One of my students began to slowly speak, "But Professor Hall, you don't understand. The truth is that, without our elders, we won't have the knowledge we need as a society. We need you." After that day, I never questioned the logic of my senior citizen priority vaccination status. Also, the council of that inspirational student at California Polytechnic University, and the motivational activism displayed by her peers during the pandemic, inspired me to undertake the core mission of this work. The student's comment points to an urgent need to merge the ideas of a new generation, outraged by the senseless death of a mounting number of men of color, with the time-tested past ethical axioms that espouse a need for cross-generational uplifting and the value of truth.

I am the adopted daughter of a mother who possessed a broad body of practical knowledge. The source of her ability to make good judgements is unknown. Perhaps this was an innate skillset that she first employed as a very small child in post-slavery North Carolina. She rarely spoke about her life in the South or

her experiences as part of the early 1900s' multi-generational family migration to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The stories that she did share were accounts about how she managed to acquire a fifth-grade education while confronting both overt and veiled discrimination. As I sat with her countless times at family get togethers, she described the taunting of white boys in school yards, and the strong dislike they had for her dark skin and kinky hair. Despite the harassment and abuse, she always ended the stories with the declaration, "but they never drove me to hate". I embraced this as an ethical line of demarcation—a point I too should never cross. My interpretation of this mantra is that individual power is exercised by not internalizing and displaying animus. Instead of developing hatred, I diverted this energy towards acquiring the one thing that could not be taken away from me: the promised empowerment of education. For most of my life, this logic worked. I found that by achieving professional and academic success I could mitigate the damage done by encounters with malicious liars, maniacal acts of prejudice towards me because of my gender and racial identity, and deaths that literally broke my heart. But the hatred produced by the complex social and political climates of the pandemic era will require a new approach—one grounded in past truths with an eye on future hostilities.

Dogmatic struggles and the intersections of truths and lies

A deeply religious woman, my mother experimented with the dogmas of Christianity. She constantly waged battles along the lines of what is ethical and what lies outside the boundaries

of truth. She managed a policy business (a type of informal gambling) out of our house, while traveling throughout Pittsburgh in a quest to find a church that suited her spiritual needs. The strategy she employed originated in scripture—"Lord forgive them"—and by repeating this phrase, she was able to placate anger by transferring it to a higher power. She often spoke about the inequality she saw in the education system, which she described as one in which Black children were often severely punished while being given little encouragement and fewer opportunities to advance. Perhaps for this reason, she and many of her compatriot fellow-migrants turned to the network of Baptist and AME Zion churches. Within the confines of these sanctuaries, Black migrants shared their struggles as they created educational and social opportunities for their children.

As a part of these congregations, she found a refuge from the control and demand of the city's fearful whites. The animosity of the whites fed the notion that Blacks were coming to Pittsburgh to work for lower wages and eventually replace them in their jobs. Even though most working-class whites in the city were themselves first-generation migrants from Europe, they abandoned old country resentments to oppose granting equal access to education and employment to the Black migratory settlers. At the same time, Pittsburgh's lucrative 1950s' steel-based industrial complex continued to demand more and more unskilled workers. Black church leaders astutely recognized this to be an opportunity extended to them by a white community in desperate need of their services. Many moderate Black spiritualists of that early twentieth century era embraced Booker T. Washington's hard-work and humble assimilationism (although

Washington's work is perhaps better understood as humble accommodationism) (Du Bois, Gates and Oliver, 1999) as being the best approach for Blacks to gain economic security. Deeply seated in Christian ideology, assimilation posited that one's cultural idiosyncrasies are bad and those of the dominant social order are the most desirable and good. I argue that my mother accepted this cautionary reasoning that there is an impenetrable barrier between what is right and that which is undeniably wrong because it is deeply engrained in church dogma. This viewpoint uniting Christianity with Manichaeism originated in the seventh century. Today, for many devout Christians, the world is still a dichotomous expression of two untenable positions: good | bad and right | wrong.

Later in life, I discovered that philosophers refer to my mother's viewpoint as an ontological divide, or in her case, seeing life as sets of diametrically opposed opposites such as the fundamental dichotomy, truth | lie. In her spiritual journeys she attended holiness, Baptist, Catholic, and Episcopalian churches, to celebrate and become familiar with the eternal truths of Christianity. But she had a precarious and questionable relationship with the Lord. In her opinion our home was a Christian household. On the other hand, our survival depended on the money she made as a numbers runner. The business of waging bets to achieve the Afro American version of the American Dream opened the doors to buying two symbols of achievement: a house and a car. She did not see any conflict at the junction of a belief that success was an estimable quest requiring hard work with the ability to bet the right set of numbers. In other words, her approach to success was just as much about luck as scholastic achievement. I am truly my

mother's daughter. I too repeatedly gamble by investing money I really don't have in the pursuit of a dream to acquire success. My mother brilliantly created analogies to enforce her ideas about truth and hatred. I employ storytelling to unite the sound judgement of my mother with my own personal tales of survival. In this way, I'm able to bring to center stage the changing and dynamic identities that exist along the border between truth and falsehood. The narrative that follows about the years leading up to my academic career is an analogy that examines resilience from a historical perspective. By looking at the elements of past and contemporary fears, this volume argues that there is a pathway forward for those born without bootstraps. For the historically marginalized, the creation of uplifting texts that highlight their perspectives opens the door for them to construct a meaningful life despite the age-old conflict between fact and falsehood and the current pressing conundrum confronting mankind.

Facts have the capacity to hold lies at bay, but it is not always easy to identify what is the truth. Another one of my mother's favorite adages will serve here as an example: "There's nothing worse in the world than a liar. I would rather let a thief or even a murderer in my house than a liar. You can lock up your valuables from a thief or buy a gun to stop a killer. Nothing in your house is safe if you let in a liar." The liar is an individual who, by my mother's definition, is a menace capable of thievery and even the destruction of life. Yet this same maxim reveals an innate characteristic of liars—a propensity to deceive and even embody the truth. It is this uncomplicated reasoning that lies at the root of theoretical arguments about doing ethnography as an anthropologist.

Based on my past experiences at the junction of truthfulness and prevarication, it is logical that I specialize in anthropology. Anthropologists employ certain procedures to accomplish doing what is referred to as ethnographic research, or the recording of the cultures of people. These tools include but are not limited to conducting interviews, participating in the day-to-day activities of the population of study, and administrating surveys. The vast body of knowledge about the practice of doing ethnography explores the long-debated theoretical concern of conveying that which is truly a representation of the cultural relationships of the people of study. Like my mother who admitted in her own words that it is not easy to recognize the truth, anthropologists too often fail to create truth in their ethnographic records. The body of literature dealing with resolving the problems associated with ethnographic praxis recommends numerous solutions to the problem. Within these volumes, there is also ample documentation about the damage that can result to a culture once it is inaccurately captured in the writings produced by anthropologists. From an anthropological perspective, the cost of what my mother referred to as admitting the liar falls anywhere on the spectrum from the thief of priceless artifacts to the total annihilation of susceptible cultures.

The account of my life you are about to read does not stray away from the above argument that dominates anthropological literature. In my capacity as a lecturer and mentor in three major institutions, I have used fragments of the stories of my youth to convey to students a simple truth: although it is rarely easy to recognize a lie, it is true that the pathway of a lie will always be cluttered, chaotic, and dangerous. This is an important message

to convey to minority students who feel alienated on campuses that claim to be multicultural oases. The purpose of the research project I was designing prior to the outbreak of COVID-19 was to investigate this dynamic by focusing on the positive outcomes of faculty mentoring projects designed to serve disadvantaged minority students.

Far too many times, historically marginalized students fail to complete their studies because educational institutions employ antiquated practices that mask the truth. For example, students participate in instructor and cultural climate quantitative surveys that falsely imply students have the power to change the beliefs and practices of tenured professors and long-serving administrators. Campus dynamics are people-centric and thereby they evolve rapidly. Conversely, the processes to bring about a systemic change are too often mired in racist and male-centric ideas that are not grounded in common sense. As an example, universities invest millions in the compilation and analysis of surveys taken to give ontological meaning to the cultural climate of their campuses. The ubiquitous use of the overarching term campus climate to describe the dynamic and complex diversity is a type of thinking that is associated with a host of neoliberal concepts such as multiculturalism—a heavily debated 1980s globalist abstraction that still lacks a concrete definition. In the political domain, administrators determine the meaning of multiculturalism and the same holds true for college campus climate surveys. Although the extrapolation of survey data is usually a joint enterprise between administrators and marginalized members of the campus community, the campus is a hierarchal society where policy creation is an administrative

responsibility. This opens the door to questioning the ability of these tools to remove bias and accurately depict the real problems of institutional racism faced by minority students. The objectification of college learning environments, like a measurement of the implementation of multicultural public policies, has the potential to point to a need to recognize student difference and imbalances in enrollment. Yet currently enrolled students from these same demographics often continue to withdraw from school in higher numbers than their white classmates. Unfortunately, these students frequently internalize their failure to succeed without recognizing that it is equally the institution's obligation to identify and meet their needs. For this reason, I selectively tell my students excerpts from the stories that comprise this volume which feature insightful adages that I credit to my mother. March 9, 2020, on the eve of a global pandemic, I focused on her ideas about truth and falsehoods as I drove to lecture my final face-to-face class at California State Polytechnic University.

Learning objectives

The text inspires an interdisciplinary literary review of several related bodies of theory about the diversity of the Afro American lived experience. Focusing on the central topic of resilience within pandemic contexts from a female and Afro-centric perspective, consider:

- What is the impact of structural racism on the Black female body?
- Is the pursuit of truth compatible with the acquisition of the American Dream?
- Are current academic viewpoints about fear, hate, compassion, and success in need of a post-COVID-19 re-evaluation?