



Reflections

Against All Odds—Reflections from a “Scary” Black Woman

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If I did not define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive (Lorde, 1984, p. 137).

BLACK RESISTANCE

There has always been an underlying continuum of resistance by Black people that manifests in everything from slave revolts to suffrage movements to the Black Lives Matter movement (Oliver, 2020). Parallel efforts overlap these resistances within higher education through fights for justice and equality to be seen and heard within predominantly white institutions. Many Black students enter into spaces to maintain their commitment to education. Nevertheless, they are often forced to develop strategies to survive attacks on their identities by creating places of affinity that transform into sanctuary spaces (Pennant, 2021).

Sanctuary spaces provide support while constructing a resistance against the erasure of Black student narratives from adult education. Sanctuaries are defined as affinity spaces that focus on the community, void of racial biases (King, 2019). Safety acts as the foundation in affinity spaces, while validation, upliftment, and resources bridge the members together. Additionally, sanctuary spaces are a learning space where storytelling is necessary to bring healing and perspective forward.

LEARNING WHILE BLACK: THE BEGINNING

Growing up, seeing myself in others was the norm as my neighborhood consisted of many Black families, which meant that most students were Black, with sprinkles of other racial groups making up the margins. However, while the students were Black, many teachers

and administrators were not. I did not think much of it as a child because I could see myself in the masses. Because of that, I cultivated a vision of what Blackness represented. Growing older, I carried that vision as my parents moved us into whiter neighborhoods. I recall noticing that suddenly my community did not feel like home with every move. I felt outnumbered as I began my journey into the uncharted territory of navigating whiteness.

As I learned how to navigate those spaces when I was 14, my parents decided that a traditional school setting was not working. At best, I was a C student, and they felt that the environment was not pushing me to my fullest potential. Therefore, they decided that I would be homeschooled and complete my GED. Going against the grain of a system that had given both of my parents' high school diplomas cemented not only my sense of otherness but also my first-generation status. At 16 years old, I obtained my GED, and later that year, I started my adult education journey at the local community college. Once I began community college, I noticed a shift in my Blackness's representation and perception in educational settings. Suddenly I felt less comfortable showing up in spaces and felt the need to negotiate my identity to fit in and ultimately fade into the background. Since then, I have continued to navigate those feelings while settling into my doctoral program at a private, Catholic research university. I recall receiving my acceptance letter and remember feeling hopeful. In that promising place, I also felt heavy as I sat with the understanding that being a first-generation doctoral student would impact me on this journey, whether I fully realized it or not. On the one hand, I had a sense of excitement about reaching this uncharted educational territory. Inversely, I could have never imagined attempting to do something that no one else in my family had ever done.

When I began my doctoral journey, I felt welcomed by my teachers and my cohort members. So, while racially outnumbered, I went in hoping for the best but prepared myself as best I could. I selected the only Black professor for both courses when enrolling in my first classes. I consciously chose to begin my doctoral program with someone who looked like me. I wanted someone who understood the impact of seeing Blackness in spaces of white authority. I relished that my professor had an ethnic name like mine. Even the fact that he had a darker hue of skin like mine gave me a sense of comfort. This comfort made me trust the process because I knew I had a mentor who would answer my questions without judgment.

I do not know how I knew, but something in my soul let me know I would be safe in these spaces seeing a Black face across from mine. I knew I would not be required to have an extensive explanation of why my dissertation topic was important to me, my community, and the structures we exist within. Instead, I had a built-in foundation from someone who, at a bare minimum, understood me as a Black person in America. Even though deep down I knew I could not hold on to it forever, I chose Blackness because I knew I needed to start from a place of protection before the reality of a white-dominant space set in.

A SPACE OF OUR OWN

As Black students, we each carry different identities within our Blackness, yet many have had similar experiences within adult education. Many of us leaned into each other out of fear of losing more than just ourselves. We promised each other that we would make it

together if for no one else but each other. For those of us who have continued in this program, we have spent the last two years battling in this space of whiteness, combatting biases, microaggressions, and just an overall lack of understanding of diverse populations. Physically, mentally and spiritually, our bodies have experienced emotions ranging from anger to sadness to depression and anxiety. We have spent most of our time combatting the images painted of us in addition to focusing on the work. With every new semester, feeling forced to continue explaining our Blackness, we put on our symbolic combat boots, leaving us wondering why we even bothered to come back.

Nonetheless, through our love and support for each other, we focused more time on co-designing our sanctuary space for our sanities. Built into the design, the foundation required space to speak as freely and be as Black as we needed to. Constructing a community allowed us to craft a way to love each other in mixed company. That love turned into the embedded responsibility to care for each other wholly. Our sanctuary gave us the necessary strength to resist the erasure of our experiences happening outside of the space. We developed a way of supporting each other during the live sessions by bringing our voices into the space through Black writers and their experiences. It was essential to give the narratives of our people a chance to ring out in a room that chose to act as though we did not exist. In this resistance, we refused to allow the silencing of our voices nor their performative fear to deter us.

As the semesters went on, I found solace in some of the other Black students in my program. Those that joined our sanctuary used it how they needed to; whether to vent or problem-solve about assignments, we made sure to support each other in the best ways we could. Each of us used our talents to push each other forward in the forms of education and external support. It was beautiful to have moments of celebration as we shared what was happening outside of the program and cried together when things felt heavy. However, those feelings of safety began to shift as the retention of Black students began to drop, and what was once nine dropped to six at the end of year one. As I entered the second year of my doctoral program, I joined as one of only four Black students in my cohort. I can only imagine how much effort it took to get each of us to this level, and while I am not sure what happened to those who parted ways, I am grateful for the time we had together.

ONE COHORT, SEGREGATED EXPERIENCES

Entering into this program, I knew there were pieces of me that would never be accepted wholly. Like any other institution built on upholding whiteness, I knew there would come a moment when I would be expected to be the silent Black person. The expectation was a subtle one that swiftly changed into a gut-punching request to silence my Blackness to make the experience more enjoyable for white people. I felt expected to fade into the background, not make waves, agree and smile, and be happy to be there—the diversity student.

Some of my professors appreciated my perspectives; however, from my white counterparts, it felt like the underlying question was: *Couldn't we just leave race out of it?* While they had never spoken it directly, I always made it clear there was no way that I could ever separate myself from my Blackness, as it is always part of my experiences as a student. As these experiences increased, I realized that my higher education institution did nothing to prepare me, a racially diverse first-

generation student, for what awaited me on the other side of their doors (Atherton, 2014; Guiffrida, 2010; Petty, 2014; Smit, 2012; Thayer, 2000). This notion had led me to believe that instead of valuing marginalized students' experiences, my only value lay in being a number.

While reviewing literature about the experiences and resistance of Black students, I found Black and Brown voices that mirrored my feelings and experiences. For instance, Brooks (2017) noted that his experiences as a student in higher education differed from what he dreamed they would be. Thinking he would spend his time laserizing into the "concrete ways to dismantle systemic oppression" (Brooks, 2017, p. 102) instead, what he found was that his predominantly white institution was just as oppressive and violent as the societal structures outside of the classroom walls.

I was introduced to Brooks' during my Organizational Change and Development course. At first, I had a visceral reaction to his Critical Theory of Love which sought to combat institutional violence and oppression with love. However, while I was entirely against the notion that the fix to these problems was to get white people to see the humanity in Black people, I forced myself to dive deeper into his theory. I began to see value in the words he pulled from Cornell West and bell hooks, yet I still felt something was missing. Nevertheless, I soon understood love's place as a reconceptualization of social justice within education, and what Brooks called love was actually reforming these spaces of whiteness by affirming and centering the narratives of marginalized individuals. By centering their experiences, he hoped to co-create rehumanizing practices that heal and restore (Brooks, 2017).

His framework allowed the opportunity to critically reflect and redefine the educational system by removing acts of violence against the oppressed and normalizing the action of loving through justice (Brooks, 2017). The demonized demanded that love and its practices publicly demonstrate fairness by creating an educational system dependent on wholeness through this concept of rehumanizing. Shifting to a system built on wholeness changes the premise from a primarily intellectual focus to one focused on body, mind, and soul.

Additionally, when added with hooks' (2006) *Love As a Practice for Freedom*, the notion of love as liberation helps shift Brooks' theory from an inconceivable utopia to one that presses towards liberation. hooks' theory points out that removing love from our systems dooms our freedom as a society and upholds communities born of oppression. Therefore, love acts as resistance to combat systematic oppression and our liberation from these systems by designing spaces of wholeness (hooks, 2006).

Codesigning spaces of wholeness takes acknowledging the broken things, the missed opportunities, the alienation that Black and Brown students face within the academy's walls. Therefore, when designing our space, I realized that my institution could not skip over the mistreatment and silencing that bore these sanctuary spaces. We must also recognize that while these sanctuary spaces are often created out of burden, they have the additional role of being spaces of healing and comfort. Therefore, it must be understood that through the creation of these experiences, there is still a need to continue forward with elements of resistance and safety. It is crucial to acknowledge the need for affinity by uplifting their voices while creating an environment that incorporates each student's experiences. Our experiences allowed us to push for more from

our institution. Our resistance gave us the power to use our voices to change our classes, including adding literature reflecting our experiences. We also used it to push into conversations at the university level, allowing our works to reach other students and seek change at the policy level.

THE SANCTUARY IS A VIBE; THE RESILIENCY IS A BURDEN

The sanctuary we designed sought to provide protection and healing from the inequities we faced as Black students at a predominately white institution. Our sanctuary acted as a place for refuge—a place for us to combat the invalidations we had experienced. Each semester we reminded our institution that its dominant narrative could not control or erase our lived experiences. We fought back using the stories of Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Gwendolyn Brooks. We added to the literature and discussion by incorporating Black theorists using their words to support us as we dismantled each brick used in oppression—the work fell on our backs. We carried a torch with the hope that no one behind us had to face the same.

Through our resilience, we created what can be regarded as resistant capital. Resistant capital acts as a non-dominant cultural capital that captures the perspectives, preferences, and resources valued among groups of color (Morales, 2021). This kind of capital acts as a counternarrative to the received mainstream messaging. In addition, it also creates a space to draw from this capital to develop strategies to navigate racialized experiences within external settings. Our resistant capital commanded justice through centering the representation of our marginalized experiences; however, this resistance capital came at a cost. The burden of proving our experiences relied on our mental and physical capacity from week to week. Each semester, we had to decide whether or not we would just keep our heads down and get out with our degrees in hand or fight while trying not to drown. The Black tax, our skin color forced us into a role where we were in a daily battle to prove our value, which in turn caused us to work twice as hard to succeed (Burrows, 2016). While our white counterparts focused on education and life balances, this environment forced us to hold onto all of that while combating a culture that did not see us. Sometimes it acted as minor scratches to our confidence; sometimes, our invisibility acted as large stones that drew blood; in either instance, they caused harm and pain.

For example, I remember the moments that led to me becoming the *scary* Black woman for my cohort, the moments where their silence spoke louder than my calls for action against the microaggressions I had endured from semester to semester. In those moments, I noticed a change in their disposition when I brought up race and the issues we faced as Black learners in a predominantly white cohort. I felt shut out outside of class; it was often rare to get responses from questions I posed in our GroupMe, so I left the virtual space. In class, their stoic expressions and lack of engagement on topics of race created a space that felt toxic. Quickly I went from being a tolerated Black face on the screen to being viewed as intimidating, aggressive, and combative. The program's administration stepped in to ease the situation but only made it worse by sharing the thoughts of our cohort and how many felt they had to be silent for fear of being viewed as a racist by the four seemingly angry Black women. The shift in my character depiction made the burden of being resilient even harder. Before, I fought consciously understanding that bias existed in this space, but to become aware that my environment was being altered by the fears of whiteness

created a suffocating effect that I did not plan for. That suffocation made me realize that while creating a sanctuary gave us safety together, we still had to go outside.

Therefore, though our sanctuary had created a vibe, our resiliency furthered our burden and often kept us feeling tired. What I wondered most is, what happens to a space that garnered freedom and, in the same vein, still carried with its limitations? How were we indeed free to succeed when the ownership of fighting was upon our backs? How was our commitment to social justice within education impacting those behind us?

The literature written on sanctuary spaces supported that these spaces are necessary to recharge and realign with the goals of the marginalized. Grier-Reed (2010) provided the following logic to the creation of sanctuaries, naming that:

for Black students to (a) make sense of their experiences on-campus and determine whether a racial microaggression has even occurred, (b) find support and validation for their experiential reality, and (c) identify alternative ways for responding to such incidents (p. 183).

That sense of validation refuels the marginalized and mirrors many outward movements from which it derives inspiration. For example, I believe that outer resistance movements such as Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName have been born from spaces like these. Both movements were born from Black women that saw a need to shed light on the senseless killings of Black people at the hands of police. Intertwined activities like these support each other by sharing the burden of proof and creating a sense of validation and community. Therefore, sanctuary spaces like mine find inspiration to push forward from movements like these. For what would we be without social justice and the frameworks that support its work? I have found that our resistance is inspired by Black and Brown authors, frameworks, and social justice movements. These resistances motivated us to combat the lack of diversity in representation within the curriculum and class setting by binding our narratives to the university and ensuring that the erasure of our narratives will never occur again.

CENTERING BLACKNESS IN EDUCATION THROUGH LOVE

When writing this reflection, I wondered what I could say to those experiencing the same? What hope could I share? What message could they take from this? I hope that you read this and understand that I firmly believe that racism within higher education should not be met with a focus on closure. Instead, it should highlight the experiences and work with the impacted community to enact change. I also hope that you take away from this that my Blackness, as a whole, is non-negotiable. To interact with me is to interact with my perspective as a Black woman. That perspective is based on the refusal to negotiate my identity to fit into an archaic system. To change me would mean that I must acknowledge a flaw in myself based on my Blackness, and there is none. The flaw is in an education system that has created structures that do not include me while expecting me to accept its toleration of my existence. To accept a system based on tolerance of my existence places dominance and fear at the center of its structure (hooks, 1994; Pennant, 2021). Instead, I chose liberation, and to gain liberation is to choose love.

Incorporating the idea of love requires those in power to look beyond their biases and see the humanity needed to resist the urge to erase the narratives of marginalized individuals. By choosing love, I combine the concepts of bell hooks' *Love as a Practice of Freedom* and Brooks's *Critical Theory of Love* to unify with the notion of liberation through the ethics of love. The central thought of these theories is that love links to our understanding, our growth, and ultimately our liberation from inequitable systems.

Therefore, while these systems attempt to seduce us into believing that love is an unnecessary tool, I value its worth by centering love at the core of my resistance. This extends the level of care towards others and allows for a nurturing impact that furthers their spiritual and emotional growth. Without this level of compassion, there is no true sustainable transformation. Therefore, in addition to creating space for dialogues and narratives of the unheard, I seek to combine the need to develop support mechanisms to generate reconciliation, transformation, and ultimately liberation. In turn, this helps free the oppressed while also removing the self-induced illusion of racial utopia (Brooks, 2017; hooks, 1994).

Accordingly, radical change must focus on utilizing love to empower minoritized voices by creating raw commentary on the societal treatment of these groups within a structure that has created illusions through color-blind and racial utopian concepts. In other words, if love is freedom and freedom is humanity, then humanity is the concept of illustrative justice in real-time. When justice is in real-time, it lacks a need for performative declarations of racial unity; instead, it places a shift to eradicate blind spots and shine a light on the dominance of white supremacy. It looks like an understanding and acceptance of one's place in subjugating another to oppression and an unwavering need to replace those oppressive actions with actions that create wholeness for both parties involved.

Centering wholeness offers a holistic approach to the reformation of our institutions. It embeds within the need for authenticity and belongingness. It survives on the need for differences to be interwoven into the narrative to strengthen inclusionary efforts. In other words, the environment thrives off of those narratives and cannot survive without them.

CONCLUSION

Centering students of marginalized identities within higher education is more than just listening to their stories. It seeks to understand these students are a part of its institution, and their experiences help to shape its narrative. Therefore, there must be an alignment with the institution and impacted population; then and only then can liberation be created. I aspire that higher education will begin to acknowledge and work with these populations to dismantle their oppressive behaviors.

I also hope that they recognize that our resistance is imperative to moving the needle forward to create restorative justice. Additionally, our sanctuary spaces will continue to mirror the external social justice movements around us and continuously incorporate ways for Black students to hold space to learn from each other, stand together and heal. While we are fighting, I hope we also

continually lean into each other with trust and honesty at the center. Furthermore, as Black students, I hope we can realize that resiliency is tiring and that it is okay to use these spaces for both the fight and the upliftment of each other. Gwendolyn Brooks once said, "We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond" (Brooks, 1983, p. 19). We are all connected to the liberation of our society, and if one group faces injustices, then we all run the risk of falling victim to inequity.

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To cite this article:

Sylvester, D. (2022). Against All Odds: Reflections from a “Scary” Black Woman. *Dialogues in Social Justice*, 7(1), Article R1337.