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# The Banality of Liberal White Supremacy: Black Women leaders, Administrative Marginalization, and the Professional Toll of Anti-Blackness

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> *Sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognize your power—not because they don't see it, but because they see it and they don't want it to exist. (attributed to bell hooks)*

The public resignation letter of Lesley Lokko, the Scottish-Ghanaian architect who left the deanship of the Spitzer School of Architecture at City College in New York after less than a year, generated a media firestorm. In an explanation of why she resigned, she outlined her limited tangible support, the "absolutely crippling" workload that resulted, and how - despite living in South Africa - "the lack of respect and empathy for Black people, especially Black women [in the US], caught me off guard" ("Lesley Lokko Explains Her Resignation," 2020, para. 4). She ended her poignant farewell by describing her resignation as a "profound act of self-preservation" ("Lesley Lokko Explains Her Resignation," 2020, para. 4). Lokko and I hail from differing backgrounds and disciplines, but the emotions she identified as a Black woman leader resonated across this divide. Her declaration regarding the diminished respect and care shown to Black women in leadership roles was something I understood deeply. As a Black woman working in the field of adult education, I also faced anti-black racism and marginalization, an experience that was further complicated by the fact that the adult education field prides itself on its commitment to cultural diversity and social justice (Brookfield, 2020). Furthermore, I also ended up leaving my leadership position after I was offered the opportunity to work in an environment where I felt I would be less marginalized.

Progressive organizations with predominantly white leadership structures often welcome women of color as leaders - at least initially. Indeed, there is generally a honeymoon period where her education, insight, social consciousness, and/or social justice commitments are valued; it is clear to her at that point that the assets she brings to the workplace are recognized. After the novelty wears off - especially if she begins to challenge the white privilege and cultural insularity reinforced by the status quo - there is a shift, as frustration and defensiveness among white leadership and staff build up. Even as she tries to work within established structures to initiate productive dialogues or promote necessary and systemic change, she finds herself moving from "pet to threat" (Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, n.d; Stallings, 2020). The result is resignation or even firing, but before that happens, she is administratively marginalized, and subjected to forms of racialized mistreatment that challenge and undermine her leadership role (Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, n.d; Stallings, 2020). What becomes clear, is that while an organization may be comfortable condemning acts of racist and sexist injustice in the larger society, they are decidedly less open to focusing a critical lens on the racism and misogynoir that is being perpetuated in their workplace (Chavers, 2020). Furthermore, in the non-profit world that encompasses much of the adult education field, white people see themselves as liberal or progressive, allowing their explicit and more covert acts of racism to be minimized or labeled as harmlessly unintentional.

The liberal white supremacists that work in adult education programs are not likely to be found among the rage-filled, face-painted mobs of the January 6th Capitol Insurrection (Mogelson, 2021). They are white people who found the Capitol attacks abhorrent, who attend Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests (with their children), and watch political commentator Rachel Maddow unpack the injustices perpetrated by their more overtly racist relations with anger and sadness. The dangerous side of this seeming benevolence, however, is often exposed in workplaces where Black women are in positions of leadership and responsibility, where the timeworn hierarchy of Black person in need–white person as benefactor/savior is disrupted. The racism and anti-blackness experienced by Black women leaders are mostly covert and situated alongside a well-meaningness that elides or minimizes negative intent. However, over time, the routine racialized harms and the persistent pricks of anti-black disregard (microaggressions) are encoded in the body as trauma (Menakem, 2017). The concomitant administrative marginalization, which limits Black women's access to the knowledge, networks, and support they need to be successful as leaders, ultimately pushes many out (Ray, 2019; Winters, 2020).

## BLACK WOMEN LEADING: MAKING OUR WAY ON THE FRINGES

> *Those who practice [racism] can operate without constraints, other than those that society decides to impose. But the targets of their hatred must move through the world limited by sometimes invisible or unpredictable restrictions on their movements, their behavior, and their words.* (Simmons, 2020, para. 5)

My entrée into the world of adult education is because of Black women, and in particular, the care and attention of one phenomenal Black woman administrator, Mrs. May Baker [a pseudonym]. She took me under her wing and inspired me to create curricula that was grounded in students' lives. The classes I taught were filled with mostly Black women, and I

wanted the classroom to be a place where Black women were centered and lifted up. Many of the women in my classes were traumatized by a public K-12 system that did not value their communities, commitments, or needs. I remember one student telling me: "If I had this class [when I was younger] …I probably would have took education more seriously. [Learning black history] makes you want to like maybe, be more, take a stand, become someone" (Jones, 2019). Being educated in a space where your history, your humanity, is rarely if ever acknowledged leads to disengagement and despair. I wanted my classroom to be a site of connection, compassion, and joy. Despite her meaningful presence, Mrs. Baker was an administrative rarity – a pattern I saw repeated elsewhere. Indeed, a certain hierarchy seemed to exist: a Black (or Brown) economically disadvantaged majority of students seeking services, predominantly white administrators (and board members) in decision-making roles, often interfacing primarily with one another, and/or the well-connected white donors they cultivated.

Anti-blackness and misogynoir, a form of specialized hatred and prejudice directed toward Black women, shape responses to Black women's leadership (Assare, 2020). Anti-blackness is embedded in epistemological frameworks that deny the humanity of Black people, a position that is linked to the history of chattel slavery in the US and the literal and symbolic violence that continues to be sanctioned against Black people (Dumas, 2016; Wilderson, 2020). Living as a Black person in the US is informed by the painful reality of not mattering, of demands for justice being seen as too much, of the possibility of death whether you fight back or not (Crenshaw, 2020; Ross, 2020). Navigating the workplace as a Black woman leader is challenging when so much of your energy is spent managing and resisting practices that hint at the possibility of your erasure. The administrative marginalization of Black women leaders diminishes the authority that comes with the leadership role, defines the places and times when Black women leaders are perceived positively by an organization, and limits the access Black women leaders have to key stakeholders. Under these conditions, the old standby of "just do the work" can only keep someone on track for so long, after a while the cost paid physically and emotionally becomes too high (Biu, 2020).

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Black women leaders navigate a racialized, professional liminality in the adult education field. As Black people (and women) they are often situated as recipients of support, while leadership signifies a person with decision-making authority. Black women are also defined against an idealized, white-centered conception of professionalism that constrains the full expression of themselves and their capacities (Collins, 2000; Stallings, 2020). The risk of being resented increases when Black women become leaders at a time of significant challenge (e.g., diminished funding). They are more likely to not only be perceived negatively but to face more severe consequences if they make unpopular decisions or mistakes (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). There is also the reality that if a Black woman riles white leadership, she may make it harder for other Black women who end up at the organization to get what they need to succeed (Hideg & Wilson, 2020; Rendon, 2021). Notions of respectability that highlight Black women's educational achievements and their "strength" do not protect them from questions about their competency (Assare, 2020; Collins, 2000). Black women leaders are reminded, in ways both large and small,

that being polite and/or gracious, is not enough. I remember spending hours drafting a (probably too) cautious email in response to a difficult meeting about staffing issues and being told by a white colleague that it "didn't seem collegial." Even after working on the email for hours, choosing my words extremely carefully, and getting feedback from others before I sent it out, it was perceived as alienating.

The "loving, knowing ignorance" of white women's responses to Black women leaders reveals how anti-blackness intersects with liberal white supremacy and gender (Ortega, 2006). This is a stance that seemingly embraces feminism, cultural diversity, and the inclusion of women of color while maintaining a positionality that centers the experiences and concerns of white women (Ortega, 2006). More specifically, solidarity and advocacy with other women focus on addressing oppression (s) enacted by (white) men and limited assessment of how racism and white supremacy play out in their interactions with women of color (Moon & Holling, 2020). Exclusionary meetings initiated by and for white women – often outside the awareness of the Black woman leader – are a reflection of this. There is no ill will intended since they "just want to talk." In my own experience, two white women colleagues made an executive decision without consulting me that was a stunning act of insubordination. Even though one woman expressed remorse and even seemed shocked by what she had done, the behavior revealed how easily they aligned themselves to undermine a Black woman's authority and assert their power.

The constant sidelining leads Black women to question leadership practices that the research literature and their own experience have shown to be effective ways to engage and support colleagues (Bailey, 2016). I am an active listener, I am compassionate, humble, take the time to acknowledge the contributions of my staff, and constantly seek out opportunities for professional development (Hagel, 2021). I also always took copious notes; felt I had to have responses to questions prepared and did breathing exercises before meetings so my voice wouldn't shake when I was forced to respond to comments like "racism doesn't exist here." These were protective, trauma responses. When the need to be seen as diverse might impact a program's bottom line or how they are perceived by the broader community, however, the Black women leader can suddenly find herself center stage. I was asked to take on a role of prominence during an event that focused on "diversity and social justice," but was excluded from the lineup when the emphasis was celebrating students' achievements. Similar symbolic visibility was bestowed when for a grant application, we needed to document that women of color (two) had a role in the organization's leadership.

Embracing a Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) approach where the focus is more on the diversity and the inclusion, and not the equity or justice only reinforces the challenges Black women leaders face (Stewart, 2017; Winters, 2020). An equity-centered vision of DEI includes dismantling barriers and uprooting attitudes that lead to the administrative marginalization of Black women. Focusing only on who is in the room will result in Black women being hired (especially in times like these when there is heightened concern diversity matters), but not being able to fully embrace the leadership role. A change in optics is a good start, but that alone does not address racist behaviors or structures, or guarantee

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accountability when harm occurs (Stewart, 2017). In situations like these, Black women leaders are at risk of being silenced and dismissed, especially if they are the only people truly invested in acknowledging or initiating difficult conversations about liberal white supremacy and anti-blackness (Rendon, 2021). I was literally shushed by a white colleague when I (mistakenly) opened up about some of the issues I was facing being a Black, female leader in an organization where almost all of the senior administrators were white. "Don't you say that!" this person said, listing my occupational experiences and academic achievements as proof that I had been able to overcome any obstacles in my way and suggesting that I was making excuses. The painful irony is that my achievements did not protect me from being excluded from conversations and committees where my perspective – as a leader, educator and/or as a Black woman – should have been solicited. It also did not stop a white colleague from refusing to acknowledge me as their supervisor.

Though the journey has been difficult, I am grateful for the lens that being a Black woman brings to the work I do. Being on the margins – culturally and professionally – is not always about isolation and darkness, especially when you make use of the intersectional wisdom, experiential insight, and sense of fortitude the margins can produce (hooks, 1989). This type of vision honors the range of Black women's capacities, which only makes the denigration of who and what Black women leaders represent so frustrating (Rendon, 2021). What Black women can bring to organizations as leaders is potentiated when their humanity is acknowledged, and when it is racism and anti-blackness that are vilified and seen as problematic, not Black women (Perry, 2020; Hideg & Wilson, 2020). I was always uplifted by the relationships I was able to craft with colleagues - white and of color - who were willing to think expansively about me and my role. They were the people who helped me become a better leader, and I am grateful that they existed in a place that could feel so isolating.

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## CONFRONTING ANTI-BLACKNESS: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLACK WOMEN LEADERS (AND EVERYONE) TO THRIVE

The fact that adult education programs serve some of the most economically disadvantaged and marginalized people in the US – frontline workers who have risked their lives (and died) in the pandemic, poor Black and Brown women who must contend with intersectional oppression(s), communities of color with limited access to sociopolitical power – makes a commitment to anti-blackness an imperative. Programs must do more than release statements of solidarity, convene reading groups or apologize for "unintentional" slights. Simply recognizing the syndemic of COVID-19, racism, and anti-blackness is not enough (Freeman, 2020). Indeed, these responses do not always recognize the harm caused or hold people accountable. If programs are committed to seeing Black women leaders flourish, they must *listen rather than hear*. In my own experience, the struggle to be listened to has been a source of intense frustration. Trying to talk around and through the loudest or most esteemed voices in the room (older, white, male) is

draining whether you are an introvert or an extrovert. Hearing is a detached act of discernment, listening honors the nuance and context of what is being said (Tomkin, 2020). Listening means that you are not focused on making an immediate, often defensive, response – that you take the time to process and reflect before you provide feedback (Biu, 2020; Verschelden, 2020). Listening also allows you to immerse yourself in counter stories that challenge your conceptions of Black women, leadership, and ambition. If white educators can read, teach and quote from the works of Black women who are ancestors (e.g., Toni, Maya, Audre, bell), they can take the time to listen to the Black women who are living, breathing people in front of them (Scott, 2020).

The *reading (and writing) that some white administrators are doing is only the first step, following this up with action is imperative*. Reading and self-analysis that is not accompanied or followed by behaviors that illustrate a clear commitment to anti-racism, confronting anti-blackness, and undoing white privilege, will not result in lasting change (Darder & Mirón, 2006; Whitley, 2020). The adult education field's response to the pandemic has highlighted its ability to innovate, even when significantly challenged, and a similar response is required when it comes to ending institutional oppression (Belzer et. al 2020; Tomkin, 2020). Program statements outlining an organization's commitment to "diversity and inclusion" should include a detailed set of follow-up actions (Rogers, 2020; Whitley, 2020). Engaging in activities of change first and reporting out later also disrupts the white savior narrative and activism for public consumption (Palmer & Helton, 2020). Let a plan of action drive the critical analysis, "courageous conversations," and social change efforts. Doing the work also means white people should be prepared to use their status and privilege to call out anti-blackness and racism in their institutions (Brookfield, 2020). This type of labor must go beyond the classroom – into their homes and communities – if it is to have an impact beyond the generation that is currently in the field.

Long-term organizational transformation *requires radical self-assessment and accountability measures* which includes unpacking organizational histories of anti-blackness to both interrogate and address the preservation of white majority leadership structures (Stewart, 2017). Centering equity and justice means programs do more than create a DEI position (or add that type of work to a Black woman leaders' duties) (Verschelden, 2020; Tomkin, 2020). Future-focused questions might assess what needs to happen for a program to be led by people who reflect the cultural and racial diversity of the student body – a conversation that should include students and identify an authentic pathway for their leadership. Black women who are leaders must not be the only ones bringing up issues of race and racism, and they should not face silencing because white colleagues have the privilege to deny that racism exists or minimize racist actions by focusing on intent (i.e., "They didn't mean it") (Kendi, 2021). White women, in particular, might benefit from conversations that explore how anti-blackness squashes opportunities for revolutionary solidarity with Black women and limits their own professional growth (Moon, & Holling, 2020; Ortega, 2006). Acknowledging harm and outlining consequences for engaging in discriminatory behavior is also key. At this moment, white colleagues must be willing to hold one another accountable, whether through program-centered restorative work, or more responsive HR policies (Biu, 2020; Melaku et al., 2020).

Anti-blackness and misogynoir are not new issues for Black women leaders and *supporting their growth and healing* require that organizations recognize the traumatizing impact of these issues on their professional and personal lives (Akpan, 2020; Chavers, 2020). Black women leaders'

responses to anti-blackness and administrative marginalization reflect a need to protect themselves and manage personal and professional demands. Post-traumatic growth often means "bloom where you're planted, and use the shit for fertilizer" (Halliday, 2020) – a way of coping that tries to balance stress and opportunity. While Black women should not be expected to expose their pain to get the support they need as leaders, collectively acknowledging the reality of their trauma can nurture a humanizing love that enriches everyone in the organization (Johnson et al., 2019; Magliore, 2020). The result is a community of care that is not only trauma-informed but healing-centered, a place that allows everyone to stay connected and hopeful about the work they do (Winters 2020). This is a hope that lives alongside the circumstances that continue to impact the daily lives of Black people in this country, and respects hopes that we may not share for the future (Larsen, 2020). Ultimately, Black women leaders may decide to move on, not out of frustration, but because their ambition and passions push them to take on new challenges. This is not abandonment but evolution. As Black women, they should not be forced to put their dreams on hold.

Adult education programs must make it their mission to *collaborate and engage with the larger social justice movements centering Black people* to highlight the systemic and structural nature of anti-blackness. Predominantly white-led organizations committed to rooting out anti-black racism will need to embrace collective accountability and link internal and external movements for change (Winters, 2020). The disrespect Black women experience in the larger society mirrors what Black women leaders face inside some adult education programs (Scholars for Social Justice, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the Black community, in particular, and reinforced the importance of aligning literacy efforts with social justice-informed activism around issues like health care; public schools; the environment; and criminal justice. Leadership in this work should be centered at the grassroots level, with adult education organizations working in coalition with and supporting Black-led groups (Literacy Assistance Center, 2020; Ransby, 2020)

The whitelash against the "racial reckoning" prompted by the brutal killings of Black people at the hands of the police, highlights the dominating force of denial and lack of accountability in the fight against racism and white supremacy in America (Kendi, 2021). In the field of adult education, we are at risk of responding to liberal white supremacy – which may seem less threatening – in the same way. What is required now are honest conversations about what truly recognizing the humanity of Black people, and Black women leaders, in particular, looks like. Shallow exchanges led by the well-intentioned will never take the place of relinquishing unearned privileges, acknowledging the harm of anti-black racism, and agitating for systemic change alongside Black colleagues as they fight for their very lives. I was recently reminded by a friend that I entered this field because I truly believe that adults can learn and that education can transform circumstances. If we commit to nurturing adult education programs where the fullness and possibility of Black women leaders is celebrated, the benefits produced will enrich all of us (Taylor, 2020).

*The whitelash against the racial reckoning… highlights the dominating force of denial and lack of accountability in the fight against racism and White supremacy in America (Kendi, 2021)*

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* NOTE While the author uses the term "liberal white supremacy," it is important to clarify that this usage does not draw from Beeman's (2022 https://www.ugapress.org/9780820362274/liberal-white-supremacy/) established framework. Here, the term functions purely as a descriptive phrase to articulate the author's own experiences with anti-Blackness perpetuated in organizations perceived as progressive or liberal. The author respectfully acknowledges this distinction, and Beeman's original work.