



## Memoiric Techniques in *When they Call You A Terrorist; A Black Lives Matter Memoir* by Patrisse Khan-Cullors & Asha Bandele

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### ABSTRACT

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has profoundly reshaped numerous narratives surrounding racial prejudice. While various texts have explored racial bias within African American literature, Memoirists affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement have critiqued and redefined some structural and aesthetic elements traditionally found in these texts. Despite extensive research on racism in African American literature, much of the existing scholarship has relied on fictional portrayals, often sidelining genuine human experiences. In contrast, Memoirists aim to interrogate the notion of authentic confession, diverging from conventional narrative approaches. This paper examines Memoiric techniques in *When They Call You a Terrorist; A Black Lives Matter Memoir*, analyzing how these techniques reflect racial prejudices faced by people of colour during the Black Lives Matter era. Employing post-colonial theory, particularly the concept of orientalism, as a critical framework, this qualitative study investigates racial dynamics during this period. The analysis contends that the Memoir's capacity to construct life through meaningful narrative connections renders its presentation techniques both relevant and democratic, offering a poignant commentary on the ongoing issue of racism.

**Keywords:** People of colour, African American, Memoir, Prejudice, White supremacy

### INTRODUCTION

The history of African American literature is intricately linked with racial themes, reflecting a long-standing effort to transform racial perspectives in the United States. This literary tradition has its origins in the slave narratives of Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass, as well as in the politically and socially charged writings of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Over time, the movement evolved to embrace a more aesthetic approach, exemplified by Zora Neale Hurston, who concentrated on the Black woman's search for identity (Wheatley, 1773; Douglass, 1845; Washington, 1900; Du Bois, 1904; Hurston, 1937).

This study contends that while various fictional writers have addressed the Black experience in predominantly white American contexts, they often create characters dictated by the conventions of their chosen genres. Consequently, these fictional representations may overshadow the actual, sometimes more tragic, experiences of real individuals. In contrast, the Memoir genre, particularly prominent during the Black Lives Matter movement, serves as a platform for authentic personal narratives, thus bridging this gap. Seffer (2015) attributes the popularity of the Memoir to its innovative narrative potential for voices that have historically been marginalized in literature (p. 50). Memoirs, as a genre favored by marginalized voices, provide a valuable means for critically examining identity deconstruction and exploring alternative perspectives on race relations and cultural negotiations.

*When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* co-authored by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, is a powerful narrative that explores the experiences of being a Black woman in America and the co-founding of a movement that advocates for justice in a nation that prides itself on freedom. For Cullors, the most vulnerable individuals in America are people of colour. These individuals are deliberately and ruthlessly targeted by a criminal justice system that upholds white privilege, subjecting them to unjust racial profiling and police brutality. Whiteness, as an entrenched determinant of worldview, operates as an invisible veil beyond conscious awareness, a condition that can be particularly detrimental to women, LGBTQ individuals, people of colour, and other marginalized groups (Sue & Sue, 2013).

In 2013, following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, Cullors's outrage propelled her to co-found the Black Lives Matter movement alongside Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi. Despite being condemned as terrorists and perceived as a threat to America, these compassionate women created a hashtag that sparked a movement demanding accountability from authorities who consistently ignore the injustices suffered by individuals with Black and Brown skin. The Memoir thus presents the authors not only as observers but also as subjects of their investigation, remembrance, and contemplation. This study, therefore, aims to explore how the Memoirists articulate their experiences during the Black Lives Matter Movement, through telling the truth, interrogating their emotional Journey as well as fluidity of narration.

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## (I). TRUTH MATTERS; THE MEMOIR

We are profoundly influenced by the narratives we encounter, whether they are read, recited, digitally consumed, or passed down through generations, reflecting societal norms. These stories, in all their forms, are integral to shaping our identities and serve as the foundation for creating new narratives rooted in truth (Heilbrun, 1988). This perspective underscores that sharing personal experiences is a fundamental human practice. Individuals are often motivated to share their stories for emotional relief, survival, or to confront injustices. This motivation has led to the rise of the Memoir genre in America, offering a new narrative space for voices traditionally marginalized in mainstream literature. Memoirs represent a democratic form of writing that reveals human truths.

Contemporary Memoirs emphasize a collective identity rather than the highly individualized focus of autobiographies. These narratives are often deeply rooted in the complex histories of the communities to which the authors belong or have been connected, even in a critical and ambivalent manner (Sanudo, 2022). This view aligns with Francesco (2020), who suggests that "the Black Lives Matter manifesto illustrates their commitment to fighting for all victims of social crimes, police misconduct, or direct episodes of racism that have been overlooked by society and the relevant authorities" (p. 12). Cullors argues that;

"Like many of the people who embody our movement, I have lived my life between the twin terrors of poverty and the police. Coming of age in the drug war climate that was ratcheted up by Ronald Reagan and then Bill Clinton, the neighborhood where I lived and loved and the neighborhood where many of the members of Black Lives Matter have lived and loved were designated war zones and the enemy was us (p.14)"

Cullors reveals a historical reality where people of colour in America have been consistently labeled as drug-hardened criminals or perpetrators of terror. Ironically, she belongs to the group that has been branded as terrorists and enemies. Carmen (2008) argues that 'the emergence of the Memoir genre is driven by the inherent and instinctive human desire to discover one's true self or define one's identity' (p. 6). Consequently, Cullors, acutely aware of the terrorist label imposed on her and people of colour, is compelled to escalate the fight for liberation. Similarly, Austin (2004) explores the motivations behind Memoir or memory writing. She feels an urge to mentally revisit past experiences—just as Cullors does in the previous quotation—through writing, to understand the influences that have shaped her current self. Austin further argues that all human beings have the right to write a Memoir, as everyone needs to make sense of the complex workings of their mind (p. 788).

Memoir writing fosters a dialogue of truth between the author and the reader. As Cullors & Bandele begins the Memoir, it is noted:

"My mother, Cherice, raises us-my older brothers Paul and Monte, my baby sister, Jasmine, and me-on a block that is the main strip in my Van Nuys, California, mostly Mexican neighborhood live in one of ten section 8 apartments in a two-story, tan-coloured building where the paint is peeling and where there is a gate that does not close properly, and an intercom system that never works. (p.15)"

Cullors's vivid depiction of their family's experience in "an intercom system that never works" substantiates her earlier assertions regarding the labeling of people of colour as terrorists. The narrative establishes a dialogic interaction with the reader, enabling them to grasp the depth of racial marginalization. Bakhti (2001) asserts that "the language in a Memoir is a living entity, dependent on the interplay among speakers, listeners, and contexts" (p. 293). This notion aligns with the argument presented by Willard & Margret (2003), who emphasize the critical connection between the reader and the writer. They argue that without such a connection, the text ceases to function as a Memoir, stressing that the genre must be defined by the subject, audience, and author (p. 512). Consequently, a Memoirist must possess the skill to engage the reader to a degree where the reader not only empathizes with the Memoirist's account but also resonates with their experience (p. 8).

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## (II). MEMOIR AND THE EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

Memoir writing often involves a process of emotional exploration, where the author reflects on their past self through the lens of their present identity. According to Sue (2009), "for a Memoir to be effective, it must possess a narrative voice that captures the full spectrum of human experiences and emotions" (p. 1). Sue further explains that the first-person perspective in Memoirs serves as a literary device to delve into and express these complex emotions. This narrative voice embodies both the external journey (the events that occurred) and the internal journey (the insights and meanings derived from those events). Additionally, the concept of dual consciousness, often referred to as the "Double I/eye," signifies the presence of the past self (the "I") at the center of the story and the narrator's reflective "eye" looking back on that self. Cullors & Bandele provide a poignant account of the historical and emotional experiences of people of colour, emphasizing the depth of their journey.

"And I knew it because I am the thirteenth-generation progeny of a people who Survived the hulls of slave ships, survived the chains, the whips, the months Laying in their own shit and piss. The human beings legislated as not human Beings who watched their names, their languages, their Goddesses and Gods, the arc of their dances and beats of their songs, the majesty of their dreams, their very families snatched up and stolen, disassembled and discarded, and despite this built language and honored God and created movement and Upheld love. What could they be but stardust, these people who refused to die, who refused to accept the idea that their lives did no matter, that their Children's lives did not matter?" (p.g 12)

Cullors & Bandele depict the historically burdened emotional journey of people of colour. Despite being a descendant of Africans who endured slavery, Cullors emphasizes her continued resolve to combat the enduring prejudices that have persisted for centuries. Laura (2017) discusses how, when studying Memoirs, it is common to question their epistemic value and their relationship to emotionality. She references Lejeune (1989), who, before shifting his focus to diary analysis, famously—and controversially—asserted that Memoirs require an "autobiographical pact." This pact is a contract established

between the reader and the Memoirist, enabling the reader to connect the text with the pronoun "I" while also implicitly accepting the role of confidant. Although readers are confined to silence, they are expected to believe the events described, recognize the authenticity of the emotions portrayed by the Memoirist, and ultimately assess the content (Laura, 2017).

This study poses a significant question: How does the narrator convey her emotional journey based on the subject matter? After Cullors reconnects with her biological father, she discovers that he, like her brother Monte, is a recovering crack addict. Monte had begun selling their mother's possessions to fund his addiction. Cullors attributes this to growing up in a neighborhood where people of colour lack recreational facilities, after-school programs, hangout spots, movie theatre jobs, treatment centers, or mental health care for those like her brother Monte (p. 32). It is reported:

"But without health care beyond LA County USC Hospital, we can't know about my brother. We only know that crack filled the empty spaces for a lot of people whose lives have been emptied out. We are the post-Reagan, post-social safety net generation. The welfare reform generation, the swim or motherfucking sink generation. and, unlike our counterparts on wall street, where crack is used and sold more, we don't have an employee Assistance plan (p.32)".

Cullors, in a tone filled with bitterness, sharply critiques a system that blatantly discriminates against marginalized individuals. This intense expression amplifies the emotional impact of the scene, evoking feelings of terror, betrayal, and helplessness experienced by those oppressed. These emotions challenge both the narrator and the reader to take action. According to Bruner (1986), "narration is a mode of mental life in which we understand the actions of people (the narrator/protagonist), who pursue goals by means of plans that meet vicissitudes," a concept he refers to as the "paradigmatic mode" (p. 1). This mode often involves various inferences, typically used in sequence, which allow conclusions to be shared from one mind to another (Oatley, 1996a).

Cullors also expresses doubt about the future of marginalized individuals when she states, "The swim or motherfucking sink generation," possibly reflecting the severe oppression they have faced within a white-centered system. Bruner further suggests that the challenges faced by the protagonist or narrator within this narrative mode often evoke personal emotions in the reader, leading to identification, sympathy, or other emotional responses (p. 1). He defines vicissitudes as significant challenges, problems for which there are no rehearsed solutions. Similarly, Cullors argues that people of colour were left without employee benefits or medical plans provided by the government. Therefore, emotions, as responses to such events, can be seen as prompting the experiencer towards creative solutions, which is a crucial aspect of their significance for us (Averill & Nunley, 1992).

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### (III). THE FLUIDITY OF NARRATION AS A REFLECTION OF RACIAL PREJUDICE

A Memoir fosters inner transformation while simultaneously revealing a change in the narrator's perception of the world (Chauncey, 2019). This implies that the interplay of pronouns in Memoirs traces the evolution of relational identity. Cullors begins her narrative in the first person, recalling how astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson taught that humans are made of stardust. She reflects, "I knew when I heard deGrasse Tyson say this that he was speaking the truth because, since childhood, I have witnessed the magic, the stardust that we are, in the lives of the people I come from" (p. 11). Cullors emphasizes that her identity is distinct, rooted specifically "in the lives of the people I come from." This subtly underscores the notion of otherness.

Tamara (2019) states that "in recounting their memories, each narrator provides readers with firsthand accounts of their racial trauma, which stirred the conscience of white society and America" (p. 227). Cullors quickly shifts her perspective: "There was a petition that was drafted and circulated all the way to the White House, and it labeled us as terrorists. We, who in response to the killing of that child, declared that Black Lives Matter" (p. 13). Here, Cullors adopts a collective identity, speaking from and among the marginalized, which aligns with Jerome's (1990) assertion that "African American writers' works are shaped by values and perceptions influenced by their experiences of sexual, racial, and social marginalization" (p. 20). Jerome further explains that these writers are united by common ground, particularly the complex connections between their individual writing 'I' and the 'communitas' they claim as their own. This tension between the writer's 'I' and the 'communitas' to which she belongs shapes their unique identities (p. 31)

Finally, this study contends that the Memoir's fluid narrative blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction, intentionally prompting readers to consider its significance. When Cullors is informed by a law enforcement officer that her mentally ill brother, Monte, was shot with rubber bullets and tasered, she poses a series of rhetorical questions.

"How is it possible that the only response we have for poor people who are Mentally ill is criminalization? How does this align with the notion of a Democratic or free society-to not take care of the least of these? More Mentally ill people in our nation's prisons than in all of our psychiatric Hospitals-combined?!Human beings charged with all manner of terrible- Sounding crimes-terrorism! -like my brother has been. What kind of Society do we live in?" (p.92).

The quoted passage, laden with rhetorical questions, illustrates how the Memoirist effectively employs fictional stylistic devices to convey her message. As previously discussed, and in a motif-driven manner, Patrisse Cullors speaks of people of colour as "human beings charged with all manner of terrible-sounding crimes—terrorism," questioning the nature of a society that persistently labels one group as terrorists. Several scholars have defined rhetorical questions as those that do not expect an answer. Akinkugbe & Philips (2002) argue that a rhetorical question has the illocutionary force of an assertion opposite in polarity to what is apparently asked, while Koshik (2005) suggests that this interrogative form, although difficult to define, is communicatively effective. Abioye (2009) further examines the versatility of rhetorical questions, using Eusani's *A New Year Prayer for Peace* as a corpus, and observes that;

The rhetorical question is used to admonish, make a plea or request, commend

or pay tribute, condemn or vilify as the case may be...capable of giving implicit

Structure (sometimes) to messages, can be used to generate or end discussions,

Provide reasons/answers, constitute opposition or reach reasonable conclusions.(p.8).

Cullors criticizes and condemns a system centered around whiteness that has marginalized people of colour, urging readers to metaphorically engage with the discussion. Casper *et al.* (2016) observe that both readers and scholars frequently discuss concepts of "identification" or use metaphors such as "closeness" and "distance" (Elder, 2006), or the idea of "walking in someone else's shoes" to relate to a narrator or character (p. 43). This perspective implies the presence of multiple selves within a Memoir. Neisser (1994) argues that 'individuals are not solely influenced by past events but that significant remembered events contribute to autobiographical memory, forming part of a life narrative that defines the self and encourages the reader to identify with that self' (p. 28).

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## CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates that the Memoiric techniques explored are crucial in facilitating a shift in understanding racial issues during the Black Lives Matter era. Given that these techniques are rooted in the narrator's personal experiences, interactions, and historical context, the Memoir serves as a vital instrument in addressing and presenting issues of racial prejudice.

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