

Memoir as Resistance: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of Patrisse Khan-Cullors' *When They Call You a Terrorist*

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Abstract—In the contemporary United States, African Americans continue to confront systemic injustice and marginalisation despite significant advances in civil rights. These inequities are definitive outcomes of a racialized history marked by slavery, colonisation and structural inequality. This study examines the multifaceted nature of racial oppression by analysing Patrisse Khan-Cullors's poignant memoir, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (2018), as both a personal testimony and a sociological critique of modern-day Black oppression in the United States. Grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT), the analysis foregrounds key constructs such as the social construction of race as a tool of power, intersectionality as a framework for understanding overlapping oppressions, the cumulative impact of microaggressions, the transformative power of counter-storytelling, and the entrenched character of structural racism. By treating memoirs as a lived archive, this research demonstrates how CRT provides an effective analytical lens for understanding race as a fundamental organizing principle that normalises systemic inequality and exclusion. Thus, the paper ultimately argues for comprehensive systemic reform, asserting that addressing broader patterns of racial injustice requires not only the dismantling of oppressive structures, but also the establishment of new frameworks that foster genuine inclusion and liberation. Furthermore, the research employs an auto-ethnographic approach to centre marginalised voices and challenges the oppressive structures and dominant narratives while advocating for an emancipatory change.

Index Terms—racial oppression, systemic injustice, counter-storytelling, auto-ethnography

I. INTRODUCTION

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” (United Nations, 1948, p. 2).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) affirms the inherent freedom and equality of all individuals, yet societal structures routinely violate these principles and contradict this ethos (United Nations, 1948). As Mann (1998) contends, institutional frameworks often exacerbate systemic inequities rather than safeguard universal rights, undermining UDHR's foundational ethos. This dissonance is starkly visible in the ongoing struggles of African diaspora communities, which confront systemic violence, racialized hierarchies, and the enduring legacies of colonial subjugation. Their fight for liberation underscores the gap between legal proclamations of equality and the realities of structural oppression. According to Hoffman, “‘Race’ has been defined as a biological feature; a local geographic population; a group linked by common descent or origin; a population connected by a shared history, nationality, or geographic distribution; a “subspecies”; and a social and political construct” (p. 1096). Hoffman (2004) dismantles the myth of race as a biological fact, reframing it as a socially constructed tool of domination engineered to reinforce systemic hierarchies. This construct classified Europeans as superior, historically justifying slavery, land dispossession, and cultural genocide against the African people. Hoffman's analysis reveals how racialization functions as a tool of power, embedding prejudice within institutions to perpetuate inequity. Echoing this, Davis et al. (2022) argue that true racial justice necessitates dismantling oppressive systems, not merely integrating marginalized groups into inherently unjust frameworks. These scholars collectively expose how structural racism persists through institutionalized violence and epistemic erasure. In this context, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, the co-founder of Black Lives Matter (BLM) and a pivotal voice in contemporary Black activism, interrogates these systems in her memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018). Blending personal narrative with critical race praxis, Khan-Cullors exposes carceral violence, state surveillance, and the criminalization of blackness while centring marginalized resistance. This study analyses her memoir through Critical Race Theory (CRT). This framework traces how race, as a social construct, reinforces exclusion across intersections of caste, class, and gender. By examining Khan-Cullors' lived experiences, this study illuminates the symbiotic relationship

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between personal trauma and structural violence. Her memoir acts as both a testimony and critique, illustrating how systemic racism infiltrates the education, housing, economic policies, and everyday life of African American communities. Simultaneously, her activism models resistance, showcasing CRT's transformative potential to confront oppression and to exert agency. Khan-Cullors' work not only indicts institutionalized racism but also reimagines justice through community-based solidarity a radical reclamation of the UDHR's betrayed promise.

African diaspora populations continue to struggle with liberation and equity within contemporary societies, confronting systemic violence, racialized social constructions, and the enduring legacies of colonial subjugation imposed on people of African descent. Patrisse Khan-Cullors is a contemporary figure in social justice movements and has emerged as a pivotal leader in the modern civil rights movement through her co-founding of Black Lives Matter in 2013. Her writing style critically engages in visceral violence, institutional accountability, and community-based resistance. Her memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018) synthesizes autoethnographic reflection and critical race praxis, interrogating racialized state violence while centering subaltern narratives. This study examines Patrisse Khan-Cullors' memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018) as a critical intervention in discourses of marginalization, employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) to interrogate systemic oppression. Through the framework of Critical Race Theory, Patrisse Khan-Cullors' memoir reveals how race is constructed and used as a tool to uphold systemic oppression. Her personal narrative turns into a radical act of resistance, using counter-storytelling to expose structural racism, highlighting intersectional identities, and challenging the dominant narratives that dehumanize Black lives. This study addresses the problem of how systemic racism, as evidenced by carceral violence, state surveillance, and the criminalization of blackness, undermines the promise of universal human rights. Khan-Cullors' narrative rooted in her activism, exposes institutionalized violence and carceral racism as tools of racial segregation. Through counter-storytelling, she challenges and dismantles the dominant discourses that identify black identity with criminality. The analysis reveals how her memoir functions dually as a personal testimony and structural critique of contemporary American society. This paper draws on Patrisse Khan-Cullors' lived experiences with racism as a lens to expose systemic mechanisms of racialized control, from policing to poverty, and the intersecting hierarchies that enforce social marginalization. Her story reveals how personal trauma mirrors structural violence, while her activism models resistance to pervasive, oppressive systems. Despite significant progress in civil rights legislation and social attitudes, African Americans still confront barriers to full participation and equal opportunities in many aspects of their lives. By examining these issues, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on racial equality and social justice in the United States.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically a critical textual analysis framework, to examine Patrisse Khan-Cullors' memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist*. The analysis is grounded in the Critical Race Theory approach, which provides a lens through which to explore the intersections of race, identity, and systemic injustice, as articulated in Khan-Cullors' narrative. The study examines how Khan-Cullors' memoir employs counter-storytelling and personal narrative to challenge systemic racism and advocate for black liberation. This study draws upon the foundational principles of CRT, including the significance of counter-storytelling, the intersectionality of race with other forms of oppression, and the importance of personal narrative in advocating social justice. Critical Race Theory emerged in the late 1970s and the early 1980s from Critical Legal Studies, a movement that critiqued the legal system for perpetuating social and economic inequalities. Dissatisfied with the limitations of the traditional civil rights discourse, legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberle' Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Angela Harris, Patricia Williams and Jean Stefancic sought to develop a new framework to understand and address racial injustice. These scholars argued that racism is not merely a matter of individual prejudice but is deeply embedded in legal structures and institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). CRT draws on various intellectual traditions, including Marxism-oriented critical theory, feminism and post-structuralism. Its interdisciplinary nature allows it to incorporate insights from fields such as sociology, history, literature, and ethnic studies. Building on its foundation in Critical Legal Studies, CRT has developed several core principles that guide its analysis of race and power.

Memoirs as a genre are valuable to CRT because they serve as a form of resistance through counter-storytelling, allowing marginalized individuals to challenge dominant narratives and reclaim their agency by sharing their lived experiences. According to Camacho (2023), counter-storytelling provides a platform for marginalized voices to challenge dominant narratives and eradicate prevalent stereotypes that often misrepresent or erase their experiences. By sharing their personal stories, individuals can disrupt prevailing narratives and offer alternative perspectives rooted in their lived realities. Memoirs allow marginalized individuals to speak for themselves, on their own terms, rather than being spoken for or about by others reinstating their lost agency. Memoirs can illuminate the systemic injustices and inequalities faced by marginalized communities. By detailing personal encounters with discrimination, oppression, and violence, authors can expose the ways in which institutions and social structures perpetuate harm against marginalized communities. Memoirs can create a sense of connection and solidarity among marginalized individuals. By sharing their stories, authors can demonstrate that others are not alone in their struggles, fostering a sense of shared experience and collective identity. Memoirs can be a tool for healing and empowerment, for both the author and readers. Writing and sharing one's story can be a cathartic process, while reading about the experiences of others can inspire hope and resilience.

III. RACIALIZATION OF AFRICANS IN *WHEN THEY CALL YOU A TERRORIST: A BLACK LIVES MATTER MEMOIR*

The racialization of Africans in “When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir” by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele explores the systemic and pervasive nature of racial discrimination against black individuals in the United States. The memoir delves into how African Americans are often stereotyped, criminalized, and dehumanized based on their skin colour, leading to unjust treatment by law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and society. Khan-Cullors’ personal experiences and observations highlight the ways in which Black people are routinely subjected to racial profiling, police brutality, and unequal opportunities in education, employment, and housing.

The text further examines how this racialization process perpetuates the cycle of poverty, trauma, and continuing marginalization within black communities. This illustrates how negative stereotypes and biases toward African Americans are deeply ingrained in societal structures and institutions, making it challenging for individuals to overcome systemic barriers. The authors argue that this racialization not only affects the daily lives of Black people, but also shapes their collective identity and experiences, ultimately leading to the formation of movements such as Black Lives Matter as a response to ongoing racial injustice and oppression.

In her book, *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, Khan-Cullors (2018) shares personal experiences that motivated her to advocate for Black communities. This journey towards political activism led to her collaboration of her book with Asha Bandele.

In this memoir, Cullors shares her journey from facing everyday injustices to becoming an activist and co-founding the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. While the book is about Cullors' life, her experiences are far from being uncommon. Her narrative reflects the shared Black experience.

Cullors connect anti-Black policies to their impacts on Black people by combining the story of BLM with her own. Cullors’ activism is imbued with a sense of inevitability through the inclusion of personal experiences of loss, anguish, injustice, and righteous anger. By thoughtfully presenting her life and work, Cullors challenges the stereotype of an angry Black woman and suggests that those who are not outraged may not fully grasp the gravity of the situation.

Cullors opened the memoir with a description of the conditions of her childhood neighbourhood, Van Nuys, in California. She described it as a deprived area with limited opportunities and social mobility, where her family was heavily policed and subjected to racial profiling and random arrest (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018, p. 14). From a very early age, African Americans have reduced access to public resources and amenities. Their impoverished neighbourhood is isolated from white affluent areas as part of redlining districts reinforcing spatial segregation. CRT helps contextualize her family’s constant vulnerability to manifestations of systemic racial injustice and economic barriers, exposing how racial inequity is perpetuated and sustained through institutional machineries.

Cullors’ early encounters with state surveillance profoundly shaped her perspective. She writes, ‘I carry the memory of living under that terror the terror of knowing that I, or any member of my family, could be killed with impunity in my blood, in my bones, in every step I take’ (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018, p. 8). As young Black males, her brothers were especially affected. They were frequently targets of law enforcement officers, who harassed them for participating in ordinary activities, like hanging out with friends outdoors. In her account, Cullors recounts the incarcerations of her brother Monte and her biological father Gabriel to depict the harsh realities of prison, law enforcement, and the criminal justice system. Through their experience, Cullors powerfully exposed the profound inadequacies and cruelties of these institutions in serving Black Americans. She attributes these outcomes as natural consequences of the American tradition of devaluing and regulating black bodies, one that has been widely recognized by both authors and scholars (Coates, 2015; Douglas, 2017).

Through a combination of personal storytelling and insightful analysis, Cullors recounted how her lived realities converged with a powerful calling for activism. Driven by a desire to mobilize community support and channel-shared frustrations, Cullors spearheaded the creation of an activist network that would eventually address the multifaceted challenges confronting black individuals both nationally and internationally. Her memoir underscores the importance of collective action and solidarity in challenging systemic racism and creating a more just and equitable society for all (Nickerson, 2024).

Interwoven throughout the memoir is the narrative of Monte, who develops schizoaffective disorder during his young adult years. He was diagnosed by the jail psychiatrist prompted by his erratic behaviour and mood swings (p. 59). This situation intensifies the formidable challenges posed by poverty and constant police surveillance. Mirroring the experiences of numerous Americans grappling with severe mental illness, Monte's encounters with law enforcement during his teenage years lead to his incarceration. Rather than receiving treatment for his condition at a psychiatric facility, he joins the roughly 350,000 adults with severe mental illness in American prisons and jails. These mentally ill individuals are held in jail under very poor circumstances (Bloom, 2010, p. 730).

Throughout the book, Cullors examines how structural and systemic mechanisms deny poor and working-class Black communities’ access to the resources and care necessary to heal from the compounded effects of trauma. She emphasizes that trauma cannot be addressed in isolation but must be understood within the context of broader societal forces.

While incarcerated, Monte suffered from blatant neglect of his basic physical and medical needs. Upon release, his condition remained unstable (p. 63). Over time, Cullors gained a deeper understanding of the inhumane treatment Monte endured in jail, as well as the systemic torture prevalent within the L.A. County system (p. 160). These revelations served

as the catalyst for the establishment of Dignity and Power Now, an organization dedicated to advocating civilian oversight of county prisons and sheriff's departments (p. 165).

Cullors' memoirs also touch on her relationship with her birth father Gabriel, who struggled with drug addiction and was subsequently incarcerated for drug-related offenses. While acknowledging this part of his life, Cullors focused on presenting a more complete picture of Gabriel as a person. She emphasized his vibrant personality, ability to connect with others, and capacity for deep affection, suggesting that his worth extends beyond his struggles. Cullors' depiction of close family members like Monte and Gabriel challenges dominant punitive narratives by affirming that even those who have caused harm are deserving of care and recognition of their inherent dignity. She situates their action within a broader context of structural violence, highlighting how their criminal records shaped by systemic racism and targeted abuse of Black communities through discriminatory policing and mass incarceration, led to job loss, eviction, expulsion from educational institutions and social abandonment.

Cullors (2018) critiques the "War on Drugs," viewing it as a calculated strategy to marginalize Black and Brown communities. Furthermore, she challenges "personal responsibility" narratives, which attribute the problems of Black communities to their own actions, while ignoring the destructive impact of drug proliferation, mass incarceration, and systemic anti-Black biases (p. 124). According to US National Survey, reported drug selling activity was more common among White youths than among African American youths, yet racial disparities persist in the number of arrests.

Through her poignant depiction of her father's life and passing, Cullors elucidates the profound human toll exacted by rhetoric, which relentlessly oppresses those who are already unfairly disadvantaged. Cullors (2018) suggest that her father was a casualty of unseen battles waged against his "thin brown body," ultimately succumbing to a broken heart, a consequence of "the cumulative effects of hatred, racism, and indignity" (p. 107). By attributing death to these intangibles yet potent forces, Cullors underscores the systemic barriers and burdens disproportionately shouldered by Black and Brown individuals, asserting that these obstacles were deliberately erected to impede Black Americans' progress, despite the illusion of legal equality.

Cullors reflect on the profound consequences of enduring years of degrading strip searches and the realization of crushing, from childhood, that one's aspirations are dismissed and devalued by a nation that deems them expendable. She asks, what is the toll of such systemic devaluation? How can one quantify the immeasurable loss of potential unrealized? Cullors suggest that her father's generation of Black men was perpetually denied the fulfilment of their hopes and dreams to the point where such deprivation became normalized. This passage exemplifies Cullors' powerful use of personal narratives to expose the dehumanizing effects of anti-black violence.

In the latter part of her memoir, Cullors transitions to discussing Black Lives Matter, the most recent phase of her activism. Drawing upon her personal experiences and expertise in community organizing, she collaborates with two other women to protest police brutality (p. 180). Fuelled by the tragic killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer, Cullors played a pivotal role in launching the Movement for Black Lives, which rapidly gained widespread momentum. She has become a leading voice in the fight against racial injustice.

While BLM has gained encouraging support, Cullors emphasizes that much work remains. The United States still has a long way to go before Black and Brown Americans can fully enjoy their promised freedom. Cullors see the fight for these rights as a continuous effort for each generation, one that people of colour must not abandon. At the conclusion of her memoir, Cullors issues a call to action that echoes Audre Lorde's assertion, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1988, p. 131). By foregrounding healing, self-care and community support, she reframes these practices as radical acts of resistance against systemic oppression.

The emergence and rapid expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement signifies a contemporary iteration of the enduring struggle for Black liberation and self-determination in the United States, building upon the historical foundations laid by previous generations who fought against the institution of slavery and for the attainment of civil rights (Ruffin, 2020).

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis was conducted using a critical textual analysis approach. Through their narrative, the authors challenged the notion that racism is merely an individual bias or prejudice. Instead, they argue that structural racism is deeply embedded in societal institutions and shapes the lived experiences of Black individuals. This understanding compels readers to confront broader societal structures that uphold racial inequities, encouraging a critical examination of policies and practices that contribute to systemic oppression.

A. *Social Construction of Race*

When They Call You a Terrorist (2018) powerfully illustrates the social construction of race and its profound impact on Black lives by highlighting how American society devalues and criminalizes Blackness to maintain power hierarchies (Motley, 2021). This devaluation is not based on inherent characteristics, but on societal biases and stereotypes that have been historically constructed and perpetuated (Cobbina-Dungy & Jones-Brown, 2021).

The memoir reveals this through several key aspects. It recounts Cullors' and her brothers' frequent targeting by law enforcement (Motley, 2021), demonstrating how race influences perceptions and treatment within the criminal justice system. Black individuals are often subject to suspicion and police-initiated contact, even when they appear in spaces that

are not commonly believed to be their realm. Secondly, Cullors critiques the “War on Drugs” as a calculated strategy to marginalize the Black and Brown communities. This shows how policies can be designed and implemented to disproportionately affect certain racial groups, thus reinforcing the social construction of race.

The memoir also explores internalized racism, reflecting on the consequences of enduring years of degrading strip searches and the realization that her aspirations are dismissed and devalued by a nation that deems them expendable. This demonstrates how the social construction of race can lead to internalized feelings of inferiority.

The use of the word “terrorist” in the title is a racial trope. The title itself speaks to how certain groups are labelled and treated as threats based on racial stereotypes (Abu-Bakare, 2020). Furthermore, the memoir highlights the impact of “years of strip searches” and the sense that one’s dreams are not taken seriously (Motley, 2021), illustrating the dehumanizing effects of systemic racism. Cullors challenge the notion that race is a fixed or natural category (Zack, 2018). She uses her personal narrative to expose how race as a social construct is used to justify discrimination, oppression, and violence against Black communities (Williams, 2016). This aligns with the CRT tenet, emphasizing that racism is not merely individual prejudice, but is deeply embedded in legal structures and institutions. Here are some instances from the text. Patrisse writes, “Blackness is criminalized. Blackness is synonymous with suspicion. We are not allowed to walk, to drive, to gather, to protest, to exist without the looming threat of death.” (p. 56) There is a deliberate misrepresentation of everyday activities as criminal behaviour. “In America, Blackness is a crime. And when you are a criminal, you are no longer human. You are a problem to be solved. A thing to be discarded” (p. 87). This shows how society dismisses black identity. Through counter narratives Patrisse exposes the hidden structural racism in society and redefines the blackness as an identity.

B. Structural Racism

Structural racism is a critical theme that permeates the memoir, as it underscores the systemic nature of racial oppression. Structural racism is a form of racism that is embedded in the very fabric of society’s structures and institutions, perpetuating racial inequalities and injustices through its policies, practices, and norms. The memoir by Khan-Cullors and Bandele exposes how various institutions systematically perpetuate racial inequalities through personal accounts and reflections on systemic violence.

Khan-Cullors and Bandele vividly illustrate how institutions such as, the criminal justice system, housing system, education, and healthcare perpetuate racial inequalities. The authors recount their personal encounters with systemic violence, revealing how policies and practices are designed to maintain racial hierarchies. For instance, Khan-Cullors’ reflections on her brother’s incarceration highlight the ways in which the criminal justice system disproportionately targets Black individuals, perpetuating cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. Structural racism is deeply ingrained in the social, political, and economic structures of society. This method allows for a comprehensive exploration of the text, focusing on the ways in which authors use their personal narrative to challenge dominant societal narratives and advocate for social change.

Khan-Cullors and Bandele (2018) elaborate on the existing structural racism through the following statements “They called him a criminal. They called him a monster. But he was my brother. My brother who loved to dance, who loved to laugh, who loved his family” (p. 23). This juxtaposition of author’s brother Monte’s humanity against the state’s demonization exposes how systemic racism reduces Black individuals to racialized tropes. She critiques the myth of Black criminality: “Blackness is criminalized. Blackness is synonymous with suspicion” (p. 56). This study shows that there is racial profiling of Black individuals based on their appearance and ethnocentric stereotypes. This involves making assumptions about someone’s character or behaviour just because of their racial identity, which is a form of discrimination. This leads to unwarranted suspicion, reduced opportunities, and even physical danger for Black individuals. The perpetuation of these practices reinforces and propagates harmful stereotypes about Black people, creating a cycle of prejudice that is difficult to break.

Another instance that points to structural racism in the protagonist’s childhood is encapsulated in this statement “Our schools didn’t have books. Our streets didn’t have lights. But the police? They had tanks” (p. 45). The authors’ childhood experiences in Van Nuys demonstrate systemic neglect and misallocation of resources. This stark contrast denotes how structural racism manifests in underfunded education and over-policing of Black communities.

Khan-Cullors and Bandele (2018) elucidate that during the 1990s, Black and Mexican youth were subjected to criminalization merely for their presence in public spaces. The phenomena of gang and drug wars served as covert mechanisms to target and apprehend young boys of colour. Deprived of educational opportunities and sufficient nutrition, many of these youths were channelled into cycles of detention and incarceration, effectively preparing them for prison labour, which is described as “an apprenticeship” commencing in childhood (p. 54). The conditions for African Americans were predominantly perilous. They were often stigmatized as threats and perceived as criminals engaged in substance abuse. There was a lack of inquiry into the factors contributing to this situation, and no initiatives were implemented for their rehabilitation or to address issues of hunger and poverty within the community. Educational and upliftment programs were conspicuously absent. Instead, there was a widespread incarceration of young individuals, public humiliation, forced labour in prisons for corporate benefit, and a systematic erosion of hope for the future, with no advocates to protect or defend their rights. There was an absence of voices affirming the significance of their lives and aspirations. The criminal justice system played a significant role in perpetuating these inequalities. Young African Americans were disproportionately targeted for arrest and incarceration, often for minor offenses. Once in the prison system, they were

subjected to forced labour, benefiting corporations while receiving little to no compensation or opportunities for skill development. This practice not only exploited incarcerated individuals but also perpetuated a modern form of slavery. The lack of advocacy and support for their rights, coupled with public humiliation and societal stigma, created an environment of hopelessness and despair. The absence of positive representation and affirmation of their worth and potential further reinforced the narrative of their perceived inferiority, making it increasingly difficult for African Americans to envision and work towards a better future.

The theories presented in the study by Shannon et al. (2024) address the profound need for Black men to cultivate meaning in environments that often seek to diminish their humanity. This research underscores the critical importance of understanding the unique challenges faced by Black men, who are frequently subjected to dehumanizing experiences rooted in systemic racism and societal biases (Vereen et al., 2020). The research paper highlights the strength and coping methods that Black men use to deal with unfriendly environments. It also emphasizes the value of cultural support systems and resources in creating a healing space. The study advocates for a societal shift in perceptions and interactions with Black masculinity, calling for more understanding and sensitive approaches in areas such as education, healthcare, and social policies to promote an equitable and inclusive society. The paper also explores the overlapping elements that contribute to compound marginalization.

C. Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality as articulated by Kimberle' Crenshaw (1991), is integral to this analysis for revealing the cumulative impact of being marginalised. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals experience multiple, overlapping identities that shape their experiences of oppression and privilege. Carbado et al. (2013) posited that in the seminal 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw introduced the concept of 'intersectionality' to address the marginalization of Black women not only within antidiscrimination law but also within feminist and antiracist theory and politics. This study examines how Khan-Cullors navigates her identity as a black woman within the context of systemic racism, gender inequality, and socioeconomic disparities. By analysing the intersections of these identities, the research illuminates the complexities of her narrative and the broader implications for understanding systemic injustice. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how multiple forms of discrimination and oppression can intersect and compound, creating unique challenges for individuals with overlapping marginalized identities. In Khan-Cullors' case, her experiences as a Black woman living in a low-income community offer insights into how race, gender, and class intersect to shape her lived experiences and activism.

Cullors recounts two significant events from the lives of her grandmother and mother that portrays the silenced family history of racial and gendered trauma that continues to shape successive generations. She writes, "A white man got her; my father tells me once when I ask why Auntie Lisa and Auntie Barbara always seem so angry. A white man got Grandma Vina, and she was very young, he says. She couldn't raise them girls. That's all I know, he says, and we never speak of it again. No one does. These pieces of family history and harm that never heal that pass on generation to generation" (Khan-Cullors & Bande, 2018, p. 36).

Patrisse characterizes her grandmother Vina as an elderly and sophisticated woman who frequently uses profane language. Many African American women continue to bear the psychological scars of intergenerational trauma, conditioned by systemic forces such as the detention of their fathers, the disappearance of partners, the loss of sons, fractured childhoods and enduring accounts of sexual exploitation including children conceived through rape. These atrocities committed against African American women, and their families often sanctioned or neglected by the state, frequently remain unaddressed, obscured by the silence, stigma and shame that ensues.

Khan-Cullors (2018) illustrates how her mother's early pregnancy is linked to religious disapproval and class marginalization. Her mother's family belonged to the middle class, but their financial difficulties were largely due to her mother's early pregnancy, which went against the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, particularly the prohibition of premarital sex. Consequently, she experienced exclusion and spent years attempting to regain acceptance within the community. Although she eventually achieved some degree of acceptance, it was insufficient to restore the stability associated with middle-class status (p. 36). Unwed single motherhood is a prevalent phenomenon within the Black community, reflecting the dual marginalization that women face due to both gender and race. The challenges and moral judgement women encounter, even within their own communities and cultures, are exemplified by the experience of Patrisse's young mother. Although she comes from a middle-class background, she was ostracized by both her church community and family for being an unwed mother and was compelled to independently support her children by undertaking multiple odd jobs to provide sustenance and secure housing for her children. These layers of trauma emerge at the intersection of racism, patriarchy and economic disenfranchisement, illustrating how overlapping systems of oppression uniquely burden black women. By examining Khan-Cullors' narrative through an intersectional lens, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how systemic injustices manifest in complex and interconnected ways. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the multifaceted nature of oppression and the necessity of addressing these intersecting forms of discrimination to achieve meaningful social change.

D. Microaggressions

Microaggressions, defined as subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or everyday offensive conversations or behaviours, are another focal point in the memoir. Microaggressions are small acts of discrimination that reinforce societal biases. They are often unintentional, but they can still greatly affect the person who experiences them. Khan-Cullors and Bandele articulate their experiences with microaggressions, illuminating how these seemingly minor incidents accumulate to create a hostile environment for Black individuals. The authors recount instances of being questioned about their intelligence, professionalism, and worthiness, all of which serve to undermine their identities and reinforce societal stereotypes.

Khan-Cullors (2018) articulates an incident in her school recalling how, unlike her white peers she was singled out for using drugs in school, publicly handcuffed and humiliated in front of her everyone despite having no drugs in her possession. She says, “At Millikan it is a daily occurrence for kids to show up to class high, to light up in the bathroom, to smoke on the campus lawn. No one gets in trouble. Nowhere is there police. Millikan is the middle school where the gifted kids go. But in my neighbourhood school things are totally different and someone must have said something about me and my weed—two girls had come into the bathroom when I’d been in there because two days later a police officer comes to my class. I remember my stomach dropping the way it does on one of those monster roller-coaster rides at Six Flags. I can just *feel* that they are coming for me and I am right. The cop tells me to come to the front of the room, where he handcuffs me in front of everyone and takes me to the dean’s office, where my bag is searched, where I am searched, pockets turned out, shoes checked, just like my brothers in the alleyway when I was nine years old. I have no weed on me, but I am made to call my mother at work and tell her what happened, which I do through tears” (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018, p. 19). This incident reflects the racialised microaggressions and unequal discriminatory practices in schools that criminalize Black youth from an early age.

Khan-Cullors describes several instances where her intelligence and capabilities were questioned, reflecting a common microaggression experienced by Black individuals in both professional and academic settings. These instances often involve subtle comments or assumptions that undermine their competence and reinforce negative stereotypes. The implementation of zero-tolerance policies in schools, along with the presence of school resource officers, often resulted in Black students being sent to juvenile detention or criminal court system based on mere suspicion (Irby, 2017, p. 1). Black and brown children are over punished in schools due to their racial status. There is a legacy of criminalization of Black boys and men. The systemic marginalization and dehumanization experienced by these children deeply shape their psyche, cultivating profound feelings of shame and inadequacy. They live in constant trepidation of the dominant white society, even when entirely innocent, solely due to their racial identity. This creates a perpetual state of hyper-vigilance and anxiety, eroding their sense of safety and belonging. There is a constant fear of being arrested, betrayed and being humiliated in public. Black students were treated as easily disposable, punishable and unwanted by the educational institutions.

Khan-Cullors and Bandele (2018) describe how Black boys, like her brothers, were criminalised merely for “breathing while Black,” as heightened police surveillance in their neighbourhoods conveyed that their lives were expendable. They were construed as criminals even for ordinary behaviours such as socialising in public spaces. Despite not engaging in more drug use than white youth, the drug war was aimed at labelling the Black youth as “super predators” to maim them and subject them to constant monitoring. This served as an everyday microaggression that reinforced their devaluation and stigmatisation (pp. 25-26). The experiences of Cullors’ brothers, who were frequently harassed by law enforcement for simply being young Black men in public, illustrate the impact of everyday microaggressions in immobilising Blacks and constraining their communities (Motley, 2021). These encounters highlight how seemingly innocuous actions, such as gathering with friends, can be perceived as threatening or suspicious when associated with Black individuals. The administrative system perceived them as a threat and hardened criminals. They were consistently targeted by law enforcement in the pretext of the drug war, while white drug dealers often remained unnoticed and unpoliced. Individuals of African descent were subjected to constant scrutiny and surveillance and were labelled as “super predators” by virtue of their birth.

The memoir effectively illustrates the psychological toll these microaggressions can have on individuals, contributing to feelings of alienation and self-doubt. By sharing their experiences, Khan-Cullors and Bandele not only validate the lived realities of many Black individuals but also challenge readers to recognize and address their own biases. Microaggressions are frequently regarded as trivial or harmless, yet they can play a role in perpetuating the broader systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by marginalized groups. This aspect of the memoir serves as a call to action, urging individuals to engage in critical self-reflection and to confront the subtle ways in which racism manifests in everyday interactions.

E. Counter-Storytelling

Counter-storytelling emerges as a powerful narrative strategy employed by the authors to resist misconceptions and challenge dominant narratives surrounding race and identity. Counter-storytelling is a method used to examine existing dominant narratives and amplify the voices and perspectives of marginalized communities. A cornerstone of CRT, counter storytelling posits as a crucial tool for marginalized voices to reclaim agency and assert their experiences against dominant narratives of the privileged. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that counter-storytelling serves as a form of resistance and “a tool for exposing, analysing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). According to critics

of CRT, by giving voice to the marginalized, counter stories legitimate their experiences and offer them as effective tools to challenge and subvert the dominant accounts held by the ruling elite.

In “When They Call You a Terrorist”, Khan-Cullors and Bandele (2018) utilize their personal stories to disrupt the prevailing narratives that often portray Black individuals as criminals or victims. By sharing their lived experiences, they humanize the struggle for racial justice and invite readers to empathize with their realities. Khan-Cullors and Bandele (2018) challenges the dominant narratives through their writing, “When they call you a terrorist, you have to ask: Who is the real terrorist? The one fighting for justice or the one denying it?” (p. 201). In another instance she writes, “Our stories are not about crime. They are about survival. They are about love” (p. 87).

Counter-stories allow people of colour to: (a) build community among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (b) challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s centre by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (c) open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (d) teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36).

In addition, Counter-storytelling also serves to illuminate the resilience and strength of Black communities in the face of adversity. By narrating her own story, the protagonist reclaims her agency and voice within a society that has sought to suppress both her and her community. The authors recount moments of solidarity, joy, and resistance, emphasizing that the narrative of Blackness is not solely defined by suffering. This reclamation of narrative power is essential for challenging societal stereotypes and fostering a more nuanced understanding of Black identity. Moreover, the memoir’s emphasis on counter-storytelling aligns with the broader goals of the Black Lives Matter movement, which seeks to amplify marginalized voices and advocate for systemic change. By centring their experiences, Khan-Cullors and Bandele contribute to a collective narrative that resists erasure and demands recognition of the systemic injustices faced by Black individuals.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined Patrisse Khan-Cullors’ memoir, *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018) through the lens of Critical Race Theory. By employing a CRT framework, this analysis illuminates the power of counter-storytelling as a potent tool for challenging systemic racism and advocating for Black liberation. Khan-Cullors’ narrative provides a compelling example of how personal narratives can disrupt dominant narratives and offer alternative perspectives rooted in lived realities.

The analysis revealed several key themes within the memoir, each contributing to a deeper understanding of the struggle for racial justice. First, the memoir exposes the social construction of race, dismantling the notion of race as a biological reality and highlighting its function as a social and political construct. Second, it underscores the intersectionality of oppression, demonstrating how race intersects with other forms of marginalization, such as gender and sexuality, to create unique experiences of injustice. Finally, the memoir bears witness to the ongoing struggle for racial justice in the face of systemic dehumanization.

Khan-Cullors’ work is particularly significant as it interweaves her personal experiences with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, offering a unique perspective on the ongoing struggle for Black liberation and self-determination. Her story combats stereotypes and invites readers to share the restorative pathways she blazes. By centring the lived experiences and voices of marginalized communities, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges confronting Black individuals and the transformative potential of personal narratives in the fight for equity and social change.

This critical engagement with Khan-Cullors’ memoir underscores the continued relevance of CRT in analysing and disrupting racial injustice in contemporary society. As scholars and activists continue to grapple with the legacies of racism and ongoing struggles for racial equity, the insights gleaned from this memoir are invaluable. They highlight the necessity of amplifying marginalized voices and confronting the structural systems that perpetuate inequality. Ultimately, *When They Call You a Terrorist* (2018) serves as both a personal testament and a call to action, urging readers to engage critically with their own biases and participate in the ongoing fight for justice and equity in a world shaped by racial dynamics. As both a testimony and an indictment, “When They Call You a Terrorist” portrays how personal narratives can reclaim power, reframe justice, and resist cultural erasure. In an era marked by escalating racial tensions, such memoirs compel us to not only listen but also act.

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