


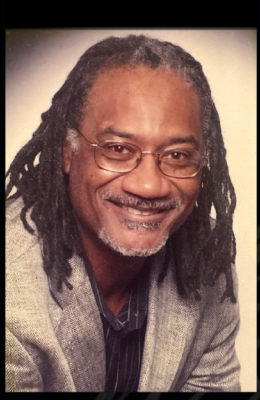

Culture, Politics, Spirituality and Practice:

A BOOK OF RESISTANCE AND CRITICAL THEORY FOR DISTURBING TIMES

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Culture, politics, spirituality and practice: A book of resistance and critical theory for disturbing times

A collection by
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Decolonised counselling in a time of rising fascism

David Denborough: It's hard to find words to describe these profoundly disturbing times. As you are meeting with people for counselling or therapy conversations about what's going on in their personal and family lives, these conversations are now taking place in the context of rising authoritarianism and white supremacist movements. Why is a postcolonial therapy significant at this time to sustain people and their relationships? What are conversations in the counselling or testimony therapy room looking and sounding like at the moment?

Makungu Akinyela: Even before the 2024 Presidential elections (in which Donald Trump was re-elected), there had been a noticeable tension building in people's everyday conversations, on the street, in public. And in the therapy room, it is rare to get far into a conversation these days without some acknowledgment of the day's craziness or a terrifying new development coming from Washington DC through the news or on social media. Now more than ever, I think a decolonising therapy is necessary. First of all, to validate people's concerns and fears and to acknowledge that these are, indeed, extraordinarily difficult times. When you're feeling

crazy, sometimes you need somebody to say, "No, you're not crazy. This is really happening. This is unusual. This is not something that we should get used to".

Can you say more about this element of naming within testimony therapy and why it is significant at this time.

Yeah. This is a crisis time. And first of all, it's important to validate to people that no, these are not normal times. It's also vital to name what's happening; for instance, to name the MAGA fascism that we are facing. That's not language that people in the United States are used to hearing, but it's important to have those conversations, to name the problem and discuss the problem and to acknowledge how fractured this can it makes us feel. At the moment, that also means acknowledging that we're afraid right now. And as a testimony therapist, I think it's important to acknowledge that it makes sense for us to be afraid or anxious now, because human beings feel fear and anxiety when their lives are in danger. And this is real. Our lives, as Black folk in this country, are in danger right now. This is a real existential crisis, particularly for colonised people. Naming this is important.

I'm trying to picture what this sounds and looks like in the counselling room. As a Black man, as a New Afrikan man, you are of the same people whose lives are being targeted. When people in your counselling room speak of their fear, when they trust you with their fear at this particular time, my guess is that you are responding to this fear in some particular way.

The way many of us have been trained to do therapy and to be therapists in North America is to place ourselves outside of the experience of the people who consult us—outside and oftentimes above them in an expert position. But this approach can often play out as seemingly inauthentic. Some Black folks might think, "You're not for real, you're being fake". But this shit is real for all of us, you know? So if someone is speaking about a disturbing event that we've just heard about in the news, I might respond with "This has been a hard day for me too". Acknowledging my

own vulnerability, being transparent, being for real, not being fake is important. As a therapist, I'm doing this intentionally. Not because I'm falling apart or because I'm panicking, but I'm using honest words to connect and build relationship. I call this power of the word *nommo*, which is a term from the Dogon people of Mali. But of course, we have to go beyond these acknowledgments and find ways to create a transformative therapeutic experience for the folk who we're talking to.

Can you perhaps share a recent story from your therapy conversations to demonstrate this?

In this last week, there have been thousands of layoffs of workers from many federal government departments. The federal government has consistently been the major employer of Black people in this country for a long time (Pitts, 2011). Whether it's working for the postoffice, or working for different government agencies, there's now a lot of anxiety about whether or not people will be able to keep their jobs. This is an issue that has come up a number of times this week as people are anxious about the possibility of losing their jobs and the disruption this may also be causing in their relationships.

I'm thinking of one heterosexual couple where the woman is concerned that she may lose her job, and she is bringing in the most money to the family. In addition to this concern, she is also upset because her husband is doing what some Black men do: he is being real cool about it. This coolness is coming across as if he does not share her concern, and conflict is the result. But in talking to him, in front of her, it becomes clearer that it's not so much that he is not fearful about her losing her job, but he believes that it's really his job and his role to hold this kind of cool space and cool position, because for him, that's exerting a form of leadership. But it doesn't feel like leadership to this woman who is saying, "Damn, if I lose my job, I'm making the majority of money for both of us, what's going to happen to our house? How are we going to make our next car payment?" Our conversation together makes it clearer that they are both concerned, but they're responding in different ways.

Sometimes that cool Black masculinity, in which you got to look cool no matter what, can injure relationship. But I also want to acknowledge that this a part of culture—a culture formed in resistance to racism.

Our conversation also created a repositioning: Your husband is not the problem. Your wife is not the problem. This fascist takeover is the problem, and it can feel overwhelming, like drowning. These changes are having real impact on relationships, on the way people relate to each other. After this naming, we can then explore possible responses: What can we learn from your past experiences of conquering problems that could help you work together on this and not make each other the problem?

I really appreciate not only the significance of how these issues are named and linked to the current political climate, but also this re-engagement with history, turning to histories for possible ways forward. But what I'd like to ask you more about is how this conversation sought to bring people together to address problems. Is this also a significant theme at this time?

Yes, it is. Within the therapy room, I'm interested in seeking solutions other than "each individual got to get it together". I'm interested in seeking solutions of unity. Part of this involves inviting people to think about what past experiences they've had, where they've had success in challenging problems on the outside. And in this time of crisis, overcoming the threats we are facing is going to require the strengthening of community over individual interests.

That's a theme that our conversations are increasingly focused on. During this kind of "shock doctrine" (Klein, 2007) approach that's going on with this new MAGA fascist government, people can become more alienated than ever. So, in our therapy rooms, we focus on what the power of community is and getting reconnected with others.

When things were just low intensity warfare against us, it was easy for people to fall into the individualism of neoliberalism. But as Black folks, we have historically and culturally been communitarian people. As things have become more intense, I can almost feel a drive towards people looking for opportunities to be in community—a drive towards

community for safety and security. Whether it's people going to church more often, or focusing more deliberately on their community organisations, or attending more social gatherings—these days in the therapy room we are talking a lot more about community.

It seems that in response to the crisis, people are increasingly looking outward and this is reflected in our therapeutic conversations. People are really seeing that looking and acting outwards is significant to their own wellbeing.

I'd really like to hear more about this. Are you explicitly asking more about these realms?

In these times we need a decolonising therapy that acknowledges solutions that go beyond just individualised solutions. So yes, I do ask explicitly. It usually starts with me asking about "How's it going for you this week? What's going on for you?" and I will then be listening carefully for whatever relationships they speak about. I think it's more important than ever to be able to sit back and see people within their networks and broader relationships and ask questions related to these; to help people weave strong bonds and connections that can be crucial at this time and in the future we are facing.

I might also hear how the person is feeling a sense of alienation from their job, or giving all this energy to people in their workplace who don't appreciate it or perhaps deserve it. Then I might ask questions that could invite a redirection of that energy, such as, "So what are you doing for your community?" And then I hear about what they are already doing or ways that they could make space to do more. These questions and conversations acknowledge for us the importance of being reconnected to community in these times.

So through these questions, it seems that the therapy conversations are acting as a bridge to other community actions?

Yes. And while that's always been true, I'm more conscious of it now. I'm more likely to ask about what's happening in your church or community

organisation, or "Are you making any special connections at work?" I'm more conscious that in these times, therapy is about fostering unity, protection and possibilities for collective self-defence.

I really appreciate this understanding of counselling as weaving a sense of unity among people.

This crisis we are facing will require a strengthening of community over individual interests, so we will all need to play our part in this. There is one other theme that is emerging stronger than ever. I'm noticing that people are much more commonly referring to our ancestors' struggles and the strengths and cultural ties that helped them survive and that could possibly help us to survive. There's a different kind of a conversation taking place referring back to the legacies of our ancestors, our people.

That renewed engagement with ancestors and ancestry sounds like a really significant theme in relation to a decolonised counselling in this time of rising fascism. Perhaps we can return to that theme in our next conversation, because the next section of your book is "Acknowledging our ancestors, healing our lives".

References

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