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Katherine Marshall Woods, Psy.D

ABSTRACT

On a brisk autumn evening, the film *Get Out* by Jordan Peele was screened among mental health professionals, followed by discussion from a psychoanalytic lens. The preparation process began by exploring the impact a woman of color discussant may have upon a conversation among a predominately white audience. The preparation resulted in an internal reflection for the discussant: examining how one's race, ethnicity, gender, and religion influence one's ability to feel safe to engage in the freedom of speech.

On a brisk autumn evening in November, I began to quickly pack my belongings to begin an arduous Washington, DC, commute. I had the honor to present at a local psychoanalytic school, one I became aware of while in graduate school and that was known for providing conferences for further education. I found myself in an anxious state as I ensured I had all that was needed: purse, workbag, and, of the utmost importance, my presentation. The nerves had arrived; my stomach twisted in discomfort and I quickly became hyperfocused on details. One detail in particular continued to haunt me. The collaborators of the program, a group of individuals interested in the intersection of race and ethnicity in the psychoanalytic world, asked specifically for a brief introduction of the film *Get Out* by Jordan Peele. We would then move quickly to screen the film, break, and return for discussion. As a consequence of overpreparation, I realized what I'd created was an introduction three times the length requested. I made edits until minutes before I was required to depart, and the printer screamed an error message needing the assistance of an administrator. I imagined fumbling to reference my laptop at a standing microphone or tracking the presentation on my phone. I was fretting on a Friday after 5:00 p.m., so I was relieved when our administrative assistant gently took my USB drive and magically produced the document with ease, saying, "Let's print two for you, Dr. Marshall Woods."

I attributed my increased anxiety to this being my first time in some months presenting for colleagues, many of whom I was familiar with, admired, and respected. With my interest in cinema and media works, my career had led me to present as an expert in documentaries or on television, communicating to the public about psychological theories and findings. I prided myself on presenting psychology and psychoanalytic principles in an inviting manner, in hopes that the field could be discussed freely with the public and to promote mental health awareness that fostered conversations void of judgment and stigma. This task felt different. I was leading a conversation about the influence of race, gender, and an individual's myriad identities in intimate relationships, as well as about how the dynamics found in these interactions can cause deceit among loved ones. I recognized the need to console myself and found comfort in reminding myself that this amount of anxiety could be used to perform superbly.

As planned, I arrived to the school an hour early: enough time to regroup from Friday DC traffic in a rainstorm and to reread the presentation one additional time. I parked on an adjacent street to provide privacy to focus on what felt like an impossible task: shorten the presentation. In reviewing, I felt my presentation was firmly grounded in data while flexible enough for individuals to have several entry points to consider. I also realized the presentation lacked any inclusion of my personal

opinions and feelings. I rationalized that considering the environment, the presentation would not benefit from my personal perspectives and contributions.

Relieved to find parking in front of the school, I was greeted by ferocious honking from a stationery car parked at the rear of the space. Confused, I settled into the spot and was met by a woman at my car window. “You can’t park there! It’s reserved for the director. He’s disabled and appreciates the spot!” Taken by her advocacy, I readily obliged. Though consciously aware of the possibility that many events could be scheduled at the school, I fantasized that this individual might find herself in the film screening. At that moment, I learned that the anxiety I believed I was experiencing was actually one of concern. I recognized that this feeling had been a persistent undercurrent for weeks leading to the event. The reality was, this evening was a coming out for me in two distinct ways. Primarily, it was the first opportunity I had to reveal to my esteemed colleagues what I had consciously shifted my energies and career toward, psychology and media. Second, I was acutely aware of how I was female, African American, and middle-aged, and found myself wondering—worrying, perhaps—how I would be received in a room of predominately white, older, established, psychoanalytically minded professionals. Terrified by my upcoming exhibition, a surprising surge of excitement helped me out of the car, up the stairs, where a welcoming group of attendees waited, all while I wondered to myself, “How did you get here?”

Approximately one year prior to the presentation, a fellow faculty member at the psychoanalytic school learned of my interest in the intersection between psychology and film/media works. He became curious regarding my blogs and anticipated book release examining the psychological dynamics found within Academy Award-winning films of a specific year that boasted the presence of increased recognition of diversity among the contenders. He shared that he was a member of a group that possessed an interest in culture, race, and ethnicity and that I might be interested in being a presenter at their film screenings. I was brewing with enthusiasm to help generate more attention to diversity using my preferred medium.

Together, we agreed upon the film *Get Out*. While many may be familiar with the film, I will offer a short synopsis. *Get Out* features Chris, acted by Daniel Kaluuya, and Rose, performed by Allison Williams, depicting two young adults involved in an interracial romantic relationship. The film centers around a weekend trip where Chris and Rose visit her family in order to introduce her parents to him. In the film, Chris had concerns regarding whether he would be accepted by Rose’s family, as she had informed him that he was the first romantic interest of color that she had introduced to her parents. Unbeknownst to Chris, Rose indeed had introduced numerous individuals of color, to support the family’s business of selling them into captivity.

The planning meetings prior to the event felt extremely productive. The collaborators were warm, thoughtful, and conscientious, and our meetings over the several months yielded fruitful insights, confirming my desire to participate. In addition to offering concrete logistics necessary for a successful event, I found them open to wondering together how this specific film would land on the audience and what discussion(s) it might yield. They encouraged me to share how I felt, being an African American woman presenting about a film that received global recognition regarding the complexities of race, privilege, and interracial relationships in the United States. Conversations explored our fantasies of the rich discussion that might ensue with attendees. We questioned whether the audience would feel safe to be their vulnerable selves or whether defenses would remain high such that genuine feelings would be curtailed. We also wondered together whether the attendees would be authentic to their experience. Because of my visible identities, might the attendees hedge, soften, or leave feelings unsaid in fear of offending, microaggressing, or hurting me and others of minority status in attendance? Most times I used my lengthy commute after the planning sessions to wrestle with, at once, the strong feeling of gratitude to have the opportunity to engage in such gratifying dialogue with colleagues and the extraordinary discomfort.

The remaining work was for me and me alone: I needed to create space for self-reflection, to locate myself in my identities and determine how comfortable I could anticipate being in the room, with this audience, presenting this topic. Dissimilar to my earlier notion that this presentation

would evoke anxiety solely on the basis of exposing my passion for psychology and film, this event evoked questions about myself in service of being a self-aware presenter. I was called to consider how I can be honest in my experience as a female person of color within the field of psychology and psychoanalysis while utilizing, with recognition, the defenses required to facilitate a conversation: that is, to be both had and heard in an ideally open, welcoming way. I wrestled with questions: What would be projected on me as a female, African American presenter discussing deceit between an African American male and a white woman? What type(s) of projections would feel acceptable? Which projections might I experience as injurious? I also found myself reflecting on the need to decide how much of my personal experience, thoughts, and beliefs would I feel safe sharing. Within the solitude of my vehicle, I used the time to acknowledge that to agree to this arrangement, I, too, must decide how authentic I would be. Will I share my truth? Can I feel safe to share my truth? The topic of the presentation focused on race and deceit was an ever-present parallel process. Would my potential silence, fear, or withholding of personal truths breed deceit similar to what *Get Out* illustrates? Would these phenomena be so powerful as to elide the good that could come from a presentation geared to create a safe environment to discuss feelings pertaining to diversity? I was disconcerted, needing to balance wanting to deliver a substantial presentation while being thoughtful regarding what *my part* was, and what I desired *my part* to be while presenting.

Specifically, I have felt that sharing one's truth is a privilege. It does not go unrecognized that sharing one's truth has cost many their lives. For some, the only currency to maintain life has been the act of withholding a truth—and in some cases, generations of truths. Whether individuals enslaved were required to withhold stating their truth for fear of being further mistreated unto their demise, or living in the twenty-first century with the ability to watch footage obtained from mobile phones of individuals being stopped by law enforcement and killed for sharing the truth that no law was broken, people with my shared skin coloring understand the power silence affords. Having a platform of willing and paying attendees with whom to share one's truth is a greater privilege. I am in awe of the great liberty of opportunity, as well as the level of defenses used to navigate the task of being asked to share my experience of my personal identities as an African American Christian female in the psychoanalytic world. My greatest discomfort lies with the recognition that sharing comes with a gamble, one that is personal and one that can be professional. And, a gambler I am not. You will not find me in a casino unless accompanying those who enjoy the game, and you will not find me purchasing a lottery ticket unless I have been summoned to do so on behalf of a loved one entertained by purchasing tickets in various states when large payouts are promised to the lucky winner. While I am aware that withholding may be used as a way to protect one's culture from further appropriation, refraining from discussion can also be an enactment that lends itself to the belief that one's culture need not be considered if I, a person of color, do not offer the appearance that I consider it within situations.

Psychoanalytically, we welcome the notion that there is more than meets the eye. On the surface, one may appear to be an active, engaged listener in conversations. What occurs beneath may be, at least for me, a Socratic method in process: inquiries to ascertain my role, desires, and fears. Am I safe to express my feelings in this environment? With whom am I sharing? Will this party be able to manage what I am experiencing? Will my experience be globalized to represent individuals with a shared cultural identity or will my experience be heard as mine personally? What is my responsibility in protecting my culture in what I share? How will what I share affect others within my culture? How will I represent myself to benefit my culture? Will individuals hear my feelings with kindness, compassion, and grace? In speaking about issues of diversity, I take great care in the words chosen and I am careful to speak with a clear aim in mind: that my experience steeped in minority status will be considered by the audience and, ideally, understood. This process, though modified with experience, has been inculcated. With the opportunity to become further involved in the field, such invitations bear increased moments of contemplating my identities. There becomes less time to

be “off,” unless in the presence of those who I trust know my intentions well; thus, my days of prayer, worship, and reflection are cherished.

To take less care and to be less careful would require defenses to ease. Yet these defenses were born from lessons learned and lessons taught in an attempt to both protect from and avoid situations that could have dire consequences, even grave outcomes. These defenses were a substantial aspect of my childhood and remain with me as an adult. They have become an inheritance that cloaks me in historical knowledge of the experiences of African Americans well before we were Americans, who we have been as women in the world and who we are today. My history, I will admit, has been shared with me in times of resistance, and, conversely, in times of awe. As a youngster, I recall emotionally preparing myself for the range of visceral feelings of hurt, pain, anger, sadness, and hope that conversations with family and classmates would conjure. I learned that these conversations typically began in an intellectualized way and inevitably would conclude as overwhelming emotional moments. My natural perspective, one of optimism, the willingness to give the benefit of the doubt, and the desire to examine the gray of situations, was of striking concern to my elders, who attempted to instill in me that there are some deeds in this world that are just right and other deeds that are just wrong. Indeed, my younger years ushered me into a conversation that came to one simplistic conclusion stated by my grandmother: “At times, people can be just bad, Kat.”

My grandmother, one who possessed a gender-unidentifiable name, Willie Mae, remains one of the loudest voices in my head, warning of the ways African Americans and women have been treated in the United States. Most times I was upset by her grim records and was unaware of her sacrifice in sharing—that in order to do so required her to disavow her whiteness to offer the realities of what I could experience being visibly African American. She instilled in me many jewels: how to spell “chicken” and “Mississippi” using songs she learned from my great grandmother, her experiences having been born in 1913, the importance of having the knowledge to grow and preserve personally harvested food from surviving the Great Depression, and numerous others. Among the jewels were also less desirable shiny pieces that included that people in the world may struggle to include, cherish, and even tolerate me because of prejudices and biases pertaining to race and ethnicity and that these people should be considered bigots and racists. She normalized the use of defenses and suggested that I speak and represent my truth in the manner that I deemed fit and that I use defenses strategically in challenging social, interpersonal, and political injustices.

I believe I am a product of my ancestors and family. My decisions, achievements, and follies are a part of the tapestry of who we are and who we have become, and contribute to the paving of the road of where we will be. These defenses I was offered in childhood have become a part of an armor I wear. With such lessons, I have the knowledge for and capability of fighting battles and wars of injustice and consciously decide what battles to engage in and determine what my part will be. My innate desire to understand and honor one another in our entirety, not surprisingly, led me to the psychoanalytic way of thinking.

Likewise, I have always had a desire for a harmonious world. I believe the world can be better and we as people can be better. As a known pacifist, considering the need to possess arms to protect against prejudice, racism, and microaggressions has disturbed and disheartened me. I am most affected when such suggestions are stated by our thought leaders, political and otherwise, in response to our current social climate. It has been most disappointing to witness that narratives of centuries ago remain relevant and alive and have been the driving force for the need for continued movements like Black Lives Matter or #metoo. I explored aspects of race, gender, and employment inequality in a chapter in my book, *Best Psychology in Film* (2018). There, I examined particular defenses when conceptualizing Dorothy Vaughn’s theatrically documented experience of working in the 1960s under Jim Crow laws in the wake of the civil rights movement in *Hidden Figures*. Not surprisingly, yet unfortunately, in constructing this chapter, I was led to the conclusion that similar defenses to manage race, gender, and employment inequalities continue to be used currently. Today, on media platforms, parents discuss searching for ways to communicate with their children, and the need to protect and defend themselves from racism and prejudice. I understand most parents, grandparents,

caregivers, and adults do not desire to feel obligated to create social soldiers in their children in order to have them survive in this country. In these moments I question what my part is as a person and as a psychologist: to listen, to concur, to offer a reaction formation of idealized optimism? Most times, I find myself sitting in shared dispirit while encouraging the exploration of the part the individual would like to have, the part that honors who they are.

The process and final product of crafting this article are not immune from the same challenging and rigorous decision points. How much do I share of my narrative that is mine and mine alone? How much do I expose of my narrative held within the context of my collective identities? How vulnerable can I be in offering my narrative, one co-created by our global collective? Will my offering be a proffer? Must scientific proof be required to concur my experience prior to it being considered? How safe will I be in rooms and in conversations I navigate with those of shared and differing identities, moments after reading that such contemplation lives inside of me? What I can assure you is that what you read today is the most authentic I find myself in my journey carrying who I am, in my identities as a psychologist rooted in psychodynamic theory and practice.

As for the presentation on that stormy Friday evening, I found myself grateful. I was allowed to read from the second printed “just in case” copy, the full thirteen minutes and twenty-four seconds write-up. My gratitude extended to the attendees who were willing to share their raw thoughts and feelings to create an environment where such a discussion could be rich, emotionally evocative, and passionate, where some attendees desired more time to think together. One participant was willing to verbalize the disturbing nature of what was being discussed: “I don’t like what we are talking about here,” she stated. Another participant thwarted my response and suggested, “That’s the point, isn’t it? To not like this and what we have seen?” At that moment, I understood that the part that I wish to play is a challenger of the status quo by facilitating conversations, even if in the displacement, using media as a platform to foster greater ease in having discussions that are honest and have the potential to lead to a change of perspective, a change in ourselves.

At the conclusion of the presentation, as participants said their goodbye, one stated, “This was great, Kat. I wish I could have heard and had more of you.” I smiled at the invitation of the privilege being asked, one that others in this world would die for, have died for. In addition, and to my great surprise, the individual who noted her displeasure about the content within the presentation contacted me months later. She shared her interest in presenting in a similar fashion and appreciated the approach that was taken to engender a vulnerable conversation, and desired my ideas, offering consultation credit for my thoughts. As the Socratic method began internally for me, I responded in kind, “That’s wonderful. I’m excited to support and to hear your ideas.”

Notes on contributor

Katherine Marshall Woods, Psy.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist providing services in Washington, DC. Dr. Marshall Woods has a small private practice and is a member of the core faculty at The George Washington University. She holds interest in the intersection between psychology and media, blogs with Thrive Global and Medium within this arena, and is the author of *Best Psychology in Film*.