

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Leaving Academia When the Pain Was Too Much: Strategies for Black Survival

Norissa J. Williams

Abstract: Black women (BW) in academia experience inordinate amounts of stress and challenges to their well-being. Surviving is a constant, often painful, struggle. In this paper, I share two personal stories of events that have transpired in my academic department in the aftermath of the racial reckoning of 2020. Both stories elucidate key points about the experiences of BW that are further elaborated on in the discussion of strategies for self-survival in academic institutions (i.e., understanding one's experience through the lens of trauma, practicing self-care, finding community, addressing internalized oppression, adjusting expectations and practicing self-advocacy, or if all else fails, leave) and what institutions can do to increase equity and belonging for Black survival (i.e., understanding the experience of BW in academia through a trauma-informed lens and institutionalizing equity and belonging in real and measurable ways).

Keywords: Black women in academia, race in academic departments, Black survival in academia, trauma in academia, retention of Black women in academia

Invisibility and Exploitation in the Academy

2020's Racial Reckoning

Though I had worked at an esteemed University in the Northeast, as a social worker in a Department of Applied Psychology since the spring of 2016, I am pretty sure the majority of my colleagues did not become aware of my existence until one irregularly scheduled faculty meeting in June of 2020. Though the academic year was over, our chair had scheduled a faculty meeting in an effort to plan for the coming semester in the midst of the unpredictability of COVID-19. However, the meeting was repurposed as the world was caught in the inevitable racial reckoning that came to be in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others.

I had known this meeting was coming. I was on the Chair's Advisory, a group of program directors who updated the Chair on the happenings in their program and also provided ideas about the forward movement of the department. As such, the Chair had asked us what our thoughts were about repurposing the meeting this way. She, a Black woman (BW), knew it was important for us all to dig in and feel the gravitas of the moment. We were all in agreement. When the meeting started, my Chair made mention of all that was going on beyond the borders of our Zoom room and suggested that there might be some work we had to do internally as well. Yes, we had students to think about. However, what might we have to do amongst ourselves? It was a question of whether race had shaped the experience of any among us and what we could do about it. As there were not many Black people in the room, it felt like a now-or-never moment, for me. Though I am typically more reserved and had been resigned to my role as a quiet and even invisible member of the faculty, I knew I had to speak up. I didn't know where I

was going with my speech, but in the first round of discussion, I made mention of the fact that although there is a pretense that there is no difference between clinical and tenure-track/tenured faculty, there is a stark difference. For one, clinical faculty tend to largely be women, and women of color more specifically. Further, clinical faculty are the ones that carry the department, in inordinate ways.

I stopped there without giving the full description I had wanted to, because I felt the emotion welling up in me and I was afraid of how unbridled it might be. In my pause a white woman spoke. This tenured professor, who had been at the university for as long as I had been alive and benefitted from many of the things I was referencing, discussed how problematic the system was. She suggested that at the school level (rather than the department level) something really needed to be done! However, I couldn't hear her knowing that she was one of the biggest offenders, and that nothing would change—no matter how involved administrators were at the school level—if every individual in the room did not investigate the degree to which they were complicit. I did hear though that she made mention of a time clinical faculty (myself and another white male who had left after his first year) applied for a tenure track position as our visiting lines were not secure. She made mention of the fact that the Dean of Faculty Affairs said that she would not let someone apply for a tenure track position that she knew would not get tenure.

As she spoke, I sat there hurting, because here again I was invisible. Initially, I thought she was speaking in support of me. However, I realized she wasn't even talking about me. They had all forgotten I even applied. My application had not even risen to the attention of the Dean. They, "my colleagues" on the hiring committee, thought even less of me than the Dean would and never presented my application to her. She was talking about the white male. Why hadn't *he* been considered worthy? She did not see or remember me, though my words were those that reminded her of the salient point she was trying to make? I then raised my hand again wanting to say aloud the things I was thinking and remind them that I had also applied—but...I couldn't. I swallowed my words. I was struck again with feelings of being an imposter. I sat there—both feeling and fearing that I probably was never worthy of the position anyway. Even worse, I feared if I said anything they would think, "*You? Seriously?*"

Instead, I said something that took just as much courage but was less direct of a challenge. I said, "In September, I will have been here for five academic years. Yet, many of you don't know me. I left a tenure track position where I was a big fish in a small pond to come here and assume a clinical position, thinking I wanted to be among the greats, because I could learn so much more just from being around you. However, that has not been the case. Instead, I have had to introduce myself to some of you as many as five times. You don't even see me. I have been in the elevator with some of you and though I have said hi, you have looked directly at me and not even returned the greeting... I do so much service that I have no career to be proud of and now every day I ask myself how long I am going to be able to stay here because of how this place makes me feel about myself..." I could then feel the cry choking me as it was making its way out onto my face. And since I had no sure direction of where I wanted to go with the discussion, I just stopped. Someone quickly jumped in, making a joke that none of us would make that kind of a mistake any time soon because we would not be in any elevators together because of COVID.

I turned off my camera and muted my microphone. The emotional pain had become physical and vibrated throughout my whole body. I was shaking. I started sobbing until I felt weak. I could barely see through my tears, and though many people were sending me private messages, thanking me for my bravery, it had no effect. My trauma had already been triggered, and my mind and body were doing their own things. Further, I was mad at myself. My last sentiment, “I ask myself how long I am going to be able to stay here *because of how this place makes me feel about myself*,” was not true. I was actually growing stronger in my self-love and self-respect and beginning to see how much I was worth and that what I was being offered here was beneath me. I did not deserve the exploitation that was happening—and yes, it was exploitation. Exploitation, in my understanding, is when the benefits of the labor of a few (or the marginalized) are transferred to the dominant class. What I wanted to say was something bolder and more direct that indicted them for their complicity and gave voice to how they benefitted from the work I and the other clinical faculty did. Instead, much like the ways in which I was indoctrinated as a Black woman in a white man’s world, I protected them at my own expense. I made myself small, and seemingly weak, by suggesting that how I thought of myself, rather than the corrupt white supremacist system that shaped my entire existence, was to blame for my dissatisfaction.

It was only a few weeks later in a conversation with a white colleague and friend (who also occupied the role of clinical faculty) that I further realized the weight of it all, on me. For one, I had just assumed a leadership position over a program with more than 700 students. This program was one that had grown rapidly without much infrastructure and development and needed more than just one director. Smaller programs with 50 students had two directors. Those directors were most often white. My program sorely needed resources in the form of more faculty and advisors. Moreover, I was taking this position at a time that a lot of changes were occurring with respect to COVID, in addition to the rightful demands of students that the program be more inclusive in light of the social awakening that was occurring in the world. Then, there were various student issues. I was working 12 to 13-hour days during our stay-at-home COVID orders, at a time when I read emails from other faculty (mostly male, mostly tenured) about finally having time to play frisbee in the back yard or hang picture frames on the wall. I started waking up early every morning because the churn of my stomach prevented me from sleep. There was just too much to do. I ran through my days with my heart racing and heaviness in my chest because it was all just too much. So, as I sat one-on-one with my colleague, and she asked how I was doing, I told her (without considering the parallel), “I feel like I can’t breathe.” She looked at me genuinely and with love before saying, “Norissa...how could you?” I realized immediately that she was making a reference to all that was going on in the world and what that would trigger for me, as a BW. However, she was also making a direct reference to the murder of George Floyd, who also, quite literally *could not breathe*. Although, my experience is not directly comparable to George Floyd’s murder, in that he had a physical knee on his back, I had also been feeling crushed under the weight of white supremacy. My death would not be in 9 minutes and 46 seconds, but as studies of John Henryism inform us, the high effort coping required to deal with prolonged experiences of inequality and racial discrimination ultimately damages ones’ health through stress, resulting in higher rates of cardiovascular disease, heart attacks, depression and other problems, including early deaths (Felix et al., 2019). As such, the suffocating environment of a predominantly and historically white institution promised to kill me too...*eventually*. Racism in law enforcement is not unlike

racism in the academy. Neither have been good for Black people.

The Weight of the Work

Eight months later, I can assuredly say that given what was happening in the world, my words held more impact than they would any other time, and they served as a catalyst for change efforts that are still underway, however clumsy those efforts may be. Yet, even as I write, I write with sadness. This week in a Chairs' Advisory meeting, a wound that was healing, was ripped open again. Having heard what I had said back in June, the new Chair came in with a mission to make things fairer and more equitable across races, genders, and faculty lines. As such, he presented to the advisory group the truth of how things were supposed to play out between clinical and tenured faculty. The preexisting policy indicated that the only intended difference between the clinical and tenured track faculty was that clinical faculty taught twice as much. In the time saved from teaching, the tenured were expected to have been doing research. They both were expected to do the same amount of service and have the same amount of time for professional activities. However, the truth of the matter is that clinical faculty do so much service that they don't have time for professional activities. This has great impact because when clinical faculty go up for promotion, they are less likely to get it. In addition, when clinical faculty go for promotion, they are at a systemically constructed disadvantage because when performance is assessed in yearly reviews, only teaching and service are considered, not professional activities.

This conversation would have been great and validating in so many ways. It would have given me hope for a changing landscape. However, before the Chair had a chance to get into the details, he was interrupted by a tenured faculty member, known for how opinionated she is. She dominantly asserted, "That's what *they* were hired for. You have to keep that in mind." Given that I had an extreme amount of work and stressful happenings just the day before and the fact that I thought we had long passed this kind of argument, I was at a lower capacity to handle such an assertion. I did, however, write in the chat box that those kinds of statements reinforce the privilege of the tenured and result in the continued imbalance. I stated that I would have spoken verbally but the sentiments both angered and saddened me. I saw her read it and stretch back on her chair completely unbothered, and it infuriated me. Again, my body behaved in ways against my desire. Tears began to roll down my eyes. I turned my video off, and I disengaged, answering minimally when called on. Days later my visceral response made sense to me. Across several days, I went from angry to sad and wanting to completely withdraw from everything but my family. Given what I know of trauma, I realized I was having a traumatic response to the trigger of the present oppressive experiences I was having, as well as the many years of violence inflicted on me in historically white academic institutions—not to mention all that transpired for those who came before me. People of color in institutions steeped in white supremacy endure violence regularly, but it often goes unnamed for so long that it is not unlike silent toxins that erode our tissues and cause cancers by way of a long and steady process. If one isn't careful, they may miss the preliminary signs of illness or question their appraisal of the symptoms, concluding that it was only a small thing—a cold, perhaps—that can be fought off with home remedies. It is a while before they learn otherwise.

This story provides a clear description of some of the insidious ways in which white supremacy exerts its influence in the workplace and shapes the experience of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) in higher education. Some, if not all, of the aspects of the story may resonate with many. Yet, I know it is one of many stories that depict the one-down position BW faculty and staff are made to assume in such contexts. Therefore, the remainder of this paper will review strategies for survival in these oppressive contexts. It will begin with a discussion of what BW can do for their own self-survival and conclude with a discussion of what institutions can do to increase equity and belonging for BW in academia. Though much of this can be applied across genders, the focus of the discussion targets the experiences of BW because of the ways gender roles and socialization intersect with race and create a yet more unique condition. Women are socialized to be self-sacrificing nurturers; BW, who were once responsible for nursing slave master's children, self-sacrifice even more so than others. Women in academia are responsible for more service than their male counterparts, even when those counterparts are Black or other men of color (Walkington, 2017). As such, the focus on BW in this paper extends to those who identify as women, have been socialized as women, and are related to as women.

Strategies for Black Survival

Self-Survival

Although there is a range of experiences across higher education contexts, for most BW, academia is like infertile soil. Of course, if tended to and an extraordinary amount of time and attention is given, the soil can eventually be revived and even thrive. Then one could plant seeds, water, weed when necessary, and wait for harvest. That would be fine, if all were given the same soil to grow their harvest, but that is not the case. Those who were given fertile soil, flourish almost immediately, having only to plant seeds, weed minimally and wait for harvest-time. As such, they reap the harvest much quicker (i.e., scholarship, research, publications, conference presentations, gaining notoriety, the opportunity to be a thought leader in their field, tenure and/or promotion). However, those who are not, not only wait for harvest, but spend years continuing to cultivate the soil because it takes many years to bring soil to a most inviting and rich place. The obstacles and experiences of the two groups are not the same; neither are the outcomes.

This mirrors the experience of BW in academia. BW have less career satisfaction because of their labor and toil, and this labor is often unseen and undervalued (Patton & Njoku, 2019). There are decreased opportunities for scholarship deemed meaningful or opportunities for promotion and tenure (Walkington, 2017). Disproportionately, they provide mentorship and training opportunities for students and spearhead diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Despite this, they are more likely to be perceived as incompetent and unintelligent (Harris, 2020). Structural factors like those that have been mentioned are not often considered in their evaluations, resulting in a decreased likelihood for promotion and tenure. Equally as important to this discussion is that BW are not often invited to decision making spaces in which they can impact change (Patton & Njoku, 2019). When they are, they are often the minority in their opinion and expression, and the cost of advocacy wears on them. Many BW leave academia, and rightly so with all the adversity. However, this perpetuates the problem as there are no

challengers of dominant discourse within the system, though this is necessary for structural change to occur. In order to survive in these contexts, BW in academia are advised to understand their experiences through a trauma-informed lens, practice self-care, find community, address internalized oppression and its manifestation as imposter syndrome, adjust expectations as a means of coping, practice self-advocacy, or if all else fails, leave.

Understand One's Experiences Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Trauma, by definition, means wound, or injury (Herman, 1997). People do not experience trauma just by virtue of being wounded or injured. Trauma is experienced when one's circumstances have exceeded one's ability to cope or make sense of. When we do experience a trauma, our bodies help us by facilitating a fight, flight, or freeze response. When we are not able to fight or flee, we are not able to discharge the energy of our charged nervous systems and experience a freeze response. The energy gets trapped in our bodies and can be triggered later on in time (van Der Kolk, 2014). An important contextual factor to consider in the context of this discussion is that power restricts the degrees to which individuals can fight or flee. There are intra-institutional consequences for getting up and leaving a meeting or directly challenging peers or those in a higher position about something experienced as racist or sexist. As such, it stands to reason that BW in historically and predominantly white institutions are in situations in which they cannot adequately resolve the activation of their nervous systems (by fighting or fleeing) and ultimately freeze with this unresolved trauma in their bodies. This must also be considered against the backdrop of cumulative traumas that have occurred historically, in one's personal life, in the community, in the larger society and in prior academic experiences. Oppression is not often spoken about as traumatic, but it most certainly is.

Some factors that influence the degree to which someone is able to bounce back from a traumatic experience include the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event (i.e., Was support provided or offered?), post-traumatic circumstances (i.e., loss of job or status, having to immediately return to work, etc.), the ways in which the larger community received them and their experience (i.e., Was the experience validated? Were structures within the community modified to allow for optimal recovery?), or repeated exposure to the stressor (i.e., Was this the first time the individual has had to deal with this stressor? If not, how many other times have they had to deal with it? What were the outcomes of those times?) (van Der Kolk, 2014). Due to the fact that Black faculty and staff employed in historically white institutions are often the numerical minority and have less power within the institution, when they discuss issues of prejudice, discrimination, or systematic racism and sexism, they are often met with defensiveness and skepticism. These responses often prohibit responses necessary for healing and posttraumatic growth. Instead, superficial topical healing may begin, akin to scabs on a physical wound. However, repeated injuries and microaggressions pick away at the scab, exposing raw skin and preventing healing. This further reduces one's capacity to respond to the racial and gendered inequities and slights experienced. Similar to the experience I described in the recent Chairs Advisory meeting, where I found myself swimming in a sadness that seemed disproportionate to the circumstance, one whose trauma has been triggered relives the trauma all over again (Herman, 1997; van Der Kolk, 2014). It is experienced the same as when it happened the first time. Our nervous systems are activated with stress hormones preparing us for fight or

flight, taking us physically and emotionally to various extremes in a short amount of time. It can do so without explicit recollection of the earlier trauma, making it difficult to trace the origins of our emotions. Though these physiological responses have an adaptive quality to them, repeated activations, without opportunity to fight or flee, eventually wear on the body and manifest in various ways including anxiety, depression, and other physical ailments (van der Kolk, 2014). If these experiences are understood through a trauma-informed lens, self and community interventions can be employed to mitigate the impact of such events, which leads to a discussion on the importance of self-care.

Practice Self-Care

Self-care is an incredibly necessary part of the survival toolkit for BW in academia. Self-care does not imply indulgence in expensive rituals but requires a habitual self-check-in where one asks themselves how they are feeling and faring. Am I overwhelmed? Do I need a break? What can I do to feel and *be* better? Self-care calls for being proactive. One cannot wait until a time of crisis to decide to prioritize and center wellness. It must be cultivated such that there is a readily available toolkit to help decompress and achieve a sense of wellbeing. Self-care can be divided into prevention and intervention measures. Prevention speaks to those things you do on a regular basis to ensure that you are ready for daily challenges. They include such things as eating a healthy diet, sleeping the required hours, exercise, engaging in activities outside of work, cultivating healthy support system(s), regular prayer or meditation, practicing mindfulness, regular staycations or vacations, taking naps when needed, and speaking kind words to oneself. Interventions are those things you do in the midst of a crisis to be able to respond to a present stressor. They include intentional activation of any preventive strategies previously mentioned, seeking a counselor or therapist, utilizing members of your support network inside and outside of academia, outreaching to your union or faculty senate, going for a massage, enjoying a date night, or taking some time off from work. The impact of intervention strategies depends in large part on the degree to which prevention strategies are regularly practiced.

Self-care is not only necessary for the challenges BW personally face in the academy; it is also necessary because BW are more likely than their peers to mentor and do more service-oriented activities (Walkington, 2017; Patton & Njoku, 2019). In so doing, they are more likely to hear of the traumas and experiences of students of color and are more likely to be engaged in activities to help these students navigate oppressive systems. As such, there is an increased likelihood for burnout and vicarious (also called, secondary) trauma (Harrison & Westwood, 2009). Vicarious trauma is not simply witnessing the experience of others and feeling empathy or compassion for them. It is greater than that. Those who experience vicarious trauma actually experience the same symptomology as those who endure it themselves. As such, their nervous systems are expended in the same ways as if they themselves endured the trauma. Additionally, they are changed by the experience and have a reduced capacity to engage life and work in the same ways as they could pre-trauma. Movement is an exceptionally important preventive component of self-care. Movement is cited as being necessary in resolving traumas that linger in our body (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; van Der Kolk, 2014). Activities such as dancing, drumming, massage, running, yoga, and acupuncture all help to regulate a dysregulated nervous system in the aftermath of trauma.

Find Community

It is essential that BW in academia have established and developed communities they can rely on in times of need. Informal networks made up of family and friends are good because individuals can relate to the people in these groups without having much relation to their work experiences. In addition, often a similar value system is shared, love and warmth are reciprocated, and one's value is seen and appreciated. It counters ivory tower experiences and can nourish in ways that prepare for the challenges of work. Academic networks should be sought as well. There are various groups targeting the needs of people of color within academic institutions today. Within colleges and universities, diversity, equity, and inclusion offices may help one access additional resources and mentors. These offices are often called different things such as the office of global inclusion; the office of equity, belonging and community action; or some variation of this. In addition, some schools have multicultural centers, affinity groups, or, at best, in-house equity and diversity lawyers. Academic affinity groups outside of one's home institution should also be cultivated. There are specific groups such as the National Association of Black Social Workers, American Association for Blacks in Higher Education, and many others that may prove to be a good resource. In addition, there are informal groups that can be found on social media. At the time of this writing, there are private groups one could request access to, like Binders Full of Black Women, Black Women in Higher Education, and Black Nonbinary People in Academia. Similar groups can also be found on LinkedIn.

Address Internalized Oppression

Internalized oppression refers to the adoption of dominant culture narratives about who people of color are. Frantz Fanon (1961/2007) calls it auto-oppression and says it is when the oppressor without becomes the oppressor within. In this conceptualization, the oppressor no longer has to daily navigate the lives and experiences of people of color to make them do what is desired. The oppressed have internalized the ways, norms, and practices of the oppressive group and act according to the unspoken scripts laid out for them. These scripts keep in place the same dynamics as those actively pursued in the initial domination of a people.

Institutions operate according to Eurocentric values and norms. Standards of promotion and the criteria by which certain behaviors are praised over others are predicated on the standards assumed to be superior and are rooted in white supremacy. As such, marginalized individuals judge themselves according to the standards and critiques of that dominant cultural group. For women and people of color, it often manifests in internalized inferiority, more notably identified as "the imposter syndrome." The imposter syndrome, first coined in the 1970s, refers to the feeling that one does not measure up (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). One does not really believe they deserve the praise and accolades bestowed upon them and does not see themselves as being as good as their white or male counterparts. Further, there is a fear that it will someday be found out that they don't really belong. The imposter syndrome is a stressful way to live, yet many know it well—and it often results in self-defeating behaviors. One might be discouraged from applying for a higher position, seeking promotion, presenting at a conference, or even doing research because they believe (and have been told in many ways) that they do not have what it takes. An important aspect of this discussion is the consideration that internalized oppression and

the imposter syndrome often make us complicit in our own oppression. BW might not even notice that we are being asked to do more work than others or that some get to say “no” or choose the kinds of service they do, while some cannot. Moreover, if it is noticed, we often do not challenge the dynamics. We might even continue to accept or even volunteer for an extraordinary amount of work that is sure to result in our own downfall. Training our eyes to see inequities where they exist and saying “no” are practices that will result in self-preservation.

Beginning to learn one’s own worth by choosing to judge oneself by standards consistent with one’s own cultural values rather than Eurocentric cultural norms is a great first step in the direction towards liberation. For example, quantitative research and linear thinking is more consistent with patriarchal, western ways of knowing and is often valued more than qualitative research. Qualitative research and the act of knowing and teaching by way of storytelling is more consistent with the cultural norms of people of color. Despite my knowing this, when I say that I am a researcher, the immediate self-critique that often follows is, “No, you’re not. That’s not really research. Don’t even say that out loud.” These thoughts taunt me because, in my doctoral training, the perceived inferiority of qualitative research was explicitly stated. Proposals were rejected because “qualitative research was not real research.” Instead of succumbing to the internalized voice of white supremacy, challenge it: Storytelling is a valid way of knowing. I tell and explore various stories and learn and teach about human behavior in a way that cannot be captured in quantitative work. They are two complimentary modes of knowing. Regular exploration of the ways in which these messages have been internalized will increase awareness of how they manifest in the individual experience. Challenging them will ensure that we override oppressive messages we have unknowingly internalized.

Adjust Expectations and Practice Self-Advocacy

A few years ago I went to a conference session and the presenters detailed how exhausting it can be going against the norm, being on high alert, noticing and fighting injustices. This understanding has never left me and is in fact something I think and talk about regularly in my classes. This work is not easy. When our expectations lead us to believe that fighting the status quo will be easy and provide immediate rewards, we set ourselves up for failure. Though we do live in a time of cancel culture, where surface level attempts at justice do *seem* to vindicate wrong doings against Black people, this swift and speedy response is not as readily experienced behind closed doors and in issues that do not result in immediate loss of revenue or status. As such, we have to know, like the title of Angela Davis’ (2015) book, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*. Countering the norm and shifting cultures, especially when we are individuals who have been traumatized repeatedly, hurts. There are many who talk-the-talk of social justice but do not walk-the-walk. When the tables turn and people learn that in order for equity to exist the privileged have to give something up, even the most liberal feel threatened. Believing in the myth of scarcity, that is at the heart of oppression, they often fight to preserve their privilege.

Leave

The final option individuals have is to either leave their current institution or to leave academia altogether. Though I still have a few months left, I chose the latter. Just a year ago I found

myself saying to a prospective Black male, queer student who was skeptical about coming into a cohort of 100 students where he was the only Black male, “You have to be in the system to change the system.” At the time, I had not realized what I was up against. I believed the people who sat beside me and sent me encouraging emails after the large faculty meeting where I bore all. I believed we were in this fight together, that all realized the cost of equity is often a loss of some power for the privileged. However, it was not long before I realized I was pushing hard, very hard, against a fortified brick wall. Though I have managed to change a lot and served as a catalyst for many changes in less than a year, the internal cost has been one that is too great to bear. And so, I had to reconsider my earlier sentiments and question the truth of whether I had to be in the system to change it. I now say, “You have to *had* been in the system to change it.” Meaning, it is very necessary to have been in a system and to understand its inner workings in order to properly critique it. However, once you know that, you are prepared to change the system from outside if you so choose. I love teaching and I will never leave that, but I am not bound to be full-time faculty. I recognize this is easier said than done for some, and it might be a longer-term goal for others. However, the point is, academia is not the end-all-be-all, and purging oneself from the ugly that can exist inside the walls of the ivory towers might be what is necessary for Black survival. I tend not to advocate for absolute thinking, so while at the moment I do not intend to return to academia full time, I hold space for the possibility that I might; as institutions differ and as more equitable policies and practices are enforced, the landscape could drastically change. I held this as the last option for self-survival because I think it is important to try to employ all the other strategies before deciding that things cannot work. If all Black scholars left the academy, where would we be? Black scholars would not be heard from, nor would they get to influence the thoughts of future generations. Black students, as well as other students of color, would miss out on the privilege of being mentored and taught by BW. So, it is necessary for BW to be within those walls, for as long as it can be tolerated. The remaining section of this paper will review actions that can be taken to increase equity and belonging for BW from an institutional standpoint.

What Institutions Can Do to Increase Equity and Belonging for Black Survival

Discussing what Black scholars can do to survive in states of violence against themselves, as occurred in the previous paragraphs, is problematic on some levels. Although it is necessary, the truth of the matter is that Black scholars should not have to endure what they endure, such that they have to develop a special cadre of coping skills. Higher education, as a tool of white supremacy in a country rooted in racism and colonialism, is what should be addressed. To think of it any other way is a distortion of reality that serves to further enable white supremacy. Yet the discussion was necessary as things are not changing with much immediacy, and BW are still within these institutions. They can employ as many of the strategies suggested as they please, but if change does not exist on the macro level, we will continue to see the same results. In broad strokes, the remainder of this paper seeks to identify and address the ways in which academia can strengthen their capacity for Black survival within their institutions.

Understand the Experience of BW in Academia Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Building on the earlier discussion of trauma, it must be understood that BW by way of their

existence in America have endured multiple traumas. Healing has been impossible in contexts in which there are continued offenses. Trauma-informed systems understand that safety is the first and most basic need for those who have endured trauma. As such, higher education establishments should provide safe spaces both at the school and university level and within departments and programs. In my observance, many institutions are checking the box by providing these opportunities at the school and university levels, but there is much less oversight around how these principles are enacted at the program or department level. Trauma-informed care and principles are most frequently discussed within the arena of mental health, physical health, or child welfare. However, they are applicable in every context that people engage in. To truly be trauma-informed, systems or institutions must incorporate knowledge about trauma at every level of functioning within the system (Yatchmenoff et al., 2017). As such, from facilities management to students, staff and faculty, thought should be given to racial trauma and how it has impacted the lives of individuals. Thought should be given to ensuring the system is less triggering, and efforts should seek to minimize revictimization. In order to examine the degree to which this happens, the voices of BW should be sought in the form of surveys, focus groups, town halls, or other community forums. In order to feel safe, safeguards against retaliation for truth telling should be considered and developed. Finally, the impact of trauma is often disconnection. As such, the antidote is connection and collaboration. Institutions can seek to foster academic communities in which individuals are deeply engaging and caring about the scholarship and work of each other, rather than coexisting in silos where people barely know each other.

Institutionalize Equity and Belonging in Real and Measurable Ways

One would be hard pressed these days to find a higher education institution that does not have a department that addresses diversity, equity and inclusion. Affirmative action won the hard, first part of the battle related to getting people of color and women into institutions. However, efforts were limited beyond that, as there was little consideration of the degree to which people felt a sense of belonging in these institutions or the degree to which these institutions demanded whiteness and maleness from those who entered them. Implicit and explicit messages normalizing and making the white way the superior way ensure that Black people who enter the institution have to employ a double consciousness (Du Bois, 1968) and have to code switch, frame switch, and change in order to be accepted, praised, and promoted. In a revolutionized academia where there is belonging and equity, every policy and practice—at every level—should be inspected for the degree to which it normalizes and rewards whiteness and maleness over other ways of being. Further, fostering the establishment of networks such as professional affinity groups, racial and ethnic identity affinity groups, and those specifically for women of color should be fostered and provided with a budget to enrich the developmental experiences of BW within the institution. Retention efforts should be targeted and strengthened as well because while institutions like the one where I am have done a better job at increasing diversity in the faculty and student body, there is a low retention rate for these individuals. Climate assessments can provide meaningful data about career satisfaction, experiences with peers, barriers to success, and needed opportunities for growth and development. Moreover, BW need to be paid their due. Despite increased labor and greater responsibilities, BW are paid significantly less than their white male counterparts (Patton & Njoku, 2019; Walkington, 2017).

If the voices of BW in higher education are to be nurtured, there must be a concerted effort of non-Black faculty to ensure that non-Black people are not making decisions for BW without their fair and proportionate representation. This means racial equity committees and things of the like should not be predominantly white people or people of color more proximal to whiteness. While it is admirable that many recently developed racial equity committees did not solely compose themselves of people of color because the work is heavy labor, Black people, women in particular, should be well represented. Not doing so poses the risk of reproducing the same dynamics of power and privilege, even though it somehow manages to look different.

Fostering specific opportunities for BW in the institution to develop and maintain self-care practices would go a long way towards addressing traditions of BW providing the nurturance, care, and service to others at the expense of their own. While it is great that these opportunities are encouraged, if the workload is not such that it can be enacted without consequence, it will not happen. Further, when incentivized and enculturated, the likelihood of use will increase. Universities have done creative things such as the creation of meditation rooms. However, one meditation room on the other side of campus when there is limited time is not likely to result in increased usage. Being strategic and employing knowledge about the lived experiences of BW in academia would allow for a tailored approach that could result in more career satisfaction.

A major point to make in ameliorating institutional conditions for BW in academia is with respect to the enormous amounts of seen and unseen emotional and physical labor. Service across departments should be considered differentially. Membership on a racial equity committee, when you are a person of color, is not the same as labor on a once-per-semester student refund committee and should not be counted equivalently. Emotional labor such as student mentorship and other often taken-for-granted labor should be considered and counted in annual reviews and considered in tenure and/or promotion. In addition, in systems that seek to create a culture of equity and belonging, the interruption of dominant discourse should be normalized. For example, in the story I presented earlier when the faculty member asserted, "That's what *they* were hired for. Keep that in mind," someone other than me should have challenged and even stopped her and pointed out the flaws in her thinking. It was excessively laborious for me to have to do so, given that I have already addressed it, and my lived experience is often invalidated in these contexts. Finally, the most important consideration is whether or not exploitation is being allowed in the institution. Constant assessments and use of outside consultants should be used to consider the degree to which this is happening. Everyone will say they are busy within a department, and they will be. However, people are busy doing different things, and that should be considered. One could be busy advancing their personal careers, while another can be busy advancing the academic programs that fund the schools. External consultants will allow people to express themselves without fear of retribution and can offer expertise that will enable them to see things differently from those embedded within the system.

Conclusion

BW are critical to the essential functioning of academia, yet very little within institutions of higher education affirm their value in policies or practices. In order for academia to be an

equitable place, it must pay attention to all the citizens within its borders. As a result of the degree to which harm is inflicted in these institutions, BW are charged with taking survival into their own hands, prioritizing their own well-being, while institutions are charged with meeting and exceeding those efforts by enacting short- and long-term strategies to attend to the lived experiences of BW in historically white institutions.

References

- Davis, A. Y. (2015). *Freedom is a constant struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the foundations of a movement* (F. Barat, Ed.). Haymarket Books.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1968). *The souls of Black folk: Essays and sketches* (6th ed.). Johnson Reprint Corporation. (Original work published 1903)
- Fanon, F. (2007). *The wretched of the earth* (R. Philcox, Trans). Grove/Atlantic, Inc. (Original work published 1967)
- Felix, A. S., Shisler, R., Nolan, T. S., Warren, B. J., Rhoades, J., Barnett, K. S., & Williams, K. P. (2019). High-effort coping and cardiovascular disease among women: A systematic review of the John Henryism hypothesis. *Journal of Urban Health, 96*, 12–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-018-00333-1>
- Harris, A. P. (2020). *Presumed incompetent II: Race, class, power, and resistance of women in academia*. University Press of Colorado.
- Harrison, R. L., & Westwood, M. J. (2009). Preventing vicarious traumatization of mental health therapists: Identifying protective practices. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 46*(2), 203–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016081>
- Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Mullangi, S., & Jagsi, R. (2019). Imposter syndrome: Treat the cause, not the symptom. *JAMA, 322*(5), 403–404. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2019.9788>
- Patton, L. D., & Njoku, N. R. (2019). Theorizing Black women’s experiences with institution-sanctioned violence: A #BlackLivesMatter imperative toward Black liberation on campus. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 32*(9), 1162–1182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1645908>
- Perry, B. D., & Szalavitz, M. (2006). *The boy who was raised as a dog: And other stories from a child psychiatrist’s notebook—what traumatized children can teach us about loss, love, and healing*. Basic Books.
- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing*

of trauma. Penguin.

Walkington, L. (2017). How far have we really come? Black women faculty and graduate students' experiences in higher education. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 39, 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.55671/0160-4341.1022>

Yatchmenoff, D. K., Sundborg, S. A., & Davis, M. A. (2017). Implementing trauma-informed care: Recommendations on the process. *Advances in Social Work*, 18(1), 167–185. <https://doi.org/10.18060/21311>

About the Author: Norissa J. Williams, PhD is CEO and Founder, Liberation RPI, Maplewood, NJ (516-429-2246; drnorissawilliams@gmail.com).