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Invisible Bruises: Theoretical and Practical Considerations for Black/Afro-Latina Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the intersectionality of race, gender, and violence in the lives of Black/Afro-Latinas who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. First, we discuss the trauma of slavery, racism, and colonization in Latin America and the Caribbean, which objectifies Black bodies and renders Blackness invisible. Second, we identify institutional and interpersonal barriers to seeking trauma support. Third, we present preliminary findings from a Listening Circle among survivors who participated in the Black Latinidad: Building Siblinghood to End Child Sexual Abuse Project. Finally, we propose a racially and culturally specific, trauma-informed approach that draws on the strengths of survivors and centralizes their voices and how to intervene.

KEYWORDS

Afro-Latina; empowerment; intersectionality; sexual abuse

“Rotundamente Negra”¹

By Shirley Campbell Barr <http://rotundamentenegra.blogspot.com/>

Me niego rotundamente

A negar mi voz,

Mi sangre y mi piel.

Y me niego rotundamente

A dejar de ser yo,

A dejar de sentirme bien

Cuando miro mi rostro en el espejo

Con mi boca

Rotundamente grande,

Y mi nariz
Rotundamente hermosa,
Y mis dientes
Rotundamente blancos,
Y mi piel valientemente negra.
Y me niego categóricamente
A dejar de hablar
Mi lengua, mi acento y mi historia.
Y me niego absolutamente
A ser parte de los que callan,
De los que temen,
De los que lloran.
Porque me acepto
Rotundamente libre,
Rotundamente negra,
Rotundamente Hermosa.

The presence of Black/Afro-Latinxs² is rapidly increasing in the United States (Cuevas, Dawson, & Williams, 2016; Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011; Logan, 2003). Roughly one quarter of all U.S. Latinxs self-identify as Black/Afro-Latinxs with roots in Latin America (Lopez, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015). The term Black/Afro-Latinx American refers to Latinxs individuals of Afro-descendent ancestry (Seelke, 2008), who identify ethnically as Latinxs and racially as Black or are perceived by others as Black (Álvarez, 2015; Borrell, 2005). National data indicated that the Black/Afro-Latinx population more than doubled from 389,000 in 1980 to 940,000 in 2000 and comprised about 1.2 million of the Latinxs population in 2010 (Humes et al., 2011; Logan, 2003). The rates of Black/Afro-Latinxs are expected to increase, as Latinxs represent the largest and fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the United States (over 57 million as of 2015; Krogstad, 2016), and are projected to triple by 2050, whereby they will account for 30% of the U.S. population (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014; Passel & Cohn, 2008).

The increasing visibility of Black/Afro-Latinxs in the United States requires a closer look at the intersectionality of race, culture, and gender, particularly as it relates to Black/Afro-Latina adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Black/Afro-Latinas face multiple traumas at the historic-political, transgenerational, psychosocial, and personal levels associated with being Black women (Bryant-Davis, 2007). Thus, it is imperative that helping agencies (e.g., rape crisis centers, culturally specific

community-based organizations) and mental health professionals provide racially and culturally-informed strengths-based interventions with Black/Afro-Latina clients.

In addition to encountering a number of cultural barriers faced by many Latinxs in seeking adequate professional help when healing from traumatic experiences (e.g., language, lack of access to healthcare agencies; Graham, Lanier, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2016), they may be required to devote additional energy to coping with racism and discrimination (Araujo & Borrell, 2006; Sanchez & Awad, 2015) and negative stereotypes that are associated with being Black/Afro-Latinas (Ramos, Jaccard, & Guilamo-Ramos, 2003). For example, Black/Afro-Latinx people live at the intersections of increased policing, anti-immigrant policy, anti-blackness, language barriers, and discrimination and are excluded from social and political institutions (Borrell, 2005). Moreover, evidence shows that Black immigrants in the United States are much more likely than individuals from other regions to be deported because of a criminal conviction due to racial profiling and over-policing of their communities (Morgan-Trostle, Zheng, & Lipscombe, n.d.). In addition, Black/Afro-Latinas may experience racial trauma and rejection inflicted by their own communities due to internalized racism (Comas-Diaz, 1996). Thus, an examination of the stories and lived experiences of adult Black/Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual assault fills an important gap and speaks to the disparities they experience.

In the following sections, we discuss the historical and contemporary trauma of slavery, racism, and colonialism, which objectifies Black bodies and renders blackness invisible. Second, we identify systemic/institutional and interpersonal barriers to seeking trauma support, including racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Embedded in this discussion are the voices of Black/Afro-Latina adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse who participated in a Listening Circle project titled, Black Latinidad: Building Siblinghood to End Child Sexual Abuse Project. Finally, we propose racially and culturally specific trauma-informed approaches that draw on the strengths of Black/Afro-Latina survivors and centralizes their voices for how to intervene.

Racism and Colonialism in Latin America and the United States

Despite the burgeoning recognition of the existence of Black/Afro-Latinxs in the United States and throughout Latin America, Black/Afro-Latinxs have historically been invisible and continue to be marginalized both within and outside of Latinx communities. The invisibility of many Black/Afro-Latinxs reflects the longstanding racism and colonization that permeates Latin America (Rodriguez, 1995; Sanchez, 2013; Wade, 2009). As a result of

Spanish and Portuguese colonization, the enslavement of African and Indigenous people was widespread throughout much of Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, during Latin America's colonial period, about 15 times as many African slaves (roughly 91% of the estimated 12 million African slaves brought to the New World) were taken to what is now known as Latin America and the Caribbean (Misevich, Domingues, Eltis, Khan, & Rayburn, 2017). Today, roughly 130 million people of African descent live in Latin America, comprising roughly a quarter of the total population (Telles, 2014; Telles & Paschel, 2014). Although Black/Afro-Latinxs live throughout all of Latin America, countries with significant Black/Afro-Latinx populations include Brazil (57 million), Dominican Republic (8.5 million), Cuba (7 million), Colombia (5 million), Venezuela (4 million), and Ecuador (1.1 million). Distinct Black/Afro-Latinx cultures have also been identified throughout Latin American, including the *garifuna*³ in Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Belize, the *cafuzo* in Brazil, and the *zambo* in the Andes and Central America (Taylor, 2012).

Central to the racial ideology and racial hierarchy throughout Latin America (and the United States) is White supremacy. In particular, the emphasis on the racial superiority of White Europeans during Spanish and Portuguese colonization resulted in the development of racial categories to identify and segregate persons of various racial backgrounds (Rodriguez, 1995). For example, between the White elite (*blanco*) and the "purest" Blacks and Indians exists a "middle layer" topped by the social Whites (Cruz-Janzen, 2002). These are light-skinned, White-looking persons, socially accepted as White but who have varying degrees of racial genealogy. Social Whites are followed by various groups of Asian heritage, particularly Chinese and Japanese. At the bottom of the middle layer are the mestizos and mulattos. In most Latin American countries, mestizos (Indian/White) are considered superior to mulattos (Black/White). Below everyone, in a category by themselves, are the darkest, "pure" Indians and Blacks.

Across the Spanish speaking Caribbean and other parts of Latin America, there are common descriptors for variations in race (e.g., *moreno*, *prieto* - Black or dark-skinned Latinxs; *trigueño*—wheat colored, or lightly tanned Latinxs), which are used to identify the degree of African heritage among individuals based on skin color and phenotype (Rodriguez, 2000). Although many Latinxs proudly tie their identity to their ancestral countries of origin and often proudly claim their indigenous roots (López & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016), few will admit to their Black heritage or don't view it positively (Cruz-Janzen, 2002; Seelke, 2008). In the United States, many Black/Afro-Latinxs often experience an "imposed" Black/African American racial identity that is not always congruent with their identity in their own country of origin in Latin America (Busey & Cruz, 2015).

Despite experiencing similar racial treatment and discrimination as African Americans, some Black/Afro-Latinxs feel that they straddle at least two identities and communities—Black and Latinx—often not feeling fully accepted in either group (Busey & Cruz, 2015). They often feel that they have to choose one identity or another as a primary identification (e.g., government, school forms).

The insidious nature of racism within Latinx communities in the United States and throughout Latin America have been cited by scholars in psychology and sociology (Adames & Chavez-Dueñas, 2017; Borrell, 2005; Sanchez, 2013). For example, Comas-Diaz (1996) notes that the covert nature of Latinx racism or that racism involves the rejection of Black/Afro-Latinxs in all spheres of Latinx societies from education, politics, religion, arts, and business to social, personal, family, sexual, and interpersonal relationships. Internalized racism, colonization, and oppression are perpetuated by Mestizaje Racial Ideologies (MRIs), which refers to the historical and current socialization of Latinxs that maintains denial, deflection, and minimization of the skin-color hierarchy (Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, & Organista, 2016).

Mestizaje Racial Ideologies place Latinx individuals from the entire color spectrum into a racial category that de-emphasizes the impact of skin color and phenotype on their lives (Adames et al., 2016; Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014). However, despite the endorsement of mestizaje among many Latinxs, there is often an unspoken sociocultural glass ceiling for Black/Afro-Latinxs, particularly Black/Afro-Latinas, whereby it is acceptable to socialize with them, or even to have sex with them, but not to marry them (Comas-Diaz, 1996). The fear of *requintar*, or the inheritance of African traits in later generations if one marries a Black/Afro-Latinx person, leads to the rejection of interracial marriage, particularly marriage to Black/Afro-Latinx women (Comas-Diaz, 1996). Due to their gender, Black/Afro-Latinas are considered more threatening to the family racial character than Black/Afro-Latino fathers as they are expected to be physically and emotionally present in the lives of their offspring more so than fathers. Consequently, the visible Black/Afro-Latina mother is a clear sign of her children's mixed racial ancestry, reducing their opportunities to *adelantar la raza* (better the race), thus limiting their attractiveness as potential spouses.

Systemic/Institutional Barriers to Seeking Trauma Support

The visibility and voices of Black/Afro-Latina women have long been erased and overlooked within both the African American and larger Latinx communities. This “double consciousness” of existing as both Black and

Latinx in a world of anti-Blackness and anti-immigrant leaves Black/Afro-Latinas with a unique identity with which to navigate their own communities and the larger world. Black/Afro-Latinas face numerous systemic/institutional barriers to seeking trauma support for childhood sexual abuse at the individual, psychosocial, and contextual levels (Borrell, 2005). At the individual level, Black/Afro-Latinxs face less access to social and physical environmental opportunities and resources (e.g., income, employment) that promote health and well-being (Borrell, 2005). For example, Black/Afro-Latinas have lower median household income, higher unemployment, and a higher poverty rate than do White Latinxs, which can influence their health status (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016).

At the psychosocial level, Black/Afro-Latinas may experience higher levels of psychosocial stressors, such as financial strain and racial discrimination, which can have negative mental and behavioral health outcomes. For example, greater perceived discrimination is consistently associated with greater stress, anxiety, depression (Sanchez & Awad, 2015) and a number of health risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, excess alcohol use, physical inactivity) linked to chronic diseases (Borrell et al., 2010). Both individual and psychosocial factors interact on the contextual level, whereby social structural factors such as environmental segregation may further limit Black/Afro-Latinas' access to culturally appropriate societal resources to buffer against the effects of psychosocial stressors, which may also influence their health and well-being (Borrell, 2005). For example, the neighborhoods where Black/Afro-Latinas reside may have lower median incomes, a higher share of poor residents, and a lower share of homeowners than do those where White Latinxs live (Logan, 2003) and more likely to have lower family incomes (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Individual and Interpersonal Barriers to Seeking Support

In addition to the institutional barriers that Black/Afro-Latinas face when confronting systems in general, similar to African American women, they often face individual and interpersonal barriers to seeking support, including negative stereotypes associated with being Black women. For example, in their seminal piece, *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood*, Epstein, Blake, and González (2017) state that “Black female bodies have long been sites of trauma, carrying not only the weight of the past, but present stereotypes that dehumanize and sexualize young girls before they even hit puberty” (p. 13). They coined the term “adultification” to refer to the perception of Black (primarily African American) girls as less innocent and more adult-like than White girls, especially in the age range of 5–15. Specifically, compared to White girls of the same age, Black

girls are perceived to need less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort and are viewed as more independent and knowledgeable about sex (Epstein et al., 2017). Another important aspect of adultification for Black girls lies in culturally rooted stereotypes of Black girls' sexualization (Morris, 2007). The commonly held stereotype of Black girls as hypersexualized is defined by society's attribution of sex as part of the natural role of Black women and girls (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013).

The consequences of adultification may also play a role across a diverse range of public systems, including education, juvenile justice, and the child welfare system, which is based on the foundational principle of serving to nurture and protect youth. The perception of Black girls as less innocent is purported to contribute to harsher punishment by educators and school resource officers. In particular, authorities in these systems may view Black girls as more independent and less needing of nurture and protection and may assign them different placement or treatment plans than White girls. Thus, recognizing the potential bias underlying the adultification of Black/Afro-Latina girls (and adult women) is an important step toward this goal.

The family and collective dynamics surrounding Black/Afro-Latinas' unique experiences often include intense ambivalence, racial projection, conflict in ethno-racial loyalty, shame, racial and gender stereotyping, and guilt (Comas-Diaz, 1996). Many Afro-Latinas have difficulty accepting their own blackness and often go to great lengths to hide their blackness via hair straightening and skin lightening. Compared to African American families, Black/Afro-Latinx families often do not buffer Black/Afro-Latinas against racism due to being Black women. Although Black/Afro-Latina women's families may be able to effectively teach them how to cope with ethnic discrimination and prejudice as a Latina, they may not teach them coping mechanisms to deal with racial prejudice and discrimination as a Black woman (Comas-Diaz, 1996). The Latinx family's lack of racial socialization has deleterious effects on Black/Afro-Latina woman differently than men because, culturally, women tend to derive self-esteem from receiving approval from significant others (Comas-Diaz, 1996).

As a result, Black/Afro-Latinas are often forced to harbor negative attribution about being Black, which engenders feelings of shame and inferiority (Comas-Diaz, 1996). Moreover, as the target of sexual-racial projection, they are often forced to cope with being defined as "other," which may lead to significant identity conflicts (Comas-Diaz, 1996). LGBTQ Black/Afro-Latinas may experience even more ostracizing, isolation, and less acceptance from their communities as they face mainstream society's racism, sexism, and heterosexism, as well as racism within the LGBTQ communities, plus heterosexism, sexism, and internalized racism of their own ethnic community (Greene, 2003).

Racism and the Intersectionality of Race and Gender Among Black/Afro-Latinas

The insidious power of racism coupled with sexism has profound consequences for how Black/Afro-Latinas who have been sexually abused as children are treated today. The dominant ideology throughout Latin America and the United States is that Blackness [and indigenusness] are inferior, despicable, and even fearful, yet also attractive and desirable, especially sexually (La Fountain-Stokes, 2013). In particular, similar to African American women, the racial and gendered stereotypes of Black/Afro-Latina women and girls as sexually promiscuous, *sucia* (dirty), *caliente* (hot), *fogoza* (fiery), *brava* (bold), and in need of socialization may underlie the implicit bias that shapes many [adult's] view of Black/Afro-Latina girls (Blake, Keith, Luo, Le, & Salter, 2017). For example, parents, families, and community members, as well as teachers and social workers, may subconsciously use these stereotypical images of Black/Afro-Latina females to interpret Black girls' behaviors and respond more harshly to Black girls who display behaviors that do not align with traditional standards of femininity in which girls are expected to be docile, diffident, and selfless (Blake et al., 2015; Torres Gotay, 2017). Moreover, this may also lead trusted adults (e.g., family, teachers/health care providers) to not believe Black/Afro-Latina girls when they disclose their abuse.

Learning From Survivors, the Black Latinidad: Building Siblinghood to End Child Sexual Abuse Project

It is important to acknowledge and give voice to powerful Black/Afro-Latina women who have paved the way for activists, mental health providers, and researchers, often without recognition. One example is the pioneering work of prominent activist Celia “Cessie” Alfonso⁴—a Black, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Lesbian feminist and adult survivor of child sexual abuse who was one of the original members of the Combahee River Collective alongside Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and June Jordan (The Combahee River Collective, 2014). The trailblazing work of Afro-Latina women like Cessie Alfonso has served as the foundation for the current project. In this article, we focus on the Black Latinidad: Building Siblinghood to End Child Sexual Abuse Project, founded by Luz Márquez Benbow (second author). This project was founded as a safe space for Black/Afro-Latina adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse to give voice to their experiences while building in sisterbrotherhood (from here on this project will use the term, “Siblinghood,” to honor gender nonconforming and Trans communities) to make community and systemic political change. This is Luz's story:

By the time I was seven I had already experienced sexual abuse by my oldest brother. At age 12, I was molested by my mom's boyfriend, and at age 14, a family friend raped me. These early sexually traumatic experiences had a significant impact on my life, especially during my adolescent years. I went from being a straight A student in middle school to becoming a truant in 10th grade, to abusing drugs, and experiencing several abortions between the ages of 14 and 19. Despite all of this, my sexual trauma was overlooked by my teachers, medical provider, members of my family, and my community who pathologized my coping mechanisms via the skewed lens of racism and classism.

Like many Black girls, I was seen as disposable as the stereotypical inner-city poor kid who was the product of a single parent household. Yet, growing up in Harlem, I received a lot of affirmation and validation for being Black. My middle school teachers at Julia De Burgos School 99 in East Harlem were deeply connected to the revolutionary movements of the Young Lords or Black Panthers and taught us about El Grito de Lares and Black pride. However, this was a huge contradiction from what I was hearing at home as the only Black-looking child in my immediate family. My mother would call me "*la prieta con pelo bueno*" (the dark-skinned one with "good" hair). According to her, genetics had "failed her," and she had failed her "race" by marrying a Black man, despite my father being Puerto Rican. Although my mother didn't talk to me about my body or sex, she always reminded me how important it was to straighten my hair. She also told me to stay with my brothers to make sure I was safe. Little did she know that one of her sons, my oldest brother, would harm me sexually.

While I know that my family, and my community failed to protect me from sexual abuse as a child, I also know that my family and community saved me. This contradiction has been my inner struggle as I healed from childhood sexual abuse. Like many other incest survivors, this inner struggle between the love for family and community and desire for safety has been a painful reality. At the age of 19, I left my home, publicly bound for college (please know that I had tried to run-away several times) and secretly seeking refuge anywhere other than in the home I had grown up in and outside of my beloved community of Harlem. By the age of 26, my life took a turn when I became a mom, I decided to join the movement to end sexual violence. This is when I became intentional about my healing.

Luz developed the Black Latinidad: Building Siblinghood to End Child Sexual Abuse Project as an extension of her own healing journey. Additionally, Luz understood the reality that Black/Afro-Latinx communities both in the United States and in their own homelands were made invisible. As a national advocate and grassroots organizer since 1998, Luz focused her work, which is supported by the Just Beginnings Collaborative Fund, on centering Black/Afro-Latinx survivors in the leadership of this movement. Utilizing a community organizing approach, Luz created spaces, called Siblinghood Survivor Listening Circles to allow for critical discussion about race and child sexual abuse. Within this space, Afrodescendant survivors could share their stories and help to create culturally specific healing modalities steeped in African traditions to assist the movement to end child sexual abuse and sexual violence.

Siblinghood Survivor Listening Circles, using a focus group format, were held by Luz with culturally specific organizations during state coalition's conferences and at national conferences from 2016 through 2017. In total, 7 Listening Circles were held with a total of 49 participants. The average number of participants in each circle ranged from 3 (the smallest) to 12 (the largest). All participants self-identified as adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse and Black/Afro-Latinx. Luz developed focus group scripts that consisted of open-ended questions dealing with six overarching topic areas for the Siblinghood Survivor Listening Circles: (a) Healing, (b) Trust/Safety, (c) Justice/Accountability, (d) Historical Trauma, (e) Siblinghood, and (f) Leadership to end child sexual abuse and sexual violence.

For the first area on healing, participants were asked: "What does healing mean to you? What has supported your healing? What has gotten in the way of healing? How do you heal? How is your healing shaped by your identity and experience as Black/Afrolatina, class, sexual orientation/gender expression?" For the second area on Trust/Safety, participants were asked to: "Define trust. What is needed for you to feel safe?? How is this impacted by identities (Black/Afrolatina, Class, Gender/Sexual Orientation, and Ability)?" For the third area, Justice/Accountability, participants were asked to: "Define justice. What does justice mean? Define accountability. How do we hold each other accountable in compassionate ways that does not isolate others?" For the fourth area, Historical Trauma, participants were asked, "How does historical trauma and current lived trauma impact our ability to support and be vulnerable with each other?" For the fifth area, Siblinghood, participants were asked to: "Define the concept Siblinghood (sister/brotherhood). What might be some roadblocks and shortcomings to these concepts?" Finally, for the sixth area, Leadership, participants were asked, "How do you want to show up in the work to end child sexual abuse and sexual violence? How do you want to stay connected to the leadership of this project?"

The following are four salient themes and narrative descriptions generated by participants in the Listening Circles.

Theme 1: Telling Our Stories: Speaking Out

For many participants, the Listening Circles were the first-time participants ever participated in a discussion about their survivor story. For example, Inez⁵, a 67-year-old participant, stated, "This is the first time I have ever participated in a group process about my survivor story. I wish I had this when I was younger, it would have prevented me from harming myself and all the shit I did."

Many of the participants in the Listening Circles were adult incest survivors. Given this reality, a lot of time was spent on discussing the harm incest has caused, such as within their families, and in forming families. One participant stated, “I struggle with trust and safety; because of what happened to me, I chose not to have children.” Questions about trust and safety were extremely challenging for many participants, given the dynamics of incest and the lack of sense of safety from an early age.

Several participants also talked about being tired of “faking it” in the world. One participant stated, “We are wearing the burdens as Black women. We are not talking about our trauma, we are just waking up and moving with our lives.” In many of the Listening Circles, participants expressed the need to “speak their truth,” “tell their stories, so that they can begin to heal and end the cycle of such abuse.”

Theme 2: Confronting Racism in Their Communities

Many of the participants expressed that they made a bold, intersectional, radical choice to identify as Black/Afro-Latina. For example, many of the survivors shared that healing from childhood sexual abuse required acknowledgement and acceptance of their Black heritage. For example, Maria, a Listening Circle participant, stated that, “My Blackness makes me beautiful and strong.” Another participant, Delia, shared that, “We need to defend our Blackness since we in the Latinx community have so much shame about being Black.”

Knowledge of one’s Black/African history was also discussed as important to the healing of survivors. One participant, Cecilia, stated that:

Knowing oneself and one’s [Black] history individually and collectively is important. DNA can be traumatizing to some [Black/Afro-Latinas] because they are living in denial of their Blackness.

Overall, participants shared the sentiment that a positive racial identity was critical to them as women, given that their communities taught them to deny their Blackness and to “hate it and be ashamed.” In particular, many participants shared that issues of colorism, class, gender, and race work to divide them and acknowledged the effects of “centuries of abuse” regarding Afro-Latinas not being valued in their communities. Over time, these negative messages about being Black left many survivors feeling invisible due to their skin tone. One participant, Amelia, shared that:

Colorism is really harmful and it’s worse in our own communities. We are seen as promiscuous, oversexualized, and this connects as to whether we are believed or not (regarding their sexual abuse), victim blaming-blame the victim.

Issues of safety around discussing the intersection of race and gender were also voiced among transgender and gender nonconforming survivors. One gender nonconforming participant, Ignacio, stated, “This is interesting to me, I usually work in my safety zone (LGBT, Poor people), but I need to talk about the little [Black] girl in me. My story puts me in a middle space where we end up discussing gender and not abuse which is problematic because it silences me.”

Theme 3: Healing Modalities

A third theme revealed in the Listening Circles was the importance of engaging in multiple healing modalities to heal trauma. Some women stressed the importance of returning to their African traditions and following in the “ways of their ancestors.” In particular, one participant (Josefina) stated that, “*el desarrollo de mi negritud en mi* [the development of my blackness allows me], to learn the stories of our ancestors which helps to build resiliency.” Participants also expressed the need for healing must go beyond talk therapy, given that the mental health system has historically been harmful to communities of color (Comas-Díaz & Greene, 1994; Sue & Sue, 2012).

Although healing took on many forms, for many of the women, a connection with their spirituality was central. Specifically, participants discussed the importance of the connection between the “mind and body,” which was reflected in both internal and external body work. For example, exploring yoga, exercise, dance, walking, and expressing one’s emotions through the arts—poetry, drawing, painting, and writing— was a central part of women’s healing. In addition, connecting to nature (e.g., the earth, ocean, and rivers) was also important to “getting grounded.” Finally, daily remedies, such as aromatherapy, journaling, and/or listening to music, helped lessen the impact of trauma triggers in the workplace, home, or in the community.

Theme 4: The Importance of Siblinghood

The emphasis on Siblinghood was an important element of healing for many of the Black/Afro-Latina participants in the Listening Circle. Please know that initially, the terms used to talk about the importance of community was sisterhood/brotherhood; but as circles were held survivors talked about utilizing gender neutral terminology, hence we began to use the term Siblinghood.

On an interpersonal level, participants expressed the importance of Women of Color spaces, especially for survivors of Color; spaces where they “validated each other and felt valued and got to release” and shared

about their experiences of child sexual abuse. The expectation was that, within these safe spaces, they could “teach community responses to disclosures so we are not victim-blaming survivors, shifting the language of victimology”. One participant, Julieta, stated that, “sistercircles are critical to our survival.” For example, fostering and nurturing strong relationships—even if they met via Skype—was important for sharing their stories and encouraging others to tell their stories, “shedding the shame and freeing our ancestors.”

At the macro-level, participants suggested that national organizations for Latinx groups (e.g., La Raza and other National Hispanic organizations) be “called to task” to address racism and sexism within Latinx communities. Both racism and sexism were identified as barriers that interfered with Afro-Latina women getting the support that they deserve and needed to heal from their trauma. For example, participants discussed how men need to, “step up to the plate” in holding each other accountable and taking care of their community, particularly in response to hearing about a child being sexually abused. One participant, Daniela, stated,

It is not our [Afro-Latina women’s] responsibility to care for men, but theirs. It is not our responsibility to care for White Latinx privilege, but theirs. We need to make time and space with *nuestras hermanas* [our sisters] across the entire diaspora.

Overall, participants noted that in order for healing to take place, critical dialog needs to take place within their families and communities. Additionally, the concept of Siblinghood requires Black/Afro-Latina survivors to be intentional about living and being in community so they can flourish. This must include holding themselves accountable to their children and building intentional accountable community.

Racially and Culturally Specific, Trauma-Informed Approach

In this final section, we outline conceptual and practical considerations for supporting Black/Afro-Latina adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. These suggestions are informed by the expertise shared directly from Black/Afro-Latina adult survivors who attended the Listening Circles, as well as the expertise of the authors who are activists, researchers, and practitioners in this area (see [Table 1](#) for relevant terms for a culturally specific, trauma-informed approach). The authors believe that practice-based organizational and systems change must occur across mental health and helping professions, particularly among those who provide direct support to survivors of sexual assault, in order to better accompany Afro/Black Latinas in their healing journeys. The authors propose the following foundational elements that must be embedded in any healing exchange. Additionally, they

Table 1. Relevant definitions for a racially, culturally specific and trauma-informed approach.

Term	Definition
Trauma	Trauma is the experience of an event or enduring condition in which the individual and/or community experiences a threat to life, the psychic, or bodily integrity and experiences intense fear, helplessness, or horror. A key aspect of traumatic experiences is that the individual and/or community's coping capacity is overwhelmed.
Structural Trauma	Harm to people that prevents them from meeting basic needs and is embedded in social, political, and economic organizations and systems—including poverty, racism, gender inequality, and other forms of human rights abuses (Schultz et al., 2016, p. 43).
Historical Trauma	An event or set of events perpetrated on a group of people or their environment who share a specific group identity that causes catastrophic upheaval (i.e., annihilation or disruption to traditional lifeways, culture, and identity) with effects that can persist across generations (Schultz et al., 2016, p. 43).
Trauma-informed approach	The manner in which a program, agency, organization or community thinks about and responds to those who have experienced trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2014). The adapted definition implies a change in the organization culture to ensure that all components of the organization incorporate a thorough understanding of the prevalence and impact of trauma (broadening trauma to include aspects that are particularly relevant for Afro/Black Latina survivors e.g., historical trauma and systemic trauma), the role that trauma plays (in the lives of individuals and communities) and the complex and varied paths in which people recover and heal from trauma (including cultural healing; Serrata & Notario, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014).

propose several principles to help guide one's healing work from a racially and culturally specific, trauma-informed perspective.

Foundational Elements for Racially and Culturally Specific, Trauma-informed Practice

When embodying racially and culturally specific, trauma-informed practice, certain foundational elements must be present in order for the approach to be effective. First and foremost, relationships with Black/Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual assault must be based on mutuality and respect. This is similar to what feminist therapists consider as a core principle of an egalitarian therapeutic relationship (Perilla, Serrata Vasquez, Weinburg, & Lippy, 2012). That is, from their first contact with the organization, Black/Afro-Latina clients must be seen, acknowledged, and honored. This is critically important as participants in the Listening Circles noted that their Black identities were essentially invisible in their families and communities. Furthermore, as survivors of childhood sexual abuse, their trust and safety were often manipulated by their family, educators, and health care providers from a critical developmental age. When discussing prior experiences with talk therapy, participants noted that the lack of trust of their therapists rendered therapy unhelpful. Therefore, building trust and genuine relationships with Black/Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual abuse are absolutely critical.

Given that Black/Afro-Latinas face multiple traumas at the historic-political, transgenerational, psychosocial, and personal levels associated with being Black women, it is important to recognize the intersectional and multiplicative effects that race-based traumatic stress can have on other forms of trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2007). For example, it is important for counselors and service providers to be cognizant of the potential for additional race-based traumas facing Black/Afro-Latina survivors of sexual abuse. According to Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2006), given the vulnerability and violation already affecting these survivors, it is particularly vital for trauma counselors, such as those working in rape crisis centers, domestic violence shelters, and emergency response workers, to be trained in race-based trauma assessment and intervention. That is, counselors and researchers must consider not only the impact of being physically violated, but also the additive effect of interacting with systems and institutions that devalue one's race. These race-based violations can add and, in some cases, multiply the traumatic stress of survivors (Bryant-Davis, 2007).

Another important foundational element is for practitioners to understand their own biases and stereotypes. The practice of ongoing self-awareness is one of the benchmarks of feminist and multicultural counseling competency (Goodman et al., 2004; Sue & Sue, 2012). Central to this process is the examination of practitioners' stereotypes and an active commitment to working to change them (Betancourt, Green, Carrillo, & Owusu Ananeh-Firemong, 2016; Kirmayer, 2012). Many of the survivors who participated in the Listening Circles expressed various instances of overt and covert "isms" when seeking help for their sexual trauma, including racism, sexism, classism, transphobia, and discrimination. Thus, it is particularly important for practitioners to be aware of their stereotypes of Black women (e.g., "the angry/strong Black woman"). These stereotypes may keep a practitioner from being fully present and supportive as they might otherwise be with a non-Black client.

Second, helping professionals (both White and People of Color) who are unaware of or are not sensitive to the varied racial histories of Black/Afro-Latinxs may avoid these topics in their work with Black/Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual abuse, which may further serve to isolate and marginalize them. Moreover, they may conflate the race and ethnicity of Black/Afro-Latinas with that of African Americans, overlooking important differences, such as immigration, acculturation, language, and racial ideology that may be unique to their trauma experiences. Thus, they must further their understanding of the complex definitions of Blackness that go beyond the dichotomous Black-White racial binary within the United States (Telles & Paschel, 2014). For many Black/Afro-Latinas in the United States, their experience of being Black in the United States may be very

different from their racial identity and racial experiences outside of the United States. Similarly, practitioners need to be aware of the harsh reality of colorism within the Black and Latinx community and do some work to untangle the internalization of these messages.

Principles for Racially and Culturally Specific, Trauma-Informed Practice

In addition to the aforementioned foundational elements to racially and culturally specific, trauma-informed practice with Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual abuse, we propose the following principles for practice.

Principle 1: Recognize How Survivors Bring Inner and Collective Growth to the Forefront

As noted in Luz's story, trauma is only one aspect of a survivor's life. Any practitioner that is supporting survivors must recognize the tremendous inner and collective strength that survivors bring to the forefront every single day. There is a growing literature base around traumatic growth and resilience; however, the field continues to be riddled with theoretical and conceptual assumptions and responses that are grounded in deficit models and pathology (Perilla et al., 2012). For example, an organization may have a tremendous amount of resources for trauma-focused therapies (e.g., Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Cognitive Processing Therapies) and very few resources to support survivors in other areas of their lives (e.g., leadership development, creative workshops, economic advancement opportunities, etc.). An organization with a trauma-informed approach which recognizes all aspects of a survivor's life may have opportunities available beyond traditional responses (e.g., shelter, therapy, advocacy, etc.). They may also have peer support groups led by Black/Afro-Latina survivors themselves (similar to the Listening Circles described above) or leadership development and community engagement opportunities, as noted by Listening Circle participants, as an important aspect of their own healing work.

For organizations and helping professionals working directly with sexual trauma survivors, including those who have experienced childhood sexual abuse, it may be easy to focus solely on "treating" consequences of trauma (e.g., symptoms of PTSD, depressions, family conflict). However, an emphasis on the resilience, wisdom, and strength of Black/Afro-Latina survivors and the centralization of their voices are also key to fostering healing from trauma (Swerdfager, 2016). For example, one participant, Maria, stated: "I see healing as structural change—change that each of us as individuals has the power to take on. We are the structures in our communities that make a difference and can end misogyny." As noted by this survivor,

healing must take place within communities and be led by survivors themselves.

Central to the approach of many trauma-informed, community-based organizations is the embeddedness of communities and the creation of approaches alongside and led by community members and survivors themselves. The community-capacity approach to supporting survivors goes beyond the practitioner-survivor dichotomy as the source of healing by promoting healing within community and as a collective (see Serrata, Hernandez-Martinez, & Macias, 2016 for more information on a community capacity approach). It is important to note that although the authors recognize that community or family can be the source of trauma for many (especially in the case for survivors of sexual assault and child sexual abuse), by centralizing the voices of survivors, each practitioner will work to understand whether to engage the community and to what extent. Empirical and practice-based scholarship document that for historically oppressed communities, communities can be a significant source of healing (Schultz et al., 2016).

Principle 2: Realize the Prevalence of Individual and Collective Race-based Trauma

In applying a trauma-informed approach when working with Black/Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual abuse, a practitioner must realize the prevalence of trauma for Black/Afro-Latinas both individually and collectively. That is, understanding the origins of trauma must be expanded to include historical, structural, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Schultz et al., 2016; see Table 1 for definitions). One form of structural trauma that is at the forefront in the current political climate is that of mass deportations of Latinx community members. As noted above, Black/Afro-Latinas may be particularly vulnerable as Black immigrants and are more likely to be deported when compared to other ethnic groups. The anticipated stress of deportation, coupled with other structural stressors (e.g., higher rates of poverty, unemployment, limited access to quality education), can result in traumatic effects for Black/Afro-Latinas. Additionally, the acknowledgement of the historical trauma associated with the enslavement and colonization of Afro-Latinx peoples is important for helping professionals to incorporate into their work. For example, Dr. Joy Leary DeGruy (2005) has written extensively about the consequences of multigenerational oppression on the descendants of chattel slavery (slavery based on the belief that Africans were genetically inferior to whites), including feelings of hopelessness and depression and internalized racism. Practitioners may need to reconceptualize Black/Afro-Latina survivors from “symptoms”

or as “problem clients” to individuals who are actively coping with historical trauma and the consequences of childhood sexual abuse and active oppression (e.g., racism, discrimination, sexism) from society.

Principle 3: Recognize How Trauma Affects Healers

A central tenant of many trauma-informed approaches is to recognize that healers are often times survivors of trauma themselves (Afuape, 2012; Reeves & Stewart, 2017). However, there is often little space for healers (e.g., staff, practitioners, advocates) to share and be supported as “out” survivors. Many healer survivors feel forced to stay silent about their own personal abuse for fear of being negatively stigmatized by their colleagues. However, a trauma-informed organization would actually embrace and lift up healer survivors within their organizations as a significant strength and would create opportunities for healing among staff. For example, a Latinx organization based in California, the National Compadres Network, provides trainings called “Heal the Healer” where they specifically work with Latinx organizations to bring cultural healing to their own staff as a way to incorporate a trauma-informed approach at the organizational level (Tello, 2016). There is a growing body of literature on the importance of preventing practitioner burnout and secondary trauma (SAMSHA, 2014). However, the key for practitioners, as Luz noted in her story, is that trauma healing starts with the practitioner’s own personal journey. Moreover, as practitioners in culturally specific organizations are also often part of marginalized groups, it is important that the complex aspects of trauma addressed in this article be considered when thinking of supporting healers in their own right.

Principle 4: Centralize the Voices of Communities and Cultural Healing

One organization alone will not be able to end childhood sexual abuse and sexual violence. A trauma-informed approach calls for practitioners and organizations to truly believe in the power and collective wisdom of survivors and communities. Traumatic experiences, such as child sexual abuse, can force survivors to disconnect from their immediate communities to survive (Schultz et al., 2016). Thus, practitioners, rape crisis centers, and culturally specific organizations should be exploring concepts such as the sistercircles described above to support survivors healing individually and also consider its role in healing communities. As noted by a national leader in this movement, “*la cultura cura*” (Tello, 2016), there is a significant need for healing to take place within marginalized communities. Building Siblinghood creates a language that empowers communities to look at ways to hold themselves accountable to the safety of Black Latinx children. For

example, the first *El Dia Internacional de la Mujer Afrolatinx, AfroCaribena y la Diaspora* gathering took place on July 25, 2017 at Howard University in collaboration with the Washington DC Rape Crisis Center. This convening was held in honor of the International Day of Black/Afro-Latina, Afro Caribbean and Diaspora Women. The focus of El Dia was to honor the collective histories of Black/Afro-Latina women and girls, share the truth about the childhood sexual abuse and sexual violence experiences, and support healing and wellness. It is through events such as this that helping organizations can uplift cultural healing, cultural communities, and “come out” as safe spaces for survivors of violence within their communities at large.

Conclusion

In order to heal the invisible bruises of Black/Afro-Latina survivors of childhood sexual abuse, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and activists all have an important role to play. In doing so, they must utilize culturally relevant and gender-specific approaches that account for the complex racial history faced by Black/Afro-Latinas, as well as actively engage them in the healing process. Thus, it is recommended that practitioners and trauma-focused organizations working alongside Black/Afro-Latina survivors, community members, policymakers, and researchers apply the culturally relevant, trauma-informed framework in a way that transforms community without recreating oppressive systems (Serrata et al., 2017). This article outlined conceptual and practical considerations for working with Black/Afro-Latina adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, as well as specific recommendations from survivors themselves for how one might engage in this approach at the individual and community level. This article closes with words from the late June Jordan (1980), a Black Feminist Poet:

And who will join this standing up
and the ones who stood without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea
we are the ones we have been waiting for

Notes

1. English translation of “*Rotundamente Negra*”¹

Definitely black
 I definitely deny
 To refuse my voice
 My blood and my skin.
 And I definitely deny
 To stop being me
 To stop feeling good
 When I look at my face in the mirror
 With my mouth.
 Definitely big
 And my nose
 Definitely beautiful.
 And my teeth
 Definitely white
 And my skin bravely black.
 And I categorically deny
 To stop embracing
 My idiom, my accent and my history.
 And I absolutely deny
 To be part of the ones who shut
 Who fear
 Who cry
 Because I love me
 Definitely free Definitely beautiful Definitely black.

2. Latinx is defined as “a person of Latin American origin or descent and is used as a gender-neutral alternative to Latino or Latina” (Oxford English online dictionary, n.d.).
3. Garifuna formally known as black Caribs are originally from St. Vincent, a mix of African and Amerindian heritage and never experienced slavery (Taylor, 2012).
4. Cessie Alfonso was a member of the Combahee River Collective. The Combahee River Collective held Black Feminists retreats as a supportive space for Black women to build sisterhood. However, the retreats also served as part of the process for developing the infamous Combahee River Collective Statement (Collins, 2002). One of the Black Feminists retreats was held in Cessie’s home at the time, in Franklin, NJ. This was during a time when Black lesbians were shunned from the Black liberation movement. Cessie, like many other Black lesbians, was struggling to connect to her community while not being omitted from history. As a Black Latina growing up in a

large Latinx community, Cessie was often ignored and not accepted by members of her community. Like many Black Latinas, her skin color, curly hair coupled with her 6-foot stature was not the “Latina standard of beauty.” As a little girl, Cessie was made invisible by her own family which prevented her family from seeing the sexual abuse she was objected to. Typical of many incest survivors, she held this secret for years and moved on with her life, becoming a leader in the field of Clinical Forensic Social Work- Mitigation. Her career, as part of defense teams, has allowed her to save the lives of primarily Black men from the death penalty for the last 20 years. As a pioneer, Cessie has been asked by the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study Harvard University for her Forensic work papers.

5. Pseudonyms were created for participants to protect their real identity.

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