

ARTICLE

“There Is No Winning”

The Racialized Violence of Debt on Health and How Women Resist

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Abstract

A range of health effects are associated with debt burdens from ubiquitous access to expensive credit. These health effects are concerning, especially for women who owe multiple types of higher-cost debt simultaneously and experience significantly higher stress associated with their debt burdens when compared to men. While debt burdens have been shown to contribute to poor mental and physical health, the potential gendered and racialized effects are poorly understood. We conducted interviews between January and April 2021 with twenty-nine racially marginalized women who reported owing debt, and used theoretical concepts of predatory inclusion and intersectionality to understand their experiences. Women held many types of debt, most commonly from student loans, medical bills, and credit cards. Women described debt as a violent, abusive, and inescapable relationship that exacted consequential tolls on their health. Despite these, women found ways to resist the violence of debt, to care for themselves and others, and to experience joy in their daily lives.

Keywords: Women; Debt; Health; Predatory Inclusion; Intersectionality; Racial Capitalism

Introduction

A range of health effects from anxiety and depression to suicide are associated with debt burdens from ubiquitous access to expensive credit (Dunn and Mirzaie, 2016; Fitch et al., 2011; Zurlo et al., 2014). The health effects from debt are concerning, especially since unsecured higher-cost debts from medical expenses (Braga et al., 2017), student loans (Institute for College Access & Success 2019), credit cards (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2019; Rademacher and Melford, 2019; Stavins 2018), and payday loans (Schmall and Wolkowitz, 2016) are rising dramatically (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2019). Women and younger people ages eighteen to forty often have high debt burdens compared to other demographic groups (Batty et al., 2018; Cramer et al., 2019; Whistle 2019), making it important to understand how debt influences their health.

Although debt burdens have been shown to contribute to poor mental and physical health (Sweet et al., 2018a, b), the potential gendered and racialized effects are poorly understood. Women report owing multiple types of higher-cost debts simultaneously (Bhaskaran 2016) and experiencing significantly higher stress associated with their debt

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burdens (Castro Baker 2014; Dunn and Mirzaie, 2012, 2016) when compared to men. Moreover, the debt burdens of Black, Latino/e, and Native peoples tend to be comprised of more expensive debts when compared to those of White people (Deweese and Mottola, 2017), which is attributable to stratified access to affordable credit (Baradaran 2017; Massey et al., 2016) and disproportionate concentrations of higher-cost lenders in racially marginalized communities (Faber 2019). Taken together, the types of debts that borrowers owe and the effects on their mental and physical health may be varied, with potentially serious consequences for all women and especially for Black, Latina, and Native women.

In the current study, we document experiences with debt that racially marginalized women already know and have routinely shared in other contexts (e.g., Bhaskaran 2016; The Debt Collective 2020). We extend prior scholarship by situating these experiences within histories of colonialist and racial capitalist violence and use a novel theoretical approach to understand how health effects from debt are simultaneously gendered and racialized. Through in-depth interviews with Black, Latina, and Native women, we use theoretical concepts from predatory inclusion (Charron-Chénier 2020; Seamster and Charron-Chénier, 2017) and intersectionality (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1991) in order to understand how racially marginalized women experience the effects of debt. Women described debt as a violent, abusive relationship imposed on them by an economic system that creates and subsequently profits from their financial hardships. Despite believing they would never escape their debt, women found ways to resist this violence and to experience joy in their daily living.

Before proceeding, we offer a note on some of the reasons we choose to conceptualize debt as violence. We frame debt as violence in ways that are both consistent with prior scholarship and women's experiences. First, scholars of debt routinely make literal and metaphorical references to violence. For instance, in his thesis on the Civil War and Black Reconstruction, W. E. B. Du Bois (1935) writes, "War is murder, force, anarchy, and debt" (p. 55). Geographer and abolitionist scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2011) writes that, "[D]ebt robs. But debt also disciplines" (p. 260). In writing about the history of markets, anthropologist David Graeber (2011a) explains how debt contributes to "new forms of predatory violence" (p. 112). Latin American feminist scholars Lucí Cavallero and Verónica Gago (2021) write about the clear "link between debt and sexist violence" (p. 6). Second, violence against women is well-established as a public health crisis in the United States (Chrisler and Ferguson, 2006) and debt is increasingly recognized as impacting public health (Agnew et al., 2022; Bassett and Galea, 2020; Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2018; Sweet et al., 2018a). Third, some women we interviewed used this specific word to describe their relationships with debt. For them, debt manifested—and was a manifestation of—violence. One woman said, "I can definitely say it's violence," and another said, "I really do not choose the violence of acknowledging my student [loan debt]." In alignment with common definitions of violence (Anglin 1998; Hamby 2017; Richie 2000), all women talked about their debt as harming or threatening to harm their physical and mental health.

Histories of Debt: Violence and Resistance

Debt plays a central role in histories of settler colonization and capitalist concentrations of power (Du Bois 1935; Graeber 2011b; Hudson 2017; Peebles 2010), particularly through race, gender, and class subjugation (Cavallero and Gago, 2021; Hossein 2016). Debt is a key mechanism of racial capitalism—fueling this economic project that creates profits by stratifying value based on hierarchical social constructions of desirability and worthiness such as race, gender, and class (Robinson 1983). Racial capitalism dictates that poor and working-class Black and non-Black women of color remain in debt or, at the very least, pay higher costs for participating in the economy. Legal scholar Mehrsa Baradaran (2017)

refers to this persistent subjugation as a “quiet” form of racial violence undergirded by the openly violent histories of colonialism and racial capitalism (p. 278).

Contemporary understandings of financial precarity attempt to separate debt from its violent roots by elevating tropes of individual responsibility and citizen consumers (Netemeyer et al., 2018; Xiao and O’Neill, 2016). However, there are many historic examples of debt’s central role in colonial violence and racial capitalism (Baradaran 2017; Cavallero and Gago, 2021; Hossein 2016; Klein 2007), such as France’s violent occupation of Haiti for the purposes of economic exploitation and their extension of that violence vis-à-vis debt. France imposed a steep debt on Haiti after enslaved peoples revolted and declared their independence in 1804 (Hudson 2013, 2017). France refused to recognize the country’s independence until Haiti agreed to compensate France for the loss of its colony, making this odious burden the high cost of freedom from racialized violence. Haiti borrowed a series of loans and paid the debt plus interest between 1825 and 1950 (Craemer 2015). When the United States military occupied Haiti in 1915 to protect its own economic interests in the region, the National City Bank of New York took control of the Banque Nationale de la République d’Haïti (BNRH) and moved Haiti’s financial reserves to the United States (Hudson 2013, 2017). National City Bank continued servicing the country’s payments to France until the debt was paid. In 2004, the Haitian government requested, to no avail, that France repay this wrongly imposed debt estimated at \$36 billion in 2022 dollars (Craemer 2015).

In another example, debt contributed to the Dakota War in Minnesota in 1862—or, more precisely, the absence of debt vis-à-vis White traders’ refusal to lend to Native peoples. The Dakota people were starving as a result of being forced off their ancestral lands and prevented from hunting (Peacock 2013). White traders refused to extend credit for buying food, in part because they did not trust the Dakota to repay their debts (Finkelman 2013). One trader, Andrew Myrick, infamously quipped that they should eat grass or dung instead. In response to being starved and denied credit, the Dakota revolted. Hundreds of Dakota and White settlers were killed. As punishment for the revolt, President Abraham Lincoln ordered thirty-eight Dakota men to be executed (EagleWoman 2005), which has become the largest recorded state-sponsored mass execution in U.S. history.

Women are disproportionately and uniquely impacted by the violence of debt (Appel 2019; Bhaskaran 2016; Jones-Rogers 2019). The literature describes sexual violence against women (Armstrong et al., 2018; Eddins 2020; Jones-Rogers 2019; Liu and Keane, 2021); and, women routinely experience various forms of abuse and exploitation through their responsibilities as caregivers and low-wage laborers (Cavallero and Gago, 2021). During slavery, White enslavers in Haiti and the United States exploited Black women’s fertility and used sexual violence to reproduce their labor force and expand their own wealth (Eddins 2020; Jones-Rogers 2019). Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers (2019) describes how White slave-owning women participated in this violence by using Black women to care for and nurse their babies, respond to the sexual desires of their husbands and sons, and settle family debts. This violence continues to impact women around the globe, with contemporary evidence in the contexts of oil extraction (Appel 2019; Lerner and Meldrum, 1992; Lyall 2017; Lyall and Valdivia, 2019) and micro lending programs (Guérin and Kumar, 2020; Guérin and Venkatasubramanian, 2020) in the Global South and some lenders in China requiring women to take naked photos of themselves to use as collateral for borrowing money (Liu and Keane, 2021).

Black women’s refusals and rebellions against this violence are also well-documented (Eddins 2020; Johnson 2020; Jones-Rogers 2019; Hartman 1997, 2019; Stetson 1982). Black women responded by leveraging power wherever it was available to them in order to secure provisions for daily survival and to struggle toward better circumstances including

freedom (Eddins 2020; Johnson 2020). Crystal Eddins (2020) analyzes archival records to explain how enslaved women in Haiti, in courageous acts of reproductive justice, escaped to protect their childbearing and mothering capabilities. Women and their children who escaped slavery formed communities in the country's mountainous regions where they exercised agency over their lives. Jessica Marie Johnson (2020) collates archival records to trace the histories of Black women of the diaspora during slavery from Senegal through the Caribbean to New Orleans. Black enslaved women practiced intimacy, kinship, and community to protect their bodies and lives, such as strategically offering hospitality to would-be enslavers and joining revolts against slave ships that were crossing the Atlantic. Racially marginalized women have continued to practice resistance into the twentieth century and beyond (Hartman 2019).

This violence of debt continues to impact women around the globe. During the mid- to late-twentieth century in Ecuador, U.S.-based companies like Chevron acquired lucrative contracts to extract oil from the Amazon basin. These contracts enabled Ecuador to meet its debt obligations yet created new conditions for Indigenous women to experience abuse from their partners and foreign employees (Lerner and Meldrum, 1992; Lyall 2017; Lyall and Valdivia, 2019). Hannah Appel (2019) describes similar experiences in the context of debt and oil in Equatorial Guinea. In India, international philanthropic donations established lending programs to encourage low-income women's entrepreneurship; however, lending programs have given rise to new conditions for women to use sex for negotiating their debts (Guérin and Kumar, 2020; Guérin and Venkatasubramanian, 2020; Liu and Keane, 2021).

Debt enables routinized, quotidian forms of violence by permeating everyday activities and subjecting borrowers to unaffordable minimum payments, high interest rates, and lengthy repayment plans. In these ways, debt is a form of racial violence against women (Baradaran 2017); and, in the context of our article, this violence is perpetrated by institutions including banks, lenders, hospitals, utility companies, and educational institutions that force women into debt. Today, women's financial lives are precarious as real income and wages have declined, forcing many people to borrow to afford even daily expenses such as groceries and rent (Mishel et al., 2012; Tach and Greene, 2014). Debt from credit cards, medical expenses, student loans, and payday loans have been rising steadily among women borrowers (Bhaskaran 2016; Castro Baker 2014), with dramatic increases following the Great Recession in 2007 (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2019). While not the openly brutal violence of colonization nor violence that is explicitly sexual in nature, persistent and burgeoning debt still exacts a toll on women (Bhaskaran 2016; Cavallero and Gago, 2021).

A Literature Review on Debt and Health

Women's debt has implications for their mental and physical health. Debt burdens are associated with effects including stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2018; Fitch et al., 2011; Hodson et al., 2014; Sweet et al., 2018b). For example, individuals who borrow short-term, higher-cost loans and accumulate debt from payday lenders have been shown to exhibit poor physical health symptoms like weight gain and cardiovascular risk (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2018) and poor mental health symptoms like stress, anxiety, and depression (Dunn and Mirzaie, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2008; Sweet et al., 2018b). In some cases, individuals have been shown to experience an increased risk of suicide ideation and completion (Lee 2019; Melzer et al., 2011). In a longitudinal study that combined discharge records from hospitals and mental health facilities with the concentrations of payday lenders in patients' zip codes, access to payday loans increased annual suicide attempts by 9% to 12% (Lee 2019).

Borrowers who are racially marginalized often hold higher-cost, lower-quality debt compared to their White counterparts, making any effects on their mental health potentially more varied and severe. For example, forty percent of Black adults borrow payday and other higher-cost, lower-quality loans compared to twenty-one percent of White adults (Deweese and Mottola, 2017) and sixty percent of payday loan borrowers are women (Bhaskaran 2016). Differences in the types of debt held by Black, Latina/e, Native, and White women borrowers suggest that debt could have unique effects on their physical and mental health. The debt portfolios of Black, Latina/e, and Native borrowers typically include higher-cost payday and private student loans that have more punishing interest rates and longer repayment plans (Oliver and Shapiro, 1997; Shapiro 2017; Sullivan et al., 2019). In contrast, White women borrowers more often have debt from mortgages and low-interest student loans that can be converted into wealth as a result of refundable tax credits and low interest rates (Killewald 2013; Seamster 2019; Zaw et al., 2017). Racialized debt portfolios help to explain how, when women reach age sixty and older, the average single, college-educated White woman has accumulated \$384,000 in median wealth compared to only \$11,000 for their Black woman counterpart (Zaw et al., 2017). Moreover, stress and anxiety may materialize differently across the life course, particularly between ages eighteen and forty when debt comes into play as women face transitions related to pursuing education, forming relationships, bearing children, caring for family, and securing employment (Dwyer 2018).

Existing research overlooks race and gender differences in mental and physical health effects associated with debt burdens. When research does take race and gender into account, the theoretical mechanisms, measures, and implications are often insufficient and incomplete. For example, a qualitative study exploring the relationships between borrowers' debt and their physical and emotional health interviewed a sample where a majority were women (64%) and Black (52%); however, researchers failed to discuss race, gender, or racist sexism when interpreting the findings (Sweet et al., 2018a). An analysis of household survey data finds that accumulating debt during the Great Recession was associated with higher self-reported stress for women and Latino/e borrowers than their counterparts; however, the study lacks a theoretical approach to contextualize the findings or propose explanatory mechanisms (Dunn and Mirzaie, 2016). Therefore, our study fills a gap in the literature by exploring relationships between debt and mental and physical health for Black women and other non-Black women of color who borrow comparatively greater amounts of higher-cost, lower-quality debt.

Theoretical Insights from Predatory Inclusion and Intersectionality

We draw together two theoretical approaches for understanding how racially marginalized women end up accumulating debt and experiencing negative consequences to their health. We build on previous scholarship and apply theoretical concepts of predatory inclusion (Charron-Chénier 2020; Seamster and Charron-Chénier, 2017; Taylor 2019) and intersectionality (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1991, 2011) to understand the health consequences of debt.

Predatory inclusion suggests that banks and lenders exact higher financial costs from racially marginalized and other historically oppressed groups for using banking and credit products (Seamster and Charron-Chénier, 2017). When compared to a White man borrower, the price that the finance industry charges a racially marginalized or oppressed borrower for inclusion is a higher interest rate on a lower-quality loan (Charron-Chénier and Seamster, 2020). This often means paying more for debt over a longer period of time. This dynamic erodes Black, Latino/e, Native borrowers' financial resources and prevents them from converting their debt into wealth in the same ways as White borrowers

(Seamster and Charron-Chénier, 2017). People of all racial groups can experience predatory inclusion; though, Louise Seamster and Raphaël Charron-Chénier (2017) describe the concept as uniquely harmful to Black borrowers, which is consistent with scholarship on racial capitalism that relies on a racial hierarchy (Hudson 2017; Robinson 1983) and on segregation that creates captive markets for exploitation (Caskey 1994; Faber 2019).

Intersectionality, a critical theory advanced by Black feminists (Collins 2019; Hall et al., 1983; Taylor 2017) and further elucidated by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), offers an analysis of the complex relationships between power and social identities that are evident in the disproportionately higher debt burdens of racially marginalized women. Patricia Hill Collins (2017) describes how Toni Cade Bambara's 1970 anthology, *The Black Woman*, illustrated Black women's multifaceted, multi-issue lives. The Combahee River Collective furthered this work in *A Black Feminist Statement* (Taylor 2017), advancing the idea that power relations along socially constructed identities such as race, gender, and class are interconnected and mutually constitutive as opposed to exclusive. Collins (2017) explains the implications of these ideas—“Black women's liberation required a comprehensive response to multiple systems of oppression” (p. 116)—and demonstrates the potential of intersectionality as a tool for analyzing power (Collins and Bilge, 2020).

Racial capitalism imposes social relations of power when it constitutes the stratification of economic value along a race, gender, and class hierarchy. A hierarchy invokes notions of fixed, discrete, and ordered classifications, which is in possible tension with the definition of intersectionality that considers the interconnectedness of identities. Scholars of intersectionality (Bilge 2013, 2015; Tomlinson 2013) caution against the theory's “Whitening,” which flattens racially marginalized women's experiences into discrete and linear or, in the case of racial capitalism, hierarchical construction that “neutralize[s] the political potential” of this analytic tool (Bilge 2013, p. 405). We aim for an application of intersectionality that is inherently political and recognizes how systems of power and oppression including racial capitalism respond to racially marginalized women based on their multiple interconnected social identities in the context of debt. We suggest that racially marginalized women experience consequences to their health vis-à-vis predatory inclusion into the violence of debt.

Methods

This study developed as part of a collaboration between community leaders and researchers, and explored how Black, Latina/e, and Native women experienced debt and took place during the COVID-19 Pandemic Recession. To approach this exploration, we conducted semi-structured interviews over the phone with Black women and non-Black women of color to learn how they described their debt and any subsequent effects, and to document the narratives they used for making sense of their experiences.

Sampling and Recruitment

Following approval from The University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB), Black, Latina/e, Native and other women of color were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling (Miles et al., 2014). In partnership with Mothering Justice, a local non-profit organization that engages in policy advocacy related to women's empowerment, we recruited members of their coalition to participate in interviews. We aimed to recruit participants and conduct interviews until we achieved saturation in women's narratives, or until we no longer identified new themes in the interviews (Miles et al., 2014). Participants were offered a \$100 gift card mailed to their home address as compensation for participation in interviews, which generally lasted sixty

minutes. To ensure that participants were aware of their rights, we asked all women to verbally affirm their consent before beginning interviews.

To be eligible for an interview, participants had to be living in Southeast Michigan, identify as a Black, Latina/e, and/or Native woman which included trans women, and to owe some kind of debt. In other words, we were not interested in comparative approaches of women with and without debt, or of debt holdings across racialized groups of women. Our purposive sampling criteria sought to recruit racially marginalized women who held debt in order to understand their experiences in the contexts of predatory inclusion and intersectional relationships to power. We did not restrict eligibility by types of debt, which allowed us to gather perspectives from women who could have different vantage points based on their debt obligations. While some types of debt may be more extractive and therefore potentially more harmful than others for racially marginalized women’s health, this was something we planned to explore during interviews.

We completed twenty-nine interviews between January and April 2021. Forty-seven percent of women identified as Black, 33% identified as Native or Indigenous, 20% identified as Latina, and 17% identified as biracial including Black and Native, Black and White, Native and Latina, and Native and White. Racially marginalized women were overrepresented in our sample when compared to the population overall in the Detroit metropolitan region, which was intentional based on our sampling criteria. Taking together both the city of Detroit and surrounding suburbs, 21% percent of people identify as Black, less than 1% identify as Native or Indigenous, and 5% identify as Latino/e (Census Reporter 2022). In our sample, 50% of women were single and 50% were partnered or married. Thirty percent had children. Women held debt that spanned from obligations to friends and family to student loans, medical and healthcare needs, taxes, and mortgages. A majority held student loan debt and credit card debt—90% and 80%, respectively. Debts from auto lending (43%), medical care (40%), and utilities (30%) were also common. On average, women reported holding at least three separate types of debt. Additional sample characteristics are available in [Tables 1 and 2](#).

In-Depth Interviews and Data Analysis

During in-depth interviews, we asked women open-ended questions about their experiences with debt including an invitation to start when or where the story of their debt began. We encouraged women to initiate the timeline of their debt in a way that resonated with their experiences. This allowed women to place themselves and their debt within a variety of time horizons, which ranged from decades to centuries in the past. We encouraged women to describe their experiences with debt in their own words and then asked follow-up questions, such as what borrowing money meant at the time and what the debt meant now. We also asked women about what the pandemic has meant for their debt, revealing ways that the pandemic forced them to use debt for survival or to reconsider their priorities.

After transcribing the audio recordings of interviews, we replaced women’s names and other identifying information with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. We coded interview transcripts deductively using Atlas.ti. Following the guidance of Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), the team worked collaboratively using thematic analysis to identify and report patterns in the data. Strengths of thematic analysis include the ability to explore patterns in the data and their underlying ideas and ideologies (Braun and Clarke, 2006), making this approach ideal for understanding the often-hidden power and oppressive dynamics of debt. After familiarizing ourselves with the transcripts, we analyzed all lines and quotes to examine the latent, underlying ideas that shaped the content of the data across the interviews. This enabled us to explore women’s narratives

Table 1. Sample Descriptives ($N = 29$)

Pseudonyms	Age	Race	Relation-ship Status	Employment	Student	Child	Student Loan Debt	Credit Card Debt	Auto Debt	Mortgage Debt	Medical Debt	Utility Debt	Tax Debt	Debt to Friend Family	Total # Debts
Jalia	28	Black	Single	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	3
Asia	28	Black	Single	Full-time outside home	Yes	0	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	3
Clarissa	30	Middle Eastern	Single	Full-time at home	No	0	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	5
Krystal	29	Black	Partner	Part-time outside home	No	0	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	1
Mallory	31	Black	Single	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	3
Ariel	31	Bi-racial (B/W)	Married	Full-time at home	No	2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	5
Brenda	29	Latina	Partner	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	2
Jacqueline	27	Black	Partner	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	2
Amira	28	Black	Single	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5
lashcia	23	Native	Partner	Full-time outside home	No	1	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	3
Chanel	24	Black	Single	Student	Yes	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	5
Desiree	24	Black	Single	Student	Yes	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	4
Chanel	28	Black	Single	Full-time outside home	Yes	0	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	5
Valentina	29	Black		Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	2
Adriana	34	Black	Single	Full-time at home	No	1	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	4
Carmen	26	Black	Single	Self-employed	No	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	3
Hailey	33	Latina	Married	Full-time outside home	No	0.5	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	1

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Pseudonyms	Age	Race	Relation-ship Status	Employment	Student	Child	Student Loan Debt	Credit Card Debt	Auto Debt	Mortgage Debt	Medical Debt	Utility Debt	Tax Debt	Debt to Friend Family	Total # Debts
Raegan	40	Latina	Married	Laid off	No	3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	5
Isabella	38	Native	Single	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	2
Julia	27	Latina	Single	Student	Yes	0	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	3
Ebony	39	Native	Divorced	Full-time outside home	No	1	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	6
Makayla	36	Native	Single	Laid off	No	1	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	6
Shaunise	38	Native	Partner	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	2
Nia	34	Native	Married	Part-time outside home	Yes	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	2
Michelle	34	Bi-racial (N/L)	Partner	Self-employed	No	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	4
Janae	31	Bi-racial (N/B)	Single	Full-time outside home	No	0	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	3
Sarah	40	Bi-racial (N/B)	Single	Laid off	No	0	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	3
Mya	40	Latina	Divorced	Full-time outside home	No	2	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	4
Leslie	32	Bi-racial (N/W)	Partner	Full-time outside home	No	1	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	4

Notes. Abbreviations for self-reported bi-racial identities include: B/W = Black/White; N/B = Native/Black; N/L = Native/Latina; N/W = Native/White

Table 2. Sample Descriptives (*N* = 29)

	% or Mean
Black	47%
Latina	20%
Native	33%
Bi-Racial ^a	17%
Average Age in Years	31
Single	50%
Married or Partnered	50%
Children	30%
Employment	
Full-Time Outside Home	55%
Part-Time Outside Home	7%
Full-Time At Home	10%
Self-Employed	7%
Laid Off	10%
Full-Time Student	10%
Type of Debt Obligations ^b	
Student Loan Debt	90%
Credit Card Debt	80%
Auto Debt	43%
Medical Care Debt	40%
Utility Debt	30%
Tax Debt	17%
Debt to Family or Friends	28%
Average Number of Debts Held	3

Notes. ^a Biracial included Black and Native, Black and White, Native and Latina, and Native and White. ^b Percentages are interpreted based on women that affirmed holding this type of debt, e.g., 90% of women held student loan debt.

for concepts of power, oppression, and refusal consistent with theories of predatory inclusion and intersectionality.

We approached our thematic analysis by coding in three levels or phases. In the first level, and in partnership with Mothering Justice, we developed an initial set of codes that reflected expected themes and aligned with our theoretical approaches of predatory inclusion and intersectionality, including codes to capture how women experienced debt and any changes that occurred during the initial weeks of the pandemic. We identified codes such as “emotional toll,” “downward spiral,” “with me until I die,” and “health.” The team applied the initial deductive codes on the same subset of interviews to compare and contrast coding practices. The team then divided the remaining interviews in order to code the full dataset, noting and incorporating unexpected ideas as they emerged. In the second level, our codes homed in on various forms of violence and resistance such as “survival,” “steals time,” “deck is stacked,” “can’t pay, won’t pay” and “joy.” In our third level, we explored how our codes fit within theoretical frameworks of predatory inclusion and intersectionality. This helped us to develop the core themes presented in the findings.

Findings

We developed the theme of violence based on women’s narratives that connected their debt to colonialism and racial capitalism in specific and nuanced ways. This theme was

exemplified in the context of discussing their mental and physical health, and subthemes included using debt for survival, experiencing a deck stacked against them, and having their time stolen. We also developed the theme of resistance as women discussed refusals and rebellions against the violence of their debt.

Violence

When asked to describe their experiences, many women talked about debt as a violent, abusive relationship that exacted a toll on their health. For example, Jacqueline, a Black woman with student loan and credit card debt, described it this way, "Debt feels paralyzing. It feels like you will die with debt, and some of us probably will." This sentiment was pervasive in our interviews. Many of the women we talked with expected to remain in this violent relationship for their entire lives and to die owing money. Adriana, a Black woman who held multiple types of debt, spoke explicitly of the violence,

I would—I can definitely say it's violence. It's, like, almost like abuse. You know, violence, abuse...kinda synonymous depending how you talk about it because it's just hanging over your head all the time.

Women described several ways that this violence manifested, including needing to borrow money to survive in a system of racial capitalism that stacked the deck against them and stole their time. Women spoke of their health as being intertwined with the violence of debt.

Debt is Required for Survival

Many women described their violent relationship with debt beginning when they took out student loans to pay for college. Women were following the expected, exalted path of education, "You told me to go to school. I did what y'all told me to do since 1998," said Jalia, referring to the societal pressure to pursue higher education at all costs (Cottom 2017). The women in our sample were highly educated on average, with many holding bachelor's and master's degrees or having pursued degrees in higher education at some point. Carmen said, "So...the story of debt began in my life...with student loans" and Asia said, "[F]or me, it probably would've started in college...I got a full tuition scholarship. And I had to take out loans to cover room and board or what have you." Those who went on to graduate school, including some who had graduated with manageable debt from their bachelor's degrees, recognized this attempt at upward economic mobility as a trap. In graduate school, tuition was more expensive, scholarships were limited, and the extensive time commitment crowded out possibilities for full- or part-time work. Women used debt to afford daily living while paying for their education. Raegan put it this way, "Grad school...is not cheap. And it takes a while to get...rid of the debt."

Racially marginalized women do not live single-issue lives (Collins and Bilge, 2020), and this reality is reflected in the range of debt beyond student loans that women used to pursue their education. This means that credit card debt can disguise medical- and education-related expenses, for instance. Women used debt—sometimes student loans, other times credit cards—to pay bills, buy groceries, care for family members, and repair their vehicles and homes. As Makayla said, "I actually used...a student loan, a private student loan, to buy [my daughter] baby stuff...crib, stroller, car seat...all of that...washer, dryer, all of these things." Chanel affirmed this experience saying, "I don't wanna say 'voluntary' because I needed [those loans] to survive."

The notion of using debt to survive was literal for many women. For example, Adriana took a leave of absence from her undergraduate program after giving birth to a child with

special needs. Her son needed a significant amount of medical care. Having recently received her financial aid award, Adriana paid for her son's medical care with student loans and credit cards. She used debt to ensure her and her child's survival, which placed an immense strain on her own well-being. While her son's medical needs were especially acute at birth, he requires ongoing care and Adriana continues to use debt to pay for his life-giving treatments. Like many women, Adriana thought she would never be able to repay her debt. She expected to die owing money. Adriana's experience exemplifies the interconnectedness of debt and health in the context of survival:

I've had doctor bills in the past that were overwhelming, because—just having a kid who has special needs, it's already difficult to be, like, a single mom by yourself raising a kid. But then, if you have a kid who has special needs, you are spending so much time at the hospital. And so, all those times that I just ended up sitting in the hospital with him, it's really—took a dent to my income. Because as I'm sitting at the hospital, I'm not at home to eat at home. I'm using gas because...I'm driving back and forth...I always spent the night, but I'd, like, leave and go get more clothes...And then, I would still have to work...I would go to work during the day and come back, and...I never worked close to the hospital...I would just blow through my time off...[I spent] like, months in the hospital...So, that would prevent me from being able to, like, pay all my bills.

Jalia also described the interconnectedness of debt and health in the context of survival. At the time of our interview, Jalia had student loan and credit card debt and owed a few hundred dollars to her parents. She had worked extremely hard to finish her bachelor's degree with minimal debt. She held down multiple jobs including work as a residential advisor in a student dormitory, all while enrolled in eighteen credits of coursework. The work and stress took a toll on her health, but it appeared to pay off since she graduated in excellent standing with manageable debt, got a good job, and started taking care of herself.

I was anxious all that time because, um, on top of trying to make sure I'm working, I wanted to make sure I was doing well at work...on top of well at school. And I was also the president of two student organizations. So I was just living very unhealthy. Drinking sixty-four ounces of iced coffee at once. Sleeping in the library for an hour, so I could wake up—wake up...staying up all night, sleeping from maybe 5:30am to 6:30am. Getting a cup of coffee made, taking the first bus back...to my home from... campus, just to come back to campus and either work or get more work done at the library. So it was just—I try not to use this language, but it was actually insane. Like, as I think about that now, I'm like, this is completely unsustainable for a human, for any—for a machine, even. Machines even need breaks, too. They shut down...[B]ut I was still okay. I could still manage everything. So between, I would say, the end of 2016 until right before graduate school in 2018, financially, I was very stable. My health was stabilized because I was able to take care of myself. I changed my diet. I had a trainer.

After graduation, Jalia worked in the corporate world earning an annual salary of about \$50,000, which, combined with modest living, enabled her to pay off her student loans. Things changed when Jalia enrolled in graduate school. "I applied in March and [...] found out I got in in May. That's not a whole [lot of] time to change your life around to start saving for school...And I did have money saved but not nearly enough to take care of myself to not have to work during graduate school." The three scholarships she was awarded weren't enough to pay for her tuition, and she still needed to pay for living expenses. Jalia realized

she couldn't push herself as hard as she once did and needed to borrow significantly to finish her degree program. Four years after receiving her degree, Jalia had accrued \$90,000 in student loan debt including the compounding interest. Not only did Jalia describe herself as worse off financially, but she now deals with significant ongoing health issues including low red blood cell counts and uterine fibroids.

I had about three and a half years of my life that were very stable. It was very shocking to me and to my system to go from being able to take really good care of myself to go back into the mode that I had to be in to survive in undergrad. And so, because of trying to put that same stress on my mind and body that I did at nineteen to twenty-one, at [age] twenty-six, my body did not handle that well. So I ended up in the [emergency room]. My...red blood cell count [was] really, really low...So I had to get a blood transfusion, two bags of somebody else's blood, which now are presenting new health issues...I had to get a second blood transfusion in 2020, because...there are—as I'm sure you know—residual impacts to stress and trauma. So I ended up back in the [emergency room] with red blood count levels even lower. And honestly, at that point, I was just angry because I said this does not have to be this way...It doesn't make sense to me...I was just like, we already know Black women are receiving degrees at higher levels but also bear the burden of the most educational debt...Right now...I'm trapped in a cycle that is set up for me to fail.

The Deck Is Stacked

Part of what made debt so violent in women's lives was the deceptive ease of borrowing to survive that subsequently set them up for failure, as Jalia described above consistent with theoretical concepts of predatory inclusion. Lenders made debt readily available to women during vulnerable yet everyday moments: giving birth, getting in a car accident, being sexually assaulted, losing a job, receiving a cancer diagnosis, pursuing their dreams, and enrolling and remaining in college in attempts to experience upward economic mobility. Many women felt, rightly so, that the deck was stacked against them. Winning—whatever that meant to an individual woman—was impossible no matter how hard they tried. As Mya put it, "It's America. Everybody's trying to make a buck, and if they can get you, that's exactly what they're gonna do." Women often traced their own debt to histories of colonialism and racial capitalism, recognizing that they were dealing with systems that had been put into place centuries ago with unique implications for racially marginalized women. For instance, Ebony immediately tied her debt to land dispossession and Native genocide enacted by White colonial settlers.

1492. That's...when my debt started. 1492, that was when the nation that is literally the territory of my people started accumulating debt and extracting resources from me long—500 years before I ever got here. That's how far back my debt is...There is no winning, I guess. If I had to give anyone advice, and especially when it came to women in debt, like, honey, there is no winning because you will do everything right, and then bam, you know, a tree will fall on your house or on your new car or, you know, something like that. Or you'll get everything and then you're dead, and then it didn't matter nowhere anyway because you didn't even get to enjoy it. Didn't even know it was there because you were already gone.

Women also described racial capitalism as the economic system that stacked the deck and made it impossible to stay afloat let alone get ahead. For Asia, it felt manageable to

repay her credit card debt and auto loan; however, like many other women, the student loan debt she acquired during college felt like a trap.

[My student loans] were only about, what, \$70,000 at the time. So it's not like I had massive, massive amounts of debt, because I know people who are in \$100,000 now. Yeah, so I was just shocked that they really thought that this person who's only twenty-four years old could afford [a] \$700 [payment each month].

Now that Asia was pursuing a doctoral degree, she could defer repayment on the loans she had borrowed for her undergraduate education. However, in hindsight, she realized that requiring students to take on burdensome debt was a political and economic choice that penalized young people and especially young racially marginalized women for “doing everything right.”

We fund so many other entities and spend trillions of dollars there...I feel as though we definitely live in a capitalist society and that, uh, they are trying to make money off of students' vulnerability and lack of knowledge or lack of funds.

Many women described working tremendously hard yet rarely experiencing their effort pay off, at least in ways that matched their effort. Julia was pursuing a graduate degree at the time of our interview. She had emigrated with her family from Mexico to the United States when she was five years old. When it came time to enroll in college, Julia decided to enroll in community college because she could pay the comparatively lower tuition out-of-pocket by herself. Having already observed her older brother apply to colleges, Julia knew getting a degree would be expensive. As an undocumented student, she would be expected to pay out-of-state tuition and wouldn't qualify for most financial aid. This legal discrimination against undocumented students was part of how the deck was stacked against her.

When [my brother] was applying...the laws around in-state tuition, and just general attitudes towards immigrants living in the U.S. weren't as bad as they [were] when it was...my turn...[W]hen you are not a U.S. citizen, and you want to pursue a college education, you have to pay out-of-state tuition, which is three to four times the normal amount of tuition. And if you're...a citizen, that's usually fine because you qualify for scholarships and student pay that'll help cover that. But when you're not a U.S. citizen, you don't qualify for those things. So, I had to take out private student loans that had like much higher interest rates...than a university student loan or Federal student loans. So, I would say that when I started at...community college,...I was able to afford to pay out-of-pocket for myself. [B]ut I would say my story of debt really started when that kind of spread to a \$40,000 institution.

During her undergraduate years, Julia worked three different jobs in addition to going to school. She eventually transferred to a four-year university to finish her degree, which is a typical path to graduating with a bachelor's degree for community college students. Julia worked, saved money, and paid off her \$50,000 student loans, even taking a year-and-a-half off from school to work and save money. After excelling in school, she was hired into a research lab and received encouragement to pursue a graduate degree. To do so, Julia paid out-of-state tuition and didn't qualify for most financial aid:

I still have student loans. I'm nowhere near done because the interest is ridiculously high...[S]ometimes as hard as you might work, it's still, unfortunately, not enough.

You might really be working as hard as you can, and still [fall] short. You might be working three to five jobs, and still not be able to make it. And that [says] more about capitalism and our, the state of our economy than it does about the person.

Women, though not everyone, attributed intentionality to the myriad ways the deck was stacked. In other words, many women believed that working hard without experiencing the rewards of their labor was a result of purposeful design. The deck was designed to be stacked, with multiple institutions working against them simultaneously. When Michelle enrolled in college at age eighteen, she was concurrently signed up for a bank account with a local credit union. However, Michelle also lost her Medicaid coverage upon turning age eighteen. This combination of events proved devastating when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Her bank helped her open a credit card in order to pay her medical expenses: "I charged all my medical bills to that. And it had an astronomical [annual percentage rate] that—and I just could never get out from under it. And that really—that's what tanked me." Michelle tried but couldn't find a way to take care of her health that didn't involve more debt; and, more debt contributed to her worsened health.

I was just drowning...I didn't have health insurance, because I lost my Medicaid. And, at that time, I was dating a guy, and he turned to me and said like, 'Well, let's get married, and you could get on my health insurance so you can get your treatment,' because I was paying all this stuff. I was like, 'Okay, that sounds great, yeah, okay. Let's get married. That sounds awesome.' And then he died. And that really messed...me up. And I just—like, at that point, I had lost him. I had moved back at home. I had a toxic relationship with my mom, but I was living with her at the time because it was saving me money. And I just was drowning. And it was, like, I had so much debt. And I was going through the health stuff, and I was going through the emotional stuff of losing my partner.

For women like Michelle, it seemed like things became worse the more they struggled to keep from drowning. This epitomized the violence and racist sexism of a stacked deck—keeping racially marginalized women in a perpetual state of drowning and near death. Michelle continued:

You're a victim of capitalism...But I also can't blame anybody because they go all out here just trying to survive. And this is what—the system is not broken. The system is doing exactly what it's designed to do, which is to keep people in survival mode so that they can't reach that mass hierarchy of be—they can't access that higher level of critical thinking that would make them wake up and go, 'Wow, this system is totally fucked.'

Debt Steals Time

Another way that debt played a violent role in the lives of racially marginalized women was by stealing their time. Stealing time can be seen as debt's "quiet" form of racial violence (Baradaran 2017, p. 278). Unlike the money that women borrowed, time could never be returned to them. Akin to how racial and gendered microaggressions are described as 1000 paper cuts (Cogburn et al., 2018; Lewis and Neville, 2015), the individual minutes and hours that debt steals are not necessarily immediately observable, nor are the concomitant health implications. Yet the cumulative effects are substantial. Women spent time checking their loan balances, talking on the phone with bill collectors, and calling student loan

officers to negotiate down their monthly payments. They spent sleepless nights worrying about their debt and scheduled therapy sessions to manage debt-related anxiety and panic attacks. As Brenda described,

[M]y avoidance of the impact debt would have on me once I was done with school, it was really something, like, I just kind of—it was in the background always looming. And when I thought about it too much, it was just very anxiety-provoking...So even, you know, I had meltdowns and panic attacks.

For some, the pandemic worsened debt-related stress and anxiety, which exacted even more time. Some interviewees recognized that this dynamic was amplified for racially marginalized women, given the multiple forces of oppression that were working against them (Taylor 2017). As Sarah described, “It’s a long, arduous process, and in the midst of a pandemic, when a lot of minority people and women are literally panicking—like, people are losing their minds.” Jacqueline confirmed these worsening feelings, saying, “We live in a very, very, very capitalistic world that, you know, for Black women, Black people, you know, we already started with a damn deficit. So climbing out of that hole does feel impossible sometimes.”

Seemingly small and isolated inconveniences could end up taking women’s time over months and years. Janae, who had outstanding debt from student loans and utility bills, described missing some of her loan payments after her purse was stolen. Not only did the theft require Janae to complete time-intensive tasks of replacing her government issued identification and debit and credit cards; she also received financial penalties for missing loan payments which added to her debt. The automatic bill payments linked to one of her debit cards had been halted when her card was canceled in order to protect against fraud. Then, a separate theft at her workplace resulted in her identity being stolen. This created additional hassles, including fraudulent activities showing up on her credit report and having a difficult time filing her taxes. Janae has spent considerable time dealing with these issues.

At one of my jobs, my identity was actually stolen. Like, our tax returns were removed from the office building where I worked. [S]o...I reported my information to the IRS to, like, let them know...[B]ut...then I requested those PIN things because now when I file my taxes, I want to make sure that it’s coming from me. And I actually did end up with, like, someone trying to file their taxes as me based on those returns that were stolen from...the office where I used to work...So it even has made it challenging because to this day I still have to use a PIN, like a special number when I file my taxes. And it always slows the whole process down, so I still have not received any sort of stimulus check, because [the IRS] could not verify my PIN.

Some women readily saw the cumulative effects of how debt sapped their time. Women were observing their peers achieve milestones like starting a family or buying a home, which were things they desired for themselves but felt behind in achieving as a result of their debt. Women expected to have reached certain milestones and felt a loss when this didn’t happen. Nia described it this way,

So being thirty-four, there’s a lot of people that I know who are set in their careers and stuff. I would really love to own a house. To have my own place. To have my own yard. I’ve been thinking about that for a long time. If I didn’t have debt, I think that’s the first investment I would make.

As aforementioned, many women expected debt to be a part of their lives forever. In this way, debt enacted violence by remaining a perpetual part of their lives, like an abuser from whom they could never escape. Women did not want to have to deal with debt or the associated stress, anxiety, and other health consequences forever; though, some women didn't have many alternatives. In comparing herself with her aging relatives, Michelle described the toll she expected debt and financial precarity to exact on her health over time,

When I get overwhelmed, I try to think of it like that, like, what am I gonna do for future [Michelle]? So, if I look at, like, my mom and my aunt, you know, who...don't have any, like, savings, they have no retirement. And, like, now their bodies are giving out, and they can't work. And I'm like, 'I don't want that to be me.' So I hate this system that I'm in, but, like, what can I do, and what difference can I make to kind of like make it not so oppressive and not so hard. I'm not trying to be a millionaire. I just would like not—I would like for a \$300 car repair to not suck my whole life.

Resistance

Women also practiced resistance and refusal in the context of violent debt. Like racially marginalized women's refusals and rebellions during colonialist violence and slavery (Eddins 2020; Jones-Rogers 2019), women exerted their power wherever it was available in order to realize better circumstances. For example, Jacqueline put it this way, "I have told myself, it's okay to live. It's okay to breath and it's okay to just be." Women like Mallory talked actively of refusing the violence of their debt, trying to prevent it from taking over their lives,

I don't choose...I really do not choose the violence of acknowledging my student loans. I just choose to live my life and make sure I pay my bills and leave it be...I can choose just constantly worrying about it, constantly thinking about it, but that's not changing it...I am never going to wake up tomorrow with...the thousands of dollars to pay it off in full.

Women's resistance manifested in several ways, including refusing to repay their debt or participate in the systems that were oppressing them. They also described taking control of their financial lives where they could and living life with joy. In many ways, women's refusals served to resist oppression while protecting their health against weathering so much debt (Warren-Findlow 2006).

Refusals and Can't Pay, Won't Pay

Some women's resistance took the form of refusing to repay their debt, echoing the campaign 'Can't Pay, Won't Pay,' of The Debt Collective (2020) that organizes repayment strikes against unjust debt. This refusal makes sense when viewing debt as an extension of the violence from colonialism and racial capitalism. Refusing to repay debt is one way women in impossible situations could exert agency and power, as described by Michelle. She had joined the military to receive health care and tuition benefits along with a steady paycheck; however, she was discharged after being sexually assaulted. Michelle ended up in worse health and with even more debt.

I'm, like, on a debt strike, can't pay, won't pay...It's immoral, and I'm not doing it. You know, and I don't understand, honestly, why I wasn't getting my [tuition waiver as an

enrolled tribal member] in the first place. You know? And I'm also—like, 'Where's my Post-9/11 GI Bill? Oh, wait, because I got sexually assaulted [and left the military], then I don't get my GI Bill? Well, no, I'm definitely not paying student loans. You can get it from me when I'm dead.

With limited options after leaving the military and perhaps out of desperation, Michelle took a unique approach to improving her financial situation. She stopped making her credit card payments and eventually had most of her debt discharged. Michelle took advantage of legislative changes from the 2009 Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure (CARD) Act (Jambulapati and Stavins, 2014) and wrote letters to credit card companies, insisting that they suspend collections. Then, Michelle stopped using credit altogether and waited for derogatory activities on her credit record to be erased. Her efforts worked.

I don't know where I heard about it, but it was, like, I...decided I was gonna try...the 'seven years' thing. I basically read somewhere that, like, your credit resets every seven years. But the important thing is just to not touch it because, every time you touch it, you reset the timer...I try to still operate, like, on cash basis.

Women's refusal to repay debt seemed to follow desperation. For some women, their limited options for surviving a violent, abusive relationship called for this reasonable response. In explaining her choice to stop paying student loan debt, Ebony talked about getting divorced and then losing custody of her child due to her poverty, experiencing racism at her workplace, and dealing with a debilitating medical issue. With "zero hope for the future," Ebony had nothing to lose.

I have a massive infection in my upper jaw that requires me to have, like, half of my jaw replaced, and then, of course, the teeth that will have to be replaced that will be missing because of that missing jaw. So, I'm—if I'm not mistaken, the total bill, [with] insurance, will probably run me about \$25,000...[S]o I'm at this really interesting place where I have, like, zero hope for the future...[A]s long as...the government can't come and...physically...break my knees until I give them a couple dollars, I think I'm gonna be alright. [B]ut I literally have nothing. I plan on having nothing, and it's a really fantastic place of freedom, right, instead of worrying about...what will happen to me when I'm eighty-eight years old? Like, statistically speaking, I'm not gonna live to be eighty-eight years old. You know what I mean? Native Americans don't tend to live that long, with or without all of the fantastic health interventions.

Women sought to reclaim their time by refusing to repay their debt. Women frequently discussed debt as something that permeated their lives, like Mallory, who said, "It takes over your mind." Therefore, refusing repayment or at least resisting the constant worrying about debt and finances prevented debt from retaining its full power. Chanel owed well over \$100,000 in student loan, credit card, medical, and utility debt, which she accumulated while pursuing her law degree. While she expected to pay off her debt eventually, Chanel's refusal was in the pace of her repayment,

I wanna be able to enjoy the fruits of my labor. And because our time is limited, we don't know how long we're gonna have to do that. So imagine me penny-pinching for ten years to pay off debt, and then in the eleventh year I'm no longer here. Like, what was the point?

Taking Control, Hustling

Women resisted their debt by taking control of their finances, including educating themselves about money and developing side hustles. In these ways, women sought to empower themselves for confronting violent systems of debt. As Hailey put it, "I woke up, and I'm like, 'No, I [want to] be a debt-free person.' And that's what I've been working on since then." For example, Brenda grew up in a family that experienced frequent evictions. Her father used her identity to open lines of credit, which she only discovered when trying to enroll in college and apply for financial aid. A relative co-signed on her loans so that she could pay for college; however, she worried about her father, who continued to struggle financially while she was in school. "I think especially once I was done with school, like, how terrified I was of debt, it was very negatively impacting up until more recently when I finally took control over it." Brenda didn't want the constant worry and uncertainty that she experienced as a child to be part of her adulthood. Just thinking about her debt would trigger a panic attack; so, Brenda began taking control.

[E]ven as scared as I was to figure out how can I fix this, I decided to break that cycle that, you know, I saw so much growing up. That I can take control of this. I can be in control of my finances, and I can figure out how I can make this work for me and not have that sinking, gut-wrenching feeling that at any moment...someone is gonna call and be like, 'You owe all of this right now,' and not knowing how to respond...when you get a call from a collector.

Women educated themselves through a variety of sources, including friends, coworkers, podcasts, and websites. Some women leveraged conversations with loan officers or debt collectors to learn about unknown tips and tricks. Racially marginalized women also paid attention to how White people made decisions about money, hoping these strategies could work for them despite the economic system of racial capitalism having been designed to prioritize and value Whiteness. As Michelle described, "So I guess, in my last two or three years, my strategy has been to think like a White man. And I really pay attention to, ...where [the White people in my network] are...spending their money."

Learning about money and finances wasn't necessarily intended to challenge or change racial capitalism. Indeed, an individual's financial education or literacy is not an antidote to the violence of debt that operates at a systems level. Individual women were figuring out how to best position themselves within this broader economic system. Though, a few women did mention a desire to challenge racial capitalism, such as Ebony, who planned to use her knowledge to fight debt.

Where I'm at now...I'm gonna go to law school and I'm gonna graduate. And I'm gonna take the BAR [exam], and then before I know it...I'm [not] gonna be driving around in a nice car and rollin' around with done-up fingernails and Louis Vuitton purses. Like, no, that's not what's gonna happen. I wanna go and argue against my collective student loan debt [with] any of the people who share my political affiliations.

Women also resisted their debt and took control of their finances by developing side hustles. As sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) has written, "Hustling is insecure and risky, but when compared to the job market, many women think the risk is worth it" (p. 4). Nearly all women worked multiple jobs or had a side hustle of some kind. Some women turned their skills and hobbies into paying side hustles, such as crafting, styling hair and nails, writing books and poetry, and podcasting. To minimize the amount of debt she needed to borrow during college, Amira worked part-time and had several side hustles,

including doing hair and nails. She managed several regularly scheduled customers to maintain this consistent source of income.

After the first year [in college], I ended up getting...three jobs again. And I also did hair on the side. So I always kept some money in my pocket, but all that money that I was making didn't even—you know, I didn't really have much to show for it because it went towards school. I had pay for tuition because FAFSA did [not] cover everything.

A few women took advantage of the new sources of income that emerged during the pandemic, such as food and grocery pick-up and delivery. For the women whose primary job offered the protection of remote work during the pandemic, engaging in this new side hustle meant risking their exposure to COVID-19 as essential workers. For example, Jalia had several pre-existing health concerns that placed her at greater risk if she were to be infected. Despite the threat to her health, Jalia saw food pick-up and delivery as a way to take control and eliminate some of her debt,

I started doing DoorDash in 2020 just to have some extra money. And so it's like, if I'm gonna be up at 4:00 in the morning [getting] people Taco Bell, I'm going to enjoy some parts of my life...Because I deserve to be happy, as hard as I work.

Living Life with Joy

Women also practiced resistance by living their lives fully, unapologetically, and with joy. As thought leader Anne Price and her colleagues (2020) write, "Finding joy in the face of trauma and oppression is not only a form of resistance, but it's also instrumental in dismantling anti-blackness and constructing an alternative world of Black freedom and thriving" (p. 1). Most women cared for themselves and their loved ones in some way, such as by getting their hair done, going out to lunch with friends, buying small gifts for their children, creating artwork, performing spoken word poetry, exercising, or spending time outside. These were acts of resistance amidst the violence of debt. For example, Nia described spending time with friends outside in nature,

I mostly try to spend time outside. I try to stay active because I know that helps me, helps my mood, and helps me feel better about things. I try to, like, find people, I guess, friends that wanna do things...Last summer, like, I did a lot of camping.

Some women, like Mallory, intentionally chose an attitude of joy and gratitude. They tried to remember how hard their parents and grandparents worked so that they could pursue their education, even if they ended up accumulating a lot of debt:

I know that sounds weird, but it's just like I don't choose to be stressed out about it. I choose to be grateful for the opportunity I had to be a first-generation college student, to be the first person in my immediate family at the time to have a master's degree.

Women frequently talked about practicing resistance by treating themselves and loved ones to something special. This was harder to practice for some women than others, depending on the intensity of the violence from their debt. However, many women found meaningful ways of engaging in this resistance. Mya talked about picking up small surprise toys from The Dollar Store for her children and buying a gift for her mother, something she had always wanted to do, "I was finally able to purchase a gift...for my mother."

Consistent with her use of humor and laughter throughout the interview, Ebony discussed recreational marijuana use, which is legal in Michigan, "Marijuana is my other coping mechanism. A combination of marijuana, humor, and learning to channel my rage. Yeah, it's hard to explain...If my teenage self could see myself now and being excited to pay taxes on marijuana."

Women created space to live and care for themselves, even when their debt stole substantial time and space. Before returning to graduate school, Jalia was able to afford a variety of fresh foods for her vegan diet. She also had a gym membership with a trainer. After graduate school, Jalia's debt payments, which she had deducted automatically from her paycheck in order to spend less time thinking about the payments, impinged significantly on her budget. She could no longer afford the same fresh foods or the costs of a gym membership. Still, she found meaningful ways to care for herself.

So this probably doesn't sound like a big deal to most people, but as I'm sure you can imagine, getting, like, a latte or something can get expensive because they can be upwards of \$7, \$8 if you get a large enough drink. And so when I would get paid, I would typically, like, put a set amount of money on either my service card or whatever coffee shop I wanted to go to. Just set some money aside for that to just enjoy a nice hot latte. Because I just love them. It's very nostalgic for me. I remember when I first started drinking coffee, and it just—it makes me feel good...I always like to just, you know, make room in my budget to go to brunch and maybe treat a friend to brunch or...just something like that or get my hair braided. You know, things that are—can get pricey. And yeah, I have debt, but it's like...I also have to enjoy my life.

Concluding Discussion

The debt held by racially marginalized women, along with any associated health effects, is deeply connected to histories of colonialist and racial capitalist violence (Cavallero and Gago, 2021; Hossein 2016). Debt burdens that contribute to poor mental and physical health (Sweet et al., 2018a, b) have unique implications for racially marginalized women, who owe multiple types of higher-cost debts simultaneously (Bhaskaran 2016) and experience stress associated with their debt (Castro Baker 2014; Dunn and Mirzaie, 2012, 2016). Debt enables ongoing racial violence against women by infiltrating their everyday activities and subjecting borrowers to unaffordable minimum payments, high interest rates, and lengthy repayment plans. Interviews with racially marginalized women revealed their unique experiences.

Our study explored the consequences of this everyday violence for racially marginalized women's physical and mental health and the ways that women resisted this violence, making several contributions to the literature. First, drawing on theoretical concepts of predatory inclusion (Seamster and Charron-Chénier, 2017; Taylor 2019) and intersectionality (Collins 2019; Crenshaw 1991), racially marginalized women described consequences to their health vis-à-vis conscription into borrowing to survive. Women described debt as a violent relationship and being coerced into borrowing for survival during their most intimate and vulnerable moments: a cancer diagnosis, childbirth, or sexual assault, for example. Women experienced student loan debt as particularly punishing, since they were coerced into borrowing at such a young age, yet they expected to pay the price of this debt until they died. This debt stole their time in addition to undermining their health.

Second, women made direct and explicit linkages between their debt and health. Women described going into debt to afford lifegiving and lifesaving medical treatment and to receive medical care for dealing with stress and anxiety from their debt. Women's

experiences were consistent with existing research that documents relationships between higher-cost debt and physical and mental health, such as cardiovascular disease (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2018) and stress, anxiety, and depression (Dunn and Mirzaie, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2008; Sweet et al., 2018a, b). Though, given a limited focus on racially marginalized women's unique experiences, the existing literature likely underestimates the scale and scope of the relationships between debt and health. For instance, the cumulative effects of being conscripted into the violence of debt in order to survive undoubtedly impact racially marginalized women's health. Racially marginalized women described bearing the physical and mental costs of prevailing against a stacked deck that stole their time and tried to take their joy and foil their resistance, as well.

Third, even while describing debt as a violent and abusive relationship, women exerted agency and refused to allow debt to control their lives. Women's agency and joy were noteworthy, consistent with Price and colleagues' (2020) framework for centering Blackness: "If we start centering the Black experience, it steers our bodies, minds, and imaginations in a whole different direction, which can lead us to true liberation...allow[ing] us to acknowledge Black genius, art, and joy" (p. 5). Women hustled, rebelled against high monthly payments, and engaged in everyday practices of joy and self-care. Similar to Black women's refusals and rebellions during captivity and enslavement (Armstrong et al., 2018; Eddins 2020; Jones-Rogers 2019; Liu and Keane, 2021), the racially marginalized women in our study developed practices for exercising agency over their lives. Women practiced joy and self-care by spending time outside, treating themselves to getting their hair and nails done, drinking lattes, and eating meals with friends. Some women practiced refusal by stopping payments on their debts, particularly when it came to student loans. Others had multiple sources of income so that a paycheck from any one employer would not be so consequential in their lives. An ahistorical and cynical interpretation could view these activities as trivial; however, the racially marginalized women of this study were leveraging the power available to them in myriad important ways and were moving toward better circumstances.

In conclusion, women described debt as a violent relationship that undermined their health and likely predisposed them to premature death by making debt so difficult to repay. Even still, women resisted this violence and lived with joy. Efforts to support individual racially marginalized women in their everyday lives remain important, as are efforts to redress violence at the structural level where the colonialist and racial capitalist origins of debt are located.

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