

*Reflections*

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## **Black Faces in White Spaces: Reflections on Racism and Being a Black Woman in Higher Education in the Deep South**

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*Black. Woman. Higher Education Professional. Lifelong Learner.*

**T**hese are just a few of the identities that intersect to inform my unique experiences. My educational and career paths have almost exclusively been at Predominately White Institutions (PWI) in the Mid-South region of the United States. The compounded effect of having multiple historically marginalized identities while living in and navigating higher education in the American south lent to experiencing my fair share of racism, isolation, and microaggressions. This reflection aims to carry you on a journey from my early childhood and what spurred my educational desires leading up to being an adult learner and navigating higher education as a Black woman.

### **VIGNETTE #1: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN**

**M**y parents both graduated from segregated high schools in rural northeast Mississippi. My mother's alma mater had the word *colored* in the name. Wow. After high school, they each attended a small private historically Black community college in West Point, MS, which has since closed. Neither of them graduated because they chose to get married and start a family. They both worked very hard to provide a good life for my siblings and me. My mom worked in retail while my dad enlisted in the military. After my dad's enlistment term was up, he served in the Army National Guard for many years, including being called to active duty during the first Gulf War. He also worked in telecommunication technology for over 40 years until he finally decided to retire.

Although they did not finish college, my parents are some of the most intelligent people I know. My parents knew the importance of education, continually stressed its value, and set the tone for how I approached my education and viewed educational attainment. As far back as I can remember, it was unacceptable for me NOT to make the honor roll. My mother required me to study something or read daily, regardless of whether the teacher assigned homework. In the long run, it paid off! I graduated 8 of approximately 158 and was the only Black person to graduate with honors.

I grew up in rural northeast Mississippi, Itawamba County, to be exact. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.), Itawamba County has an entire population of less than 25,000. Of that, only 7.3% are Black. Those statistics are vital to note because raising a family in that environment likely increased my parents' desire for my siblings and me to be well educated because receiving an education was viewed as the *great equalizer* (McPhail, 2021) and *the way out*. I grew up seeing various racial, social, and power structures at play, but it wasn't until I became an adult that I truly understood what I was witnessing. I am thankful that my parents set the foundation and expectation of education as a necessity. Because of my parents and the value of an education instilled in me early, I knew I would pursue my doctorate one day.

## VIGNETTE #2: WHY DO YOU WANT A DOCTORATE?

As previously mentioned, not pursuing education was never an option. As I began my career in higher education, I knew I would need to earn my doctorate to position myself to be better qualified for future career opportunities. A significant perk of working at my institution is the generous staff scholarship programs that allow us to take courses without paying tuition out of pocket. I started taking classes several years ago when a now-former colleague suggested we take a class through a non-degree seeking track to “*get our feet wet*.” Unfortunately, we needed our immediate supervisor's approval to utilize those benefits. My supervisor at the time, an older white female, who has her doctorate, was very passive-aggressive towards me. She would smile in my face, all the while making comments that caused me to raise an eyebrow. I dreaded having to approach her and request approval to take classes. I finally spoke to her, paperwork in hand, and revealed my interest in taking a class. Her response was, “Why do *you* want a doctorate? Do *you* think you can handle that?” Unfortunately, at that moment, I did not have the agency to call my supervisor out on those comments. I replied, “Well, why did you want to get yours?” My supervisor did not answer me. She signed the paperwork and walked out. Soon after that, I applied for another position on campus and transferred to another department.

This encounter was troubling on several fronts. As an adult learner, I wondered how many other adults have been dissuaded from pursuing college degrees because someone questioned their abilities. As an adult learner, that one comment could have discouraged me from pursuing my doctorate, causing me to rethink if I could balance my professional and familial responsibilities with taking classes. As an adult learner who is also a Black woman, I wondered if my race had her question my goal. As a Black woman, who also occupies the positions of an adult learner and a higher education professional, I had to maintain my character and be aware of my response to avoid being labeled “the angry Black woman” and tainting my professional reputation (McCluney et al., 2021). I am keenly aware of existing power structures in higher education. Those issues

underscore the constant struggles Black women face while navigating the often-hostile higher education climate.

### VIGNETTE #3: CUTTING ME OFF

There are many times where I have been either the only Black woman in a room or one of only a few. There was one instance where I was invited to a committee meeting for a workgroup of a new initiative on campus. I was the only Black woman and the only person without a doctorate at my table. I instantly felt that familiar twinge of the imposter syndrome – questioning myself and whether I would bring something of value to the group. Thankfully, due to the position I held on campus, I was well versed in the topic we were given to discuss. I was like, “*Okay, I got this.*” I was making a statement about how students who face many obstacles (grades, family, finances, etc.) often do not prioritize school and end up on Academic Probation or Academic Suspension. They often show remarkable resiliency in pursuing their education, even after sitting out and re-enrolling later. They can graduate and achieve their goal of earning a degree. However, before I could finish making my point, a White male administrator dared to cut me off to make a counterpoint. My mind went from “*I know he didn’t*” to “*Girl, don’t forget you got bills*” in a split second. I was determined to show that I was knowledgeable on the discussion topic. I wanted to send a reminder that I had something to contribute just like everyone else, which is why I was also invited to attend. I learned that sometimes my mere presence in these spaces was a form of resistance, and I refused to question my credibility as if I did not belong (Davis & Brown, 2017).

Even more determined not to fall into the stereotype of the *Angry Black Woman*, I channeled the professionalism of Clair Huxtable and the sass of Maxine Waters. With a voice as smooth as silk, I assertively restated my opinion and backed it up with data. Some people may question whether my race or gender triggered that response. To that, I say, as a BLACK WOMAN, I cannot separate the two. It can be emotionally draining for Black women to be on guard constantly, work twice as hard, and get half the recognition while dealing with displays of racism and patriarchy (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021).

### What Does All of That Mean?

Whether students or employees, Black women in higher education often experience intense isolation and marginalization (Collins, 1986). Supervisors have questioned me in front of students. I have been cut off and talked over in meetings. I have presented ideas only for someone else to take the credit. Unfortunately, I learned firsthand that *all skin folk ain’t kinfolk*. That led to not knowing who to trust and feeling alone. Stress, headaches, burnout all have manifested themselves, and I am still learning how to manage them. The weight of trying to navigate spaces not designed for us can take its toll on our physical and emotional well-being. Furthermore, without adequate support, those pressures have the potential to impede our ability to be successful in our educational and professional endeavors (West, 2019).

As a Black woman, both an adult learner and a higher education professional, I exist in multiple dimensions. It is essential to recognize that we are not monolithic in our experiences. My experiences as a Black woman at a Southern PWI have varied according to my role at the time. My career as a higher education professional has given me insight that has allowed me to feel more comfortable navigating the higher education landscape as an adult student. I have had situations where I felt highly supported and valued, and others where I felt undervalued and dismissed. As an adult learner, I have had some great and supportive encounters with faculty, staff, and peers in my program. There have been minimal instances where I have felt that course expectations were a bit much, especially when balancing my coursework and work and family responsibilities. I am very thankful for those supportive relationships and those who encouraged me. I have been talked off the academic ledge multiple times – by my master’s advisor and by my current advisor in the doctoral program.

However, as a Black woman professional staff member in higher education, the support is not always there. Am I more of a threat because I can be outspoken? Am I expected to slide under the radar? I know I deserve to flourish in my career. I know I can do my job and do it well. I deserve recognition for my contributions. We deserve to be supported when we express our desire to progress our education and careers. We need to have safe spaces to talk about our experiences, embrace our spirituality, and seek empowerment (Agyepong, 2011). These safe spaces could take the form of an organized professional counterspace, mentoring programs, as well as a targeted professional development and empowerment series (West, 2019).

It is a challenge maintaining the character and operating with the proverbial mask. I am constantly aware of my perception and mannerisms and going out of my way to be collegial and not aggressive, biting my tongue and picking my battles, and letting things slide because I have got bills to pay and a child to support! Higher education has a lot of work to do in social justice. Social justice is more than fancy slogans and periodic events on campus. A commitment to integrating social justice into the fabric of an institution needs to include a deep introspective look from leadership. Colleges and universities must foster an environment where Black women can succeed in higher education. There must be a commitment to challenging economic, cultural, social, and educational inequities stemming from an inequitable distribution of resources, privilege, and power in policy and practice. (McPhail, 2021). I know that I am not alone. I hope that sharing my experiences will encourage other Black women in higher education- whether a student or professional- to do the same.

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