Research Articles

We, too, are America: The Erasure of Racialized Faculty in Higher Education

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"We, too, sing America"
By Langston Hughes

We are the darker brothers.
They send us to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But we laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
We'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to us,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful we Are
And be ashamed—

We, too, are America.

Langston Hughes

Erasure (2019), according to the Webster Dictionary, is defined as the removal of all traces of matter; in essence, its obliteration. One becomes invisible and, when this occurs, one does not take up space in people's minds, hearts, nor economic, historical, political or social concerns (Sissel & Sheared, 2001). Almost twenty years ago, Guy (2002) pointed out the need for culturally relevant education in adult education programs, unpacking ways in which white culture was consistently privileged in higher education. Unfortunately, not much has changed. Erasure of racialized faculty and students continue on a number of levels and ways in universities. In this article, I describe my own story of erasure as a racialized faculty member moving through the tenure and promotion process and address how emblematic this is of the ways in which whiteness gets manifested in adult higher educational spaces.

Chronicling this story is an effort to contribute to a sustainable dialogue centered on fostering racially just democratic spaces and practices. In addition, this narrative aims to support activism and resistance in racial justice struggles. The goal is to contribute to a collective conversation grounded in deconstructing regimes of truth, to engage in resisting and contesting sacred truths around whiteness, and to challenge higher education culture in an effort to transform the word and the world. By remapping my tenure and everyday lived reality, I situate my experiences within a larger framework of race and gender within higher education in order to explore the landmines that face racialized faculty within the academy. The study unpacks barriers (visible and not) that can undermine all newer faculty, but especially newer racialized faculty.

WHITENESS AND THE UNIVERSITY

Frankenberg (1997) describes Whiteness as multidimensional: It is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege; a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. "To name Whiteness is to refer to a set of relations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and intrinsically linked to dynamic relations of White racial domination" (Frankenberg, 1997). This is important in this study because higher education institutions in North America are essentially white spaces with faculty and students of color continuing to be interlopers.

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Bonilla Silva (2015) reminds us that white oriented and led institutions reproduce whiteness through their symbols and traditions, while simultaneously passing as neutral spaces free of race or color. Because diversity initiatives do not address the underlying fundamental whiteness of university policies and practices, the everyday grammar of whiteness remains unaddressed and intact (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). In institutions with overwhelmingly white faculty, there is a perpetuation of pedagogies rooted in white liberal frameworks in which the radical remains untouched (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Universities cannot claim to value diverse faculty without changing fundamental processes. In the absence of change, such claims are meaningless and insidious. This continues to support the erasure of racialized faculty.

Whiteness continues to be deeply worshipped in the academy (Lazos, 2012). In 2013, 84% of full time professors were White with 58% being male and 26% female, 4% Black, 3% Hispanic, and 9% Asian or Pacific Islander (NCES, 2015). Universities continue to have predominately White leadership teams at 73%. When faculty of color find themselves in the academy according to Johnson-Bailey (2012), it is often in an environment that is filled with microaggressions, unspoken hostility, and a landscape where the odds are stacked against them.

Because of the weight of histories of structural racism and legacies and manifestations of those histories, faculty of color bear heavier burdens (Brookfield, 2018; Johnson-Bailey, 2012; Ramdeholl & Jones, 2018).

In addition to the profoundly heavy teaching load at teaching institutions (such as mine), there are also the invisible aspects of workload which never get considered. This includes the emotional caretaking and labor regarding students who are in crisis. The demographic who makes up the majority of students at the SUNY institution in which I work are marginalized with many living in various states of precarity. Their crises usually require more or less immediate responses. This work is not seen, acknowledged, or credited anywhere on any workload checklist

Much has been written about ways in which different standards exist for racialized and non-racialized faculty and also how racialized faculty have their credibility questioned on a daily basis. For faculty of color, this culture is daunting, toxic, and traumatizing and informed by whiteness. From students accusing these faculty of "sounding" angry, to being mistaken for a secretary (because you do not look like the professor), to being questioned by security when leaving campus with a computer (J. Johnson–Bailey, personal communication, 2012) or to be asked by a student (as I was over summer) "why I would want to see her, a white woman, fail"? "What exactly did I have against her personally"? The list of psychic assaults is virtually endless. At the institution in which I work, the number of racialized tenured faculty is abysmal but this is no different from other academic institutions. This means, writings by racialized scholars often get analyzed through frameworks of whiteness (Cooper, 2018). Martin (2019) points out that white male centered scholarship being valued over and above non-white scholars is only one reason why people of color do not see their future within the academy. The unspoken norm is often a Eurocentric canon with theorists of color placed alongside non-Eurocentric, Indigenous, and other scholars of color, which ensures these theorists remain in a position of "other…in other words, the exotic version placed next to "legitimate" bodies of knowledge. With certain bodies of knowledge being privileged, those who teach and research from those "more legitimized" perspectives are tacitly approved thus ensuring replication for hiring, pedagogical decisions, etc. (Brookfield, 2018; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) For people of color to stay is to move forward in an environment that was not created with them in mind (Ahmed, 2012; J. Johnson–Bailey, personal communication, 2012). This piece is not intended to portray all experiences of people of color as monolithic but recognizes that the academy is situated in a history of white male privilege and continues to be a space where brown and black faculty face numerous microaggressions every day (Brookfield, 2018; J. Johnson–Bailey, personal communication, 2012).

MY JOURNEY

In 2009, I began my current position at a public state university in a tenure track position. Before joining the academy, I was a community based adult literacy practitioner for nearly two decades where naming/speaking truth to power and working in solidarity with others were the foundations that shaped my everyday reality. One of the first things I noticed was how few faculty of color worked at the institution. I had read about the low number of racialized faculty in higher education but had not expected to notice it so immediately. In the last eight years, all of the faculty in my Center who did not receive tenure have been racialized faculty. Though discussions centering race do not occur in overt ways at my Center, it could be argued that expressions like, "he/she just doesn't fit in" might be a veiled way of alluding to race. There is also a certain false color blindness which operates, serving to preserve dominant interests.

Tenure

Soon after I began my position, I was asked to be part of a team developing a new graduate degree and then to coordinate that program. I did not realize at the time that when junior faculty are appointed to leadership positions, some senior faculty members become increasingly threatened. I taught four courses at that time and I was up until after midnight most evenings responding to student work. It is fairly unusual for a junior

faculty member to teach so much. In addition, I was charged with coordinating and staffing the new program, developing courses, and responding to program queries from prospective students, etc. These are significant responsibilities for any new faculty. Without realizing it, I was being set up to fail. I brought it up repeatedly with my Chair and while she was sympathetic, no extra supports or resources were allocated. At the time, the program was completely undeveloped.

I heard repeated murmurs from certain senior faculty that one needed to be part of the institution for at least 10 years in order to understand how it really worked. The subtext was I did not have the experience required to be the program coordinator. One senior faculty member even said to me that she would coordinate the program for 10 years and keep the seat warm for me. On another occasion, after asking a senior faculty member to complete a simple program related task, I instead received an email with 15 questions that had nothing to do with the task. I ended up completing the task myself. It was a classic case of bullying a vulnerable faculty member without tenure.

The former dean who appointed me had been fired and was replaced by a dean who had never been a faculty member. For idiosyncratic and arbitrary reasons such as the focus of my scholarship being too narrow, the new dean did not recommend me for tenure. This dean was also closely aligned with one of the senior faculty members most antagonistic towards me. The dean's recommendation went against the faculty vote. Usually the two are in alignment. One aspect of the process in the institution in which I work is that the candidate up for review leaves the room while others discuss their work after having read the candidate's file. It could either be a lovefest or a verbal slaying. I had witnessed both. After various people speak in favor or against the particular candidate's request for reappointment or continuing appointment, each faculty member votes. After which, the candidate returns to the room. In many cases, faculty only meet at annual or center meetings yet they vote on colleagues whose work they hardly know.

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In my situation, as reported by colleagues, during my absence the one senior faculty who was most antagonistic towards me spoke for 15 minutes about why I should not receive tenure. One of the reasons was that this was a teaching university and I should have had fewer publications (somehow implying my focus was not on teaching instead of realizing that my scholarship grew out of my practice). Despite this, the majority of faculty voted in my favor. As I walked back into the room, no one would meet my eye but a few friends patted me on the shoulder. Everyone looked drained. I felt weary from the inside out and disconnected from my body. I spent much of that weekend trying to regain some sense of re-centering. I wrote a response to the dean's recommendation. Other faculty rallied around me, writing letters of support. This all then went to the Academic Personnel Committee (APC), a college wide committee, who voted in my favor. I also contacted the union who while very supportive was unable to do much.

Ultimately, the provost and president overturned the dean's recommendation and I received tenure but was denied promotion (which I have since applied for and received). However, the process had taken its toll. The support of my allies was invaluable throughout and I could not have walked this journey without their comradeship and solidarity. Finding allies in this process is necessary. I also sought the support of faculty of color in other institutions since I am the only faculty of color in the program in which I am teaching. These conversations allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my reality. Many of the faculty of color with whom I spoke were engaged in some variation of the same script I was experiencing at their own universities.

Silence, Complicity, and Bullying

Some points of my narrative have implications for other faculty of color worth mentioning. For example, after not supporting my tenure, my then dean burst into tears at one of our meetings. Much has been written about ways in which tears of white women are used to distract and deflect harm inflicted on people of color (Ahmed, 2012, Cooper, 2018; Hamad, 2018). Emotions of some groups are constantly privileged, and given space (Taylor, 2018) while other groups are not allowed to display vulnerability or fear. For women of color, much of the time, there is no space to express feelings. This ensures our humanity is never fully seen or felt. Also, as human beings, we are denied the freedom to access/demonstrate emotions such as apprehension, fragility, or vulnerability. The trope of anger and black women has been a powerful tool to dehumanize and silence black women (but also other women of color) for decades (Cooper, 2018; Hamad, 2018). For decades racialized women have been expected to caretake the emotions of dominant groups, even though those groups have inflicted damage upon their psyches/bodies (Hamad, 2018). In that moment, in my meeting with my then dean, I was no exception, being expected to forgive and caretake.

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Another point worth noting is the ways in which senior white faculty who bully faculty of color often are supported by certain administrators. Academic bullying is a daily issue for many racialized faculty (Ahmed, 2012). Often if one attempts to complain or explain their situation, they are met with silence. This is one way of silencing others. One might choose to drop the complaint because they feel vulnerable and unprotected. The problems continue and get reproduced through the maintenance of silence (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The injured party is asked to move on and get over what for them is not over. For me, maintaining distance from this senior faculty member was the only way I could go forward. This was not a conscious decision but one made out of self-preservation. For this decision, I was perceived by some as refusing to move forward. Ahmed (2012) points out that not supporting those who have complained about racism can lead to being rewarded by the academy. So faculty always need to look at what is being promoted and for whom, and at what cost to whom? Oluo (2018) reminds us, racism is not necessarily an intention or feeling but a system that benefits some and erases others.

Student Evaluations and Tenure

Student evaluations represent part of that system. For those outside and inside of academia, tenure and promotion are mysterious processes, arbitrary and deeply politicized. Many who have navigated this process speak about how psychically drained they felt during and after it was all over. In the institution where I work, in order to receive tenure, five requirements by which all faculty must succeed are: university service, mastery of subject matter, scholarship, teaching effectiveness, and continuing growth. These requirements are all subjective to the extent that they are interpreted differently by different deans and administrators and the standards are not applied the same to each faculty. Some faculty's journey through tenure receive little to no critical scrutiny, while for others it is the equivalent of facing a gauntlet. Though literature (Lazos, 2012; Sensoy & Di Angelo, 2017) warned against the very limited nature of student evaluations, this is the way teaching effectiveness is mainly assessed in many teaching institutions. For example, one dean might place heavy emphasis on student evaluations, considering anything less than 4 out of 5 problematic. To another dean, this is a non-issue. Lazos (2012) discusses ways student evaluations can be potentially retaliatory, inaccurate snapshots of one's practice. Universities can use these lower scores as a tool to discipline and punish.

Further Tagamori and Bishop (1995) determined that the questions on evaluations are too ambiguous so one cannot determine exactly what is being asked. They found that 76% of the questions contained subjective terms and over 90% of them did not correlate with classroom teaching behavior. These evaluations, in other words, measure students' subjective reactions at the particular moment they are polled (Feldman, 1989). In addition, Williams and Ceci (1997) determined that charisma or likeability also impacted student ratings and ratings were impacted by what students believe they are learning from a professor but not what they actually learn. In various studies, being described as an extrovert (McCroskey, Valenic, & Richmond, 2004) positively impacted student evaluations leading to a concern that student perceptions of teaching effectiveness are basically a personality contest. Hamermesh and Parker (2003) found that measures of

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perceived beauty matter in student evaluations of minority women professors and faculty with accents were generally penalized. In spite of what is known about the nature of student evaluations, these subjective measures are used in the tenure process to determine teaching effectiveness, making or breaking faculty members' careers . This is especially true at teaching institutions where student evaluations are weighed heavily and often used in punitive ways as ammunition against vulnerable faculty. It is important to actually consider what student evaluations exactly measure. There has been much critique on over-reliance of standardized assessments both of students and of faculty.

In addition, unconscious bias, stereotypes, and assumptions impact the ways women and minority faculty are perceived. Bonilla-Silva (2015) explains, white-oriented institutions reproduce whiteness in a vast array of ways; curriculum, readings, culture, etc. It is not questioned but is the order of the day; the "correct" way of doing things. These assumptions have an impact on student evaluations, which impact faculty during evaluations and the tenure process. Racialized faculty tend to get lower scores than non-racialized faculty for a variety of complex reasons (Lazos, 2013; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and courses that are focused on race are rated more negatively (Ahmed, 2012; Lazos, 2013). In addition, there is a wide belief that faculty of color are less qualified or can only teach courses about race (Cooper, 2018). Interestingly, though not surprisingly, when faculty of color mention race their student evaluations are negatively impacted (Lazos, 2012).

Also, for women faculty of color who labor in roles that are perceived as male, they counter stereotypical assumptions that they are not competent, authoritative, or charismatic leaders (Valian, 1998). However, the double-edged sword is that when women attempt to make up for these perceptions, they can be viewed as more incompetent or insecure (Lazos, 2012). Research shows that minorities and women are presumed incompetent from the minute they enter the space/place (Lazos, 2012). Women have to navigate within narrow boundaries set by cultural stenotopic expectations. In workplace settings, they must be sufficiently assertive but not too much so or their evaluations will suffer (Lazos, 2012). Students also tend to challenge their female and minority instructors more. According to Statham, Richardson, and Cook (1991) students have less fear of and respect for women of color faculty. In a study conducted by Harlow (2003), minority faculty face racial performance burdens in the classroom that white professors do not encounter. Because minority professors fear their competence will be undermined, 69% of black women and 44% of black men choose an authoritative demeanor, which in turn, may turn off students who reward likeable professors. In addition, the study found that white students are not able to accurately perceive the emotions behind the facial expressions of minorities, so misunderstandings about intentions, emotional warmth, etc. are very likely to occur. Troublingly, white students perceive faculty with African American features as less attractive, which in turn negatively impacts student evaluations (Lazos, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Newer faculty can be better supported in the tenure and evaluation process. Below I offer recommendations informed by my experiences and the extant literature.

- Colleges and universities should proactively protect new faculty through policy and practices if they do not want to set these faculty up for failure. Newer faculty should not be expected to assume significant responsibilities such as coordinating new programs and organizing entire conferences. If they are, they should be given adequate support and the option to not take on or step away from such responsibilities if they interfere with aspects of the position evaluated for tenure and promotion.

- Colleges and university should proactively protect the academic freedom of faculty. This requires creating an environment that values equally all ways of knowing. Doing so would reduce the incidence of newer faculty being penalized covertly or unconsciously for valuing ways of knowing and paradigms that differ from powerful senior faculty.

- The role and importance of student evaluations should be reassessed and safeguards at the university and college level need to be put in place to ensure that student evaluations are not used as weapons. Multiple sources must be taken into account when assessing teaching effectiveness (testimonials from students, research with students, etc.).

- Universities and colleges should be more transparent in the tenure and promotion process by making tenure requirements explicit and clear with uniformity across the institution. This could involve listing a specific number of publications instead of employing vague open ended language which creates confusion and opportunity for personal biases/vendettas to play out against candidates up for tenure. When racialized faculty are hired and then left to flounder, there needs to be language and visibility around these landmines. Mentoring of newer faculty and faculty of color should be the norm at universities and colleges. Self-care, communities of support and a network of allies including other people of color networks, and practitioner networks are essential if faculty of color are to survive the tenure process. It is critical that the academy put more supports in place to create more fairness and equity around the tenure process for racialized faculty. It is also important for newer, racialized faculty to come together and struggle collectively outside of institutional constraints and think about developing new ways of building a more egalitarian discourse that subverts hierarchical, competitive ways of being rooted in traditional academia.

- I have managed to survive largely through the support of other faculty of color and non-institutionalized groups to which I have connected. Mentoring programs which involve helping newer faculty and faculty of color to find a mentor and/or peer group and training senior faculty to be better mentors should be developed. Such programming could help protect newer faculty and faculty of color from the toxicity and opaque nature of academia. As skewed as the rules are, it is still important for untenured faculty to know, understand, and follow processes in place by their institution.

- Respecting the significance of the research, teaching, and service contributions by members of underrepresented groups is critical. Universities and colleges should have mechanisms in place for ensuring fair and equitable review of dossiers especially when evaluating research productivity. This will help prevent research from being marginalized and diminished. Often research such as what some faculty of color choose to write about: race, poverty, and other institutionalized inequities is dismissed as "not serious scholarship.", reflecting "angry people of color" and being too narrow. This was the case in my situation when my field: adult education/adult literacy education was referred to as too narrow (even though it was what I was hired by the university to teach).

- Counseling services and other appropriate supports need to be in place for students and faculty. This is especially true if the student body is mainly comprised of poor/working class students who are precariously situated on a number of fronts. This inevitably takes a psychological toll on the students. Often, faculty become informal counselors, which in turn takes a psychic toll on them yet they often have no supports of their own in place.

- Universities and colleges should address at all levels the privilege and entitlement that is prevalent within the academy. Climate surveys should be conducted to identify institutionalized barriers that work against faculty of color within the academy and reinforce de facto preferences for white males and females. This is especially important because faculty members continue to perceive women of color through their own biased lenses because covert, overt, and unconscious racism among colleagues remains an enormous issue. Good intentions are not sufficient to guarantee that equal opportunity will insure equal treatment. There is a price for being silent on issues of inequity and for not being silent on those very same issues. A self-study should be undertaken to create an accurate historical and contemporary account of the racialized and gendered nature of the academy. Collective historical memory impacts our constructed realities in ways which we are mostly unaware. A self-study would highlight what professors have historically looked like and a task force dedicated to eradicating inequities should be created. There is an urgent need to deconstruct those images and implications of those images of who is or is not a professor in our consciousness, our lives, and our practice.

CONCLUSIONS

To the extent that higher education can be one of society's critics and conscience, then extensive measures must be implemented in order to shift the culture, making it less toxic to newer scholars of color. This involves the decolonization of higher education. Unfortunately, decolonization has become a buzzword, removed from social justice and more radical roots to something insipid and sterile such as adjustment in some course content or perhaps some diversification of curricula. But the actual pedagogy and institutional culture remain intact allowing the university to thrive as a space where profound inequalities continue to get perpetuated. Instead, I would argue decolonizing academia needs to be an all-consuming, all-encompassing project which calls for each and all of us to reckon with our individual and collective complicity in privileging the dominance of western knowledge production in a quest to dismantle oppressive power structures. Including more modules on race or scholars of color does not address core structures of disparities and racism within academia. Most modules on black history, colonialism, etc. have become synonymous with black/brown pain and brutalization of those bodies but the majority of these people researching and teaching this subject are white. Given the deeply racist structures that faculty of color continue to encounter within academia (and that are already embedded in its culture as part of the air we inhale). Too often these efforts to decolonize end up recolonizing and centering whiteness (Cooper, 2018). Diversifying is not the same as decolonizing. Diversifying does not address institutional racism, structural inequality or embedded hierarchies in academia. If we are committed to dismantling, reimagining, and truly decolonizing our institutions to truly effect change, then we must be willing to tackle the structures that marginalize black and brown intellectuals while collectively supporting their work as important knowledge producers.

Erasure through colonization is commonplace within the academy. The scholarship of theorists of color are read, studied, and analyzed through a lens of whiteness by Caucasian faculty, which is distinctly extractivist. A box is checked answering the question of whether the work of faculty of color is studied in the program

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but it must be asked in what depth and through whose analysis? Faculty of color's knowledge may get circulated but without any sense of their lived experiences or histories, or legacies of the histories of racialized groups. Blackness analyzed from a white perspective. This may not be intentional but, ultimately, for faculty of color the impact is that their work and intellectual capital is used without them. hooks (1994) cautions us that when people do not tell their own stories, others do it for them. hooks adds,

there is no need to hear your voice when we can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. I want to know your story. And I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk. Stop. (pp. 151 – 152).

When certain groups can talk about you better than you can talk about yourself, your existence is no longer necessary; you are erased. Antwi (2018) points out, as an instrument of capitalism, the university consumes that which is meant to help faculty of color survive, taking it and claiming it as its own.

Ahmed (2012) points out that when we, faculty and university workers of color, speak out about racism, we (not the institution) are seen as responsible for the damage and we become labeled as damaged and in need of containment. Often, there is a pathologizing of our presence in that space. Whiteness is also seen as an image problem instead of an institutional systemic one for which the answer is using faces of color on public relations. For those of us who embody diversity (or to be frank, color) we must present happy images, uncomplaining and smiling (at least for the brochures). We must smile on the outside regardless of our inner feelings and emotions. The problem is not treated as institutional because to do so would mean it is systemic; instead it becomes about punishing the individual. The culture that promotes this must be urgently changed. The university must engage in the project of decolonizing.

For myself and other activists who have found ourselves in academia, our commitment is to continue to find ways to bridge the divide between the academy and communities and to work with marginalized communities to co-create a critical body of work that would honor knowledges, voices, and perspectives that have been historically marginalized. This remains my commitment. Other scholars of color have and continue to support me in protecting my energy, labor, and peace. These are critical if we are to survive and maintain mental health, which can be eroded in such a corrosive culture. Embracing new ways of knowing and being can support academia in learning how to better serve the communities in which they exist, to honor knowledges that have been silenced or stolen, and to access different, important conversations rooted in change that offer a more equitable vision of the world. At present, this vision is largely absent.

Currently, I am an active member in a recently formed racialized faculty caucus and am involved in other anti-racist organizing within the institution. These spaces are intended to support racialized faculty in struggle as well as newer faculty. It is too soon to know whether gains have been made but there is power and strength in collective organizing as well as a dire need. We may be the darker brothers in Hughes' (1994) poem but we refuse to be the dirty secret that is forced to stay and eat in the kitchen. Risam (2019) points out, scholars of color challenge, reimagine, and reinvent scholarly practices to survive, and in doing so, transform universities. We, as insurgent academics, draw upon a long history of practices by scholars of color that form the unrecognized basis of strategies for saving higher education. As racialized scholars we have and continue to resist erasure on a daily basis and we continue to demand recognition for our valuable contributions to struggling for justice within the academy.

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