In My Mother's Compound: The Consequences of the Erasure of Igbo Women's Trauma During the Biafran War and Its Relation to the Nullification of African-American Womanist History in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues for the importance of incorporating Black womanist historiography into national public school systems, libraries, and cultural archives in light of the recent elimination of current diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. To emphasize this argument and explore potential harms of eliminating DEI, this paper draws on the historical connections, consequences, and controversies of the lack of education on gendered violence toward Igbo women in the Biafran War (or Nigerian Civil War).

Introduction

Contemporary US Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in American public education is currently under threat. In January 2025, President Donald J. Trump publicly signed off on various executive orders related to eliminating DEI initiatives, including Executive Order 14190, which eradicates "discriminatory equity ideology" in educational institutions (Trump 2025). The elimination of DEI contributes not only to the erasure of history for various communities of color but also to the loss of cultural memory for African-American women who continue to be impacted by the adverse effects of racism.

Historical Parallels Between Nigeria and the US

The suppression of marginalized history within educational systems is not unique to the United States. Just like the contemporary DEI rollbacks taking place in American academic institutions, Nigeria has also made significant efforts to eliminate the history and

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stories of gendered violence, specifically in the context of the Biafran War and educational reform in Nigeria.

The Biafran War was a significant event that not only highlighted issues of ethnic tensions and the mishandling of Nigeria post-independence, but also violence toward women who were pressured to stay strong by default. The events of mass murder, rape, and constant relocation, orchestrated by the Nigerian government, have led to historical wounds among these women. There is a plethora of knowledge that can contribute to the generational healing of Igbo[1] women by incorporating the content of this war in Nigerian school curricula. Nigerian school systems and US DEI notions both have the power to alleviate trauma and promote healing through education and access to repositories.

Gaps in History and Comparative Analysis

This paper uses a comparative analysis to depict how excluding educational and archival content in relation to gendered Black scholarship promotes the continuation of transgenerational suffering in Black communities. The comparative lens uses the erasure of Igbo women's history of trauma during the Biafran War and the eradication of African-American womanist history to portray the consequences of erasing gendered history. This paper then explores how incorporating these historical narratives positively contributes to education and healing for Black women and their communities everywhere.

In this context, Black historiography (with women as the subject) is a framework that centers the quality of life and the survival of Black women in their social, economic, and political conditions. Trauma, along with trauma-informed education, is a system that helps to underscore a shared collective experience not only among Black women living in the US, but globally as well. Together, these structures provide unity, historical clarity, and community restoration.

While the historical settings differ, the experiences of oppression faced by Igbo women during the Biafran War and African-American women throughout a multitude of different events in US history depict a range of unified historical consciousness for Black women globally. This reinforces the need for this content in education that honors these women and their diverse experiences of oppression.

Literature Review

Dominant Narratives of the Nigerian-Biafran War

Scholarship on the Nigerian-Biafran War focuses on gendered violence primarily initiated toward male victims and survivors. Many pieces of literature cover wartime casualties experienced by men, the inhumane conditions of camps that Igbo families were forced to endure, prevalent diseases such as kwashiokor[2] derived from hunger, and constant relocation. Well-known Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, in his work *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra,* emphasizes these conditions and the lasting effects they have had on Igbo societies even in contemporary times.

[1] The Igbos are a large ethnic group located in Southeastern Nigeria.

[2] Kwashiokor is a disease that causes the physical swelling of the stomach when there is a lack of protein in a diet. This was a very common disease in children throughout the events of the Biafran War and many third world countries today.

However, the majority of scholarship fails to address events of gendered violence toward Igbo women during the war, despite this population still being negatively impacted today. The limited scholarship that does exist to underscore these significant gendered narratives includes "Fighting on All Fronts: Gendered Spaces, Ethnic Boundaries, and the Nigerian Civil War" by Obioma Nnaemeka and "War and Stature: Growing up During the Nigerian Civil War" by Richard Akresh, Sonia Bhalotra, Marbella Leone, and Una Okonkwo Osili. These works depict the sexual abuse and exploitation that women had to endure to survive.

These authors also describe the consistent social and familial pressures to fulfill male-dominated roles during and after the war. Igbo women were forced to wear a veil of independence as vast populations of Igbo men were murdered on the frontlines. They took up male-dominated occupations such as agriculture or hunting to feed their children, most of whom were suffering from kwashiorkor due to the food blockade[3] enforced by the Nigerian government.

An increase in additional scholarship that directly addresses sexual violence committed in the Biafran War would give readers more profound insight into how this has affected Igbo women generationally. The lack of literature on Biafran sexual wartime violence is likely due to survivor's guilt, the shame associated with assault, a lack of legal protections, and the overall cultural values surrounding rape in Nigeria.

Scholarship on US Intersectional History

Just as documenting and learning about Igbo women's experiences during the Biafran War is crucial, incorporating intersectional history in the US helps to validate and heal collective Black experiences. Substantial evidence indicates that the teachings of African-American woman-centered historiography have led to positive academic outcomes. For example, Turea Michelle Hutson, in her 2022 piece, "By Any Means Necessary: A Brief Educational History of Black Women and Girls in the United States," discusses how learning about the experiences of Black women and girls helps to inform students about the severe impact of racial trauma, intersectional discrimination, and healing practices. Other academic works, such as Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminist theorist work, *Black Sexual Politics,* provide readers with knowledge on how racial discrimination and sexism help shape the discourse of a Black woman's quality of life (2004). All in all, the histories of Black womanhood in school systems are necessary to help students understand the historical effects and dynamics of colonial trauma and American racism.

Introduction to the Biafran War

Origins of Biafra

The Biafran War was fought from July 6, 1967, to January 17, 1970. This war was a direct byproduct of the failures stemming from Nigerian independence[4] in 1960. During the transition to independence from Great Britain, many Nigerian ethnic groups struggled to find common ground and agreement on the way Nigeria would lead its country going forward.

[3] Food blockades were common war tactics initiated by the Nigerian government toward Igbo lands during Biafra. The Nigerian government would prevent food, medicine, and essential resources to Igbo people in order to encourage Igbos to resist war and ideas of succession.

[4] Nigerian Independence from British colonial rule took place on October 1, 1960.

The most prominent tensions arose between the Igbo, Hausa[5], and Fulani ethnic groups. These groups held different perspectives on the role of governmental power in Nigeria. The Igbo people believed in a system that respected secularism because they were concerned that the intersection of religion and politics would shape biases during the curation of public policy. They believed that secularism would prevent political violence toward other communities. They also held strong values in individual entrepreneurship and the equitable distribution of resources. In anticipation of decolonization, the Igbos looked forward to obtaining more economic autonomy and access to natural resource ports.

Alternatively, the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups valued the role of religion in the establishment of government, particularly Islam. They believed that Islamic values would form the foundation for Nigerian politics, as well as provide a basis for religiously affiliated leadership. They expressed a high demand for revenue-sharing formulas, as they believed that all resources in the new country belonged to the central government.

Military Coups, Pogroms, and Ideas of Secession

Ethnic tensions, significant political differences, and cultural rivalry eventually led to the first military coup on January 15, 1966. This coup was primarily led by a mix of Igbo and Yoruba leaders in the name of cleansing Nigeria from the state of corruption. During the coup, several northern Nigerian leaders were killed, including political figures such as Sir Abubakar Ifawa Balewa, who was the Prime Minister at the time.

In retaliation for the 1966 coup, the Nigerian government infiltrated the Igbo pogroms.[6] This included a host of violent events and interventions toward Igbo civilians in the north that included mass shootings, beheadings, machete attacks, and rape. Throughout the drastic events that took place in this period, between 30,000 and 50,000 Igbo people were murdered without any intervention from the government (Korieh 2013). The daily slaughtering and disregard for Igbo people residing in the north during the pogroms resulted in ideas of secession, the creation of Biafra, and the beginnings of the Nigerian Civil War (2013).

Gendered Violence Toward Igbo Women

Silenced Experiences of Biafran Women

Throughout the Nigerian Civil War, there were many acts of violence against Igbo women that continue to be understated. During the war, Igbo women and their children watched as male partners, siblings, and loved ones were gruesomely murdered. This is a war tactic used to instill fear in individuals who try to revolt against the Nigerian government. Furthermore, women and girls who were forced to witness the brutal deaths of their male family members were not given emotional support or space to grieve and process these rampant themes of death. The tumultuous nature of war and the potency of the government did not allow it. In a 2009 interview with Biafran War survivor Gertrude Chinwe Ogunkeye, she recalls moments of terror as she was forced to witness the death of individuals while being held captive by Nigerian soldiers. In this powerful interview, she discusses the death of a man from her grandfather's village, which occurred in front of his wife and newborn child.

[5] The Hausa and Fulani are two large ethnic groups located in Northern Nigeria.

[6] The Igbo pogroms were a violent event led by the Nigerian government in 1966. In this event, Nigerian soldiers invaded Igbo homes in the North, murdered Igbo families in large numbers, and seized their properties.

In the interview, she says,

> I did not have any perception of death because the only dead person I have seen in my life was my great-grandmother, and she was very old. Sitting where we were, there was a man with a baby. A Nigerian soldier came to him and said, "What are you doing here? Tell them bye-bye." He just took the baby and gave it to his wife. We heard a crack, pop, and they shot him. The wife did not say a word. She just sat there holding her newborn baby. She did not say a word. (2009)

Ogunkeye's recollection of this moment illustrates the beginnings of long-term trauma stemming from unprocessed grief among Igbo women during the war. Igbo women were consistently forced to move forward with their lives during wartime violence as they took on traditional male responsibilities in order to maintain the household and family lineage that male members left behind. The experiences of unprocessed grief and lingering trauma derived from the war underscore why teaching gendered realities of Biafra, particularly the experiences of Igbo women, is essential for challenging archival absence and advancing community healing.

Institutional Consequences of the Biafran War and Its Connections to the Erasure of African-American Womanist History

"No Victor, No Vanquished"

Despite the Nigerian government's prominent role in the mass murder and destruction that occurred during the war, the military head of state in Nigeria at the time, Yakubu Gowon, famously stated the phrase "no victor, no vanquished" to describe the outcome of the Biafran War. In other words, there were no identifiable winners or losers after the war, but rather a unified country (Gowon 1970). The perceived unification of Nigeria and the government's consistent promotion of the "no victor, no vanquished" principle contributed to the justification of eliminating Biafran history from Nigerian public education. It did not help that Nigeria's investment in public education dropped significantly due to the loss of infrastructure and the lack of adequately trained teachers after the war (Onyemelukwe-Waziri 2017). Lack of acknowledgement of war atrocities and demolished educational infrastructures has prevented Nigerian students from learning the full truth of how Igbo women were treated during and after the war.

Biafra and Educational Reform in Nigeria

In addition to this, the Nigerian government has initiated other projects and educational reforms aimed at African unification (Nwachukwu 2023). These initiatives include the 1969 National Curriculum Conference[7], the 1970 Public Education Edict[8], and the 1971

[7] This was a nationwide conference in Nigeria aimed at creating an educational curriculum that would benefit and uplift all ethnic groups and not just individuals.

[8] The 1970 Public Education Edict was a tool used by the Nigerian government to control and centralize authority over staffing, curriculum, and school administrations.

Introduction of Social Studies as a Compulsory Subject.[9] To further demolish the remains of history pertaining to the war, the Nigerian government has also removed public school infrastructure, including classrooms that hold historical significance. This includes the Research and Production Agency of Biafra[10] at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (formerly known as the University of Biafra).

The lack of transparency within the stories of Biafran women in Nigerian academic institutions has led to many adverse effects on Igbo women's quality of life and health. These impacts include reduced adult stature, an increased likelihood of being overweight, and, most importantly, lower educational attainment (Akresh et al. 2023).

The Significance of Intersectional History in the US and Nigeria

Intersectional history must be a high priority in educational curricula to correct historical omission, highlight intersectional oppression, and promote empathy. Most importantly, the inclusion of this history in schools enhances educational development and encourages ancestral healing (Parameswaran et al. 2024). The erasure of Biafran women's experiences through Nigerian institutions reflects the same consequences that may occur when DEI is entirely eliminated in US school systems.

Throughout American history, Black trauma passed down from woman to woman can be seen in different historical contexts that have promoted gendered violence. These events include sexual violence in American slavery, American lynch culture, and more. It is essential for students to be taught about the detrimental impacts of these historical events, as without this knowledge, schools are at risk of retraumatizing students instead of healing them (Parameswaran et al. 2024).

Healing Generations of Women Through Intersectional Education

The positive impacts of teaching Black women's history and past trauma can be seen in an independent study course created by organizer and educator Betsy Brinson at Open High School in Richmond, Virginia. Brinson's course, "Black Women in American History," focused on topics such as the sexual objectification of the Black body, Black women and racial prejudice, the complexities of Black womanhood, and more. At the end of the course, Brinson found that this class not only helped students engage with the past but also enabled them to create tangible connections and solutions based on their own experiences (1980). Most of the students who took this course were young women of African descent and were very appreciative of learning more about the origins of contemporary Black trauma in their own communities (1980). All in all, Brinson's class motivated these young women to apply knowledge from "Black Women in American History" to curate positive changes in their own neighborhoods and communities.

Additionally, a 2023 study found that to create a safe and trusting educational space for students in the classroom, it is essential for teachers to center the voices of marginalized students. Healing must be grounded in historical honesty and accountability that centers people who derive from groups that have been systemically oppressed (Krazinski and Flores

[9] The 1971 Introduction of Social Studies as a Compulsory Subject was a Nigerian public policy that made the subject of social studies a priority. Social studies focused on developing positive rapport between ethnic groups and nation-building.

[10] The Research and Production Agency was a department that created homemade wartime arms and militant strategies for Biafran Soldiers during the Nigerian Civil War.

2023). This notion provides tools for adopting more holistic and comprehensive approaches to trauma and for identifying historically situated perspectives that resist essentializing (2023).

This study helps to underscore the importance of continuing to center the voices, trauma, and past historical events of Black and African-American women in the US through the arts of education and historical archives. Cultural memory in pedagogical spaces provides students and educators with transparency and depth into how ignoble the culture of American racism is. This transparency, however, also helps to cultivate a culture of healing and shared cultural memory across different groups of women.

Black Womanist Education in Archival Practices

In this context, education includes access to historical archives and libraries. There is a wealth of evidence suggesting that educational archives that embrace intersectional Black history and trauma studies have led to positive outcomes. For example, Michelle Caswell, in her piece, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," discusses the significant impact that access to local archives has had on community members and their engagement. When individuals gain greater access to resources that tell the real, authentic stories of marginalized groups, it has epistemological, ontological, and social impacts (2016). The epistemological impact (specifically for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds) includes learning new content about their own histories and cultural heritage. The ontological impact helps to confirm that their experiences are valid and relevant. Finally, the social impact makes these individuals and their communities feel more included in society (2016). In the context of gendered Black history and Black woman studies, access to these archives is pivotal in recognizing historical trauma and facilitating the healing process.

Academic scholar and librarian Kellee E. Warren takes this perspective even further in her piece "We Need These Bodies, But Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles." In Warren's work, she discusses why the narratives of Black women are essential to contemporary historical archives. She uses the context of the underrepresentation of enslaved Black women from the French Caribbean Islands to articulate the consequences of ancestral erasure. She finds that the absence of this history creates a disconnect in Black cultural memory, which is crucial for understanding justice work and restoration practices. She also underscores how the inclusion of stories and detail-oriented accounts of these women turns their history from quantitative to qualitative data (2016). To add to this notion, a 2024 study concluded that representation in archival work provides pedagogical benefits and fosters community empowerment (Awa 2024).

Conclusion

This paper argues that the erasure of stories and ancestral harm toward Black women in academic settings can be very dangerous, as it prevents students from learning in depth about the history of discrimination, trauma, and racial violence that Black women continue to experience. By comparing the erasure of this history with the omission of Biafran gendered narratives in Nigeria, I demonstrate that the consequences of erased narratives, the eradication of cultural memory, and education are extremely intertwined. Within the field of Africana Studies and Black international politics, we hope to see more literature, historical narratives, and educational archives developed that depict the connections of the voices of Biafran women and African-Americans who share the same struggle of holding onto Black collective memory

in a world that continues to uphold the legacy of European colonialism and White supremacy. Black feminist history in education is a necessity as we continue to reveal a global struggle over whose stories are deemed worthy of remembrance.

In memory of my maternal grandmother, Virginia Ndilika Okoye (1952–2025). A mother, grandmother, cultural custodian, first daughter, and Biafran War survivor. You ran so that your children and grandchildren could walk.

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