

Keynote: Story Culture Live: Black American Story Spaces as Actionable Antiracism Work

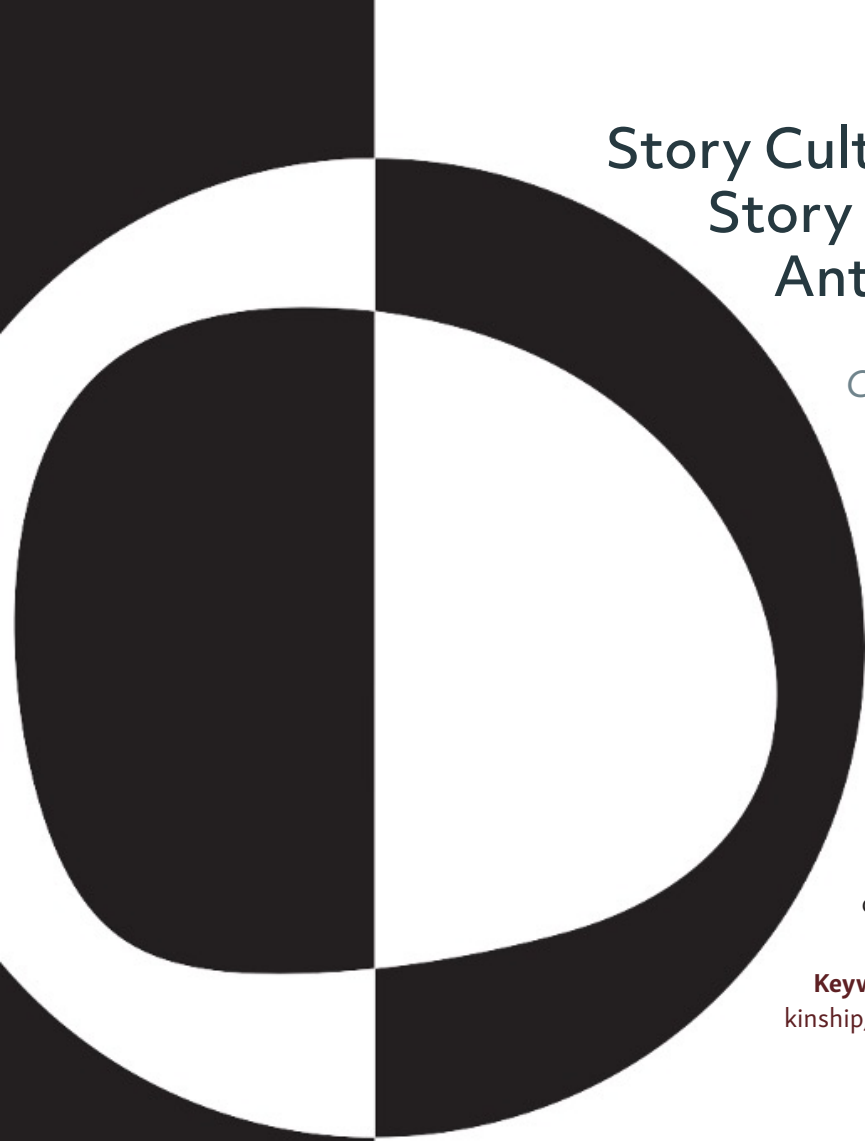
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Story Culture Live: Black American Story Spaces as Actionable Antiracism Work

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Abstract “Story Culture Live: Black American Story Spaces as Actionable Antiracism Work,” was a keynote given at the Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference at the University of New Hampshire in spring 2023. The keynote details the genesis of my podcast, *Story Culture Live*, which reimagines storytelling as actionable activism in antiracist work and explores concepts such as Black teller agency, kinship, and collective responses to tensions through storytelling that can inform and build new stories in writing centers.

Keywords storytelling, antiracist work, Black teller agency, kinship, *Story Culture Live*

Unbound:

adjective: a. (1) not fastened (2) not confined c. not bound together with other issues. (Merriam-Webster)

Not restrained or tied down by bonds. (Collins)

. . . it has, or seems to have, no limits. (Collins)

“Unbound” was the title of the 2023 Northeast Writing Centers Association Conference. I was invited to be the keynote speaker, the first live post-quarantine voice of the region’s unmasked gathering: “An opportunity to share what’s going on in your Centers and spaces, your work as writing center professionals . . . and beyond. The potential for topics is unlimited.” Honored yet ambivalent about the invitation, I knew that as a Black American woman directing a college writing center, I could easily develop a message anchored in many descriptors: poached,

unpromoted, gaslit, and mischaracterized, for example. But unbound? This call for proposals read like speculative fiction to me. Canvas-designed handouts, tutor training activities, or reporting the results of stale-but-toiled-over data seemed to disservice “unbound.” I called a cherished writing center colleague, R. Mark Hall, seeking suggestions. He said: “Use the keynote to speak to the Clarissa you were during your first year as a writing center director. Seat her in the audience and tell her what she desperately needed to hear.”

This is what I told her:



Figure 1. Story Culture Live: Black American Story Spaces as Actionable Anti-Racism Work.

My Hydrangea Bush (The “Porch Treasure” Origin Story)

Walker

I grew up living with my grandparents in Georgia, specifically east Augusta or “the Bottom.” Lore suggests that the Bottom was a dueling ground in the 1800s and then, over a century later, our neighborhood was couched between rival housing projects; or, maybe “the Bottom” didn’t eternalize violence. Perhaps it’s a hyperbolized moniker acknowledging the frequent flooding of the nearby Savannah River and the looming threat that we could easily end up at the bottom of it. As a child, I believed that my grandmother’s front porch was protected . . . by a hydrangea bush. Standing watch in the center of the yard, the plant’s puffed-up periwinkle crowns and resilient stems served many roles: a finish line for the foot races, a bike stand when I needed to rush into the house to use the bathroom. . . . Richmond Co. school bus #143 dropped me off at the end of the block and when my open palm sliced through the air over those guardian blossoms, I had signaled to the universe that I finally made it safely home.

During the 2020 quarantine, I directed the Rhode Island College Writing Center from the patio of the second-floor condo that I rent in

Narragansett, Rhode Island. This is a part-time, interim “benefits eligible” position. After years of fruitless advocating for increases for the writing center and for me, the situation played out like a Hip Hop musical in my head: Method Man, or sometimes early Queen Latifa or Mos Def, powerfully make demands on my behalf. The few Writing Board and English Department meetings that I attended, populated by white women eye-locking each other (the way they reference their previous conversations about me each time I contribute), were chronicled in my mind as scenes from the film *New Jack City* (1991): Deliberations guided by Wesley Snipes’s drug kingpin character, the masterful intimidator, who entered meetings skipping rope with the chain link leash of his Doberman pinscher. This was the vibe. These were my colleagues. In my professional isolation—the quarantine-induced one—it may have been the dashed hopes that I held on to as a doctoral student, with my head down (the recommended posture of graduate students who would even have a shot at crossing the finish line), pressing through just knowing that once I graduated, changes in my agency position would yield a different professional experience.

It had to. Right?

In this open-air Narragansett story space, with my work desk perched at treetop level, I began an inspired journey into my origin

story as a writing professional. Riding the air among the branches like Toni Morrison's character Milkman at the close of *Song of Solomon*, who learned to fly (yet still not unbound), I reached back for the people and spaces in my hometown, Augusta, Georgia, that caused me to fall in love, not with writing, but with storytelling. Some of my questions were epistemological: Where had the passion seeds been planted and who were the earliest nurturers of my own version of storycraft? It was this wonderful and reinvigorating reflection that led me back to Georgia porches, specifically the "porch treasure," its opulence, that I had imbibed at the home of my grandmother's first cousin, Phoebe.

I have to talk about these southern porches to center them.

Shots fired at the South as a nucleus of violent race-based incidents are spot on. But blanketed, regional critiques and stigmas of things southern sometimes drift into sacred spaces. My hope is that we can continue to fuel the fervency of our targeted antiracism transformation work, while simultaneously protecting ourselves from the inadvertent erasure of Black American greatness like "porch treasure"—which is country, lush, sustaining, and contributive.

On Saturdays, Gram (my maternal grandmother) and I took a taxi downtown. Cousin Phoebe lived in a shotgun house on Eighth Street; a shotgun house was a design in the South from the Civil War to the 1920s. The body of the house was narrow and long, like the barrel of a shotgun. All of the entryways were on the same side of the house. So you could look into the front door, pass the foyer, living room, three bedrooms and the kitchen and have an unobstructed view out the back door. The city could leave a couple of feet between the houses, which were configured to make overcrowding easier. Black soil under inconsistent patches of the city's sod were the Eighth Street front yards and our cherished playgrounds. On lucky days, I was exhausted, filthy, and fulfilled by dusk; Gram wiped off my face, hands, knees so that I wouldn't "dirty up them people's taxi" on the ride back to the Bottom.

On Eighth Street Saturdays, we also spent time sitting on Phoebe's compact porch,

fanning the heat and the flies with dated newspapers. Phoebe and her husband, "Ike," owned a carpentry business but they were also number runners. (This was the illegal lottery before the less-illegal state lottery was the lottery.) Ike gambled and played cards. Apparently, he had a seat at the neighborhood's high table. I knew this because he sent runners scrambling up the porch steps to get more cash from Phoebe when Ike was running low elsewhere during his card game. She knew her husband sent the boy because he produced evidence: Ike's hat, his belt . . . their code. The languages and signs in Phoebe's story space thrilled me. In her hand, the rolled newspaper was sometimes a gavel. She swatted her shin with it to hit mosquitoes and to percuss the high notes of what she just said. Sometimes she waved the paper in circles in the air over her head. These gestures of hers told as much story as her words.

This porch was the consummate story space for us, but it was also a classroom for me. For example, I learned that as number runners, Ike and Phoebe never wrote numbers on paper. Folks would come on the porch and say things like, "I want to play one dollar on 237 three ways" and Phoebe would nod. That's it. Nothing else. Because when the police raided the runners' houses, they took all scratch papers and notebooks (even Rolodex cards with telephone numbers written in them). They took all numeric inscriptions as court evidence. So out of necessity, Phoebe's mind was a library of numbers, story plots, updates, and the minutiae of the Eighth Street characters. As a storyteller, Phoebe's language was whimsical, abundant, and bright. Her thought life and memory were widely known to be precise, especially as she recalled events that she witnessed on her street. Circumstances made her an embodiment of the "psycho-physical space capsule, carrying intact the invisible/atomic culture" of kidnapped Africans (Braithwaite, 1971, p. 13). The community needed her, needed that porch. It was a meeting place. People "did business" on that porch. It was where neighbors converged to report, to warn, to be updated, and to grieve. I also remembered how riffs of laughter hung over that porch because Phoebe was the

storyteller with the power to liberate a listener from a day's weight. "Laugh to keep from crying" was a phrase I heard on that porch all the time. Crazy, wiry, gray hair, high cheekbones, and skin like black coffee, the elder version Phoebe sat in an iron porch chair, pouring out an archive. So in my eyes, Phoebe's power was well established on that porch, where she created a kind of *story culture*.

Story Culture Live and the Porch Treasure Model

Conceptually, *Story Culture Live* is meant to honor the complex social ecologies Black American storytellers created on these porches and their establishment of this beautiful story space where agency rests with a matriarch, neighbor, griot. The amplification of teller power in this way is one response to the factors that keep the voices of tellers like Phoebe embattled in "the mainstream" (Royster, 1996, p. 34). There has long been a call for experiences and grassroots pedagogies of Black American women, our things that may disrupt the antiracism failures in writing spaces. Further, the exclusion, erasure, and misinterpretation of these women's contributions place proponents of these accomplished agents on the defensive, warding off mishandling and necessarily chastising efforts that seek to remove their power instead of learning from their wielding of it. Royster (2000) said:

African American women have been persistently subjected to measures of value and achievement that have been set and monitored by others, who have not had their interests or potential in mind and who have been free historically to discount, ignore, and disempower them. (p. 4)

This monitoring of the "white gaze" (Morrison, 2018) imprints and prioritizes the agenda, languages, and interests of hegemonic groups, even in mainstream story spaces under the stewardship of black American women.

In her seminal essay, "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own," Royster (1996) describes "home places" as a cultural community

"that exists quite significantly beyond the confines" of the mainstream (p. 34).

Royster clarifies how people should behave in the home places of others and delineates observed violations of those who lack vision, are incapable of seeing human potential, and who lack the potential "to understand human history both microscopically and telescopically" (p. 34). The grappling with the subjectivity, the value-defined boundaries, and the alterity lens of the audience is too often ours to do in cross-boundary models. The audience question often disrupts the natural flow of story culture. In her documentary, *The Pieces I Am*, Toni Morrison (Giebelhaus et al., 2019) speaks of black writers whose books told stories to white readerships. She said: "I know that you are assuming a white audience because you are explaining things that you don't have to explain when you are talking to me" (Giebelhaus et al., 2019, 00:11:38). When the audience is connected to each other through a form of kinship, there is a collective ownership of the story space and a community-rooted support for their elected storyteller. Porch treasure is presented as a home place and provides a glimpse of one such insulated Black American story space, one that is situated under the guard of its membership and led by their selected teller agent. These southern porches as story spaces inform because they are sites that demonstrate generative, supportive, and sustained engagement of elements that are, in this project, called the Porch Treasure model.

The Porch Treasure Model of Story Culture Live

As a 10-year-old child, I felt safe, nested among elders in this outdoor community-facing, community-fortified house front. In 2020, on my patio, the three elements of this model gave me an opportunity to re-experience the taxonomy of these cultural story spaces that lined many communities. During an interview about *Story Culture Live*, a Black American reporter challenged my use of the word "safe" describing my endearment and sentimentality as a 10-year-old. "Nowhere is safe for us," she inserted. To that, I responded: "You are

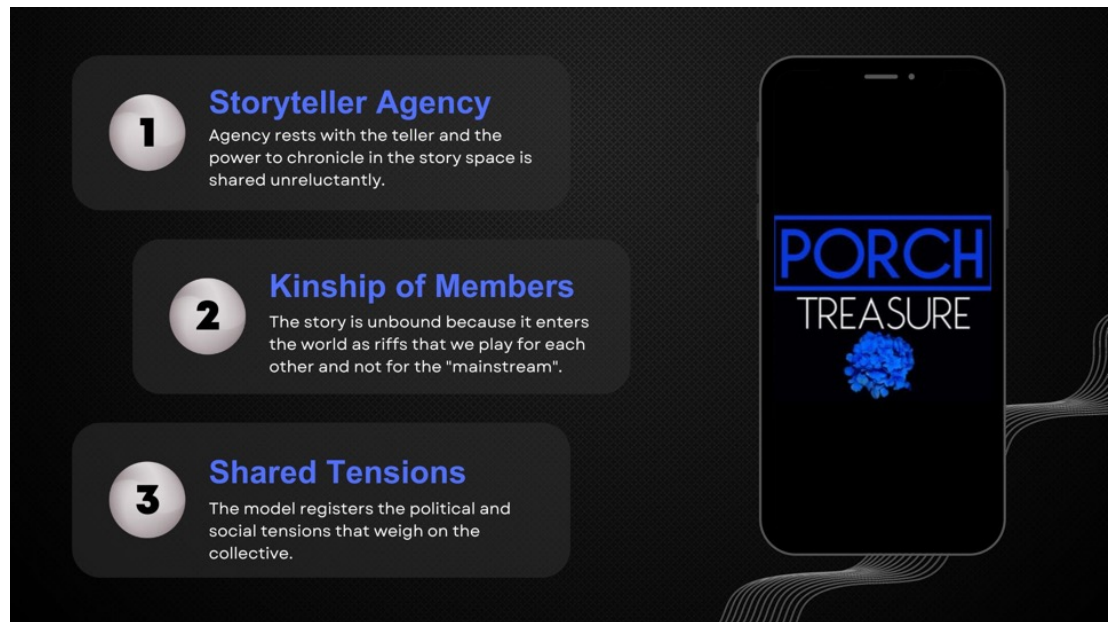


Figure 2. Model: Storyteller Agency, Kinship of Members, and Shared Tensions.

right. In the U.S., bodily and materially, there has been a sustained threat against black bodies." (That's the consideration of the model's "Shared Tensions.") It is noteworthy that these porches unceasingly nurtured homegrown creativity and storycraft, which compromise our contributions, productivity, and confidence.

Storyteller Agency Position as the Subject Position

Soul singer James Brown was my grandmother's classmate at Floyd Elementary School in Augusta, Georgia. Although we are from the same hometown, as a kid, I didn't understand the scale of Mr. Brown's career influence and music industry accomplishments. In part, I attribute this to the Eighth Street elders' "subject position" in that story space (Royster, 1996, p. 30). Mr. Brown's car pulled up in front of us at my grandmother's church each Sunday; he dropped off his aunt who was a member of Mt. Calvary Baptist Church, too. Each year, for Thanksgiving week, Mr. Brown personally distributed free turkeys on Ninth Street, one block over from Phoebe's porch, where the singer spent most of his childhood. To my elders, he was "James" from Ninth Street. From this subject position, he was not a behemoth trailblazing druggy controversial

superstar. He was their neighbor, classmate, kinfolk James, "who was always actin' out" and who always could perform. There wasn't even a voice inflection when they said it. Power rests with the teller. The teller's agency was endorsed from among us, so there was a constituents' collective agreement that Phoebe was as dope as I'm claiming she was. But I learned that the power to chronicle in that story space was shared and passed around unreluctantly.

Shared Social Tensions

For the Black American teller, there will be tensions in the story space. Pulling at the back of the neck, twisting around itself in the pit of the stomach. What's not on the porch is the pressure, the tacit responsibility to deal with your own war-weariness in such a way that does not make white folks uncomfortable. This story space of Phoebe's porch absolved us of the full-time job of assuaging white guilt, yet we are bound by the ghosts of all of our story spaces. Phoebe's street was among the 130-block area during the 1970 Augusta race riots. A mentally impaired black youth, 16-year-old Charles Oatman, was brutally murdered in the Richmond County jail. When the boy's body was released, he had several foot-long,

½-inch gashes in his back. The back of his skull was cracked, lit cigarette butts had been put out on his body. According to the coroner, the cause of death was drowning. Black Augusta, of course including this Eighth Street community, rioted.

On my Narragansett, Rhode Island patio in 2020, 50 years after the Charles Oatman murder—I was among the multitude of the angry, quarantined, and brokenhearted dealing with the many murders of Black Americans including Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

So story culture must register the pressure of political and social tensions, a place to address lingering tensions born out of racist acts that hover and have a sustained impact on our story spaces. This Porch Treasure model registers the political and social tensions that distend and weigh on storytellers.

Kinship of Members

The riffs of story and laughter hung over Eighth Street came from the bonds that could celebrate the orality of African-derived people, our love of call and response, signifying, testimony—all of our things. The kinship connection referenced in this model includes learned, earned, and inherited consciousness.

I attended a magnet school in Augusta called Davidson Fine Arts School from fifth through 12th grade. I played the piano and sang alto in the Mixed Chorus. One year, I got it in my head to play the baritone saxophone in the jazz band. I'm tall, so I looked real good holding it, but this thing wouldn't do anything I wanted it to do. My hoarse airy sounds and the persistent squeak of my reed even seemed to surprise my band teacher. But after one year, I was able to release a clean, in-tune middle C. That year deepened my love for jazz. During concerts or jazz festivals, a saxophonist skillfully whizzing by middle C got a swoon from me. For subsequent decades, I hunted for live jazz in all the cities where I've lived. I learned to show up at sets late and, like a proper groupie, I asked the band members if they were "sitting in" elsewhere afterward. See, the highest artistry was in these after sets. Early sets were paid gigs, where the musicians were performing for tipsy diners who

sent scribbled down predictable requests on a napkin and sent it to the stand: "Summertime" or "Take the A Train" or some version of Ellington's "Mood Indigo." During the after sets, when the musicians sat in with other off-the-clock musicians, ties were loosened, jackets hung on chair backs as they waited their turn to play—not for the "mainstream" as Royster would say, but for each other. The highest standards of the night were established in the meritocracy of peers who knew their thing . . . very well. After a solo, if a young musician got even a nod in this space, it was worth more than whistling, applauding, standing ovation of the mainstream paying folks. The kinship was the difference. During the after sets, these musicians displayed, with exactness, the "kinship" that I am speaking of in this model.

It's a story space where the elders are blessed to encircle us, so that a replenishing and a unique fellowship can take place. In my post-porch experiences, whiteness often doesn't present itself as an imbibing audience; whiteness routinely replaced mutuality with hierarchies, with its own set of protocols, or critique with criteria that's outside of my experience. *Story Culture Live* is born from the unbound sovereignty of the story space created and overseen by Black American tellers.

A Conversation: My Own Porch Treasure

Largely through the eyes of the 10-year-old witness, I've shared with you a type of memoir narrative depiction of the Porch Treasure model of *Story Culture Live*. Phoebe is long deceased now and her Eighth Street shotgun house was razed for the building of something new. So, how do I operate in all of this now? Black American teller agency, kinship, and the collective response to tensions—as I have presented them to you today—create an opportunity to build story culture in story spaces LIKE our writing centers. (Yes. I did remember that this is a writing center conference.) This is a call for protected fora that are generative, untrammled, and ready for the making of new porch treasure. I know that there are keynote protocols—even if they are unstated. To be



Figure 3. Porch Treasure model.

fully transparent with you, all of this, the intimacy of it, for me is not in models. This inhabits my heart in a conversation with Phoebe as if she were on that patio with me.

Our conversation changes in small ways, but it goes something like this:

Me: *Phoebe, I don't know if I have ever done this successfully, the way that you did. But I have it in my mind now to try. With a little more life under my belt, I understand your requirements. I left Eighth Street and Augusta, Georgia, in possession of the ways of seeing what you all taught me; I'm your legacy.*

Phoebe: *Really? Oh. That's good, Baby. You were shy and shame as a little girl.*

Me: *Yes, on my adult journey, too. There were times that I felt apologetic about our treasure. The way you taught it to me. Now, I've presented on it in the United States, Europe.*

Phoebe: *That's nice, but did you ever get a real job?*

Me: *Yes, ma'am. I've had two careers. First, I worked more than a decade in journalism, now I'm in the college. For two of those journalism years, I worked on Guam in Micronesia.*

Phoebe: *Good Lord, Chile. That's the other side of the world!*

Me: *Yes, ma'am. On the whole other side of the world. I told news stories and was a full-time print journalist at a daily Gannett Communications publication called the Pacific Daily News. The paper put me on this diversity committee. (I've been on a lot of those, Phoebe.) The front page of the newspaper was failing to reflect the island's ethnic representation. See, Chamorros, the name of the Guam locals, were the dominant group. The smaller ethnic communities of the island were the Palauans, Pohnpeians, Chuukese, and Filipinos. This newspaper's diversity committee was supposed to help us hear their porch treasure and the riffs of their music, fruit of their kinship, because their shared tensions were the victories they carried.*

Phoebe: *You really like it out there. Never went back home, huh?*

Me: *For a time I told stories back home; I was a metro reporter for the Augusta Chronicle. Guess what? Many times I interviewed James Brown on Ninth Street, one block over from your porch. When he died, he got an arena, a statue,*



Figure 4. Me with James Brown.

a roadway. . . . He had to die first to get most of that, though. I went to the funeral. You know, Michael Jackson came.

Phoebe: You know he went to school with your grandma.

Me: Yes, ma'am. I remember y'all telling me that.

One time he talked to me about the Augusta race riots after the Charles Oatman murder and about the free concerts he gave all over the country hoping that music could quell the tension. He told me he thought that if he did that maybe no one else would get hurt.

Phoebe, many others still got hurt.

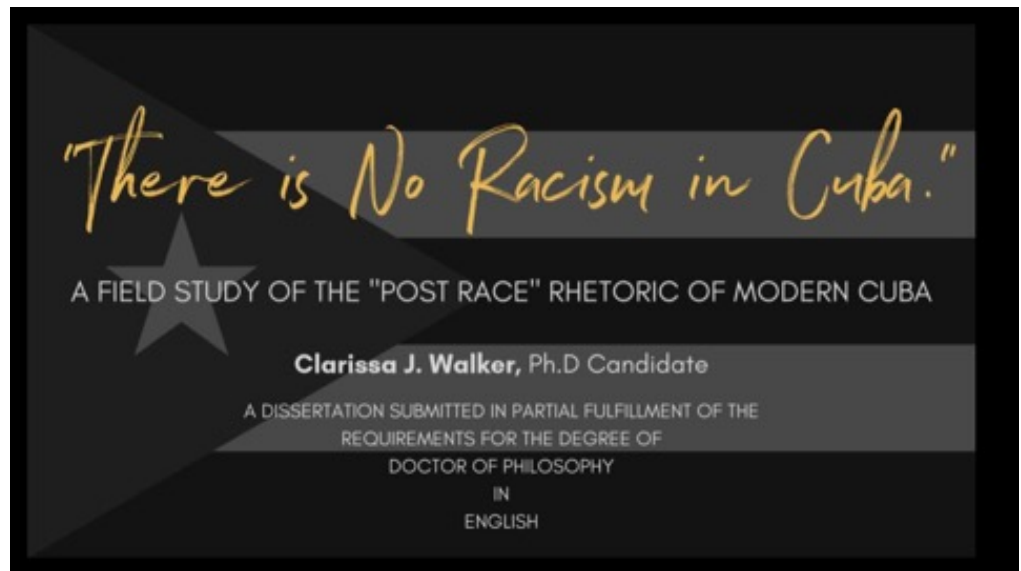


Figure 5. There is no racism in Cuba.



Figure 6. The interview participants.

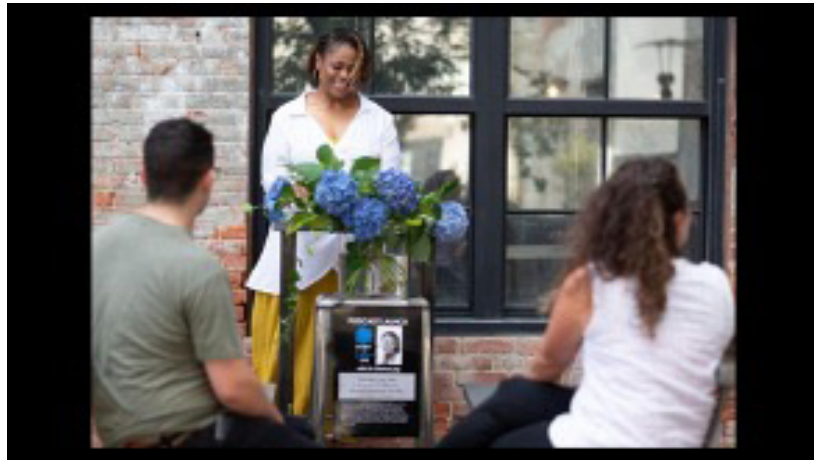


Figure 7. Porch Treasures.

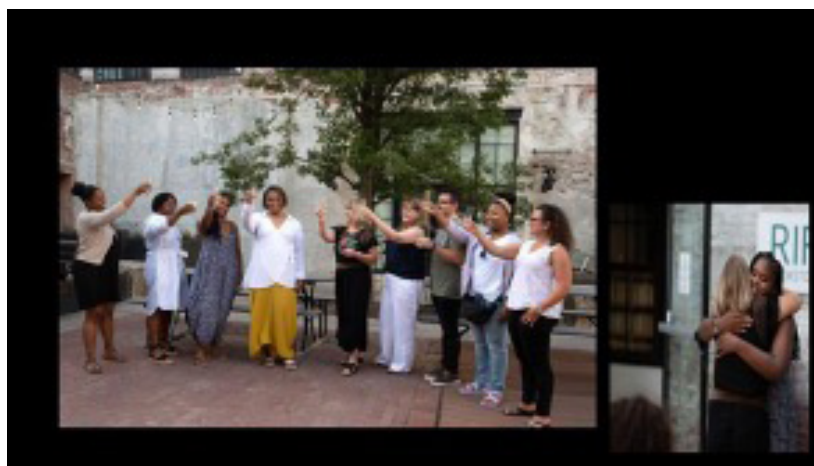


Figure 8. Porch Treasures.

Walker

Phoebe: You still at the Chronicle?

Me: No ma'am, I don't do that anymore. I work in the college now.

Phoebe: Well, that's safer, Baby.

Me: Naw. It's still dangerous. It's just dangerous in a different way.

I'm a doctor now. Not the medical kind.

Yep. The first one in our family. See what y'all did? I went to Santiago de Cuba for research, Phoebe. It was amazing. I'm what they call a rhetorician. Basically, I just study how people chose to say it.

Phoebe: Ha! Well, we been doin' that.

Me: You right. We been doin' that. In Cuba, I interviewed 97 Cubans about how they chose to talk about experiences with racism. Race words chosen in Cuba are important because it's treasonous to say them.

Phoebe: Really? Racists down there, too? You stay there long?

Me: Yes, ma'am. A white gaze there, too.

Cuba needs a porch. Oh no. I was only there for 6 weeks doing research for my dissertation. I live in Rhode Island. I direct a writing center.

Phoebe: Finally. We always wanted something safer for you.

Me: Naw. It's still dangerous. It's just dangerous in a different way.

I just want to tell you. I remember all that you taught me and I'm so grateful. I launched this podcast last summer called Story Culture Live. I thought I could make my own porch, invite tellers up, and when they sat down, I could say: "Rest yourself." The way you did. On the day I launched the podcast, two state senators, educators, and folks from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island came out. Guess what we did! We gave you a champagne toast. Thanking you for

*your story culture legacy and the porch
treasure that you provided . . . unbound.*

Phoebe: *Thank you, Baby. You loved
hydrangeas when you were a lil' girl.
You still like 'em?*

Me: *Yes, ma'am. I still love hydrangeas just
like I did when I was little. This other
plant from Ghana is important to me,
when I think about us. It's called Aya. It
means "fern" in Twi. The Aya fern grows
in difficulty and thrives in the rockiest,
harshes places.*

*In Ghana, the Asante ethnic group
made it a symbol. A person who shows
this symbol is saying: "I am independent
of you." "I am not afraid of you." With this
fern, we mean to demonstrate that we
have gone through many difficulties and
we have outlasted them all.*

Thank you.

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