

From Seed to Impact

Stories of Struggle, Resistance, and Resilience in the Fight for Justice

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AND MARION BROWN

La fondation de la section de la Nouvelle-Écosse de l'« Association for Black Social Workers (ABSW) » en 1979 a marqué le début d'une tradition de mentorat des femmes noires en matière de leadership et d'influence. Dans cet article, l'une des membres fondatrices partage ses idées et ses stratégies lors d'une conversation avec quatre de ses anciens étudiants qu'elle a encadrés jusqu'au statut de collègue.

Introduction

The Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers (ABSW) was founded by four African Nova Scotian women in 1979, and we have been fighting for change for over 40 years. Wanda Thomas Bernard was one of those founding women, and has been on the front lines of community advocacy and education throughout the decades. Over the course of her career, Wanda has purposefully planted seeds across her involvement in practice, teaching, research, community engagement, and scholarship in order to grow the influence of racialized women and men and challenge systemic exclusion. This paper is a dialogue among Wanda Thomas Bernard and four former students—Sasan Issari, Rajean Willis, Bria Symonds, and Marion Brown—about our interwoven journeys in the pursuit of social justice. We write in the spirit of collaborative autoethnography (Hernandez et al.): a joining of overlapping experiences in life and work, which broaden our individual narratives to create a collective, relational story that offers insight regarding struggle, resistance, and resilience. Each former student represents one of the decades that Wanda has been tending the gardens of social justice. We write as a multi-generational cooperative, occupying different

locations in our journeys. When we wrote this article, we were an undergraduate student, two doctoral students, a Professor, and a Parliamentarian. Although Wanda is the hub of the wheel in stimulating this conversation, we share a range of interactions and engagements with one another, extending the reach of our relationships.

Collaborative Autoethnography

Collaborative autoethnography is a framework that draws upon individual accounts to encourage meaning making across social, political, and cultural experiences. It mirrors our commitment to drawing upon all of our voices to unpack the complex social phenomena that comprise our lives and experiences in social work education, research, and practice (Hernandez et al.). Writing in this collective takes an intentional stand against single-story explanations that contribute to essentialism and its erasure of joint efforts. Particularly in a discussion about struggle, resistance, and resilience across generations of social workers each at different stages on our journeys, collaborative autoethnography provides powerful validation to both speak from our own and our shared locations. It is recognition of the self and the social as mutually constitutive, an intersubjectivity facilitated by relationship and shared commitment to the aspirations for equitable, inclusive, and expansive narratives of racialized women in leadership.

Our collective grew intentionally through Wanda's invitation to have a "fireside conversation" at the ABSW 40th anniversary conference. Through reflective dialogue, we shared experiences, examples, lessons, and learning about how to have influence amidst societal structures

that systemically exclude the voices of racialized women leaders, marginalized students, and how to challenge the white supremacy that allows those structures to flourish.

Sasan is the first of Wanda's former Master of Social Work thesis students to pursue doctoral studies, and to engage in empirical research that builds from her foundational work on the social, health, and wellness impacts of racism. Recognizing the synergy in their research interests, Sasan has been mentored by Wanda in the development of academic presentations at national and international conferences. Rajean was a student of Wanda's during the middle years of Wanda's teaching. Rajean undertook her social work field placement with ABSW, and as a result of the growth that occurred through having a student placement, the ABSW successfully lobbied for funding for a full-time staff member. Rajean was that first staff member, and through that role engaged in several community projects with Wanda. Through a major project on mental health and gambling, Rajean developed strong leadership skills as she was responsible for leading a province-wide project. Rajean is a PhD candidate at Mount St. Vincent University.

Bria was an undergraduate social work student in the last Afrocentric Social Work Perspectives course that Wanda taught at Dalhousie University in 2019. Bria was invited by Wanda to join a project at Nova Institution for Women in winter 2020, while she was doing her student placement at ABSW. This project focused on advocacy work for female inmates who were experiencing discrimination and marginalization inside the correctional institution. Bria has also worked with ABSW on a community project on commercial sexual exploitation and the impacts human trafficking has on Black women and girls. Marion was a student in the first class that Wanda taught at Dalhousie University in 1990. They later became colleagues when Wanda hired Marion for a part-time, short-term teaching contract in 2002, which then progressed to a tenure track position. Wanda has been a mentor to Marion throughout, in engaging in meaningful academic work that counters dominant narratives of race and uses privilege for action.

Our Dialogue

MARION: "If I'd have known then what I know now" is often a way of articulating lessons learned. Having learned from your thoughtful, intentional approach to learning and living since 1990, it is hard for me to imagine what you might choose to revise, but I do wonder what, if anything, you would have expected differently of students, colleagues, and even yourself, if you had, in fact, known then what you know now.

WANDA: Reflecting on this question, I realize that

I don't have different expectations from students or colleagues, but I have many of myself. One major difference is that I would have engaged more in political processes in the early years of my career. I misjudged just how important the political is to the personal and how significant the political is, in advocating for inclusion and change. As a result, I would have built more of this into my teaching. While I always focused on social action and social advocacy, I positioned these from the outside, never from the inside. I have a better appreciation, now, for the fact that we need strong advocates in all these spaces. As a Black woman in leadership, I have a responsibility to teach more about these processes, and to encourage racialized women to enter these spaces.

I also would have entered administration earlier in my career. The opportunities for this came later in my career, as did work in the academy. My very presence in the academy defies the lack of expectations placed on me at birth and through my early years. The fact that I managed to break through some glass ceilings was a matter of preparation meeting opportunity, compounded by sheer luck. But real change cannot depend on such factors, hence my strong desire to mentor the next generations, while breaking barriers to change.

MARION: From my perspective, your positioning in the academy alone is mentorship to future generations. You worked long and hard towards that end, and I see the effect it has on students over the years. I can imagine that some opportunities may have felt like luck; however, I see the dedication and the hard work to make it so. I wouldn't want the idea of "luck" to obscure the toil and its tolls!

I also want to bring into our conversation how steeped your lessons have been in anti-Black racism. You've been a central teacher for me in learning and unlearning my white privilege as well as anti-Black racism. Sometimes you directly educated me, and many times you offered space for me to ask questions of myself and others. You had clear expectations that I do my own work, and also you offered yourself as a resource. What are your priorities now, in your anti-racism work?

WANDA: I have been doing anti-racism work during my entire career with most of that time on the front lines trying to lead change. Today I am more focussed on the systemic issues, trying to effect change locally and nationally, through policies that will help to make anti-racism work more effective. Bolstered by the Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024), I am also drawing attention specifically to anti-Black

racism. Furthermore, African Canadians have not experienced enough progress, and our realities are not well known nationally. I also want to focus priorities on African Canadian communities to help prepare our critical mass for the new opportunities that lay ahead.

SASAN: As a racialized, cisgender man working in mental health and addictions, throughout my academic journey and in my practice, working with you has deepened my analysis of the ways in which systemic racism impacts the mental health and well-being of racialized health professionals. What suggestions do you offer racialized workers who are feeling silenced and voiceless in their workplaces and organizations?

WANDA: There is a fine line between feeling silenced and voiceless and *being* silenced and voiceless. If it is a feeling, you need to understand why you feel the way you do, and then develop an effective strategy to deal with it. You will know the difference if you are actually being silenced. The strategy will be different, depending on your analysis of what is happening. An approach my colleague and I developed several years ago (Bernard and Hamilton-Hinch) is the Triple A Paradigm: “Awareness, Analysis, and Action.” Once you are aware, do a critically reflective analysis, and then commit to actions that you can take to lead change. Seek authentic allies to support and assist you on this journey.

SASAN: The Tripe A Paradigm resonates deeply with me. I agree that action is crucial when it comes to confronting racism and staying well. Racism, intersectional oppression, and white supremacy impact our spirits. They are traumatic events that can have long-standing effects on our mental health and well-being. You remind me of the importance of braver spaces in our teaching and practice: it is not enough to individually feel comfortable and safe; we need to be allies that people can trust and lean on in difficult times. That said, I am cautious to not assume that everyone is an ally. I am mindful that racism goes beyond horizontal violence; I have experienced lateral violence in various academic and work environments. Specifically, racialized educators and practitioners are already mindful of the hostile environment we occupy; sometimes we assume that someone is an ally since they share a similar experience. The reality is that structural and systemic racism have created deep divisions in communities. You remind me of the importance to be brave and take those actions for change.

BRIA: During my time as your student, you advocated that anti-oppressive and Africentric practices can be used by folks from all walks of life. Since

graduating with my BSW, I strive to use different lenses appropriately and effectively. I believe my generation has the potential to reach amazing heights, with pioneers like yourself leaving us the tools. What advice would you give up-and-coming professionals who want to use anti-oppressive and Africentric practices effectively?

WANDA: I see the mentoring of the next generations as one of my greatest responsibilities today, and I take that role seriously. My advice is straightforward: first, be academically prepared. Get as much formal education as you can and also commit to lifelong learning, especially in the social justice field that is constantly evolving. Second, in your workplaces, know the policies and how to implement them in the best interest of the people with whom you are working. Third, be grounded in whatever sustains you, and that will be different for each of us. Fourth, lift as you lead and give back to the communities that helped to raise you. Aim high, set clear goals, and always remember to bring others along with you. Build on my legacy but also create your own.

SASAN: I really appreciate this deep dedication to pay it forward in the community by “lifting others as you lead” and being an ally. What has helped you to do so?

WANDA: One of the things that really helps me to continue fighting for change and to continue to lift as I lead is the pure joy that comes when others join the journey. Whenever a young student gets that “fire in the belly” commitment to social justice and a determination to fight for change, I feel excited! I am also inspired by allies like you, working across difference. That is the essence of this dialogue with the four of you—all students from different decades of my academic career, and each of you with not only a passion to continue the fight, but the evidence of you actually doing so. You cannot imagine the joy that it gives me to see what you are doing in your own journeys.

MARION: I’ve watched you lead with quiet determination, calm, and wisdom—in classrooms, board rooms, around tables at faculty meetings and with administrators. I can easily recall conversations going in several directions, emotions growing hot and high, and at some point, we would all look to you—never ruffled, never out of sorts, always focused and clear. You mentioned that we all need our ways to stay grounded. What are your suggestions for us, in sustaining our energy amidst systems, structures, and tensions that can bring out the opposite of the best parts of ourselves?

WANDA: Leadership requires a number of interrelated skills, but people often overlook these soft skills that you reference in this question. I would say that my spirituality is the number one strategy that helps me to stay grounded, in the midst of storms, competing demands, and complex sets of priorities. I am not sure what I would do if I did not have my faith, which is rooted in an African-centred spirituality. My second point is the experience of being grounded in Africentric principles and theory and an Africentric view of the world, which underpin my thoughts, my decision-making processes, and my actions. Although it can be challenging to practice Africentricity in Eurocentric environments, it provides me with such a strong anchor that it enables me to remain calm and determined, even in the worst of times.

My third survival strategy is knowledge of and deep respect for our ancestors. Our shared history sustains me during the most challenging times. Learning about our past is not a luxury we had as children growing up in this country. Therefore, the opportunity to learn, value, appreciate, and build on our history is now a privilege and a responsibility. This knowledge definitely helps me to remain calm in the midst of struggle.

African spirituality, knowledge and pride in African history, and using Africentric Theory to guide my work has been soul sustaining. It is not about how I keep these at the core, but how these practices have enabled me to be strong in the face of adversity. It is not about *me* keeping *them*, but these practices keeping me strong, resilient, proactive, and productive in environments where I was often marginalized, unwelcomed, directly and indirectly. I have been the first in far too many situations, which often means that I am the yardstick by which others coming after me will be measured. This is an incredible weight to carry, and I could not have done so without such a solid foundation. For that I will be forever grateful. RAJEAN: I'm encouraged by the growing acceptance in academia of intertwining professional and personal interests when it comes to research and writing, evidenced in the phrase "we write about what we worry about." How have you woven who you are, as an African-Canadian woman, wife, mother, community member, and academic, through your professional career?

WANDA: I made a decision early in my career that I would engage in research that was important to me. I wanted to do research that would have value and meaning in my community. I wanted to engage in research that would make a difference. In every major research project that I was involved with, I

can say that the personal was intertwined with the professional, even before this was accepted in the academy. Perhaps I helped to lead that change in the academy. Doing groundbreaking work that was relevant and meaningful to communities was incredibly rewarding, although I was frequently told that it could undermine my career. But as I look back, I would not change much of it. Those projects each made a contribution. If I were to change anything, it would be to have published more from the various projects so the work could have reached a wider audience. Reflecting now, that is one thing I wish I had devoted more time to.

RAJEAN: That is so helpful. As people of African descent, we are aware of the harms that research can and has had on us as a people, given the history of research being done "on" us. However, I am learning how research can also be helpful, and that is the research I want to lead—for example, when a participant feels empowered through the sharing of their story, or perhaps impacts policy development from their story. I want to be part of change on individual, collective, and societal levels. Ultimately, positive impact for African Canadians is the overarching goal. My introduction to academic research was through the Dalhousie social work program, and your research on race and well-being. Coming into it, my thoughts about research were of a positivist, evidence-based orientation, with an emphasis on science, which is what I was taught in school. It was through your work that I came to understand how research is so much more. I came to understand the difference between "research with" and "research on," which I appreciate greatly.

I could not imagine myself in this place, with a completed PhD, until a few years ago. Although I had a few examples, through you and the other few Black women in academia whom I knew, I was resistant, for reasons I now see as misinformed and falsely limiting. I feel as though my presence in academia is important not only for those who might look to me as a mentor, but also for the broader society to see me and hear my representation of voices of my community, validated through research and teaching. We need more racialized women in academia, and I want to be a part of that proud trajectory. What is a moment you are most proud of in your career? WANDA: It is difficult to choose one! When I completed my doctoral studies in 1996, I was determined to find ways to bring Africentric Theory to our school and my work. I received funding to explore the field of study with African Nova Scotian social workers and

determined that while many were using its principles, most were unaware of the theory; there was also a strong interest in learning more about it. As a result, I proposed to the Dalhousie University School of Social Work that I develop an elective in Africentric Social Work. It was approved for the graduate and undergraduate programs, and has been offered on a regular basis since then, and I continue to teach it as a Sessional Instructor. The first year I taught the course in 1999, 30 students were enrolled, and I was so encouraged! One of the assignments was an Africentric analysis of media stories during a one-month period, which was powerful. Ten students continued to work with me after the course ended, and we created a multi-media tool using their media stories. The DVD called “Stop, Look and Listen,” later won a Human Rights Award. I have also used this content to mobilize communities and teach Africentric Theory to community groups in different contexts. This work has definitely been a seminal career moment.

BRIA: The Africentric course was a transformative experience in my first year of the BSW program. It helped me find myself as an individual, and shaped how I can grow as a service provider through using a holistic approach that values everyone yet centres those racialized. The course allows students from all walks of life to analyze the importance of unity, partnership, community, and African practices that engage and empower the learning journey. Africentric Theory has helped me progress as a student and in my professional life by intersecting with anti-oppressive approaches to analyze barriers and problematic systems.

RAJEAN: I always brag about the Africentric Theory course at Dalhousie University School of Social Work, being a former student and also Teaching Assistant for the course. It was my absolute favourite course in my social work journey due to its community-oriented nature and the validation of my personal worldview of Africentrism. Learning about Africentric Theory was so affirming for me as a student, and continues to be in my developing career, and in my understanding of myself personally and professionally. As a TA in this course, I gained a greater appreciation of the significance of the theory for people and students of African descent, as well as how those of non-African ancestry can practice within an Africentric framework. These were clear in class engagement, assignments, and reflections of being within the community as their assignments required them to engage with a community of African descent, which was brilliant. I observed your collegial teaching style, and you

provided the opportunity for me to co-teach as a TA, which helped me grow into being a presenter and facilitator as well as a sessional instructor.

BRIA: In addition to your teaching in the university, your community work has boundless lessons for we racialized women aiming for leadership. Your creation of the Association of Black Social Workers in 1979 has led me to find a personal and professional home, decades later. Being an African Nova Scotian woman who struggled with owning my Blackness and standing strong in my truth, ABSW is the only organization where I could be unapologetically Black and my authentic self. I felt at home because the work I was doing at my practicum placement reflected me as a racialized person and spread awareness on how people of African descent deserve to be treated. Since ABSW is embedded in Africentric Theory and anti-oppressive practice, I was able to approach my clients and situations with a social justice lens that was congruent for me. Although in earlier university education I had exposure to analyses of class, gender, and race, I didn't see myself or people of African ancestry reflected in academia. You were my first Black professor, and a Black woman at that. It means a lot to me, in my identity, to learn from a Black woman about theory and practice: it brings a sense of critical hope, resiliency, and power to achieve great things despite the obstacles stacked against us. Your books [*Race and Well-Being; Fighting for Change*] underscore the very dialogue we are having in this paper: that Black women are often forgotten, overlooked, undervalued, and are expected to “make the best” of every situation. Though Black women prove time and time again we can make a way out of no way, it wasn't until I applied Africentric Theory and worked at ABSW that I was validated for being “enough.”

RAJEAN: I agree fully, Bria. ABSW was where I began my social work career, and I will forever be grateful to Wanda for initiating and sustaining its existence. Mentorship grounds the work of the ABSW, and it has been foundational to my professional and career growth. Wanda, you were very involved in my supervision during this time; you supported and challenged me. And the breadth of exposure to various fields of community and government work, research opportunities, training, facilitations, counselling, and stakeholder involvement has been invaluable. Moreover, ABSW was the only organization offering culturally specific mental health experience. Having an opportunity to learn more about mental health and addictions, as well as the opportunity to lead a province-wide community project, were opportunities

made available through ABSW. This experience led me to employment within community mental health services at provincial and federal government levels, and a graduate thesis that explored the impact of culturally specific community-driven programs on the life journey of African Nova Scotians. ABSW was identified as one of these initiatives, which speaks to the significant leadership provided by this organization.

Conclusion

An intentional and cumbersome web of societal structures work to exclude and dismiss Black women from taking their rightful stand in leadership positions across a range of institutions and organizations. And yet Black women persevere, influencing and investing in a legacy for current and future generations of Black women and all who want to lead change. This article has detailed how, through a combination of culturally rooted, collective resources that fortify and ground, intentional partnerships that grow community connection, and fostering relations with allies who will take action in the struggle, Black women weave experiences and stories of struggle, resistance, and resilience to tend the gardens of social justice from seed to full bloom.

Wanda Thomas Bernard, BSW, MSW, PhD, is a highly esteemed social worker, educator, researcher, community activist and advocate for social change. She is a founding member of the Association of Black Social Workers and she was the first African Nova Scotian to hold a tenure track position at Dalhousie University and to be promoted to full professor. She is a member of the Order of Nova Scotia and the Order of Canada and was appointed to the Senate of Canada in 2016. Wanda is Professor Emerita at the Dalhousie University School of Social Work.

Sasan Issari, PhD, RSW, has his own clinical and consulting business.

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