



*Reflections*

---

## **I's Tired Boss: Reflections of a Southern Black Woman Higher Education Professional**

**Angela S. Kuykendoll**

The University of Memphis

---

**W**hile driving home from work, I replayed my conversation with an adjunct faculty in my office. I wish I could say I was surprised by the conversation, but I was not. I am used to it. As I bumped Tupac's (Shakur, 2004) "Hit 'Em Up," I tried to shrug it off, but honestly, we get tired of this sh\*\*. You see, this adjunct faculty is an older white male who I have heard make questionable comments about the Black students in his class on several occasions. On this occasion, he assumed I was a single parent and said, "It is hard for single mothers, especially Black mothers attending school when they have a bunch of kids; I am sure you can relate being a student and a single mother." I looked at him like he had three heads. I said, "Well, I would not know anything about being a single mother because I am married and have been for the last ten years." It was his turn to be shocked. He looked at me like I was some kind of unicorn. Then he said to me that he was surprised given that "we"—talking about my people—have a lot of Black unwed mothers these days and commended me for doing things the "right way." Because I needed to keep my job, I made an excuse and walked away.

*It is tiring and exhausting to present ourselves as respectable Black people to gain some modicum of respect, but in the end, it never really matters how we present ourselves; it is what it is, and it ain't what it ain't.  
We are Black!*

This story is not an isolated incident; these kinds of conversations, statements, and assumptions happen to Black people every single day. It is tiring and exhausting to present ourselves as

respectable Black people to gain some modicum of respect, but in the end, it never really matters how we present ourselves; it is what it is, and it ain't what it ain't. We are Black!

Working at an HWI for over 20 years has provided first-hand knowledge of Historically White Institutions (HWIs) continuing to perpetuate and uphold institutional racism within their institutions. HWIs participated in the Atlantic Slave trade and used enslaved Africans to build their institutions and work within them. According to Wilder (2013), in the Americas, slavery was required and attributed to the rise of HWIs. After the American Revolution, the slave economy helped to establish 18 new universities, which continued to flourish through the turn of the new century (Harris et al., 2019). Subsequently, institutions must recognize the historical significance of their participation in enslaved Africans' brutal treatment for economic growth and development. That participation holds institutions culpable for the present plight of Black folks in this country and in their educational institutions. Moreover, despite the advancement of civil rights legislation and diversity and inclusion initiatives, the fight for diversity and inclusion of Black faculty and staff at HWIs still occurs at a snail's pace.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a lens, I will share my counterstory of growing up in the south, working at a southern PWI, and moving towards resistance against racism. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe critical race theory as a movement of scholars and activists interested in studying and transforming the relationship of race, power, and racism. Counterstorytelling in CRT gives a member of a minority group a unique voice to highlight race and prejudice in order to resist the dominant narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These forms of resistance tell stories of our experiences “that oppressed groups have known instinctively ... are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

## GROWING UP BLACK IN THE SOUTH

I was born and raised in the south, and as a Black woman, I know the history of racism in the southern part of the United States. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. The Confederacy was born in the south, and a statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, stood in Memphis until recently. Growing up in this area, I was shocked that there were Confederacy remnants throughout the region to remind and celebrate the south's fight to uphold slavery. In 2020, Memphis had a 64.4% Black or African-American population with a 26.4% poverty rate (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2021). The racial tensions in Memphis, Tennessee, are palpable, and the city continues to be divided on race, education, housing, and healthcare. Memphis's political system has been controlled with generational power held by wealthy white families that work to maintain control in housing and education.

## WORKING AT A SOUTHERN PWI: A BLACK FACE IN A WHITE SPACE

**B**eing African American in a predominately white institution is like being an actor on stage. There are roles one has to perform, storylines one is expected to follow, and dramas and subplots one should avoid at all cost. [It is like] playing a small but visible part in a racially specific script. Survival is always in question. (Arday & Mirza, 2018, p. 314)

As a Black woman, working at an HWI has been challenging. Black women must operate with dual consciousness (Collins, 2000) in that we learn to play the game of our oppressors while hiding our authentic selves. Putting on a façade to be accepted as a professional is the unspoken rule for Black women. When encountering my white colleagues at work, I must always be “on,” whether in speech or appearance. I have to be sure to use White English standards, the oppressor’s language (hooks, 1994), rather than the cogent standards of AAE (African American English) (Smitherman, 1977). Standard English is not the language of my ancestors but the standard of the United States that negates the native tongue of our ancestral roots (hooks, 1994) and has been used as a method of domination to shame and humiliate those who do not use it (hooks, 1994).

Consequently, I would be seen as uneducated and unprofessional if I failed to use it (hooks, 1994). Therefore, it is a relief when I have the opportunity to let my guard down with my Black colleagues because I don’t have to pretend. Young (2009) confirms this dilemma as what W.E.B. Du Bois describes as double consciousness, Blacks trying to merge into two worlds, our Black selves and an American. I don’t want to have to police what I say every second of the workday because I cannot be my authentic self. However, it now seems acceptable for white people to speak in Black slang when convenient. So, now, I am in a position of having to witness what I cannot do for fear of being labeled “ghetto” by white folks who have the privilege of using it without consequence. This type of microaggression, a form of racism, reminds me that I should stay in my place (Arday & Mirza, 2018). Unless Black women look, dress, speak, and wear their hair a certain way, our professionalism and education are constantly questioned.

## ANGRY BLACK WOMAN

**M**oving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (hooks, 2015, p. 9)

I identify as a Black woman, and my identity as a Black woman is synonymous with who I am. The two are not separate. I cannot separate being Black and being a woman, and society does not view me as separate either, just the invisible Other, which places me in an outsider-within position (Collins, 2000). As an outsider-within, Black women are expected to shut up and work. In other words, Black women are expected to be silent and invisible. When we do speak, our

tones and words are policed. If we are self-assertive and outspoken, we are labeled the angry Black woman. Even when our tone is clear, direct, and non-aggressive, that is how we are labeled and deemed to be a problem. Unlike white women who have the power to stand up for

*“Unlike white women who have the power to stand up for themselves and not be dismissed because of their gender, Black women are not given the same grace.”*

themselves and not be dismissed because of their gender, Black women are not given the same grace. For example, it is not uncommon for me to be in situations where I must bite my tongue when hearing racist or condescending statements. Speaking up when I hear

something offensive will label me combative and aggressive. It is exhausting to police your emotions, and it takes much restraint because you work hard not to be labeled an angry Black woman.

But I am angry! I am angry at the recent killings of unarmed Black men and women. I am angry that no one acknowledges the emotional turmoil we feel while continuing to do our jobs, knowing that again, there will be no justice sought for my Black brothers and sisters. I am angry at the continued racist practices in this country and at HWIs. My anger matters, my Black body matters, my beautiful red locs matter, my Black womanhood matters, and my voice matters. I will use it! My anger, my resistance, and my voice will be heard. I will talk back (hooks, 2015).

## MOVING TOWARDS RESISTANCE AGAINST RACISM

To be present at this moment, addressing issues of inequities, is an opportunity to move towards resisting the discriminatory systems in place. Black activism has been at the pinnacle of systemic change in this country. Resistance has been a catalyst in bringing about change in this country (McKersie, 2021).

The Black Lives Matter movement focuses on the systemic disenfranchisement of Black people, so it was inevitable that their attention would shift to university campuses, which serve as microcosms (and, in some cases, sources) of larger societal trends that were historically created, funded, and organized primarily to preserve white wealth (White, 2016).

Working at an HWI, I must tell my truth. My voice matters and I need to be heard. I must be unapologetically Black, which translates to how I move and exist in the workplace. So, if I drop a "mane what?!", "nah playa," or other colloquialisms from my hood, I should not be labeled as "ghetto." African American English represents the colorful language Black folks use in our community (Smitherman, 2021), and asking me to give up my language for another is asking us to choose, forcing us to abandon our racial identity through language (Young, 2007). Code-meshing (Young, 2009), meshing African American English with standard American English, would allow me to navigate the two without losing my racial identity. My identity is important to me, so assimilation is not an option. Hence, my presence at

*“My identity is important to me, so assimilation is not an option. Hence, my presence at HWIs is an act of resistance.”*

HWIs is an act of resistance. My voice and how I choose to show up in white spaces and be authentically Black is an act of resistance.

## DON'T LOOK AT ME!

Working at an HWI equates to working on a plantation for Black folks. Plantations served economic, cultural, and political objectives that created inequality, which also exists at HWIs (Durant, 1999; Squire, 2021). The enslaved were treated as inhumane and unintelligent, like Black folks at HWIs today, who continue to face microaggressions, isolation, devaluation, and demeaning regularly (Solórzano & Huber, 2020; Squire, 2021).

*“We are tired of talking. We need action. Do not look at me or any other Black person to fix the issues white supremacy built.”*

Consequently, positions such as Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) were created to address these hostile environments and create a more inclusive environment for faculty, staff, and students of color (Tuitt, 2021). Realistically, Black folks know these positions hold very little power to make systemic changes and only serve as a symbol as referenced in plantation politics - the CDO of today is the chauffeur driver from the plantation (Squire, 2021; Tuitt, 2021).

Diversity work, much like CDO positions, is exhausting for Black folks, particularly when we consistently battle with surface-level initiatives such as the statements issued by HWIs that Black lives matter after the shooting of George Floyd that offered no systemic changes (Ash et al., 2020). These diversity positions and feel-good statements do not move us. We have toiled and produced anti-racism work through research and activism, and yet here we are in 2022, still having conversations about race and oppression at HWIs.

We are tired of talking. We need action. Do not look at me or any other Black person to fix the issues white supremacy built.

In short, I am tired. Black folks at HWIs are tired. We are tired of racism and microaggressions. We are tired of our bodies, speech, and hair being scrutinized and commodified. We are tired of our Black men and women being policed and murdered. We are tired of performing to the standards set forth by white America. We are tired of waiting for our lives to matter.

## References

- Arday, J., & Mirza, H. S. (Eds.). (2018). *Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, whiteness and decolonising the academy* (1st ed. 2018 edition). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ash, A. N., Hill, R., Risdon, S., & Jun, A. (2020). Anti-racism in higher education: A model for change. *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Justice*, 4(3), 2.
- Collins, P. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. (Rev. 10th anniversary ed.). Routledge.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction: Vol. 3rd ed.* NYU Press.

- Harris, L. M., Campbell, J. T., & Brophy, A. L. (2019). *Slavery and the university: Histories and legacies*. University of Georgia Press.
- hooks, b. (2015). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking Black*. Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.
- McKersie, R. B. (2021). The 1960s Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter: Social Protest from a Negotiation Perspective. *Negotiation Journal*, 37(3), 301–324.
- Shakur, T. (2004, August 10). *Hit "Em Up*. MNRK Music Group.
- Smitherman, G. (1977). *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Smitherman, G. (2021). Word from the hood: The lexicon of African-American vernacular English. In *African-American English* (pp. 223-248). Routledge.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103>
- Solórzano, D. G., & Huber, L. P. (2020). *Racial microaggressions: Using critical race theory to respond to everyday racism*. Teachers College Press.
- Squire, D. (2021). Framing plantation politics. In *Plantation politics and campus rebellions: Power, diversity, and the emancipatory struggle in Higher Education* (pp. 35–55). essay, State University of New York Press.
- Tuitt, F. A. (2021). The contemporary chief diversity officer. In *Plantation politics and campus rebellions: Power, diversity, and the emancipatory struggle in higher education* (pp. 171–197). SUNY Press.
- U.S. Census Bureau *QuickFacts: Memphis city, Tennessee*. (2021). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/memphiscitytennessee>
- White, K. (2016). Black lives on campuses matter: Reflecting on the rise of the new Black student movement. *Soundings*, 63(63), 86–97. <https://doi.org/10.3898/136266216819377002>
- Young, V. A. (2007). *Your average nigga: Performing race, literacy, and masculinity*. Wayne State University Press.
- Young, V. A. (2009). “Nah, We Straight”: An Argument Against Code Switching. *JAC*, 29(1/2), 49–76.



Angela S. Kuykendoll is a Coordinator and Student Advocate for UofM Global at the University of Memphis where she also teaches Intro to Public Administration and (De)Constructing Race as an adjunct instructor. She has a B.P.S. in Paralegal Studies, MPA in Public Administration with a focus on Public Policy and Higher Education Policy. She is currently an Ed.D. doctoral candidate in Higher and Adult Education program at the University of Memphis where she is researching the experiences of Black Professional Staff at Predominately White Institutions using Critical Race Theory, Plantation Politics, and Anti-Black Racism.

To cite this article: Kuykendoll, A. S. (2022). I's tired boss: Reflections of a Southern Black woman higher education professional. *Dialogues in Social Justice*, 7(2), Article R1295.