Teaching While Black: My Journey from the Caribbean to Teaching in White Canada's Blackest City

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Abstract: This narrative traces my travels from an Afro-Trinidadian upbringing to coming to white-dominant Canada where I became a social worker for 20 years. It follows my struggles to confront racism and become a teacher in institutionally white universities. It culminates in my challenges and successes in finding a space to thrive, both inside and outside the classroom, at a university in Canada's largest and Blackest city.

***Keywords*:** academia, Canada, the Caribbean, gender, race, class

Road to Academia

Teaching while Black often is centered around experiences of Black scholars in classrooms and in their interactions with colleagues. Without doubt, I feel, these are contexts in which being a Black scholar is often felt acutely—events of anti-Black racism are everyday experiences that are often overlooked or talked away. As I reflect on teaching while Black, I have a different starting point, and I quickly arrive at a narrative that doesn't neatly separate teaching while Black from living as a Black woman and experiencing constant intersections between my professional life as a professor and my private life as a Black woman. For this reason, what follows is the story of my life as much as it is the story of teaching while Black. While even I find it difficult at times to fully connect aspects of my journey across professional and private spheres, I choose to narrate my story across these domains as a whole rather than two separate parts.

I was born in Trinidad and Tobago to a family of immigrants from the neighbouring Caribbean island of Grenada. Much of my development through girlhood and early adulthood followed the pathways one might have expected and even hoped for. I attended a girl's Catholic high school and graduated with the requirements to acquire a government job as a civil servant. As a dark-skinned Black woman, I was considered by many people in my family and social circles as quite lucky to get a permanent job. Many of my social connections thought, and sometimes voiced, that all that was left for me was to get married and have children while I wait for the mandatory retirement age. For many Black women in Trinidad and Tobago, this was considered a positive and meaningful pathway through life. I, however, dared to dream beyond my working-class upbringing, and I hoped to attend university. Some of my friends at the time suggested that I consider studying abroad, and as a result, I applied to colleges in the USA. My first attempt at dreaming big ended in a nightmare. In fact, I was deported. I was turned back from entering the country by the immigration officers at the airport after questioning me on my intentions in the US and discovering I was planning to begin my studies on a visitor's visa. It was humiliating being escorted to the plane by security officers with only my handbag, as my luggage would be shipped on another flight.

I remember feeling deeply dejected, and also embarrassed, because everyone back home had expected me to be studying in the US; instead, here I was, back home, with no real prospects of making good on my courageous declaration that I would study abroad. In retrospect, I recognize that this was my first indication that Black women don't get free passes. While I am quite sure that this could also have happened to a white woman, I think it more possible that a white woman may have somehow wiggled her way into the country despite the situation. First lesson: Black women don't get to wiggle into spaces where they are seen not to belong.

I returned to my desk job, dejected. Amongst those consoling me, one colleague suggested going to Canada instead. He connected me to his brother who was a teacher in Winnipeg. Once again, I felt a glimmer of hope that my audacious dream of studying abroad could come true. However, challenges awaited that move. Two pages of my passport had the word "deported" in large red letters. I was advised by a private consultant that I would not receive a visa with my current passport. The options for requesting a new passport were limited to theft or loss in a fire and the application would have to include a police report. Fortunately, the "who-you-know" technique in Trinidad and Tobago worked, and I was able to get a new passport officially through the relevant ministry and application process.

With one hurdle over, the next was to apply for the Canadian student visa. Anecdotally, during the 80s, it was common for African-Trinidadians to study in the United States and Indo-Trinidadians to migrate or study in Canada. None of the people I knew had much experience with the migration process to Canada. I was on my own. I went to one of the consultant services advertised to help those migrating to Canada. One of the many requirements was to show a bank account with funds to cover a portion of the degree costs. My father had recently died and my mother, my sibling, and myself shared in his estate. However, this was inadequate to cover the funds required by the Canadian Embassy. My mother reached out to a family member for a loan to support my bank statement. I specifically remember it was $4,000 TT dollars (then worth about $2,000 CA). I also remember the morning of the immigration appointment, my mother sitting in the veranda of our home, quietly praying that I would be successful in receiving the Canadian visa. The consultant placed all my documents in one of their advertised envelopes. When I proudly opened the envelope to share my documents, the immigration officer became quite angry and proceeded to give me a lecture on the use of these "illegal" immigration consultancy services. My heart sank. I feared that my application would be rejected. However, a few minutes later, she began to tell me about the weather in Winnipeg and that day I received my Canadian student visa. That was the beginning of a new journey in my life towards becoming an academic.

Living on the Canadian Prairies

Manitoba, a province in western Canada, became my unlikely home away from home. In fact, aside from a couple of longer return visits to Trinidad during which I worked in a residential care facility and taught social work at the University of the West Indies (UWI), I spent the next 15 years in Winnipeg, Manitoba's capital and largest city. Although I always wanted to teach, during my many years as a social work practitioner with two undergraduate degrees and one graduate degree, I was never given the opportunity to teach at the only accredited school of

social work program in the province at the time—but I noticed other white social work practitioners were teaching at the school. To satisfy my desire to teach, I accepted many social work students for practicum placements and added small group teaching modules to their experiential learning.

I had the opposite experience in Trinidad and Tobago. During one of my longer returns to Trinidad and Tobago, I was interviewed and given a contract to teach at UWI. I began to think that it was not my knowledge that was keeping me back from the opportunity to teach in Manitoba, but my identity as a Black woman. Teaching while Black was inconsequential at UWI because the majority of the faculty and staff were Black or Indo-Trinidadians. Although it was common there for people to teach without a PhD, I returned to Manitoba and registered in the full-time PhD program. I was able to teach while being a student. I was not conscious of being perceived differently as a Black woman, although in hindsight, I now understand that my students were certainly conscious of being taught by a Black PhD student.

Before and during completing my PhD, I worked as a child and family services worker in northern, urban, and rural Manitoba. I also worked in adolescent mental health services, both hospital and community services. In all my professional experiences, especially in the remote north of Manitoba, I was usually the only Black person, and definitely the only Black woman, present.

Road to Tenure

Three decades after migration to Canada as a young international student, I started in the world of academia after being offered a tenure-track position in the School of Social Work at Algoma University. Algoma is located in northern Ontario in the city of Sault Ste. Marie, which had a population of approximately 70,000, exactly 127 of whom were Black people—128 after I moved in!

I applied for this position a few months after I graduated with my PhD. I knew my chances were good based on my work history—my academic credentials and my experience living in northern communities were major assets in applying to teach in social work programs. However, I remember being concerned that my natural hairstyle and large earrings might look too threatening to the interviewers. I had internalized ideas about being "too Black" for academia in Canada.

At Algoma, the majority of students were white with four Black students—one international student from Nigeria, one from the USA, and two students from Toronto. This was the university's first hiring of a tenure-track Black woman professor. There were two Black men who had worked there for over two decades. This was the formal start of my career of teaching while Black. During one of the classes, I asked how many students had had a Black teacher before. For the student from Nigeria, it was normal; however, only one white student had a Black teacher during her final year of high school.

Although I only spent one year at Algoma, there were a few complaints by students, either about their grades or about course content. A group of four students wrote to the department director complaining about their grades: "marking seems to be arbitrary, unclear and often unexplained … meetings with Petra produces [*sic*] advice that is limited or not clear enough to be of use." In another case, a student openly challenged her grades during class. She indicated that the grade I gave was wrong and demanded that I make the change immediately. Although I told her I would review it at the end of the class, she angrily slammed her book on the desk and mumbled, "Okay, so just shut up and don't ask questions." Others complained that I made them feel uncomfortable in discussions about race and racism. Although it is true that all professors get complaints about their grading, I believed that I was singled out because I am Black. Furthermore, it wasn't just the complaints, but also the audacious method of complaints, which often featured students speaking to me or about me as if I were their peer. I felt they were not being respectful of my status in the university and my knowledge and experience because I was Black.

The university had hired three professors during the year: one East Asian woman originally from Hong Kong; one white francophone man from New Brunswick, Canada; and myself. My two colleagues never received official complaints from the students to the director or dean. The complainants from my classes went directly to the director or dean without first approaching me. In the complaint about class discussion and race, the students felt that I was directing the discussions to them as white people and accusing them of being racist. I believe their discomfort was about having a Black person speak openly about racism. The topic was new and may have been challenging as this was the first Black professor or teacher they had ever had.

The news of my departure from Algoma brought many congratulations from my colleagues there. I had been hired by Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) in Canada's largest and most diverse city. TMU had more prestige than Algoma, so it was seen as a step up. Also, most thought that Toronto was the place for me as a progressive Black woman. The view was that there would be a lot of Black people and Black progressive activists there with whom I could engage and activities in which I could become involved.

It was true that I was moving from the field of social work to the field of child and youth care, but much of my practice experience, both in Manitoba and in Trinidad, was quite congruent with what I understood child and youth care to be. Social work has a longer history as a discipline and focuses not only on children and youth but also on people through the lifespan. In child and youth care, a great deal of attention is paid to the interpersonal context of practitioner and young person, with systems and structures that impact families as elements of the ecological system in which young people's lives unfold (Stuart, 2010). The field often uses phrases such as "life space intervention" and "relational practices" to get to the core of its purpose (e.g., Kiaras, 2019). Social work, in contrast, typically centres the systems and structures that shape communities and offers a more critical analysis of those systems and structures, with less attention on hard practice skills (especially at the undergraduate level)—these are usually left to be learned through field education components of social programs (Parris, 2012). Although I initially thought that these distinctions were quite minor, I quickly learned that social work and

child and youth care are in fact quite different fields with considerable variation in how they approach practice.

I felt the School of Child and Youth Care, and the faculty of which it is a part, were a good fit for me. The School and faculty support Caribbean research, and a significant proportion of the Black students in the Greater Toronto Area are from the Caribbean diaspora. Actually, the province of Ontario is home to more than half (52 percent) of the Black population in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019). I was also very excited that the faculty members in the School consisted of 50 percent Black scholars. Except for my time teaching at UWI, I had always been the only Black person in all my previous places of employment in Canada.

My initial experiences in this academic world in the heart of Toronto were not what anyone had previously described and certainly not what I envisioned. The promise of a Black presence in Toronto, relayed to me long ago in Winnipeg, in fact came true. And yet I felt more a stranger, more on the periphery of activity, than ever before. I met my Black colleagues briefly; there were introductions and admittedly a warm welcome. But the initial encounter to say hello seemed to meet the needs of everyone else, while I remained alone. I saw my colleagues mostly during faculty meetings. They told me to call anytime, but this is a large university after all, and in my experience, these offers often mean nothing outside of an established relationship. Two white colleagues did take me out for lunch. I was expecting, although did not ask, that my Black colleagues would take me out for coffee and introduce me to significant places and things I should know at the university and Toronto. Places like where to get a Black hairstylist or products for Black hair. I should admit, I did not do much to interact with colleagues both white and Black. I did not make the calls. I found it uncomfortable to make the calls. I may have been relying on my experiences in smaller communities which were more friendly because they were smaller social circles. This compounded my experience as a new Black faculty member.

I have since heard from others that senior faculty members should have seen it as their responsibility to help me get settled in Toronto. I did not feel like they did. This made me think how easy it is to make assumptions about another's needs. The assumptions could not have been that I had a pre-existing social circle, a community of belonging, somewhere to turn to when I needed someone or something. These things don't develop overnight, and I was a complete newcomer. I have lived in enough different communities to know that it takes time to develop a social circle. This would take even longer in a large city. It may be that my colleagues did not know what it was like to live in communities that had only a tiny minority of Black people and assumed I would have no trouble becoming comfortable with the university and the community.

My reality was that I was in a new city, new to the social and cultural diversity offered by the city, new to the hustle and bustle, and new to trying to find my space, my Self and my spirit in this place. I was also existing with a broken heart and an emptiness from the loss of my sister and only surviving relative who died the same day I was moving to Toronto to start the tenure-track position.

Inside the Classroom

I was very excited for classes to start in September. At least this was a place where I expected to feel comfortable and like I belonged. That is not quite how it happened.

I am confident in social work knowledge and practice. I have a very large amount of professional experience. I believed my knowledge and skills were transferable to child and youth care, particularly for a course like Interpersonal Communication Skills, which was one of my first assigned courses. I felt a little more apprehensive about a core child and youth care course I was asked to teach, given that I was not yet as well-read in the field. But I do have a critical analysis of human services work widely speaking and my knowledge and my experience is broad—both urban and rural, and northern, always with a focus on Indigenous peoples and a focus on international migration, which feature centrally in child and youth care as much as they do in social work.

I was comfortable taking a position in a school of child and youth care specifically because my practice and my conceptual approaches have always been situated within the context of children, youth, and families. I had worked in residential care. I had worked with families in crisis. But I still had an identity crisis. This was the first time since graduating with a Bachelor of Social Work that I was not teaching or doing something under the professional banner of social work. I started thinking that I was not a social worker anymore, and I was not a child and youth care practitioner, either. So, who or what was I?

A combination of the size of classes, which were much larger than what I had encountered at Algoma University; the mix of students; my newness to the program; and being a Black woman made managing the classes quite challenging. I thought of something I had read that referenced Black scholars. Nellie McKay (1992): "Being Black and female in the academy has its own particular frustration because it was never intended for us to be here. We are in spaces that have been appropriated for us" (as cited in Alexander, 1995, p. 451). It was a very tough first semester, and I suffered in silence. A paragraph from a student's final self-evaluation captured my experience of teaching while Black. This is a white 19-year-old student:

> As a final note, thank you for a good semester, especially with the cards that you were dealt. Starting in a new place, a new environment come up with new students' challenges, new rules and norms … is never easy and I want to officially apologize on behalf of myself and my classmates. I know it has been a difficult semester for you Petra but I'm extremely proud of how you handled everything. Each week I saw the effort you would put in at trying to be a more "reasonable" professor, (e.g., getting a mic, providing extensions) and in my opinion what you did was more than enough. Next semester, do not let anyone take advantage of you. Remember to always stand your ground!

After a discussion with the director, I made some changes in the next semester, including getting a teaching assistant, yet I still did not feel that I was in complete control of the class. I still felt that my Blackness was preventing me from gaining the respect of all members of the class. I used some of the feedback from my in-class teaching assessments performed by my senior

colleagues. I changed some of the ways I presented the lectures and the classroom activities. Many students did give me positive feedback. But my confidence was shot. I didn't come to a university in the heart of Canada's biggest and Blackest city, and a school with perhaps the most representation of Black scholars of any school or department in the entire country, expecting to face what seemed present but distant in the overwhelmingly white world of Winnipeg—anti-Black racism!

While the Academy is well known for its lack of authentic practices with respect to resisting or fighting anti-Black racism (or anti-Indigenous racism), Toronto had always been described to me as the city of diversity and the city of multiculturalism, and most importantly, the city in which being Black, much less teaching while Black, would not be a problem. I had high hopes to find myself in this city, to finally live with easy access to all things Black. How quickly my anticipation was shattered! With all this hope, I may have ignored the many voices that said Canada is a racist country and always has been (e.g., Foster, 1991; Maynard, 2017).

Outside the Classroom

I linked my experiences in teaching while Black to what I experienced outside the classroom, which included several concrete incidents of anti-Black racism. I realized quickly that notwithstanding its diversity, Toronto was still a space in which anti-Black racism could thrive, including in communities that are themselves racialized. From the hair salon to the shopping centre, experiences of anti-Black racism quickly accumulated, which had the effect of centering my consciousness of being a Black woman both outside of the classroom and within the academy. As an example, I had returned to Toronto from my sister's funeral. I had a trip to Italy planned, so the Sunday before my departure, I quickly dropped in to get a pedicure. Salons are not usually crowded on a Sunday. The man at the entrance looked me up and down and then said that they were busy. It did not feel right. I walked around the block, unsure if my feelings were accurate. I called a white friend and asked her to call for an appointment. She called back with horror in her voice and explained that the man had asked her to hold and then came back on the phone with an appointment for that very day.

This hit me to the core. It felt like the first time I was deliberately being rejected based on the colour of my skin. I had never experienced this in Winnipeg, in the northern Manitoba city of Thompson (where anti-Indigenous racism is rampant), or in Sault Ste. Marie. Months later, another incident occurred involving a business telling me that there were no walk-ins available that day. Again, I asked a white woman to please call and see if she could get an appointment or if they were not taking walk-ins. She did and was promptly told that walk-ins were available. With these kinds of incidents, I found myself quickly developing a hyper-awareness of being judged. Toronto is indeed the city for all things Black—including anti-Black racism.

I not only experienced petty racial discrimination, but I came to feel unvalued by Black academics and activists in Toronto. I think the identity issues that played out for me in the Black community mirror those related to my professional ambivalence around social work and child and youth care practice. I found myself feeling like an outsider in the "Black community." I did not have a community, and no one really was giving me an application form to join the

community. I felt like I was made to remember that I was someone from outside of Toronto. Whatever I may have done elsewhere, however I may have been positioned before coming here, was not really relevant. No one asked or expressed any interest in what it was like to work with Indigenous families on small reserves in northern Canada, or former alumni of residential care institutions in the Caribbean, or the fight for access to mental health services for newcomers from Sierra Leone and Sudan. It seemed to me that to matter in Toronto, you had to be able to point to your activism, your contributions, your active resistance to racism in Toronto.

For much of the first ten months of my time in Toronto and my time in the School of Child and Youth Care at the university, I had only very limited interactions with my Black colleagues, and I did not feel like I belonged to a Black community. No one had my back because I did not have a community. At one point these feelings overpowered me, and I was reduced to tears while at a friend's party. This was an old friend from high school in Trinidad with whom I had recently reconnected. I felt she was a safe person to discuss these feelings with as she was a Black woman in academia and was a part of the Black Toronto community. She validated my feelings and gave me her experiences in living and teaching while Black in Toronto.

A Visit from a Friend

The turning point in my journey came from an unlikely relationship. I had a visit from my friend who had also been my high-school teacher. She was just a few years older than her students. She too ended up going to Winnipeg to study. We met each other just two days before our departure from Trinidad. She was attending the University of Manitoba to do her master's degree in history. I was starting as an undergraduate student at the University of Winnipeg. Our friendship developed further as she stayed in Winnipeg to complete her PhD before returning to teach at UWI. She later moved to the US to teach at Spelman College, and we kept in touch.

A visit from this friend to Toronto came just at the right time and ended up being a very meaningful experience. I did not know how much I needed it until it was over. I initially asked her to visit mainly for her to see two of her former students (myself, and another former student who now lived in Toronto). I wanted her to see our development as scholars. However, the time spent with her allowed me to remember who I was, where I came from, what I brought to Toronto and to TMU and not to forget that! It was also nurturing and intellectual. She re-introduced me to Black women writers. We also talked about my sister's death. Since she had known my sister in Trinidad, it was easy to bring her death into the conversation and not feel the need to apologise for any discomfort to the listener by talking about grief. And how I needed to talk about my grief!

My friend was a Black woman academic like myself with a similar cultural background and similar graduate school in Manitoba, and initial tertiary teaching experiences in Winnipeg and in Trinidad. While I remained and entered the academic profession in the white space of Toronto and in a demographically white institution, she had gone to the US South to teach at Spelman College, a historically Black college. While the history and entrenched extent of anti-Black racism in the US South is well documented and undisputed, the city in which she landed is seen as one of the most empowering places for upwardly mobile Blacks in the US, the Black

Mecca—Atlanta, a city central to the civil rights movement for Black empowerment, desegregation, equal rights, and justice (Wiltz, 2022).

Her institution, too, is one of the only two institutions of higher education specifically for Black women, a place which fostered the rise of Black feminist thought, community, and pedagogy. In other words, a place with more ingredients for the making of a safe space for Black women intellectuals than Toronto. Yet, even here, in a sea of Black academic womanhood, sisterhood support and community were not complete. My friend, too, felt alienated by the fact of her different cultural background and immigrant origins.

There is no nirvana, no ideal place where total acceptance can be achieved. No utopian safe and all-inclusive space. But with such visits, shared understanding, bonding, empathy, and nurturing, community, however geographically dispersed, can still be achieved. The community and support system we seek may be spatially ephemeral, but the empowerment is real. If we treat such moments of connection like oases in a vast desert, we can provide others who are similarly located the much-needed sustenance for which we thirst. When we share our ideas, and even lived experiences of "teaching while Black," we are fortified and renewed in resolve, knowing that we can do it, we can always find fuel for the next mile; we are not alone.

My friend found that I was not taking the impending COVID-19 lockdown seriously. She walked to the corner store and bought me a care package, including toilet paper, milk, and flour! She asked for a needle and thread to sew a missing button on my jacket. She gave me a journal with the inscription "This book is for you to document your incredible life journey." Although the lockdown occurred a few days after the end of my friend's visit, the impact of her stay was so empowering. I found myself feeling that neither I nor my teaching was the problem. Toronto was the problem. Toronto suffers from Toronto centrism, much like New Yorkers see their city as the centre of the US. Many Torontonians know nothing or little about life in the rest of Canada. And Black people in Toronto suffer from a different kind of oppression that I naively did not realize that I would encounter.

Hope

In March of that year, the world changed rather abruptly. The lockdown brought on major loneliness for many people, myself included. It felt like I was abandoned all over again. What I needed was to get out, at least for some time. When everyone else was avoiding planes and travel, I hailed a taxi and left for the airport. I knew Trinidad was not an option at that moment, but Winnipeg—where I continued to maintain a home before making a permanent decision whether or not to relocate to Toronto—was my second home, and certainly was an option. I was so happy to leave Toronto. Waking up in Winnipeg felt like heaven. The distance really helped me further analyse my ten-month experience in Toronto and put it in context. I no longer felt less than. I decided I now knew my worth. I saw how I could get to the next step. I knew that there are still things for me to learn about teaching while Black in academia, but my knowledge rooted in practice and theory places me in good standing with knowledge worth sharing with my students and my colleagues.

Conclusion

It's been an incredible journey of hardship, opportunity, disappointment, and finally the rediscovery of the meaning of relationship and care. When I returned to Toronto for my second year of teaching, an open discussion with my Black faculty colleagues and sharing of my experience resulted in a more supportive relationship. A similar discussion occurred with white faculty members. I found supportive people in Toronto's Black community and among those who work in academia. They were able to provide me with support in working while Black. My social circle includes both Black and white colleagues. We socialize outside of the university. I am involved in initiatives to resist anti-Black racism both in the School and in the community. I feel fully engaged in the field of child and youth care. Sometimes I get excited about the things I learn. But often, I wonder whether child and youth care, just like social work and all the other human professions, really understands that young people, just like me, can perform wellness but can be hurting on the inside. In the end, I found a path toward renewal and my own wellness in relationship. An old friend; a trusted soul. Someone who cared enough to go out and buy me toilet paper.

Teaching while Black is an important subject that calls for greater exploration. At the same time, I believe that teaching while Black cannot be neatly separated from living while Black. Of course, I encounter all of the challenges that Black teachers and scholars encounter every day. I still wonder whether my knowledge is taken as seriously by students as it would be coming from a white professor. I still find myself having to justify decisions in the classroom that for others may just be accepted on the basis of the authority inherently embedded in being a professor. And every time I enter the classroom, I am conscious that I am being evaluated not on the basis of substance, but on the basis of whether I reflect the normative standards of being a professor that were set by white people many, many years ago. And still, for me teaching while Black has been about the precarity of relationships, about belonging in communities where one might intuitively feel that one should belong, and about recognizing that even when offered the exceptional opportunity to teach in a department in which most scholars are Black and where conversations about teaching while Black occur regularly, I still cannot relax. A Black woman in the academy is still a unique person with a unique story of how she got there, and yet I feel that story is somehow rendered invisible, much like Black lives are often rendered invisible.

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