

## Essay 1: Autobiographical Essay

My favorite place in the world is my mama's kitchen. A place where different ingredients are dissected and combined to produce something magical. A space where secrets are traded, acts of resistance are planned and executed, and feelings of warmth, love, and healing are created. My earliest kitchen memories take me back to Hamburg, Germany—my hometown. My parents met in Germany in the early 1980s. Both had immigrated from Mali, West Africa. Both were committed to creating a better future for themselves, for their families.

For most of my life, my mama was a single parent. Papa loved us from afar, because "*Germany was no place for Africans.*" Mama has always been committed to creating safe spaces for women like herself. In my mama's kitchen, immigrant women from everywhere learned how to file for visas and enroll their children in school. Brave and emboldened women devised plans to protect their daughters from female genital mutilation and organized escapes from abusive husbands. In mama's kitchen, we celebrated successful jollof rice tries, first loves and engagements, wedding announcements and pregnancies, successful visa and school applications. We also cried—over miscarriages and the loved ones left behind, and deaths at the hand of the treacherous sea separating Africa from Europe. And, in mama's kitchen, we fought—over hair relaxers and skin-bleaching creams, over being African or German, and over what it means to be a Black woman in Germany, in Mali, and homes I hadn't yet come to know.

As I grew older, I realized that mama's kitchen existed—in one way or another—in every corner of this world. It existed in my grandmother's kitchen when I moved to Mali at age 16 to work with fellow adolescent girls who were survivors of gender-based violence. It existed in my girlfriend's kitchen during my short attempt at living in Morocco. It existed in the community kitchen run by Caribbean nannies on playground benches during my Au-Pair year in London. And, after I moved to the Bronx by myself at age 19, I found mama's kitchen in many places: the African Braiding Salon, my mentor's office, brunch with my girlfriends, and—eventually—my own kitchen.

Mama's kitchen isn't a location, it's a feeling – and it's more than that. It's a space where I have been a part of women all over the world, from all walks of life, coming together to heal, organize, and learn. It is fundamentally built upon an ethic of care, and steeped in principles of community, cultural diversity, and respect.

My purpose as a psychologist is to widen the *access* to and *impact* of mama's kitchen. As a critical participatory action researcher—or storyteller—I aim to highlight the invisible narratives shared in mama's kitchen to support the development of *community-level solutions against colorism, gendered racism, and gender-based violence*. Navigating oppressive systems requires comfort, solidarity, and safety; and movement toward liberation requires healing. As a therapist, I strive to provide the sanctuary and healing experience of mama's kitchen to every person who enters my room.