

## SEARCHING FOR OTHER BROWN FACES: BLACK FEMALE EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOLING AND THE ACADEMY

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We are text. We are read. We are “understood”. We are boxed into a prescription that relegates us to particular performances and presentations without as much as trying. The nature of being text not only requires knowing how we are read, but making a choice to decide *how* we will be read. How do we, Black women, wish to be read? How do we wish to be seen? To what extent are we working against dominant narratives or working with the dominant narrative? To what extent do we experience a deviance or refraction from the self? To what extent are we struggling to produce our narrative in order to be “understood”?

We assert the notion of struggle, because we hold that “without struggle there is no progress” (Douglass, 1857). We also assert that struggle comes with playing with contradictory terms, that as we begin to make decisions for how we are seen in this world or even begin to rewrite the narrative of Black women onto this world that we are met with contradiction. A contradiction that suggests we are both negligent *and* caretaker, aggressive *and* passive, oversexualized *and* prudish, capable *and* incapable. Toni Morrison (1992) suggests that our images of the self, our self-reflexive process of understanding Blackness, is only done to give meaning to what Whiteness isn’t. The contradictions that arise are intended to be the opposite of Whiteness, when present.

This paper explores a concept that surfaced through a pilot study conducted of Black women undergraduates at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). The purpose of the study was to learn how these Black women undergraduates conceptualized their experiences both academically and socially at a PWI located in the Deep South. Through this pilot study the participants expressed and discussed feelings of dismissal, isolation, and marginalization. Through the uncovering of their experiences, the participants agreed that they find themselves “searching for other brown faces” in order to feel a sense of protection and belonging in a space where they know protection and belonging are not necessarily afforded to them.

We suggest that our quest to search for other Brown faces, compels us to create the narrative we wish to be center to the understanding of Black women. This paper expounds upon the notion of searching for other brown faces to explore the authors’ experiences with White spaces or PWI in order to shine a light on the dismissal, isolation, and marginalization felt in the academy and the impact we believe it potentially has on the trajectory of black women in certain higher education fields, particularly those who pursue education and teaching as a career path.

### **Situating Our Work**

We draw our understanding of self and weave together our stories through a framework of Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and position our voices as Black women academics through autoethnographic counter storytelling. Ellis (2002 & 2004) contends that this method centers an individual’s narrative as political, socially-just, and socially-conscious. “... I was encouraged to write myself, my struggle, my meaning into existence” (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2006, p. 89). The uniqueness of Black feminist thought is that it positions Black women at the center of understanding reality from a raced, gendered, and other categories of different points of view; it empowers individuals to rearticulate reality as created and accepted by the dominant group (Brock, 2011; Collins, 1986, 1989, 2017; Huckaby, 2013; Yancy, 2000). Black feminist thought supports the development of our stories and shared experiences in order to challenge dominant ideologies (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

### **Critical Race Theory**

We engage our experiences and sharing of those experiences through the act of counterstorytelling. Counterstories serve to explore, analyze, and disrupt the majoritarian stories told about people of color. Counterstories present a reality about People of Color that is not usually told through majoritarian narratives. Scholars of

CRT believe in the benefit of experiential knowledge (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). Experiential knowledge is understood through narratives in order to present the main tenet of CRT, which is, race is normal, not aberrant in American society. Narratives are informed by our “racialized, gendered, and classed experiences” and can be used to challenge the status quo (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 134; Delgado, 1989). The counternarrative or the counterstory, which is told by people of color or marginalized people, is used for “exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138). The counterstory is necessary for presenting a reality that is unknown or that is not consistent with the dominant frame of thought. “Counterstorytelling is used to cast doubt on existing ideas or myths held by majority group members” (Howard-Hamilton, 2003, p. 23).

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Through the use of Critical Race Theory, we are able to define why our counterstories are necessary as Black individuals, which we combine with notions of Black Feminist Thought (BFT). Black Feminist Thought developed in response to feminist theory because Black female scholars felt marginalized and voiceless through a theory that was created by women who owned a privileged voice. Traditional works of feminism often reinforce the inferiority and alienation felt by People of Color (Crenshaw, 1991; Cleaver, 1997; Crenshaw, Ocen, Nanda, 2015). “White feminists often define themselves against a male-centered perspective” (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 107); feminist theory did not provide the substance needed to express Black female existence in its failure to address the oppression felt and experienced by racialized and gendered beings. Collins (1991) writes, “Black feminist thought encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women’s reality by those who live it” (p. 22).

We are supported through this framework and critical race theory to develop counter-stories to position our voices to undermine and challenge dominant ideologies (Taliaferro-Baszile, 2017; Nash, 2011). Accordingly, Black feminist thought affords Black women scholars a theoretical terrain to interrogate the epistemic claims and performances of Whiteness that are always already present (Yancy, 2000). Further, it provides the substantive theory necessary for engaging in “emancipatory and reflective” work for constructing an autoethnographic narrative (Yancy, 2000, p. 32). This work presented here is emancipatory in that we had the theoretical space to write ourselves into existence and to make this a process in which we feel a sense of

freedom to construct our narratives as Black women academicians, teacher educators and students (Cole, 2009; Taliaferro-Bazille, 2006). Through Black feminist thought, we can move ourselves away from the margins and use a language of theory to talk back and resist dominant ideologies (hooks, 1989).

Black feminist thought provides the theoretical support needed to subvert the dominant ideologies held, but also challenges us to capture how we think about the space we interact in with the pre-service teachers. hooks (1995) writes, "Confronting one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing conflict, we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth" (p. 113). Brock (2011) suggests that when we are equipped with the proper tools to discuss and analyze race, gender, and other categories of difference, we can begin to deconstruct notions of dominance that pervade society.

### **Critical Race Feminism**

Critical race feminism emphasizes the multiplicity of voices of Black women and Women of Color unlike the feminist constructions before it (King, 1988; Berry, 2009; 2010). Critical race feminism provides the theoretical terrain to center our voices and to deconstruct essentialist ways of knowing about the experiences of women. CRF allows us to draw out the intricacies, nuances, and specifics of experiences of Black women and Women of Color, to label various forms of oppression and their manifestations, to give voice to and raise multiple political identities, and to do so through various fields of understanding described earlier in this paper through Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought.

There is no monolith of Black experience, the experience of Black men and that of Black women is not to be conflated. As hooks (2015b) describes, the experience of Blackness is commonly felt but, Black men are still men—"his maleness may serve to mediate the extent to which he will be attacked, dominated, etc." (p. 60). To that end, the experiences of Black women cannot be subsumed within the experience of White women or all women for that matter. We are called to demythologize the narrative of Black women as a unified identity (Cleaver, 1997).

We argue that this places Black women academics in crisis. Crisis because we are at the bottom of totem pole, we don't neatly fit alongside our Black male counterpart in being affirmed by the institution, we are often missing from the canon as reputable sources, we don't experience enough of our presence to create solidarity and to give

rise to the many Black women who enter into higher education. Further, as Black women in the field of education, our presence is minimal, which creates a crisis for K-12 students or students who may consider studying within the field of education. We are in crisis (hooks, 2015b). We have reached a moment, as Black women in the Deep South, when we must surface the issues amongst us both within the institution and socially. We must surface the experiences we had that brought us to this moment. We must surface the issues as often as possible if we are going to provide support to the women who come behind us. hooks tells us, “it is important that Black women in higher education write and talk about our experiences, about survival strategies” (p.61).

### **Autoethnography**

The composition of our counterstories was generated based on the exchanges presented during a focus group of Black women undergraduates in a pilot study. As we engaged in this space with these undergraduates, we were not only moved by their stories, but allowed those stories to draw out our experiences as scholars and students. We were able to engage in an autoethnographic process of deeply and critically looking at our experiences as having genuine impact on the cultural phenomenon of dismissal, isolation, and marginalization expressed during the focus groups. Autoethnography places the researcher in an interesting position as the resource for data collection and as a data source that adds to the viability of the project. What we present in this paper is just that. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) define autoethnography as a research approach that uses personal experience to understand a cultural phenomenon. The researcher has the opportunity to place themselves amongst others to understand a cultural phenomenon. We use our counterstories and engagements with theory to shine a light on the cultural phenomenon of the multiplicative/multidimensional identity of Black women and experiences of dismissal, isolation, and marginalization. Berry (2005) and Boylorn (2013) contend that an autoethnographic approach to education research by Black female researchers affords them the space to insert their voice and critically explore topics centered around intersectionality.

Critics of autoethnography (Buzard, 2003, and Delamont, 2009) argue that autoethnographers are allowing subjective truths and researcher storytelling to taint the nature of qualitative research. They argue that the extent to which personal story or narrative is used lessens the quality of the data—autoethnography is “nonanalytic, self-indulgent, irreverent, sentimental, and romantic” (Denzin, 2014, p.

69). Autoethnographers push back by arguing that the intent of autoethnography as a method and a text is intended to function reflexively in order to question sociopolitical constructions and affect social change both aesthetically and scientifically (Ellis, 2009; Ellis, 2002). Denzin (2014) argues, “autoethnography cannot be judged by traditional positivist criteria” (p. 70). Similarly, Bochner (2000) posits that autoethnography simply highlights the existence of “incommensurable ways of seeing” and that scholars must accept the incommensurability as useful for informing particular fields.

Scholars of autoethnography understand that it is not merely the study of self, but the study of the self through co-constructed narratives with others (Ellis 2004). Ellis (2007) writes, “When we write about ourselves, we also write about others” (p. 14). What we have co-constructed in this paper is the multidimensionality of Black woman identities that when told collectively are able to highlight experiences of dismissal, isolation, and marginalization. The power in co-constructing our narratives and presenting them through three different voices allows for a conscious display of the variation that exists in Black women, and also our means of navigating systems to survive the onslaught of moments intended to silence us.

### **Counterstories from Perspectives of Three Black Women**

This paper was written as a response to the data collected from a pilot study with Black women undergraduates who expressed realities of isolation, dismissal, and marginalization. As we reflected on the data of the pilot study, we were moved to use these narratives to construct our counterstories, to co-construct meaning alongside these undergraduates. Providing our counterstories also served as a way to capture that Black women cannot be essentialized and that, although Black women cannot be essentialized, we are looking for the same thing—to be understood as capable of constructing who we are and to be received and respected for who we are, not what the dominant narrative assigns us to be (Crenshaw, 2014). Each author of this paper provides her experiences of her academic and professional institutions.

The counterstories are presented by two tenure track faculty members and one undergraduate who served as a research assistant on the project. The first counterstory is told from the perspective of a tenure track faculty member, Valin, who details experiences of trauma at Predominately White Institutions of higher learning and her struggles to exist and survive in those spaces. The second

counterstory is told from the perspective another tenure track faculty member, Kay, who displays experiences of visibility and security at an HBCU but, the opposite upon entering the workforce. The final counterstory is told by an undergraduate, Jourdan, who paints a clear picture of a need for mentorship and opportunities to connect with women like herself on a Predominately White Institution campus. Throughout each counterstory, each woman details the ways in which they navigated school and professional institutions in an attempt to find solidarity vs. isolation, to find acceptance vs. dismissal, and to find valuation vs. marginalization. Each woman includes an element of survival techniques/tactics used to carry them through towards success.

### **Valin – Tenure Track Faculty**

School has always been a place I loved and mildly disliked at the same time. I loved the idea of doing work, no matter how challenging. I loved being able to help my peers in class. I loved reading and doing projects at home that I knew were going to be better than everyone else's. I loved the idea of school. I mildly disliked school because I stayed in trouble: for talking back, being disrespectful, rolling my eyes, not wearing my uniform appropriately, and for starting fights. From elementary school to tenure track faculty, I've been surrounded by White bodies attempting to control my Black body.

I attended predominantly Black parochial schools for elementary and middle school; during my kindergarten to eighth grade years, Mr. Lynn was the only Black teacher I encountered. So, while we as students were able to find comfort and solidarity amongst each other—the faces that were charged with teaching us and restricting us were White. Fast forward to my high school years, I attended an all-girls Catholic school, located in the same neighborhood of Queens where Donald Trump grew up; I only had one Black teacher at this school as well. During my K-12 experience I had two teachers, two influencers, two people to regard as role models, two people who had some sort of connection to me as a Black child.

This experience of being without connection, without solidarity, without someone to lean on followed me into college and through my years in the classroom. During my third-year teaching, one of my more precocious students stayed behind for a minute at her desk while the rest of the class left for lunch. She sat with chin in her right palm, tapping her left hand on her desk—clearly thinking about something. She got up from her desk, walked over to me and said, “you know Ms. Jordan, I've never

had a teacher who looked like me before.” She gave me a hug and skipped out of the room. Right where I was standing, I sank and began balling my eyes out. It was at that moment I had a breakdown and a breakthrough. This third grader had pointed out in her short time in school she had never had a Black person as a teacher, and I was aware that she might not have another for a long time. And because of that, I had to do better to create a school experience that was memorable for her. To see that she got what I always needed, a sense of solidarity and connection at school.

My last year in the classroom, my students knew I was applying for doc programs. They knew I had to take the GRE. They knew everything that was appropriate for them to know. And they took that as their call to create solidarity, connection, and family for me in the school space. They made sure I ate during the school day—some of my students would have their parents buy me lunch at the deli when they got their lunch—they called and checked on me at night to ask if I completed my applications, they would ask me how much water I was drinking during the day, they wanted to know if I was getting enough sleep. They wanted to know if I was doing what I had to do, “to make it”. When I was accepted to my doctoral program and offered a GA position they threw me a party at the end of the school year. It was bittersweet, we were no longer going to physically be in the same space anymore, but they were excited to see me move on. There were lots of tears the last day of school, but I spent a fair amount of my summer with them just hanging out in Harlem, and the first three months I was in Washington, D.C. many of them called and sent emails to check on me. To make sure I was okay and to tell on each other. Hooks (2015b) positions that Black professors are charged with creating an environment of affirmation for their students, but in my case, as a classroom teacher, my students created the environment of affirmation organically. It was almost as if they felt compelled to take care of someone who was like them. To take care of someone who was doing something for the culture, for the collective. They saw in me what they saw for themselves and recognized that if they nurtured and supported the habits they wanted to see, they would see it—similar to how I showed up for them.

This wonderful feeling of being affirmed and of being loved and cared for in the school space ended once I began my doctoral program. I was back to feeling out of place and misunderstood. My years of experiencing “getting in trouble” were back in full force. My years of being seen as “angry, callous, disrespectful, and unapproachable” were back in full force. My years of tolerating microaggressions, mischaracterizations and being policed at school were back. I went from being



affirmed and made to feel whole, to being asked to give a speech on being my doctoral program's fairytale. I went from experiencing assurance in my Blackness as a classroom teacher, to being told I need to check everything I am at the door if I think my data collection for my dissertation will go well. I was constantly told I wasn't likeable, and I wasn't like the other people in school of education. I once heard "oh you're Valin, you're not who I was expecting. From what I've heard about you I imagined someone else—someone taller and well, darker." I went from feeling whole, affirmed, and out of crisis to a deep depression.

This isn't the experience of my White counterparts: they experienced the frustration of not hearing back on their work soon enough. Or having a breakdown in communication with their chair about their study. Or having to rewrite a section two and three times. They were experiencing their academic prowess being challenged, and for many it was difficult to be challenged in such a way, but they were willing to play the game and "submitted to playing the role of subordinate" (hooks, 2015b, 59). My look of despondency in conversations with my peers was often misunderstood as not wanting to engage because they didn't understand or know I didn't feel whole and that I was being made to feel broken and out of place. My attendance at a PWI was similar to that of our participants, I was familiar with being out of place or experiencing microaggressions, what I was unfamiliar with was the clear threat being placed on my psyche. And as a Black woman, I was experiencing what my Black male counterpart will never know as I stand firmly at the intersection of race and gender. This threat to my psyche is what hooks calls *psychological colonization*. Psychological colonization is necessary to keep Black women in check (2015a). The act of psychological colonization is to place upon the "other" the thoughts and ideas intended to control their behaviors. Black women are to be seen the way the colonizer intended, any appearance or manifestation of being liberated, strong, valued, respected or powerful must be quelled at the onset (hooks, 2013 & 2015a). This threat to my psyche and the psyche of my colleagues worked. I was the only Black person in my cohort and the cohort before me had two—this threat to our psyche kept us wondering the same question, "are we the wrong type of Black?" This wasn't so much a colorism question as it was a question of whether we have what it takes to survive and, if we do, what strategies are we using to make sure we do? hooks (2015b) advocates that it's important for Black women in higher education to discuss not just "our experiences, but our survival strategies" (p.61).

I use theory to write me out of my pain and the experiences of being deintellectualized, dehumanized, and devalued. It's a survival strategy that allows

to me to feel affirmed and to take care of myself so that I may be able to show up for others. It's a strategy that allows me to bring my sisters along with me, so they may find the space to express their feelings of isolation, marginalization, and pain. My survival strategy is to uncover and unearth the silently aggressive ways in which I'm told to have a seat or to know my place. My pain is not another Black woman academician's pain, our experiences are not a monolith, but as Black women we must create the spaces for ourselves to come together and celebrate that we are still standing.

Now that I am in a tenure track position, in the Deep South, I still continue to feel a level of isolation that is consuming. Many of the spaces I enter—from the classrooms in which I teach, to the yoga studio I attend, to the restaurants I frequent—I am often the only Black body in the space. It creates a lot of doubt and fear about my work and survival in the academy. But, I'm charged with how I work to challenge and resist the oppression that works to silence me. Being Black, a woman, and a Black woman, I am an enigma in academia generally (Collins, 1986). I must work to be able to "fit" the academy's norms, while also maintaining my sense of self. The question comes with, what's the reality in that. What is the reality in being able to talk about my Blackness, teach through it, and live through it in a space and a place that rejects my Blackness? What is the reality of showing up whole and affirmed, when I'm met with pause by Black colleagues who believe race has no bearings on experience or that I must maintain a certain level of presence about me that is palatable. I met with a conundrum of sorts, the viability of my work and presence is intended for my former students and for many students in K-12 classrooms. The viability of my work and presence is necessary for the affirmation and success of Black students and Black women in particular who enter higher education seeking a degree in education and in other fields.

### **Keita – Tenure Track Faculty**

When I think of the notion of still standing, I think of all the ways that I am still standing despite my experiences in schools and work spaces including academia. I also think of the women who need me to continue standing instead of letting negative experiences shape or change who I am called to be—that brown face and safe space that someone is searching for.

I was born in Detroit Michigan in the 70s and the majority of my parents' friends and family members were products of the Deep South—Alabama, Georgia, and

Mississippi. These products of the Deep South had migrated North for the promise of better future and opportunities for employment. Being reared in an urban area brought a certain level of exposure to different cultures; however, with Detroit being a predominantly black city, there were always opportunities to celebrate your blackness. Celebrating this blackness included seeing black excellence as leadership in schools and in the community. As I matriculated through school, I had my share of mentors who were determined to see me go as far as my drive and intellect would take me.

In my quest to continue to be embedded in blackness, I attended a Historically Black University. There was no searching for brown faces at Howard because we celebrated each other at every possible moment, and it was our professors' quest to expose us to the writers and leaders that would shape our cultural pride: We read Countee Cullen's *Ballad of the Brown Girl*, the autobiography of Assata Shakur, *The Souls of Black Folk* by DuBois, which left many us empowered and still standing.

This empowerment allowed me to effectively navigate employment and higher education opportunities on the East Coast; eventually, I returned to Detroit prior to taking a job in the Deep South as an educational consultant for a state agency. At the time, I was working on my doctoral degree, which is something that I did not readily discuss with my colleagues. I recall the first week of work, where I was responsible for getting my badge and filling out the documents to receive business cards. I was elated to have my first set of business cards at this prestigious state agency, and I remember writing Keita Rone, MS. I wanted it to be known that I had a Master of Science and would always be quick to tell people that it was in Special Education and the degree was from a premiere institution located in Baltimore.

I awaited my approval for my business cards, and I will never forget the moment where I saw the MS scratched out by name as if my Master's degree has disappeared. I was told by my White female boss that "people typically did not put their degree on their cards". I was confused and insulted and genuinely pissed off. The degree that I had worked for seemed as if it was being stripped away from me. Titles may not be an issue for most but I figured that an educational agency would want to tout the fact that their consultant had an Master's Degree; in fact they were actually elated in the interview that I was also pursuing my doctorate. This defining moment of seeing my degree scratched off led me to immediately search for other brown faces. There had to be at least one person I could discuss this incident with to gain some insight. I was torn between wondering if it was an actual policy or a

microaggression by a White woman who was threatened by my degree. I quickly learned that the South that I was experiencing was the south that my parents had warned me about. That moment reminded me of the fact that racism existed in both the North and South. James Baldwin once stated that, "There is no difference between the North and the South. The difference is in the way they castrate you" (Baldwin, 1963). I was not naive enough to think that racism didn't exist; however, I was very cautious about the way in which I needed to process that experience. I was incensed beyond belief, but did not know how to navigate that space without being viewed as an angry black woman.

In Audre Lorde (1981) *The Uses of Anger*, Lorde states:

My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone. It has also served me in classrooms without light or learning, where the work and history of Black women was less than a vapor. It has served me as fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of White women who see in my experience and the experience of my people only new reasons for fear or guilt. And my anger is no excuse for not dealing with your blindness, no reason to withdraw from the results of your own actions. (Lorde, 1981, p.131)

In hindsight, I realize that it is still my duty as a black woman to deflect the negative projections and assumptions that others may make based on their own fears and misguided ideologies. These experiences help me make a conscious effort in my academic space in higher education to show up for my female students and colleagues of color who are searching for brown faces.

### **Jourdan – Undergraduate Research Assistant**

Growing up, I wasn't well informed on Historical Black Colleges and Universities or what they would have offered to my identity as a Black woman. Neither one of my parents went to college until my sister and I were in high school, but they did instill the importance of education in us ever since we were young. So, when it came time to apply for colleges, I only knew what I was introduced to. Coming from a predominantly White high school, the only schools that would come around to give us information were Predominately White Institutions, so it was no surprise that is where I ended up spending four years of my life.

One of the initial reasons I chose the university I have now graduated from, was because of the “diversity” that both the website and recruiters claimed the institution to have. The website states, “Our campus and our city are diverse, welcoming places that embrace other cultures and traditions”. This is far from the truth.

I chose to major in early childhood education, so the first two years of my college career were full of general education courses, with one or two college of education centered courses, and my last two years were my major centered courses. There’s a certain anxiety you get when searching for brown faces, kind of like when you are watching a scary movie and you know something is about to pop out, but it never does so you just keep anxiously waiting and waiting. After a while your anxiety will either turn into relief or defeat, relief if another brown face enters the room or defeat when you realize you are going to be the only person of Color in the class for the whole semester. I distinctly remember my sophomore year in my Chemistry 212 class—chemistry for education majors feeling frustrated because I was in yet another class where I was the only brown face—and then a girl who looked like me came in. I am sure my face visibly brightened, but then she left just as quickly as she came, muttering something about being in the wrong class, then the dark cloud was back. My general education courses were full of people who looked like me but when it came to my major centered courses, the brown faces became scarcer, and once I got to my last two years of college I was only one of two brown faces in class. When you are the only person of Color in a class, you are expected to advocate for all people of Color and it can be draining, especially when you and your White classmates have differing views on topics and they think that your opinion is wrong and invalid.

The last two years of my college career were spent with the same females from 8 am to 3 pm. Within those last two years, I began to notice how my White female counterparts would treat our Black professors compared to how they treated our White professors. They were always so quick to threaten to go to the Dean to complain about our Black professors, but a White professor could do the same thing, sometimes worse and they would not utter a sound. Every time a test was given back, they would calculate the points to make sure that the point distribution was correct whereas our White professors “would never make a mistake when it comes to grades”. Robin Diangelo (2011) states, “Further, universalism assumes that Whites and people of color have the same realities, the same experiences in the same contexts (i.e. I feel comfortable in this majority White classroom, so you must too)” (p.6). My White female counterparts worked really hard to prove to me that they

were “down”, that we were friends and were all going through the same struggles in school. Ask me how many of those same girls I still talk to on a regular basis, not including the one other black girl or the one White girl that I happen to work with? Ask me how many of those girls have my phone number? I am pretty sure none of them would have even known my last name had we not been Facebook friends.

Some of my White professors were supportive of me, while others made it very clear that they thought I was incapable of doing the work even though I proved time and time again that I was very capable. My sophomore year, I had one professor that pulled me to the side it seemed like after every assignment I turned in, asking me if I was sure that this is the field I wanted to go in. You know that old saying, “You have to work twice as hard to get half of what they get”, that was very accurate in this teaching program. Collins expresses that Black women are shaped by their subordinate status in an array of either/or. Either male or female. Either black or White. African American women have been placed on the inferior half of each duality, which is central to their domination (Collins 1986). While my White professors sought after my White counterparts to see why they got a bad grade on an assignment because that was “unlike” them, I was simply given the bad grade. I would have to email assignments to my instructors well in advance just to get timely feedback, I constantly had to be on it just to get the support that my peers received. I still do not understand why I had to basically beg for support from my instructors when others were just handed support easily. This made school much harder when the support was supposed to ease the struggle.

Now that I have graduated and am on the other side, officially teaching in my own classroom, I can still say that when I went in for my interview, I was scanning the school for Brown faces. In this space that I am in now, there a plenty of Brown faces, men and women alike. I feel like I am free to teach my Black and Brown kids how they need to be taught.

My freshman year, I wished that there were more Black women faces. My sophomore year, I wished that there were more Black women that I could have related to, women who actually understood what I was going through as a student. My junior year, I wished for more Black women faculty I could have confided in; women who I could have gotten opinions on my hairstyles from. Women who could have mentored me. Women in higher places who could have helped me get to higher places. Women that I know would have genuinely cared about my well-being. After three years of hoping and wishing, my wish was finally granted my

senior year in my Diversity class, but now I'm hoping to be that brown face for my own students so that they won't have to hope and wish like I did.

### **Discussion**

What is clear from our stories is that there is no monolith of Black woman experience. Our co-constructed narratives come together as a collective to suggest the tensions that exist for Black women. Berry (2010) refers to this as an act of revelation: we placed our narratives in conversation with each other to showcase who we are as Black women, to create a moment of vulnerability to impart knowledge on the intricacies of Black womanhood. Counterstorytelling provided us an opportunity to talk back to the oppressive and silencing containers which operate to keep us at the margins.

Through these narratives, we've positioned ourselves as Black women who are pushing forward an agenda to stand center to reveal the ways in which oppressive conditions operate to keep us at the margins. This work of counter-storytelling exists as a form of advocacy because it gives rise to the development of resources, strategies, and tools to support the development and growth of Black women in academia and our existence in higher education broadly. This work cannot be done in isolation, in order for our advocacy to be impactful, we need the sustaining support beyond lip service. We need support that is curated and mindful of Black women, not to be conflated with that of other women or Black men. Through our work of sharing our stories we are advocating for a better experience that allows for stories of isolation, dismissal, and marginalization to be shared openly and freely without fear. We have made the choice through sharing these stories to stand alongside the many other Black women scholars who have been pushing and advocating for the voices of Black women to be heard and valued. We've joined in the need for research on Black women (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Again, practice and policy for Black women cannot be generated from work focused on Black men or White women.

For two of the authors, we recognize our practices of bringing Black women students along with us on our journey to be heard and valued in the higher education space must be accomplished through care. Our care for our sisters must happen in a way that is strategic and impactful to their growth and development. Berry (2010) explains that teacher education programs have to provide opportunities for Students of Color to feel empowered to use their life stories and experiences as meaningful

indicators for grappling with the material of what it means to become a teacher. Our teacher education programs as a whole do not provide much, if any room, for students to truly engage in a process of self-inquiry or self-understanding. But, if we are looking for students to feel welcomed to engage in such work, teacher educators must put themselves in a position to engage in acts of vulnerability. This act of vulnerability creates a terrain and provides a direction for how we situate ourselves in the context of the curriculum. We have to be willing to show how our stories matter to the canon of education, but also how it helps to define how our students of color, particularly, women of color, find themselves needing a place of visibility. Our standard must be to engage our students in fruitful processes that are meaningful to their development and growth as a whole person and future educator.

As we look to build future educators out of our Black women and women of Color, we have to be mindful of policies in place that are intended to support our students and faculty in higher education towards success. We find on many campuses of higher education the will and push to support our men of Color, particularly Black and LatinX men. In an effort of advocacy, we have to raise our voices to articulate that our experiences as Black women and Women of Color cannot be essentialized to the extent of not receiving or benefitting from policies and actions intended for us. We have to look to revise hiring policies and practices that limit the presence of Black women and Women of Color in higher education. Our presence serves as a reminder that we, as Black women, matter, not just in terms of career existence in academia, but our presence is meaningful to the students who need to see our faces.

### **Conclusion**

“Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story” (hooks, 2015b, 43). These are our stories. Stories of missing mentorship, stories of invisibility, stories of crisis, stories of survival, and stories of a cry for more. In our search for other Brown faces we are still seeking to be seen, to have opportunity to exist as subject versus object. Telling our stories doesn’t solely serve to feed a cathartic need, it’s our survival strategy. We are able to survive and potentially create space for the women who come behind us to survive, to know the subject versions of themselves can exist. Taliaferro-Baszile (2006) calls for us to be encouraged to write ourselves,



our struggles, and our meanings into existence. Our task then is to continue to tell our stories, bring our Black women students and colleagues along with us on this journey to share our stories—our means of survival must be to continue to create ourselves as subject.

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