

***In Our Own Words:***  
**Challenges to Black Female Leadership and  
Using Action Research to [Re-]Frame the Questions**

**By Amie Louise Harper**

## **Introduction**

I begin by directing the court's attention to the fact that as the accused in this case, I find myself at an enormous disadvantage. As a Black woman, I must view my own case in the historical framework of the fate which has usually been reserved for my people in America's halls of justice.

From the pre-Civil War slave codes and the equally pernicious Black codes of the postwar period to the overt, codified racism of the South and the more subtle institutionalized racism of the country as a whole, Black people have consistently been the victims of what is supposed to be "justice." In a courtroom situation, the White prosecutor, White witnesses, especially White policemen are given far more credence by the jury-- usually overwhelmingly White-- than the Black defendant. In the event that the Black defendant has been previously convicted of a crime, his chances of acquittal are virtually nonexistent. He is therefore generally advised by his White court-appointed lawyer to enter a guilty plea even when he is manifestly innocent...

...These comments are relevant because they indicate the nature of the institution in whose hands my life has been placed. They reveal the general circumstance and the prevailing atmosphere in American courtrooms whenever a Black man or woman is placed on trial. I repeat, as a Black woman, accused of three capital crimes, I am at an enormous disadvantage. The prosecutor, representative of forces which have continually upheld this institutional racism, has enormous advantages. The history of America is on his side. There can be no doubt that we are unequal adversaries.

...It might be argued that I have ample legal assistance to adequately present my case...I believe that my role in the case will add a different and qualitative dimension to the defense. No matter how great the quantity of defense lawyers, they could never be considered a substitute for the qualitative contributions only I will be in a position to make toward my defense. The nature of these contributions will become clear during the course of my argument.<sup>1</sup>

## **Action Research and the Narrative**

On the evening of May 4, 2005, thirty-three years after Angela Davis proclaimed her powerful opening statement to a courtroom in California, a small group of Black women met at Harvard University to engage in an intimate space and share narratives and recollections of experiencing life in the United States as Black identified female U.S. National citizens. These women convened within the context of a non-traditional research model called Action Research. Unlike quantitative analysis that show racial and gender demographics as numbers in charts and

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, Angela. If They Come in the Morning New York: Third Press, Joseph Okpaku Publishing Company, Inc, 1971. 249-250.

graphs, making invisible the intimacy of the human spirit and experience behind the numbers, the qualitative component of narrative research humanizes people and holistically transforms them from the traditional “research subjects” to human storytellers. Action Research, which encompasses the narrative experience in its methodology and practice, was implemented because of its foundation in creating social change from the perspective of the marginalized.<sup>2</sup>

Action Research as a model for the May 4th gathering: (1) Shifts the traditional power balance by using research as a vehicle for the voices and thoughts of Black women to be expressed; (2) Validates the contributions of individuals and empowers participants to offer their knowledge and their sense-making skills, which are often different from those valued in traditional research; (3) Resists and deconstructs the original First World intellectual elitist and White Supremacist based “scholarly” agenda of doing research on the “Other” which is rooted in the history of colonization of the mind, body and ecology; (4) Researches with people not on people; (5) Brings your entire self to the research, not just your specific discipline or career which is commonly found in more traditional research. The latter intentionally causes fragmentation of the world, teaching researchers that they need not be accountable for the human and ecological consequences of fragmentary research and unequal policies and agendas that support it.<sup>3</sup>

Over bottled water and food, seven Black female storytellers broke bread and shared their narratives of the leadership challenges they had faced as Black females in non-profit organizations as well as in life in general. Inspirational stories were spun and weaved together. Manifesting from these narratives was a shared fabric of reality of what it is to be a college educated Black female born and raised in the United States of America.

In the spirit of Action Research, this paper will not only re-frame the questions that arose from this two hour experience, it will proactively re-structure the traditional manner in which the

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<sup>2</sup> Greenwood, Davydd and Leven, Morten. Introduction to Action Research : Social Research for Social Change. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas, Carlis. “Using Co-operative Inquiry with Black women managers: exploring possibilities for moving from surviving to thriving.” Systemic Practice and Action Research Vol 15:3 (2002) Pp 1-12. <http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/SPAR/CarlisDouglas.htm>

answers found in Westernized research are generally presented in the academy. The use of the first-person and personal narratives will be the basis of how the reader will initially explore the knowledge from this event. This method was strategically and intentionally chosen to engage the reader to participate in Action Research and question the very nature, methodologies and intent that has sustained traditional Westernized Euro-Anglo centric perceptions of acceptable and valid knowledge acquisition. Where traditional knowledge in the academy has had its roots in “objectivity”, Action Research engages “subjectivity” as a critical analysis tool for the foundation of knowledge acquisition.

Secondly and more importantly, the presentation of this work aligns with the manner in which the narratives of the two-hour event occurred. Because Action Research is a “learn and reflect as you go” praxis, there are no assumptions or expectations made at the onset of the research. Elusive questions and reoccurring themes unfold through reflection, either simultaneously as the stories are being told or after the event has occurred. Participants engage in self-reflection to draw out the elusiveness of themes and questions. New questions and clearer themes arise while the more traditional questions are reframed, repositioned or restructured to proactively resolve social inequalities. Therefore, the analysis of the narratives will occur after the stories have been presented to respect the flow of uninhibited and unstructured pure recollections of these ladies. My motivations behind this are to allow readers to think about these narratives from their own perception in a slower and more reflective manner. By not immediately analyzing each recollection, one after the other, readers can engage in connecting the themes they in all stories before I do it *for* the reader. The intention behind this is to help facilitate an engagement of critical consciousness in readers, a key component to Action Research.

Critical consciousness is a way of always increasing one’s awareness of the institutions of oppression, current and past, that sustain the status quo and suffering of people on every level. Not only are external factors of oppression questioned and researched, critical consciousness also forces the person engaging in it to constantly be aware of his or her own ignorance and privileges

that help to perpetuate and maintain inequality and misunderstandings at all levels. Taking responsibility for confronting this ignorance and these privileges, then understanding the relationships to power they have (or do not have) within institutional oppression is what evolves critical consciousness from theory to practice in a way that revolutionizes a person's awareness level from "asleep" to "awake" and engaged.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, by creating a narrative space for Black females, this research acknowledges and resists the historical context of the silencing of these women by the United States of America's systematic and institutionalized oppression of non-Whites, non-heterosexuals, economically poor and female population through systems of Whiteness and White Supremacist ideologies:

Countless authors from Freire to Fanon have suggested that oppression is best apprehended from the experiences or vantage point of the oppressed. This is not to suggest that oppressed people, as individual subjects of domination, somehow possess the correct or true understanding of racial oppression. Many of them are just as confused as Whites when it comes to an organic understanding of racism...[However]; there is a difference between analyzing Whiteness with an imagined White audience against an imagined audience of color.<sup>5</sup>

America's scholarly literature in the academe has primarily been written and published for an imagined White audience. However, the language and intent of this paper is for an imagined audience of color because

when scholars and educators address an imagined White audience, they cater their analysis to a worldview that refuses certain truths about race relations. As a result, racial understanding proceeds at the snail's pace of the White imaginary.<sup>6</sup>

The initial collaborative understanding and goal of the May 4th gathering was to ultimately address leadership challenges, focusing on gender and racial discrimination, embedded in America's dominant culture of Whiteness for hundreds of years. The "imagined" audience of this paper is Black female U.S. citizens. However, readers who do not identify as such should ask

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<sup>4</sup> hooks, bell. Black Looks: Race and Representation. Boston: South End Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Leonardo, Zeus. "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the discourse of 'White privilege.'" Educational Philosophy and Theory Vol 36:2 (2004): 137-152. Page 141.

<sup>6</sup> Leonardo, Zeus. "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the discourse of 'White privilege.'" Educational Philosophy and Theory Vol 36:2 (2004): 137-152. Page 141.

themselves how this dismantles Euro-Anglo centric traditional notions of knowledge and power when the intended audience is not the status quo. If this is uncomfortable or difficult to understand for some, simply imagine being a female of color living in a blue-collar town that is ninety-five percent Caucasian. Imagine that for twelve years of this girl's public school education, ninety-five percent of the knowledge presented to her in literature and videos is intended for an White male audience, meaning she rarely sees or hears about experiences of History, Arts, English and Science from the perspective of someone who has experienced life as a working class woman of color. How invisible would she feel? What challenges to becoming a leader would she encounter? Readers are invited to take a moment to pause and reflect on this crucial question before continuing to read more of this paper.

### **Finding the Storytellers**

Several weeks before the gathering, I posted flyers and e-mails inviting Black female social activists to talk about impediments to leadership within non-profit organizations (Appendix I). Flyers were posted in Boston area cafes and sent e-mails to non-profit organizations such as the Boston Women's Fund, Boston Black Women's Initiative and YouthBuild Boston. Though I had hoped to attract Black identified females from all economic and educational backgrounds, six storytellers responded. In April of 2005, I had emailed the storytellers my perceptions of a "good" leader so they could understand what my interpretation of the word was. This entailed five criteria: Critical Consciousness, Unconditional Love for Humanity, Communication skills, Self-Love, and Appreciation for a balance between humanity and the ecology (See Appendix II of the actual document sent). In the e-mail message, I had made it clear that it was simply *my* opinion and that they were not bound to agree to these criteria. I invited them to e-mail me their perceptions of effective leadership skills if they felt my criteria didn't align with their vision of leadership. No one conveyed disagreement.

At approximately seven o'clock in the evening, the storytellers gathered at a table in the corner of the Grossman Common room at Harvard University. Conscientious of the necessity to provide a safe space for these women to comfortably share their intimate stories, I introduced the

storytellers to the videographer: a White woman named Susan<sup>7</sup> that engaged in social activism related to deconstructing and resisting White Supremacist ideologies. This was important because I had invited solely Black identified females in order to create a private space. At the same time, I wanted to respect and acknowledge the fact that the person behind the camera recording the event was not a Black identified woman. Once everyone had agreed that this woman's presence would not compromise the safety of this space, I began to explain to the women why I had asked them to join me.

As an introduction, I explained my concern about lack of dialogue in many Boston area non-profit organizations that address impediments to leadership for Black Female in the United States. I asked the ladies to think about deconstructing rigid categories of race and gender within the mainstream discourses of those subjects. To embark on this, I asked them to think about how Westernized Euro-Anglo centric discourses, often a legacy of White Supremacist ideologies, has contributed to a (mis)understanding of the construction of race and gender as it is applied to Black Female U.S. Nationals. Therefore, I emphasized the need to analyze these racial and gender identities that had been constructed within the context of Whiteness (view Appendix III for the actual transcribed introduction). The seven of us ladies introduced ourselves, starting with Dorothy.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Storytellers and *Our* Language**

Dorothy is in her forties. She had been born and raised in New York City and identifies as gay. She lives in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Her background is in non-profit management, public health and policy. Her first job involved working in the HIV/AIDS sector in 1983 in New York City for a doctor whose practice was focused on servicing gay males with sexually transmitted diseases. Her work eventually expanded to immigrant health and women's health issues. She is the founderess of the only Black Gay Political action committee in Massachusetts called Mass Black Alliance Mamba.

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<sup>7</sup> To protect her privacy, I have used a false name for her.

<sup>8</sup> All of the ladies names have been replaced with fake ones in this paper.

Stacy is a native of Sacramento, California. She received her graduate degrees from Harvard School of Education and is a Professor in the Counseling Psychology Department of Northeastern University. She is in her forties and has worked at Johnson C Smith College, North Carolina State University, and MIT.

Melanie is the National Director of Graduate and Youth Opportunities at YouthBuild USA in Somerville, Massachusetts. She helps graduates of YouthBuild programs with career development and college placement. She is in her mid-thirties and has worked in education for about fourteen years. She is interested in the idea of how the arts connect to leadership. She has a Bachelors degree from Smith College where she majored in theater and political science.

Sister Annie is a Roman Catholic Nun. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and does research on Womanist Feminist Liberation Theology and is currently working on a project with women from the African Diaspora. She was born in Mississippi.

Irma is a twenty-nine year old MBA student at the Boston University School of Management. She is one of five Black students in a graduating class of over one hundred students. She was born and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts and is of Haitian descent. She attended Brandeis University where she received a Bachelors Degree in American Studies focusing on Latin America and has worked for profit corporations such as Raytheon.

LeAnn was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She is in her mid forties and grew up middle/upper middle class. She attended University of Pennsylvania as an undergrad and received a doctoral degree from Tufts. She has her own consulting company called Mmpau that services organizations that are sincerely trying to improve their internal conditions of social equality.

Breeze Harper is a twenty-nine year old Master's Candidate in the Technologies in Education department at Harvard University Extension School. She was born and raised in Lebanon, Connecticut, a ninety-five percent Caucasian working class rural town. She attended Dartmouth College and received a Bachelors degree in Feminist Geography. She works at YouthBuild USA in the Department of Graduate and Youth Opportunities.



There were over forty-five transcribed pages from the May 4<sup>th</sup> recording of this event. All recollections and stories were an substantial contribution to the discourse on race and gender, however, I have chosen three narratives for readers to explore before moving into the critical analysis portion of this paper This is to give readers a more holisitc understanding of the context in which some of the themes and questions emerged, reflected on at the end of the paper. This allows the true voices of the women to be heard without me re-interpreting what they have said through traditional objective analysis and Standard English. Therefore, out of respect for the pureness of their voice, I consciously did not edit the grammar or slang. If Standard English is the reader’s first language, I am hoping that the English languages in these stories will engage the reader to see and hear the life of these Black Female U.S. Nationals in *their* language. Standard English is the acceptable norm in mainstream discourse, even in topics written about race, class and gender discrimination. I ask the reader to think about what this means to those English speakers who have powerful contributions to the leadership discourse on Black Females who’s knowledge is silenced in the academe because of it’s strict rules of adhering to the conventions of Standard English. After all, “the medium *is* the message.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Hearing the Stories**

**“Did you know that all the brown people...?”**

Irma’s’s Story

I’m part of this MBA program at Boston University and I worked very hard to get there and I thought, “Ok, I’m here, I’m going to work hard and it’s going to be great and there’s going to be this support structure and I’m going to network like crazy and do all the right things and it’s going to be wonderful.” So, it’s okay. It’s not wonderful. There’s no support structure. I was looking for support, not just in the Black community, which really doesn’t exist in the MBA program, but just from administration overall and even from my peers because I figured they’d

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<sup>9</sup> McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. MIT Press: Cambridge, 1994.

be people that were working out in the real world and they would understand the problems in the real world.

Part of your MBA career revolves around your internship for the summer after your first year. This is an opportunity for you to get some exposure if you're transitioning careers like I am. I and one other person were among the first to receive an internship and we worked very hard for them and they were really competitive. The other day, I heard some- these two guys in my class- we'll call them 'privileged' because they are. He said to another friend of mine, who is actually an international student from Haiti, "Uh, everybody who has internships are either minorities or women."

This kind of nerved me a little bit because I was vexed because I worked really hard for my internship and I know that American Express is not in alliance with any other company to exclusively recruit women or minorities, particularly since the other candidate they choose for the position is a White male. So, I thought to myself, "Why am I getting all vexed about that? Why are they talking to her? She's an international student and she is Black." She's not aware of the "issues" and she doesn't understand what it means to have these two White males come over and say, "Did you know that your people and the other brownish people are the only people that have jobs?" Mind you, they never even looked for a job and it's not a priority but they went out of their way to talk to this person who doesn't know anything about this and I overheard. I pulled her over and just asked her to fill me in on the story. She told me that they indeed performed some sort of analysis across our class of one hundred fifty five people. You know, I'm like, 'I know all five of us and we do not all have jobs.' <sup>10</sup>

### **"Black People Don't Enter the Monasteries..."**

#### Sister Annie's Story

I was volunteering at a non-profit in Mississippi. I am originally from Mississippi. Well, not originally. In Africa I was told that I was originally from Africa so I have that bit straight.

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<sup>10</sup> Though these are literally her words, this was formatted into short-story form from the transcript of the May 4th, 2005 Event.

I was volunteering at a non-profit and the director heard that I wanted to become a nun. She said, “Black people don’t become nuns. Black people don’t enter monasteries.” Well, I was pretty advanced in my sacred path so I didn’t bother to pursue that statement. A little voice whispered in my ear; something that I heard from my third grade teacher. She said, “You can run your mouth but you can’t run my business.” So, I listened to that voice and I went on to enter a monastery.

I did enter a monastery even though she really did try to block it because she wanted me to stay there and help her with the work that she was doing. After I finished my training at the monastery, I was invited to go to Africa of all places.

I am a co-founderess of a Franciscan monastery in Zambia. Also, another important piece of information that I diligently researched and worked so hard on: The first Catholic monastery was established in Egypt. So, I had the privilege of going to Egypt and communicating, praying with and fellowshiping with the African nuns, brothers, priests, and monks. That was, as Rebecca Walker says, ‘Colonize this!’ because I made a complete circle. My basic understanding is: you never give people the power to define you; to define your secret path; to define your vocation. You have to take the power yourself. Through the grace of god or the goddess I was able to do that and I continue to do that.<sup>11</sup>

**“They had no fear, no hesitation, no second guessing...”**

Melanie’s Story

One of the experiences I had with an organization that I worked with was with myself, and three White men who started the organization. All of them came from a significant amount of privilege. Old German money. One of them showed me a picture of his grandfather playing with the Steinways. They came from *that* kind of money.

What I got to experience was that no one can tell me that privilege isn’t real. People try to make you think that you’re a little crazy and that you’re a conspiracy theorist. What I

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<sup>11</sup> Though these are literally her words, this was formatted into short-story form from the transcript of the May 4th, 2005 Event.

experienced for a few years was that these White men- highly intelligent, had good hearts were friends. If I had to choose White men to work with, these are the White men I would choose to work with.

I got to experience how they actually didn't have to have a formed idea before people were willing to shower them with resources. They didn't have to have a solid proposal. They actually only had to have maybe a five page concept paper. That is really all it took for these three White men and me to get showered with resources. It was incredible and I mean financial resources. "You guys need some help figuring out your organization development strategy, diversify your funding stream. I'm going to have this person, who is the CEO of this company, sit down with you. Why don't you guys have a steering committee that can help you figure out your internal structures and your infrastructure.?" It was incredible. I, as a Black woman who doesn't come from anything close to that lineage, got to witness it, experience it, often engage with it and see how it was just a completely different way to perceive the world. When I first started working with these men, I felt like they were rude because they would just call up anybody and ask for something. They had no fear, no hesitation, no second-guessing to call up anyone to ask at any level. About 80% of the time they got what they asked for. Some of that was because they had these family connections and what have you. Some of it was because they had this sense of entitlement.

### **Finding the Question, Reframing the Question, Themes Emerging**

*"I hope that we shall once again begin to build beloved community not looking for a leader but determined to respect and activate the leadership capacities within each on of us."*

*June Jordan<sup>12</sup>*

After much critical consciousness induced analysis, this dialogue showed that the underlying themes that are often found in the challenges of Black female leadership must be

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<sup>12</sup> Jordan, June. Some of Us Did Not Die. New York: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002. Page 149

reframed and re-questioned from a radical point of view. Though issues such as White Privilege<sup>13</sup>, low self-esteem among Blacks, gender-discrimination, and the analysis of the ‘Other’ have been part of Academic discourse on Black issues in America, a deeper analysis shall be done in this section. Within the Western Academe, dualistic based White Supremacist ideologies continue to permeate even the most socially progressive issues that are published for the mainstream audience; an audience assumed to be White, physically-abled, heterosexual, Christian faith influenced, and/or middle-class. White, Black, Heterosexual, woman, man, etc, - we have all been touched by the legacies of Euro-Anglo colonization; legacies in which the discourse of race, gender, class, etc., issues have sprung from.

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory, therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.<sup>14</sup>

*I am a product of it; at the same time, my engagement in critical consciousness helps me to not only understand this but also engage in moving beyond these perimeters and into the boundary-less possibilities that are not constrained by it.*

It has been nineteen days since the seven of us ladies shared our stories. During the end of our stories we spoke of the challenges to thriving as a leader; a leader not solely of an organization but of one’s life, community, and the world. In this section, I will analyze several major themes I drew from the May 4<sup>th</sup> dialogue. Lastly, the analysis of these themes will be written in a manner in which the subjective mode and self-reflective process may be used.

### Theme One: The Self Esteem Assumption

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<sup>13</sup> “Defining Whiteness and White Privilege.” [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/Whiteness\\_and\\_privilege/Whiteness\\_defining.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/Whiteness_and_privilege/Whiteness_defining.cfm) “White privilege entails the differences in power between Whites and non-Whites, and the advantages White people automatically take for granted. The advantages of being White include learning the history of one’s own race in school, to seeing members of one’s own ethnic group widely represented in the media, to being confident that job refusals are not based on one’s race.” Cited 20, November 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Bayoumi, Moustafa. Rubin, Andrew. Antonio Gramsci in, The Edward Said Reader New York: Vintage Books, 2000. Page 90.

The need for high self-esteem among Blacks has been part of the discourse in empowering Black people in the United States for decades. High self-esteem is crucial in birthing leadership skills in human beings. However, analysis of the May 4<sup>th</sup> dialogue shows that the mainstream information that has constantly been presented to the status quo in regards to the “crisis” of low self-esteem among Blacks must be re-analyzed.

There has been far less research on the self-esteem of White Men. An online Harvard library search of journal articles about Whites and self self-esteem, results in 162 records. On the contrary, there are 444 journal articles in the Harvard University library’s digital archives that focus on self-esteem among Blacks. Is this because White men have been constructed as the foundational models in which ‘good’ self-esteem for Blacks should be constructed? If this is the case, how has this bias affected the psychoanalytic discourse around Black female self-esteem and leadership?

The definition of self-esteem, based on the paper “An Effective Leader From My Perspective” in the appendix section of this paper, will be used in this section of analysis. Self-esteem, in this context, means being comfortable with and loving the essence of oneself without the need to materialistically falsify high self-esteem through such means as becoming a CEO or an Ivy League doctoral recipient. Such material attributes have high cultural value in the United States of America. I would like to consider the possibility that many of these high profile White Men who consume these high cultural values do wrestle with *low* self-esteem. Their desire to become CEOs of Fortune Five Hundred companies or validate their knowledge through receiving an Ivy League advanced degree may not be a reflection of high self-esteem but in fact a reflection of low self esteem that is ingeniously masked by what the status quo has positively constructed as “successful” examples of leaders in their fields based on Euro-Anglo Centric value system. This is a system based on Christian Fundamentalism, imperialism, capitalism, individualism and material acquisition, which are at the very false but accepted foundations of

being human in America.<sup>15</sup> In this system, everyone is expected to change the external, not the internal, to be self-loving. However,

soulful Black culture of resistance was rooted in hope. It had at its heart a love ethic. In this subculture of soul, individual Black folks found ways to decolonize their minds and build healthy self-esteem. This showed us that we did not have to change externals to be self-loving. This soulful culture was most dynamically expressed during the racial segregation because away from White supremacist control Black folks could invent themselves.<sup>16</sup>

What would happen if we were to ask whether or not a majority of White Men, as well as the status quo in general, unnaturally *change externals* to pursue these highly valued positions and practices to mask the fact that they have low self-esteem and that positions of power make them feel like they have self-worth and are valued in society? What then does the leadership and self-esteem question look like when we refocus on the low self-esteem “crisis” that has been diagnosed as an impediment to leadership among Black Females?

### The White Privilege Question in Mainstream Social Activism Discourse

White Privilege is often a challenge that Black Females face in becoming leaders. However, language and discourse around White Privilege must be re-assessed if we are to understand its implications in leadership impediments. “Instead of emphasizing the process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the advantages that Whites receive.”<sup>17</sup> Mainstream discourse constructs that it is *abnormal* for White economically stable people to receive “privileges” such as education, technology, economic mobility, and health services *because* they are White. There is a flaw in this traditional one-sided understanding of White Privilege because it gives the illusion that Whites are receiving “privileges” or “extras”.

It can be argued that Whites are not receiving anything *exemplary* for being White. Looking at how White Privilege is used, in the context of economic mobility, health services,

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<sup>15</sup> Leonardo, Zeus. “The Color of Supremacy.” Educational Philosophy and Theory 36:2 (2004). 137-152.

<sup>16</sup> hooks, bell. Black People and Self-Esteem. New York: Atria Books, 2003. Pages 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Leonardo, Zeus. “The Color of Supremacy.” Educational Philosophy and Theory 36:2 (2004). 137-152. Page 138.

education and access to technology, it can be debated these are not “privileges” but basic survival and thriving needs and rights that all human beings are entitled to.

In 1998, James Scheurich was on an educational research panel. He conveyed to his audience that being White was like having a mysterious entity put money in your pocket while you’re walking down the street. When the end of the day comes, the audience is asked to imagine a White person with a lot of money without having worked for it. Zeus Leonardo asks to turn Scheurich’s example on its head and envision a person of color walking down the street:

Describing White privilege as the process of having money put in your pocket comes with certain discursive consequence. First, it begs the question: if money is being place in White pockets, who places it there? If we insert the subject of actions, we would conclude that racial minorities put the money in White pockets. It does not take long to realize that this maneuver has the unfortunate consequence of inverting the real process of racial accumulation, whereby Whites take resources from people of color... Second, we can invoke the opposite case...The experience of people of color is akin to walking down the street having your money taken from your pocket. Historically, if ‘money’ represents material, and even cultural, possessions of people of color then the agent of such taking is the White race, real and imagined. The discourse on privilege comes with the unfortunate consequences of masking history, obfuscating agents of domination, and removing the actions that make it clear who is doing what to whom. Instead of emphasizing that process of appropriation, the discourse of privilege centers the discussion on the advantages that Whites receive.<sup>18</sup>

Essentially, basic human entitlements of survival, such as the access to education, technology and health services are taken away from the non-Whites but are constructed as a “privilege” to have by Whites. Why were basic human entitlements of survival renamed as “privilege?” With this restructuring of the common concept of White Privilege, What then does the discourse in leadership and White Privilege look like when applied to the challenges that Black females face in becoming leaders?

### The Problem of the Discourse of the “Other”

The concept of the “Other” has been traditionally written from the point of view of the 1<sup>st</sup> World status quo. Essentially, the “Other” as been constructed as someone who is not “of the

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<sup>18</sup> Leonardo, Zeus. “The Color of Supremacy.” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36:2 (2004). 137-152. Page 138.



White Race.” K-12 student in American usually read about European and American White colonizers perceptions of “discovering” the “Other” in school textbooks. Furthermore, at Dartmouth College, a Black student in my graduating, once recalled that she had met a White Male who claimed that he wanted to date Black and Brown girls because he found them to be “exotic:”

America long ago fell in love with an image. It is a sacred image, fashioned over centuries of time: this image of the unharried, unconcerned, glandulatory, simple, rhythmical amoral, dark creature who was, above all else, a *miracle of sensuality*...

Yet what is curious, what never ceases to amaze no matter how long one lives in America, is that it always seems to shock those without that the Negro is confounded by this image that they have of him; that we Negroes cannot seem to find ourselves in that image.<sup>19</sup>

When I peruse the bookstores, I am astounded of how this legacy of imperialistic nostalgia permeates the premiere publishing house’s presses. For example, books written by Whites who have traveled to the “Other” spaces have historically been phenomenal bestsellers. Most recently, I have spent a fair amount of time in the bookstores to see that it is popular for the status quo to read about a White female First Worlnder’s experience in a Third World country. It is assumed that First World readers will be *mesmerized* by the White protagonist’s interactions with a *strange* culture, often void of *normal* tools of living such as internet, malls, Super Sized McDonald meals, anti-perspirant deodorants, television and cell phones.

There is a difference between being the imagined “Other” and an actual non-White identified person. The usage of “Other” intentionally elusive, abstract and inhuman, however, it is a word that is still used in American discourse about non-Whites.

From slavery to the present day, the Black female body has been seen in Western eyes as the quintessential symbol of a ‘natural’ female presence that is organic, closer to nature, animalistic, primitive...Black females have been historically perceived as embodying a ‘dangerous’ female nature that must be controlled. More so than any group of women in this society, Black women have been seen as ‘all body, no mind.’”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Hansberry, Lorraine. *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. NY: Signet Books, 1987. Page 210.

<sup>20</sup> Hooks, bell and West, Cornel. *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* Cambridge: South End Press, 1991. Page 153

This is a by-product of product of the “Othering” process. If we are to engage in creating healthy leadership paths for Black Females, we must first deconstruct and question how much of the mainstream resolutions to leadership challenges are perceived through the lens of an *imagined* “Other” as opposed to a *real* group of historically marginalized people of color with souls, minds and the right to thrive.

Perhaps discourse about the “Other” should encompass Whites in order to destabilize the pervasive myths of people of color being “exotic” and “strange.” For example, what does the discourse on this subject look like if we ask, How is the “Other” defined and created by those who were colonized? Were White European and American colonizers seen as an “Other” by those who were colonized? How would it be if people of color were able to hear the voices of the colonized and their descendants talk of Whites as if they were, in actuality, the “Other?” What about today if an Indian Hindu vegetarian in India were to perceive a White traveler as a *savage* barbarian “Other” because he ate animals? If this flipside were to enter the mainstream discourse perhaps the status quo may easily see the discomforts of being perceived as an “Other” and that the mainstream methods of social equality need to be re-evaluated.

### **Conclusion...not quite**

The ideas, themes and questions that were born out of this May 4<sup>th</sup> storytelling event could have been written as a book. However, confined to a limited amount of pages, all of these themes and questions will not be able to be explored in much detail from *my* analysis in this paper. However, the reader is invited to engage in critical consciousness by exploring the other themes and questions that arouse from the May 4th dialogue:

1. How do binaries in Western Thought hinder Black Female Leadership potential?

Any Black person who clings to the misguided notion that White people represent the embodiment of all that is evil and Black people all that is good remains wedded to the very logic of Western metaphysical dualism that is the heart of binary racist thinking. Such thinking is not liberatory. Like the racist educational ideology it mirrors and imitates, it invites a closing of the mind.

Hence, it can never promote the critical thinking that is essential for the maintenance of healthy self-esteem.<sup>21</sup>

2. Are Non-Profit organizations in existence to help under-represented peoples simply survive and endure the status quo or to help them thrive and obliterate the status quo? How does this affect Black females access to leadership roles in those organizations if the answer to the first portion of this question is ‘yes’?

3. Tracking and mentoring have been defined as key elements to whether or not women in general are to become successful leaders. However, tracking often begins in elementary school. Who determines that a child is ‘gifted’ and should be tracked to ensure that she is put on the path to leadership? Furthermore, how is ‘gifted’ being defined and is the definition within the context of a Euro-Anglo centric value system that was intentionally created *not* to support Black females?

4. All Black women are not the same, which is why I emphasized the storytellers as Black female U.S. Nationals. Often, the U.S.A. mainstream population does not recognize the difference between Black adult women born and raised in the U.S.A. and Black adult women living in the U.S. but born and raised abroad. In Irma’s story, she notes that the international Haitian student in her program comes from a culture in which socio-economic class is the center of social injustices because in Haiti, for the most part, everyone is brown and racialization is not as pervasive as it is in the U.S.A. Is this being addressed when studies are conducted to look at the successes of Black women in the U.S.? If not, how does this skew the *real* experiences of racial and gender discrimination in the discourse about Black Female U.S. Nationals and Leadership if Black international people, such as Irma’s friend, are unaware of race as in issue in USA?

5. Has the legacy of the Civil Rights Act of the 1960s helped Black females to simply survive or have they enabled and encouraged them to flourish and thrive?

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<sup>21</sup> hooks, bell. [Black People and Self-Esteem](#). New York: Atria Books, 2003. Page 91.

6. A majority of Blacks in the USA are Christian. Though the church has historically been the center of strong Black communities in the U.S.A, “Fundamentalist Christian thinking about gender roles ha[s] been deeply embedded in the social thought of Black folks from slavery on into freedom.”<sup>22</sup> Fundamentalist Christianity was the basis of the religion of the White Plantation slave master. Heteropatriarchal gender roles and slavery were normalized under this Fundamentalist Christian rhetoric. Though the inherent nature of Christianity is not ‘good’ or ‘bad’, one must question the negative psychological effects this Fundamentalist Christianity has had on those Black who choose to still practice and engage in it as a basis of their faith. How does this inhibit Black female leadership?

The stories from the May 4<sup>th</sup> event raised complex themes and questions that are not always resolved through traditional systems of Westernized modes of logic and research. However, the purpose of Action Research is to be an alternative to the traditional system of epistemology. It is an on-going continuum of constantly re-evaluating cultural norms in research that may sustain social equality. Though one cannot expect to discover complete answers to the themes and questions from this one May 4<sup>th</sup> event, the best one can do is to continue to engage in this continuum of proactivist research and continue to validate the subjective voices of Black women as *key* human beings in all academic research and social activism.

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<sup>22</sup> hooks, bell. Black People and Self-Esteem. New York: Atria Books, 2003. Page 8.

# "What it Takes:

Black Female Social Activists Discuss Impediments to Leadership within Non-Profit Organizations."

**Date: May 4, 2005**

Time: 6:30pm-8:30pm EST

Location: Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Extension School, 51 Brattle Street, 2nd Floor Grossman Common Room.

PLEASE Register by emailing or calling: harper2@fas.harvard.edu or 617-877-2096.

**Who's Invited?** Black identified female: non-profit workers and/or adult students of non-profit organizations. I'm looking for all types of ladies. Work or interests can range from being a literary activist, to being out on the front lines at rallies, to being a student, to being a counselor who works with empowering the marginalized, to teachers that teach about destroying inequalities towards human, non-human animals and/or the ecology through such disciplines as Women's Studies, Environmental Studies, etc.

**What to Expect:** Women will come with their narratives of leadership experiences. For example, ladies can speak of their experiences of being in a leadership position (director, manager, mentor, community organizer, student activist, etc) and what challenges they face. Ladies can speak of leadership experience via experiencing a leader in their non-profit that was difficult to work with, due to discriminatory mindsets. Ladies can share leadership experiences with working with children and the challenges faced to create resources for young people in need of positive models. Narratives and experiences from all different points of leadership are welcome. Also welcomed are ladies who perceive that there are NO impediments to herself as a leader or potential leader and why.

This will be an open and engaging dialogue that will be **VIDEO-RECORDED**. Potential Leadership topics to be discussed (but not limited to) will be: Whiteness, White Privilege, Sexual Harassment, Gender Discrimination, Mentoring, Class, Race, and Sexual Orientation. This dialogue and video recording will be used as part of a research initiative that critically analyzes impediments to leadership for Black women within non-profit organizations. It will ultimately be published into a DVD and literary work that can be used for anyone interested in leadership development within non-profit organizations.

**Contact:**

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Harvard University  
Technologies in Education  
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**This is a dialogue sponsored by Harvard University Extension Program in Education and Technologies.**  
(APPENDIX 1)

## Appendix II

### **An Effective Leader From My Perspective**

When I think of leadership, I immediately think of the saying, “a picture has a thousand words.” Before dabbling into what I believe to be skills that are essential for someone to become an effective leader, I first need to define what I perceive a leadership position or a leader to be, especially within the context of the work that I do. The definition of leader is not objective and I firmly believe that it relates to an individual person’s or community’s value system.

In my community, the work I do, paid as well as unpaid, is towards the equality of humanity, specifically focusing on the economically disadvantaged and racially oppressed youth (16-24 years old) of the United States of America. In the context of YouthBuild USA community, where I do my work, a leader has the connotation of being someone who is thoroughly invested in the understanding of: race, class, gender, culture, sexual orientation, Whiteness, colonialism, physical and mental ability, geographical location, ecology, language and power. Furthermore, a leadership position at my organization demands that the leader in this position can connect the relationship of race, class, gender, etc., to each staff member who works at YouthBuild USA as well as the young people who enter the alternative education and leadership programs we offer. The most effective skills or “ways of being” that a human being can bring into leadership positions are: critical consciousness, unconditional love for humanity, superb communication skills, high self-love, and appreciation for a balance between humanity and the ecology of the planet.

**Critical consciousness.** In order to combat systems of oppression against the youth that I help to create graduate resources for, I believe that a leader within my organization has to embark on his or her goals of equality through an understanding and practice of critical consciousness. However, this can also be applied to a leadership position outside of my organization’s context. Critical consciousness is a way of always increasing one’s awareness of the institutions of oppression, current and past, that sustain the status quo and suffering of others on every level. Critical consciousness can be a difficult practice because it digs deep into the soul of one’s culture. Ultimately, it goes into the core of the very essence of the individual engaging

in it. Not only are external factors of oppression questioned and researched, critical consciousness also forces the person engaging in it to constantly be aware of his or her own ignorance and privileges that help to perpetuate and maintain inequality and misunderstandings at all levels. Taking responsibility for confronting this ignorance and these privileges, then understanding the relationships to power they have (or do not have) within institutional oppression is what evolves critical consciousness from theory to practice in a way that revolutionizes a leader's awareness level from "asleep" to "awake" and engaged.

Unconditional love for humanity. A human being that does not judge or create a system of conditions that determines his/her love and respect for another human being is a phenomenal skill to have as a leader. It is phenomenal because few people can love a human being as a 'brother' or 'sister' without prejudices getting in the way. For example, if I am in a team and the manager of the team has mentally programmed herself to only respect and love people who are only of her religious faith, this will be problematic. Upon entering a relationship with a team member who does not fit this criteria, she will never allow herself to fully love and respect this human as a sentient being because she has already created her system of love and respect on **conditional** factors. If a leader engages in a relationship with a human being from an unconditional love standpoint, he or she is immediately entering the relationship on an equal level of respect and love for a "sentient being." This is a love and respect that isn't imprisoned by conditions based on factors such as class, race, physical ability, cultural, and personal prejudices.

**Communication skills.** Effective communication is key to being not just a good leader, but also a great human being. Knowing when to speak when necessary and how to speak in a way to engage your audience is key to making people aware of you and your community's needs. However, effective communication skills also entail listening to people regardless if you agree with what they have to say. A good communicator is able to connect to a person on a humanistic level. This is not as difficult as it sounds because we're all human beings and human beings have many more things in common than we don't have in common, such as the basic need

for love, food, companionship, recreation and spiritual fulfillment. What may differ are our routes to attain this, but the bottom line is that on the most basic level, all humans have the same needs and that is what connects us. If a leader is able to engage a person or people in effective dialogue, this helps to paint a picture of the various stories that are happening behind each face. When a leader is able to hear individual or community stories he or she can connect them to the current goal or problem because he or she has applied the ‘human’ component to it.

**Self love.** When a human being loves him/herself, they are able to spread this love to their external environment. If you love yourself and are happy with yourself without the need for material items and physical attributes to bring you happiness and self-love, it is more effective in enabling you to become a successful leader. People who tend to have no self-love and low self-esteem project this onto their external environment. It is dangerous for a person who has low self-esteem to obtain a position of leadership because they may abuse the power they have to offset the low self-esteem they have. Not all people with low self-esteem abuse leadership roles, however, a person with self-love will rarely abuse the power he or she has in his or her leadership position. Those who love the essence of who they are become great mentors and role models for others who are looking to build stronger self-esteem. The last person a teammate with low self-esteem needs is a person in a leadership position with low self-esteem as well who projects his or her own self-doubts onto other human beings. This can only create an uncomfortable and stagnant environment where the leader and his/her teammates learn nothing but contempt for each other. Ultimately, neither can grow nor flourish in a way that benefits them, their community and beyond.

**Appreciation for a balance between humanity and the ecology.** Lastly, a human being who understands that they live **with** the Earth (and all its life) and not **on it** is a human with great leadership skills. Every decision that they make should not just benefit themselves or simply their department or organization. Every decision made should encompass the ideology of the “Butterfly Effect.” For example, as a leader of a produce company, if I were to increase my profits by five hundred percent because I choose to change where my company buys fruit, am I a



“good” leader? Perhaps I am a good leader in the perceptions of those in my company if everyone were to get a raise in salary due to cutting costs on our buying end. However, if we dig deeper, how did my decision effect the farmers we now buy from? If I decided do business with a farm that agrees to grow produce using unequal labor and pesticides in order that my company meet its goals, am I truly a “good” leader in the eyes of the people who will suffer from the pesticides and lack of fair wages? This is a very complex situation and there are deeper structures at play here, such as American Corporate system of imperialistic values dictating what “success” is which usually is at the expense of the ecology and 3<sup>rd</sup> world human beings who suffer to sustain 1<sup>st</sup> world privileges and material acquisition. When a corporate or non-profit leader starts making a valiant effort to understand these structures and make decisions that cause the least amount of suffering for all humans and the ecology, then they are an effective and successful leader.

**Difference in leadership styles.** It has been my experience that women and men who encompass the five “ways of being” stated in this essay, show no difference in effectiveness in leadership styles. However, the problem is that that these human individuals that I encounter are far and few between. I have found that the most effective person in a leadership position, in terms of my **own** personal experience, is with women. However, I must articulate clearly that within this category, it is women of color and/or “queer” women who come from working class backgrounds that have the most effective leadership styles in motivating **me** towards my goals of abolishing human inequality. This is largely due to the connectedness I feel with them as people who have learned how to navigate their way through racism, sexism, classism and/or heterosexism within a system dominated by Whiteness and hetero-patriarchal values, stemming from the effects of hundreds of years of Euro-Anglo centric based colonialism and imperialism. Essentially, she has learned the “tools of the master,” understanding the language of the oppressor while simultaneously being the “oppressed.” This is not to say that anyone who isn’t from her experience cannot be an effective leader. There are many effective leaders who have not been or are not “these women.” Such leaders, based on my five criteria, are Ghandi, Martin

Luther King Junior, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Jesus of Nazareth, David Bohm, and Derrick Jensen.

So, what do I see as an effective path to becoming a leader for women and men?

The path to becoming an effective leader for any human being must start with engaging in and practicing critical consciousness. From that point of entry, unconditional love for humanity, the desire to acquire superb communication skills, the search and acceptance of self-love, and appreciation for a balance between humanity and the ecology of the planet will follow. These elements create great leadership potential in any human being that is willing to find the passion and necessity to do it. The biggest problem with paving this path is combating the current status quo that has established leadership for hundreds of years as “a way of being” that only benefits a minority of people while maintaining the systematic destruction of human beings, spirits and the ecology of the Earth. Current leaders and those in leadership positions who begin questioning this status quo by engaging in critical consciousness will begin to create paths for others who desire to take on leadership roles.

**Breeze:**

I know I can't really generalize the entire demographic, but it seems that in the past 29 years I am realizing a theme among women who identify as myself. A lot of things that came across to me were things that had to deal with discrimination as a form of something that is subtle to discrimination that is out right in your face. It's not just about being "Black" or a "Female". It has more to do with its position within the system of "Whiteness." Then looking into the past year of colonization which Whiteness is embedded in. A lot of the time I meet people who want to discuss it but they just don't know how to move beyond the superficial level. I'm here today to start the conversation. A very intimate conversation. I very informal conversation. A narrative, a dialogue. Women just coming and talking about their stories. You don't have to talk about anything in particular. I would just love to hear stories. There is a lot of power in stories. The model that I'm using is called Action Research Model. It's not research just for the sake of research. 'Gee, what would happen if I created an experiment?' I don't like that type of research. This research is research focused on social change. In this case you find a problem you want to address and you find the constituency- in this case, women with the same issues you want to address. You don't really have immediate themes that you're going to draw on. You don't say, 'I'm, going to have this talk and this is what we're going to look at and this is what we're hoping to gain.' I would like to share the stories first and whatever themes arise, we can talk about it. There isn't really a structure. It's a kind of 'learn as you go,' process. I'm hoping that you guys are open to that because most of us have a background of being taught in Western academe in which you have to have an agenda and a rigid plan and I kind of want to get outside of that. This is valid model and as of 1993 someone kind of coined it. I'm sure in the past a lot of us know that a narrative has been a great way to share information; it's just that in academia it was never accepted. So, that's where I'm coming from.

## Appendix III