

Tanya Domi:

Hello. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at the CUNY Graduate Center. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating groundbreaking research, assisting New Yorkers, and informing the world. Our guest today is Britton Williams, who is a drama therapist and licensed creative arts therapist. She works as an adjunct professor in the NYU Drama Therapy Program. She is also an adjunct lecturer at Hunter College and has a private practice. She is a PhD candidate in the social welfare program at the CUNY Graduate Center where she is also a member of the inaugural Mellon Humanities Public Fellows cohort. Britton's work is deeply and urgently concerned with the possibilities that live within radical reimagining and the inextricable connectiveness of healing and liberation. Her dissertation research project, The Black Map Project: A Black People's Epistemology of Healing, lifts the history and trajectory of black creative healing and seeks to reimagine mental healthcare for black people. Welcome to The Thought Project, Britton Williams.

Britton Williams:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Tanya Domi:

You are a very unique person as well. You're bringing an incredible dissertation project here at the Graduate Center. First of all, you're a licensed therapist. You're a drama therapist, and you work as a licensed creative arts therapist. And you're also an adjunct professor in the program in Drama Therapy at NYU, one of the leading drama schools in the United States. How did that all come about and how long have you been doing it?

Britton Williams:

Yeah. So, I went to NYU undergrad for theater, and I remember long ago taking a class in theater and therapy and thinking, "This thing called drama therapy sounds really interesting." But when I graduated, I performed for a while. And at one point I started doing some teaching artist work in schools, in community centers, and I started to feel like I kind of love working with folks using the creative arts more than I love performing on stage. And I knew at some point I need additional training to do the kind of work that I want to do. And I went back, all those years back, to my class as undergrad, and I was like, "Drama therapy." And so low and behold, I applied for the Master's program in drama therapy and I was back at NYU in 2012, or 2010 rather, graduated in 2012. And the rest, as they say, is history. I'm now a drama therapist and have definitely found my path.

Tanya Domi:

That's an amazing story. And it's never too late, as they say, to learn. So, now you're here at the Graduate Center under one of your many hats as a PhD candidate in a social welfare program and you have created and conceptualized The Black Map Project. And because you're a therapist and it's logical that you would be interested in these practices to support black people in their quest to embrace a positive mental health. Obviously we just heard some music from your website, which will be shared with our audience, by the way. And with regard to embracing a positive mental health position within the community, this is carried out against a long backdrop of oppression and racism. We just witnessed it most tragically recently in the Buffalo shooting. how did you come about conceptualizing this? Because it has to have been probably something that you came to understand over many years.

Britton Williams:

Absolutely. I mean, in many ways I've said several times, it feels like this project found me as opposed to me finding it, like this was the thing I was meant to do. And I'm just coming into it. And some of the key turning points for me include and feel very important actually to the story of The Black Map. One in particular, speaking to professor Willie Tolliver. Early in my time in the doctoral program I went to Dr. Tolliver and I just said, "I've got all these ideas and I don't know how to bring them together." I was like, "I'm thinking about the prison system. I'm thinking about education. I'm thinking about mental health and the ways in which black folks have to navigate these systems that are not meant to support them. And I really want to link this together, but it feels so disconnected."

Britton Williams:

And he said to me, "No, no, no, no, no. This is actually not disconnected. It's all interconnected." And he really helped me remember, and I say remember because I think it is a severing, an intentional severing by powers of domination to say, "These are different things that require different attention." And what Willie reminded me in that conversation is that it is white supremacy, it is beliefs of dominance that would have me to not look at what is happening across, blend all of these systems together to say, "What's going on?" And so that was a first turning point. In that conversation, and this is crucial and center to The Black Map Project, he says to me, "Do you know the story of Mary Turner?" And then he tells it to me. He says, "She was eight months pregnant. Her husband had been murdered. She went and she spoke out against his unjust murder and they killed her. They murdered her while she was eight months pregnant." And so that's horrific. And-

Tanya Domi:

Indeed.

Britton Williams:

... he says to me, after telling me this story, he says, "So, what does therapy look like for the descendants of Mary Turner?" That question-

Tanya Domi:

That's powerful.

Britton Williams:

... it's so powerful and it has stuck with me. It is actually one of the questions I take seriously in my dissertation. It is one of my dissertation research questions. And so after that conversation, I really made the determination, my work needs to center black folks, and it needs to be about how, not only we can heal, but how we actually have been healing. We've been healing through all of these incredible practices and it hadn't fully come to me yet how this was going to come together. And then I had an independent study with the chair of my dissertation, Dr. Michelle Fine. And I'm talking to Michelle and I'm just saying, "I really want to, for my own self, get a clear understanding of the arc of black music and creative practices over time, specifically middle passage to present."

Britton Williams:

And I was really doing this just to help myself track, what are the ways in which we have been healing, pushing back against oppressive systems? And I would come and I would present what I was finding to

Michelle. And at some point, Michelle was like, "This is great, and now you need to index it." So, now I start indexing it. And in that I start distilling these themes that are coming through so clearly in the ways in which black folks from, again, middle passage to present, were really utilizing music performance and what I call embodied and enacted practices as a way to not just survive, but also thrive within an anti-black world. And so at some point I realized, "This is not the addendum or the supportive material to my research. This is-

Tanya Domi:

This is it.

Britton Williams:

"This is it." Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Britton Williams:

And that is how The Black Map Project was born. It was that culmination of all of these turning points and realizing, "I have the core here. And my work is not about finding something that doesn't exist, but lifting that which does exist, but has largely, in many ways, been ignored and overlooked."

Tanya Domi:

Or purposively excluded.

Britton Williams:

Absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

I think it's a paradigmatic shift from my personal viewpoint. I'm not a professional in your field, but I get it. I'm somebody that spent many years in therapy out of my oppression as a lesbian and what I've survived in the Army. And so the idea that I would go to a straight therapist didn't make any sense, or if somebody who was allied with me, right?

Britton Williams:

Mm-hmm.

Tanya Domi:

So, I totally get this. I relate to what you're doing. And on top of it, which I think is so beautiful, is that you situate this research at its core to embrace social action within the community and the mental health care practices. And how do you envision that stance? How do you envision that? Because as you have said and pointed out and the idea of integrating approach with black folks in these rooms of therapy, it just doesn't happen. It just hasn't happened. So, how do you envision that? Because I think that's an amazing effort, too.

Britton Williams:

Yeah. Okay. So, I mean it's a multifaceted vision in many ways. And I will just say I'm a person, I still work in some of the systems that we would consider traditional mental healthcare systems. And so certainly I'm not suggesting that black folks can't get something from them. Some folks absolutely do. And also, I've been witness to the ways in which black people and not only black folks but that's the focus of my dissertation so I want to also name that, many folks are harmed within these systems. And it's because, if we trace the history, they have actually been rooted in oppressive systems. And so what my vision is, it's a multifaceted one that considers, what are people already doing within their communities, one. And I'm just going to give a quick example. I went to see a show a couple years ago called What To Send Up When It Goes Down.

Britton Williams:

And it was a theater piece and it was about black people who had been murdered by the police. It was part theater, part ritual. And I sat in this theater as a drama therapist and I thought, "Well, this is actually not so different from what we do when we do therapeutic theater, for example." Everyone in the audience was asked to participate, engage in a process of healing in this theater production. And I felt so moved, shifted by this performance. And I thought, "Well, this is actually something that communities do often and that this is not a practice that is an anomaly." And so what I'm suggesting is that the walls that exist in hospitals and the walls that exist in community treatment centers may not be the only spaces that healing can exist. And I would actually say, not only may not be. I know that they're not.

Britton Williams:

I think about when I've gone to church and I look around and I see people dancing and singing and expressing. That doesn't necessarily look any different to me than running a drama therapy group when we're dancing, singing, and expressing. And as a black person, for me being in black healing spaces, which could look like church, which could look like a street corner and someone just singing and then other people coming in, I started to think, "Well, what would happen if we actually turned to these moments and started to ask how these actually are therapeutic?" And there's this myth that goes around that black people don't do therapy. And I'm actually suggesting, maybe that's actually not the case. Maybe the prescriptive, the Western European notion of therapy-

Tanya Domi:

Therapy-

Britton Williams:

... does not fully encapsulate what's already happening. And so this is why I say, my vision is not that I'm creating something that doesn't exist. It's that I want to zoom into things that do exist.

Tanya Domi:

And identify it.

Britton Williams:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

And pull it out.

Britton Williams:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

And be able to talk about it like we're doing right now.

Britton Williams:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

So, I think for classic white America, the pictures that I always have are there's a shooting, there's a killing, there's a murder, and then there's the press conference. And you see people come together and it's actually very emotional and it's also, you can see the community within the lawyers and the families and the survivors. And you get that image. And then you get the funeral image. Of course, one of the most iconic is the image of Barack Obama singing the spiritual-

Britton Williams:

Amazing Grace. Yeah, yeah.

Tanya Domi:

... Amazing Grace in Charleston. And you see that. You see that church scene, which is classic. And we've seen so much of that, which is so tragic. But for people who are white and not in the black world, I'm not sure they see much beyond that, depending on their personal relationships with others. They may or may not have black friends, for example. So, I think what you're bringing here is something unseen, unseen by white people, which doesn't mean that it isn't legitimate. I don't mean to suggest that. What I'm seeing is it's unseen and maybe it's just unknown as well within the black community. They don't formalize and think, "Oh, we're healing when we're dancing on the corners to the most contemporary songs." I mean, I think one of the most resonant music styles is rap. It went everywhere.

Tanya Domi:

And I happen to be a Balkan regionalist. And when you haven't lived until you've heard people in the Balkans rapping in classic black style about war and oppression. And so it's everywhere. It's in Germany. It's in Eastern Europe. It's all over the place. And I would say that, first of all, I had a young person talk to me about that. She was 14-years-old, survived the war between Bosnia and Serbia. And she was very angry and she connected to rap as an example. So, what's so interesting to me was in... And also one of my favorite places that, when I was living and working in Montenegro, I went to a nightclub where it was all jazz. It was all American jazz, jazz and blues. And we were just listening to that when we began this podcast from your website. So, you actually posit that the dismissal and erasure of black creative healing in the practice, it's a problem in the research that you seek to address.

Britton Williams:

Well, absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

It's also one of the cores-

Britton Williams:

Yeah, absolutely.

Tanya Domi:

... that we're talking about, right?

Britton Williams:

Absolutely. I mean, even for myself as a black drama therapist, I mean, it was rare to see myself reflected in the theorists that create the field. And part of my research looks at, who are the folks that are shaping the field and what are their beliefs? Karl Jung, who is highly regarded in the creative arts therapies, was antisemitic and believed black and brown folks to be racial infection. If we don't connect that kind of ideology to the practices, how might we actually be asserting practices over communities that were never meant to include them?

Britton Williams:

And so for me as a black person, how do I take that information and work with those materials and feel seen and reflected in the work? And so part of what I hope to do, when my students who do look like me say, "Who are the black drama therapists in the field that I can look to for their work?" And that is something that is growing and expanding, but there's more work to be done. Certainly in the mental health field at large, there are tons of black folks doing amazing work. And also, our practices are not being talked about as central and core to mental health, wellness and healing. And for me as a black drama therapist, when I came into the field one of the things that I remember being told early on is that the field is predominantly white clinicians that serves predominantly black and brown people.

Britton Williams:

And I have found that that has been largely true. And so that means that the folks that are receiving care are often not seeing people who look like them on the other side of them. And that also means they're not necessarily receiving treatment that actually is an alignment with the histories, narratives, experiences, holding the range, perhaps, that maybe black folks want to experience. When I go into see my own therapist, I want to know that you actually know what's going on in the world. I want to know that you know something about black people's historical experiences in this country, and I want to feel like I don't have to explain why-

Tanya Domi:

Translate.

Britton Williams:

Yeah. That translation.

Tanya Domi:

Translate. So, this is a good time to ask you, why do black patients run a higher risk of misdiagnosis by mental health clinicians?

Britton Williams:

One of the reasons is because of that erasure from the research. Not only is it predominantly white folks that have done the research, it's predominantly white folks that have been researched. And so you see things like Jonathan Metzl wrote *Protest Psychosis*. Black people to this day are disproportionately labeled with schizophrenia when their white counterparts would receive more affective diagnoses, and this is rooted in-

Tanya Domi:

In other words, classic depression or anxiety.

Britton Williams:

Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

The evil twins. Yeah.

Britton Williams:

Right. Or even like a schizoaffective disorder, right?

Tanya Domi:

Sure. Okay.

Britton Williams:

Right? When you even look at, over time, the ways in which schizophrenia once upon a time was not looked at as a disease of aggression. When it started to be attributed, and Jonathan Metzl in his book really lays this out clearly, when it started to be attributed to black people, especially during the Civil Rights, folks that were speaking out against racial oppression, it was now labeled as this disease of violence and aggression. You also see things like black folks being underdiagnosed with depression because our symptoms may not show up the ways in which they do in white counterparts. And so this is what happens when we don't include people, and black people have largely been left out of the research. And so that's why we find this.

Tanya Domi:

Not surprising. It's kind of like when NIH does all their studies on the body of men and not women's bodies. That's something that comes to me that's parallel. Also, I mean, we were talking about how you imagine this stance, but how do you imagine mental healthcare through the intersections of black culture, music, performance, art, literature? I mean, you gave me some examples of this play that you went to that there was interactive real-time participation by the audience.

Britton Williams:

Yeah. I mean, so it's things like that, 100%. I mean, even through The Black Map Project, my long-term future goals are, I mean, having land, space where black folks can come, where we can eat traditional black cuisine, where we can have healing spaces. I'm thinking about things like nap ministry. The ways in which black folks have not been able to rest, the labor that it takes just to get up and move through the world. And so this is a work that's still in process. It's important to me that my mind is not the only mind that shapes this, what this looks like. I want to say one thing that's so important to The Black Map Project is that I am not saying that The Black Map Project offers the way. I'm saying The Black Map Project is meant to be a way to re-understand, reimagine the potentials and possibilities of mental health care.

Britton Williams:

And I'm kind of disrupting this version of care, being that I am giving you care rather to look like we are caring with each other. So, I'm really talking about community spaces, community practices, and coming back to that type of healing work. I often go back to bell hooks, who reminds us of the importance of centering a love ethic. Love is at the center of this work. I mean, to me, this is my love for black community, my love for people, and the belief that people should be able to be free. Alexis Pauline Gumbs says that, and I quote her literally all the time on this, "Freedom is not a secret. It is a practice." I am looking at the ways in which black folks can practice freedom, in the ways in which we can practice moments of deep healing together.

Tanya Domi:

Well, that's quite beautiful. What's so interesting about your project and your dissertation project is that you have this public website. And it's public-facing, and you're developing this archive in real time and you're sharing it with the public, with people that you don't know, and hoping that people will take whatever they want from it to aid themselves or their communities. What have you learned from that, from just creating that public archive? What information have you learned that you didn't think about? Or are you getting contributions, ideas from people? Are they engaging with you that way?

Britton Williams:

Yes. I mean, so it's multifold. So, one thing I would say it's not a learning, but it's an important reminder, especially when we find ourselves in the time like now where the unrest is so swelled, the histories that I've traced before opening the archive for submissions are a reminder that at every turn there has been creative resistance. And I think that's actually an important creative reminder.

Tanya Domi:

Creative resistance. Great hashtag, by the way.

Britton Williams:

Yes. Hashtag creative resistance, right?

Tanya Domi:

Yes. Yes.

Britton Williams:

That has been present at every turn. You can literally trace the turns of our history and what's going on in the world with the black music practices that I'm tracing. I mean, literally from Negro spirituals on a plantation to the blues, to jazz, to hip hop. We can see what's going on in the world in the backdrop that births these movements. So, that's one thing. But then people are now submitting into the archive. And that, for me, has just been like, "Whoa." Because that was the conversation. This, for me, is the call and response. And the call and response of this work is central because call and response-

Tanya Domi:

Sure. That's right. Yes.

Britton Williams:

... to black living and being is central, right? And so people are writing themselves into the archive, which is important to me. And in that, it's expanding my understanding of when you're asking me, "Well, what does this creative healing look like?" I'm still discovering it. Because people are submitting things that I wouldn't have necessarily thought about. And that is why that conversation, that call and response, was important to me. Because there's a wealth of knowledge that exists out there. Black folks were not a monolith. And so I'm learning the range, basically, of ways. I mean, I've gotten things like why the use of makeup is so important for black folks, as both a way to reveal, but also maybe hide that which needs to be hidden.

Britton Williams:

Quilting as a practice for connection with a mother and a daughter. My hope is that this will not just be something that helps me reimagine what it is I want to contribute to in the field of mental health and healing and care work, but that it's also a resource for black folks, that we can log onto this and see, "What are other black folks doing when things get hard?" In a week like what happened in Buffalo, this could be a site that we go to and see reflections of how we make it through, how we do-

Tanya Domi:

In real time. In real time.

Britton Williams:

In real time.

Tanya Domi:

Yes. That's really profound. It would, I think over time, I think it would be very interesting to see if there's any themes that keep repeating themselves. And you also go further, which makes sense. You explain African black psychology approach recognizes the connections between the individual, the spiritual and the ancestral. I actually did my thesis from the South Africa example of truth and reconciliation, and about the idea of family. Community was really central to that South African experience that did eventually come up with the truth and reconciliation process. And you reference this engagement through what's called Emotional Emancipation Circles. Why don't you tell our audience what that is and how you're leveraging that into this dissertation?

Britton Williams:

Yeah. So, Emotional Emancipation Circles, I actually learned about them through my research. And they were created in collaboration with the Association of Black Psychologists as a way to help combat the internalized myth of black inferiority, to help black folks come together and do healing work within community. So, it's rooted in black practices, meant for black people. I myself have not been able to participate in one, but it's something that, to your point earlier, I didn't even know about them until I started doing this research. And I wonder how many other black folks, for example, might be interested in knowing that something like that exists, that they could maybe participate in. Hip hop therapy is also something that I've learned about in my research. These are practices-

Tanya Domi:

Hip hop therapy.

Britton Williams:

Hip hop therapy. Yeah. And-

Tanya Domi:

That's very cool.

Britton Williams:

Yes. And there's looking at the ways in which these groups and ways of practicing are out there and exist and are providing different ways for us to say, "I'm going to attend to the whole experience of the person," which is very much within an African-

Tanya Domi:

Construct.

Britton Williams:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

Right?

Britton Williams:

That's exactly right.

Tanya Domi:

And so this brings me to the idea of oral traditions, the oral history. How are you tapping the traditional or maybe not oral traditions within the black community to learn more deeply about how people think they're healing? Where do they go, their story sharing, how are you tapping it?

Britton Williams:

By literally doing oral histories. So, my interview structure is oral history interviews. I'm going to meet with 15 people. So far, I've met with four. And they're oral history interviews, oral histories of black creative healing. And it is really-

Tanya Domi:

So, your IRB includes that?

Britton Williams:

That's right. That's right.

Tanya Domi:

Okay, great. Wonderful. I'm sorry. Please continue.

Britton Williams:

It's meant to lift this oral storytelling tradition to say that it is through the stories. I don't construct the interviews. I meet with the folks that I interview. Once I even called Michelle, my Chair, and I was just like, "You know..." Because I'm really trying to situate this within black feminist practice, which also reminds us that conversation is learning, is knowledge co-creation. I was like, "Can I call these oral history dialogues?" So, I'm also playing with calling them oral history dialogues because in the call and response method, in which I'm putting forth in this work, that conversation is part of it. And so when something resonates with me, I don't pretend like it doesn't. Again, I'm bringing into the work a black epistemology that says that there is a relational imperative here, and I'm not ignoring that. I'm actually centering it.

Tanya Domi:

You're embracing it.

Britton Williams:

I'm embracing it. That's right.

Tanya Domi:

You're embracing it. I spoke to Dr. Fine yesterday, because I wanted to get some of her insights, and it's an amazing project, Britton. It's really-

Britton Williams:

Thank you.

Tanya Domi:

... remarkable. What do you think would be the greatest outcome from this project? And first of all, I would think it would be a living, breathing, ongoing project.

Britton Williams:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

It seems like it's probably totally integrated into your life and your work, right?

Britton Williams:

Yes. Yeah.

Tanya Domi:

But what can you think would be, if you were saying in my best dreams of what I've envisioned, what would be some of the things that you would love to see as an outcome?

Britton Williams:

I would love to see the archive swell past my imagination, meaning that it's reaching people that I never would've been able to reach. And that's-

Tanya Domi:

How about the US Library of Congress?

Britton Williams:

Listen, I mean-

Tanya Domi:

Or the Museum of Black History now.

Britton Williams:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

The Smithsonian, right?

Britton Williams:

Well, I mean, even-

Tanya Domi:

Schomburg.

Britton Williams:

When I talk to Willie, Willie often reminds me that in some ways, it works like a museum, how I'm pulling things up. And I do see this living somewhere. It feels living to me. I don't know, because I'm so in it right now, what the best possible outcome could be, but I know that I want it to have impact that is meaningful. I know that I want it to connect people across the waters, so to say. I had a friend who submitted something to the archive and was like, "You know what I just love about this," he said to me, "is that I can put something on and then come back to the archive and see who else has been contributing."

Tanya Domi:

Who else has been contributing.

Britton Williams:

"Who am I in conversation with." When he said that to me, I was just like, "Right. I want that. I want-

Tanya Domi:

Because people want to see it. It's kind of like, okay, an example would be going on Facebook and posting something and then somebody coming back and saying, "Oh, I see this. I agree with this," or-

Britton Williams:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

... "I don't agree with this or, "Here's my ideas about it," right?

Britton Williams:

That's right.

Tanya Domi:

So, it's taken on a life of its own.

Britton Williams:

That's right. I want it to grow in a way that I can't imagine. That would be the best possible outcome, that it will grow in a way that I can't imagine that has a meaningful, supportive impact to the black community. And I use black community here expansively, knowing that there is no one black community.

Tanya Domi:

Of course. Of course. So, you have many hats. I mean, you teach at Hunter. You teach at NYU. You're a full-time therapist and you're a PhD candidate. I can relate to this kind of life, but what's next for you?

Britton Williams:

That's a great question. Hopefully graduation. I'd like to graduate sometime soon. And I think what's next for me is continuing this work. Like you said, this is not dissertation work to me. This is life's work. And so what's next is a deepening of this work and I hope a continued expanding my own understanding of what it is to radically reimagine care.

Tanya Domi:

We wish you every, every possible wonderful thing to come from this.

Britton Williams:

Thank you.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Britton Williams, a PhD candidate in the social welfare doctoral program at the CUNY Graduate Center.

This transcript was exported on Jun 01, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Tanya Domi:

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by audio engineer, Kevin Wolf and CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.