

Confessions of a Black counsellor

Onajite Clarke urges us to consciously attune to race within the therapeutic space

It's been almost a year since I completed my Level 4 Therapeutic Diploma, and truth be told, as a Black woman, I recognise that processing my experiences takes time – more time than some might expect. This is not due to a lack of insight or emotional capacity but because I carry trauma that runs deep – both generational and lived, rooted in the intersections of race, identity and belonging. These intersections aren't theoretical but real, visceral – and they shape every part of how I move through the world.

Let me paint a bit of context. It's rare to hear someone like me openly say they hold a dual identity, but I do. My parents were part of the African diaspora that came to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, full of dreams, strength and a rich cultural heritage. They were born in Nigeria and carried within them the wisdom of their tribal dialects, customs and histories.

That connection to home is something I never got to fully inherit. I was born here. The UK is all I've ever known. I don't speak our native languages. I've only been 'home' once or twice. I love Nigerian food, but I've never worn our traditional dress with regularity. I am British. But I am Nigerian. And that complex duality is where my story begins.

Cast your mind back to last year when Conservative donor Frank Hester made vile comments about Labour MP Diane Abbott, claiming she made him hate all Black women and should be shot.¹ The sheer violence of his words was barely masked, and yet what followed was not collective outrage or a swift and

meaningful response. It was polite distancing, empty denouncements and the subtle brush of a scandal too inconvenient to hold onto. Diane Abbott – who had to stand up 46 times to even attempt to speak on the matter in Parliament – was ignored, silenced in the very chamber where her voice should have held weight. The irony? She was the victim. And yet she became the afterthought.

The social consequences for Hester were mild. His so-called apology was a masterclass in gaslighting, claiming his words had 'nothing to do with race or gender'. Really? Then what, exactly, were they about? And why the rewriting of a story we all witnessed in plain view? What message does it send when such hatred is met with bureaucratic shrugs and reputational spin? For many of us Black women it reinforced what we already knew – that we are rarely seen, heard or defended.

Even Abbott, who has made missteps, was met with a year's suspension for a racially related comment she apologised for almost immediately. The disparity in consequences is stark and telling. It showed how speaking truth to power as a Black woman can cost you everything – your position, your safety, your voice.

That entire episode mirrored my own experience in therapy training. Of the 17 people in my cohort only two of us were Black women. We were encouraged to create 'safe, inclusive spaces' – the type of environment where vulnerability could exist, where healing might be possible. I was hopeful. I truly believed that I could be my full, Black self in this space. But six weeks in, that dream shattered.

Showing up

One of my first red flags came early – comments like, 'You speak really well.' I know this isn't always meant with malice, but in a room of future therapists,

this assumption, this surprise at my eloquence felt loaded. It suggested I was the exception, not the expectation. The veiled compliment of 'articulate' when said to a Black person? That's a microaggression. And it stings.

When I later shared a book review of Viola Davis's *Finding Me*,² the silence from my peers was deafening. No curiosity. No questions. Just a cold, collective withdrawal. I raised this discomfort in our next session, reflecting on the lack of engagement around race and difference. And then the tide turned. One member accused me of speaking over them. They cried while looking at me, shifting the narrative entirely. Suddenly, I was the aggressor.

I was stunned. This weaponising of tears, this manipulation of fragility – this is what Ruby Hamad writes about in *White Tears/Brown Scars: how white feminism betrays women of color*.³ The phenomenon is real. The tears of a white woman became more believable than the truth of a Black woman. I was made to feel dangerous simply for naming my experience. The group distanced itself from me. I was shut out, ignored and slowly vilified for the rest of the course.

Behind closed doors, a few acknowledged they saw what was happening but none would speak up. The risk of being 'othered' was too high. My Blackness, my emotional intelligence, my voice, all became threats. My existence was politicised and pathologised. And I was alone.

And still, I showed up.

I wore my coat all day. I stopped speaking before and after class. I quietly endured, heart heavy, anxiety heightened. I lived in a state of racial burnout, watching the calendar with one eye on the finish line and the other on survival. My therapist became my sanctuary. Through it all, I made it. I passed. But I did not forget.

I remember standing on the final day, looking around the room like a stranger in a place I once had hope for. The pain, the humiliation, the triumph – they all sat quietly with me as I walked away. They didn't break me. But they almost did.

LESSONS

For practitioners in this space – whether training or qualified – here's what I need you to know:

- **This profession is not neutral.** Therapy happens within systems of privilege, race, gender and power. To ignore that is to do harm.
- **Being Black in a therapeutic space is a dual burden.** Not only do we work to heal others – we often must heal from the space itself.
- **You are not entitled to comfort at the cost of someone else's truth.** Emotional fragility should never outweigh the validity of lived experience.
- **Allyship is action, not silence.** If you see harm, name it. To do nothing is to collude.
- **Reflection is not optional.** Be relentlessly curious about your own bias. If someone calls you in, do not centre your shame – centre the impact.
- **Create spaces, don't just fill them.** If the table isn't welcoming, build your own. And when you build it, make sure others are invited with dignity.
- **Resilience is not the goal – liberation is.** Don't praise Black clients or colleagues for surviving racism. Work to dismantle the systems that require our resilience in the first place.
- **Hold nuance.** We can be hurt and healing. We can be both professionals and survivors. Honour the whole human, not just the parts that make you comfortable.
- **Therapy must be political.** To ignore injustice is to reinforce it. Anti-oppressive practice is not a module – it's a responsibility.
- **And finally – listen.** Truly listen. Without deflecting, dismissing or defending. Listening is where change begins.

The saddest part is that they made me question whether this was just me – until I spoke to others like me and realised: this is far from isolated. It is patterned. It is systemic.

This experience shaped me deeply. It made me the practitioner I am today – grounded, aware and unwilling to shrink. I share my story not for sympathy but to spotlight what too often stays hidden. If you're reading this and working in this field – especially if you're white – sit with the discomfort. Let it challenge you. Let it change how you show up.

Because until we are *all* safe to speak, cry, rage and heal, therapy remains incomplete. And so does justice. ●

REFERENCES

1. Seddon P. Frank Hester: Tory donor accused of racist Diane Abbott remarks. [Online.] March 2024. [bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68539981](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-68539981)
2. Davis V. Finding me. 2022; Coronet Books: London
3. Hamad R. White Tears/Brown Scars: how white feminism betrays women of color. 2020; Trapeze: London.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Onajite Clarke MBACP is a neurodivergent counsellor, keynote speaker, mentor, coach and advocate with an academic background in social policy and social work. Her practice focuses on trauma, mental health, relationships, SEN parenting and domestic abuse survivors. She is a mother of three and grandmother of one. thecounsellingcornerspace.com



'The tears of a white woman became more believable than the truth of a Black woman. I was made to feel dangerous simply for naming my experience'