

Journal of Contemplative Inquiry

Volume 9
Number 1 *Transcendent Wisdom and
Transformative Action: Reflections from Black
Contemplatives*

Article 4

2022

Ode to Woman on the Train and My Sistahs: Healing and Reimagining Loving Relationships with Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC)

Ericka Echavarria
Columbia University School of Social Work

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci>

Recommended Citation

Echavarria, Ericka (2022) "Ode to Woman on the Train and My Sistahs: Healing and Reimagining Loving Relationships with Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC)," *Journal of Contemplative Inquiry*. Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/joci/vol9/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Contemplative Inquiry by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

Ode to Woman on the Train and My Sistahs: Healing and Reimagining Loving Relationships with Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC)

Ericka Echavarria

Columbia University School of Social Work

In March 2019, I was assaulted on a busy NYC train during an early morning commute by a Black woman who appeared to be mentally ill. The incident left an indelible impact on my heart, body, and soul, and created a somatic opening to experience oneness and healing with my attacker, a Black woman, as well as with other Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color who have harmed me, and who I have also harmed. This article will discuss how I used contemplative practices to unpack the complexity of emotions I experienced in the processing of the incident and other interactions with BIWOC, including grief, rage, compassion, and resolve. I will conclude with a description of how I am leveraging this experience to cultivate a commitment to healing and supportive relationships with BIWOC and reimagining ways we can presently experience liberation from our conditioned patterns of relating with one another.

It was a brisk March NYC winter morning in 2019, when I left for my commute one Friday. I was excited, as I was planning to have some drinks with colleagues after work, and I could not remember the last time I was out on a Friday night. My commute was uneventful and smooth from Queens to Manhattan, and by the time I had reached my transfer stop and boarded the train that took me to Harlem where I work, I was scheduled to arrive early and even had a seat. Just before the stop that went express to my final stop, a few more passengers boarded. One of the commuters, a Black woman, sat next to me in our two-seater seat. The train pulled away to go to my designated next stop, and as

I fussed around with my winter layers to prepare to go back outside, I accidentally brushed the shoulder of the woman next to me. Before I could blink she was standing over me, hitting me over the head and screaming loudly: *"I ain't got time for this shit today, I ain't got time for no fucking immigrants today!"* Instinctively, I put my hands up and started yelling back, *"What is your problem?"* which was the wrong choice of words. There was another *BOOM*, to my head, followed by the feeling of a warm, gooey liquid in my eyes and hair. The woman had spat on me! The social worker in me went into triage mode; it was as if the woman's bodily fluid was communicating to my body, the deep disturbance and residue of trauma in her cells. Intuitively, my body responded before my brain and though I don't remember thinking them, I heard these words coming out of my mouth: *"Ma'am, I am sorry you are having a bad day."* She seemed to be immediately soothed by my words, retracted as quickly as she charged, and turned her back away from me, positioning herself in front of the doors to deboard at the next stop.

I fought the urge to vomit as I wiped the woman's saliva from my hair and face by taking deep belly breaths and grounding my feet on the train floor. No longer in trauma response, I found my footing, stood up, walked towards the door, and poised myself to exit. I was standing about one foot away from where I had been seated, and also directly behind this woman. By this time, the woman seemed distracted with the music on her phone and was singing loudly on the train. Through my peripheral vision, I could now see the entire car sitting there motionless like robots, staring at me and the woman. For the first time it struck me that other people had been in the car and witnessed what had just happened. Since no one intervened or said anything, it felt like I had been there all alone. This set off a different response for me and the heat in my body shifted and rose rapidly, first in my belly, then rising to my chest and diaphragm, and I found myself unzipping my jacket and loosening my scarf. I was having trouble breathing. The reaction of the bystanders pulled me back into trauma response and I wanted desperately to get out of the car to escape further humiliation in front of these bystanders. The doors seemed to take forever to open, and when they finally did, I waited for the woman to deboard in front of me, walked a few steps be-

hind her, then ran to a different set of stairs towards the exit. As I made my way up the stairs, I could feel some of the passengers looking at me and even heard some offer: *"I am sorry that happened," "Don't believe what she said..."* The statements felt inauthentic, shallow, and too little, too late. I wanted to get out of the station quickly to avoid any further attention, especially that of law enforcement whose presence was heavy at this particular station. I found myself gasping for breath as I reached above ground and called my colleague and said, *"Can you wait for me downstairs...I've just been assaulted on the train."*

When I arrived to at my office, my entire team was waiting there for me in our common area. As I opened the door to my office and began to remove my coat and set down my belongings, I began recounting the events of my commute. What came out were not words, but sobs. As my friend leaned in to embrace me, I completely melted into her arms. She intuitively knew what I needed in that moment, and in the safety of my office and my team, my body no longer in defense mode, I surrendered. After no more tears remained, I proceeded to tell the story, this time screaming and slamming things around the office as I spoke. The release of that energy helped me move to a place where I could begin to process the full breadth and impact of the event on the train on my heart, mind, soul, *and* body.

That same day I repeated the story several times to colleagues, friends, and family. I went through a preliminary analysis of inquiry in trying to understand the complexity of what I was being presented with through this seemingly traumatic moment. Though unquestionably traumatic to some of my listeners and supporters, I was not yet ready to claim trauma and leaned into the inquiries which were organically arising. Should I have involved law enforcement? Why did I feel angrier towards the bystanders than the woman who attacked me? Why was I feeling connected to the woman on the train? I was very clear on not getting law enforcement involved. Based on my experiences of being a defense-based advocate for Black and Brown folks within the criminal legal system, I imagined the police's line of questioning would diminish my experience and criminalize hers, and that the focus would be shifted towards punishment, not care. The type of violence she inflicted on me

led me to believe this was a person with a deep level of trauma, and what she really needed was healing, not confrontation and interrogation. While some of my colleagues empathized, others argued that the woman was still on the loose and might cause harm to others. As the person harmed in this particular experience, I felt it was not my responsibility to hold that enormous accountability and I was not going to perpetuate the further victimization of the woman on the train.

The question regarding why I felt so connected to the woman on the train remained. As I continued to sit in my daily zazen (meditation) practice, I often returned to this feeling of familiarity and this interconnectedness with her. For example, both she and I seemed invisible to the bystanders on the train. Was it because we were WOC? Was it because she was a Black woman, and I, though a woman of Dominican ethnicity, was also another Black woman? What did they see? What kinds of assumptions did they make about us based on what they perceived? Were they afraid of her? Or did they ignore us because they were New Yorker commuters, who had been desensitized to violence on the train? Was it all of the above? As I journaled my reflections and consulted with my spiritual community, there was a knowing that the questions that had arisen about my relationship with this woman would lead to me to an important finding.

Around the same time of this incident, I was participating in a racial equity training with colleagues which brought me face to face with a BIWOC who had harmed me throughout the course of several administrative meetings. In sum, this woman had undermined my experience and wisdom in a room full of predominantly white staff. During the training, while describing how racism showed up at our PWI, the BIWOC made some superficial comments about how students at our PWI experience racism. Her lack of authenticity and inability to understand the nuances of how others experienced racism at our PWI enraged me. How could this BIWOC condemn racism in one breath and belittle and patronize me in a room full of white colleagues in another? I confronted the woman through the group space process and questioned her authenticity. She responded by also attacking me and accusing me of causing her harm. Additionally, she questioned

my genuineness and motives behind my perceived allyship with a white female colleague.

As I sat there listening to this woman accuse me of causing her mental, physical, and emotional anguish, I flashed back to the woman on the train. I noticed my body constricting, my breath stuck in my throat and upper body, and I felt hot and flushed. Here was another BIWOC attacking me. The heat quickly transformed into rage, and I poised to defend myself and redirect with equally violent verbal assaults. Luckily, another BIWOC, my Black colleague/sistah/friend, instinctively knowing where I was going, abruptly interrupted me, and lovingly offered an alternative response to me. She offered that what was playing out between this woman and me was the result of deep internalized racism and sexism which impacts the ways BIWOC interact with one another, including at PWIs. My colleague courageously reflected the mirror of internalized racism within herself. Choking back tears, my friend shared how she had been victimized and also perpetrated the same harm on other BIWOC, and pleaded with me to focus on the true enemy of white dominance and supremacy. I was stunned and ashamed. I paused, took several breaths, and adjusted in my seat. I then apologized to the BIWOC and offered an invitation to further dialogue after the training. Although we were unable to repair our relationship, she accepted my apology. The apology interrupted our contentious dynamic and we were able to sit in the space for the remainder of that training session without further causing harm to one another.

My friend's invitation to examine my actions helped me see how we were *both* victims and set up to be in relationship in the following ways: fighting for control over/hoarding resources; trying to take power away from the other; delegitimizing the other's expertise and experience through actions and words in collective and siloed spaces; believing our experiences are separate from one another, instead of interconnected in struggles for legitimacy, dignity, and respect. Though I could not change what occurred between myself and that particular BIWOC, I vowed to honor what had awakened in me during that racial equity training. There was a painful truth about my relationship with other BIWOC surfacing that I had been unable to see before. Through continued moments of

stillness and returning to my breath in stillness and meditation, I became more aware of deeper emotions and sensations. As I recorded my observations in a journal, I saw how angry I was with other BIWOC who had “attacked” me. I was also ashamed about silencing, gaslighting, questioning, accusing, and judging other BIWOC, including the woman who I had harmed in the training. I saw the aggressive parts of the BIWOC on the train and the BIWOC in the racial equity training who had harmed me, in myself. I was both women. I had been a perpetrator of violence on my fellow BIWOC. I had also been aggressive towards both the woman on the train and the woman in the training.

I was also becoming more connected to how and where all these feelings lived in my body. I recalled the slap on my head and the warm gush of fluid landing on my person. It was a “WAKE UP GIRL!” moment and the saliva which fell upon my eyes had offered a heavy solution to wash the grime of white supremacy from my vision. As I grappled with these observations, I noticed the heaviness in my chest, the knot in my throat, and my anger began to melt into tears. I was grieving. My grief revealed my broken heart which had been broken long before the incident on the train. I was distraught over how often it is that we as BIWOC mistrust one another and are especially critical of one another. I was saddened by how frequently we reject and misunderstand each other because we are showing up in other manifestations of our identities and positionalities based on our own unique lived experiences. I cried over the violence we inflict on one another because we cannot see this in ourselves. I sobbed over the ways we have been violated, oppressed, and silenced through different iterations of white supremacy, including but not limited to: slavery, colonization, patriarchy, colorism, genderism, ageism, and ableism. I processed my contribution to the loss of relationships, harm inflicted to myself and other BIWOC, and surrendered to the fact BIWOC would continue interacting in this way with one another due to notions of white dominance. I was able to see how my internalized racism had caused me to respond in similar ways white folks often interact with BIWOC.

Nonetheless, I also saw parts of my colleague/sistah friend who had called me in during that training. In fact, I was able to see how that

incident on the train had represented an embodied shift for me. On that day in the train, I was able to mitigate further harm to me and my aggressor by actively engaging in specific practices. Shortly thereafter, I was able to access the same contemplative praxis in avoiding further conflict with another BIWOC. I continue to regularly apply these mindful tools when encountering painful moments with BIWOC:

Pausing;

Breathing;

Dropping into my body, feeling my feet on the floor and adjusting in my seat or stance;

Sending compassion to myself, then to the BIWOC with whom I am engaging;

Remembering our commonalities, bearing witness to and holding our different lived experiences; (more breathing) and,

Apologizing for and taking accountability for harm I have caused.

Through my body's wisdom, I learned that it is not in my nature to harm other BIWOC, even when being harmed by them. In allowing the rage and grief to be metabolized through my body, I was able to process and release these and many intense emotions. Now that my rage and grief were no longer strangers and had settled, I was beginning to see through the eyes of compassion and more deeply understood the similarities of experiences in our BIWOC bodies and points of entry for connection. I was ready to offer grace to myself and other BIWOC with whom I interacted.

The woman on the train had caused me an injury which touched on some unhealed wounds and offered a somatic opening to revisit the pain surrounding those hurts on a deeper mind, body, heart, and soul level. After moving through the pain, I had greater capacity to feel see, hear, and be, with my BIWOC sistahs in a different way. As I embraced this awakening, other opportunities for healing were divinely presented.

One example occurred a couple summers ago, while working on a presentation with colleagues regarding being BIWOC as Field Educators, in schools of social work. My friends and I bore witness to each other's stories about being silenced, questioned, dehumanized, and harmed in our roles. We felt the ways in which we had been harmed so viscerally; it was as if we all had experienced one another's pain. Moreover, I was able to understand when and how I had misjudged and misinterpreted one of my colleague's demeanor towards me, and apologized to her. That moment of intimacy and vulnerability brought us closer together as colleagues, and as friends, and has been one of the most transformative relationships I have experienced with another black woman. Since the incident on the train, I have co-created, co-learned, co-facilitated, and co-celebrated with other BIWOC in many different spaces, in ways that feel more authentic, generative, loving, and hopeful. I owe much to the woman on the train, and my being in community with BIWOC in different spaces, both virtual and live, and am forever grateful for that moment of deeper awakening on the train. I offer this poem as a final affirmation of gratitude and a prayer to the woman on the train, and to all BIWOC wherever they are, at this unique moment in time, so that we may experience healing:

Ode to Woman on the Train

The woman on the train
 Was not a lesson in vain
 The woman on the train
 Made me ask
 Who was really to blame
 The woman on the train
 Made me feel
 Her pain
 And my pain
 One and the same
 The woman on the train
 Made me feel
 The shame

Of how I treated other women
 Like me
 And had no capacity
 To see
 That it was really
 white supremacy
 Who was to blame
 For her pain
 And my pain
 And the feeling that we are not one and the same
 As the people on the train
 Peered into our experience of violence
 There was silence
 Resulting in the
Invisibilization
Dehumanization
Annihilation
 Of my experience
 And hers
 As they sat back,
 held back
 Remained unmoved
 And offered no words to soothe
 I was able to see
 She was me
 And I was she
 I breathed and
 Released the words
 To soothe
 And I was able to see
 Her in her madness
 And me in my sadness
"I am sorry"
 I was sorry
 For what had transpired that day on the train

A travesty of the largest gravity
Another black woman harming another black woman
And the complacency of the bystanders
Over the mediocrity of what had they had witnessed
Inspired me to make a different choice
And voice my apology
To mitigate further catastrophe
Against me
And she
Because this would not be the last time
We would face a crime
Committed by one of us
against us
because that is how we have been positioned to be in relationship
with one another
For better or for worse
In this society
Since that day with the woman on the train
I have sat and sat
to strategize
Apologize
And visualize
A better way of being in relationship with my sistahs
I continue to pray on ways
To hold space for them and me
As we seek to be **free**
Of this GOD DAMN WHITE SUPREMACY
So we can just **BE!**
So you see
The lesson I learned from the woman on the train
Was Definitely not in vain
I did get my answer
She was not to blame
The people on the train were not to blame
It was White Supremacy and its toxicity.