The Academic Resiliency of This Black Man

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Abstract: This autobiographical narrative reflects challenges I have faced, throughlines I have identified, and insights I have drawn and can share from my experience as the first Black male chair of the social work department in a predominantly White postsecondary context. This reflection offers a historical profile of my lived experiences with occurrences and patterns of interpersonal racism that have shaped and intersected with my goals, duties, and responsibilities as an administrative leader and department chair. I share and unpack these details here to provide context and support to scholars and academic leaders of color still to come.

***Keywords*:** Black male chair, administrative leader of color, PWI, academic chair, social work, racism, racism in academia

Two years ago, I became the first Black male to chair my academic department at a college I served then as an associate professor but where I am now a full professor in the school of social work. This is a predominately White postsecondary institution with a 169-year history. Only once before that had there been a Black chair, and electing a Black female to the position was a genuinely progressive move at that time, but no other Black leader had served since then—until me. I had already served as interim chair the previous fall and knew firsthand that chairing an academic department is challenging and involves a lot of detailed work and focus. The role certainly affords a great deal of interaction and intervention with both faculty and students. In addition to managing the curriculum, the department chair works closely with the school's dean to ensure curricular compliance with the Council on Social Work Education. The department faculty and the dean carefully observe the chair's leadership and communication skills and patterns. Such assessment and examination should happen if the chair is to fulfill the intended role of assisting students in sorting the appropriate required course options to graduate, offering and guiding students through learning challenges within the curriculum, providing strategies for the betterment of the college/university's educational growth, and assisting faculty whom they supervise with professional development options and goals for advancement.

Despite gradually fulfilling chair leadership obligations by working in a committed department, I worried that my Blackness itself would sometimes cause White colleagues to subconsciously doubt my capability to lead. This expectation was grounded in experiences of former colleagues with unfounded racial and social perceptions they weren't always even aware they held within and outside academia. I expected race-related diminishment and challenges to occur and accordingly positioned myself for racial prejudices and oppression that I did, indeed, encounter from some White colleagues.

Though unanimously elected by my peers, I was aware that I was the only person who volunteered for this position of authority. Academic leadership positions are typically time-consuming and can be challenging. Like me, many of us in academia have witnessed departmental struggles involving former chairs that arose due to personality conflicts or control issues. Potential candidates may not want a leadership position because they worry about known

or debatable obstacles to their success. When I asked before my election, former and current departmental chairs described the chair position as generally undesirable for these and other reasons. Yet, someone needed to step up. I was the next senior person in line for it and thought I could do a good job, and I hoped to make a difference for our department's faculty and students. I also felt sure I would continue having to navigate my Blackness through what was sometimes unfriendly territory.

My first acute awareness of being Black in the academic world occurred in high school when my honest intent to write a poem for an English contest was questioned. Given my hard work on the poem, one White teacher's ill judgment made me aware that my academic skills and potential would not be assumed and would sometimes be questioned for the mere reason of my skin color. Like many others, proving myself in the White Academy at every level became part of my coursework. For more than 45 years, the messages and actions of various White academics have been piling up as memories of racial trauma that would doubtless be unimaginable to those very people. Significantly, only *some* White people contributed to my academic trauma as a Black man—not all—though this former pattern of treatment which, as I share and unpack here, has shaped my experiences in profound ways that continue to impact how I view my place within academia.

Consistently proving oneself can become second nature, as can navigating low expectations, verbal abuse, and microaggressions. While working within and on behalf of my academic community, I have needed to find ways to address my challenges—and vulnerability. Sharing these experiences and related learnings is essential because I want to encourage other Black male academics. In *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, Shelby Steele (1990) writes, "Racial vulnerability is best thought of not so much as the wound of our oppression as the woundedness we still carry as a result of it—our continuing openness to inferiority anxiety and racial diminishment and shame" (p. 57). Steele is expressing what I have experienced insofar as some White academics have dismissed and verbally attacked me for no reason other than my skin color. Marc Lamont Hill (2021) states, "Emotional vulnerability can cut deep. The world hasn't created space for us, particularly Black men, to say, 'What you said hurt my feelings' or 'What you said made me feel insecure or inadequate'" (p. 76). Expressing emotional vulnerability in writing is scary, but bell hooks (2004) reminds us that "if Black boys and Black men do not allow themselves to feel … they are not able to take responsibility for nurturing their emotional growth; they cannot access the healthy parts of themselves that could empower them to resist" (p. 93). hooks (2004) suggests that emotional growth is a journey to empowerment to resist and can be modeled and nurtured by Black males who do not internalize false and demoralizing images of their Blackness. The idiom "there is strength in numbers" may be a cliché, but it is not an exaggeration. I hope that this essay may help other Black male academics feel safer articulating manifestations of white supremacy and anti-Blackness if they experience racist harm in their professional lives.

Judith Herman (1997), the author of *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, writes, "To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human

nature" (p. 7). A Black man examining his own experiences of racial trauma can reflect on his willingness to be vulnerable, enabling potential healing.

My racial trauma was triggered early in life via overt and subtle racist messaging and actions. The White male guidance counselor tasked with helping me discern post–high school pathway options and realize my priorities and potential taunted me by saying, repeatedly, "You're not college material." Those words, on repeat, were overt and devastated me, an adolescent whose entire family was college-educated and expected the same for me. Perhaps this guidance counselor had absorbed negative messaging from protests of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. Digging into these demoralizing sentiments and low expectations, he would methodically plant subliminal messages and give me material for a trade high school. However, my resiliency prevailed, and I was self-motivated to improve my grades, attend a prestigious college, and graduate.

Into adulthood, I continued to find ways to react positively to opportunities and new contexts despite being judged and treated in non-affirming and negative ways because of my race and having others try to define me rather than let me explain myself. Indeed, I had been given some tools and know-how from older Black folk who were biologically related or considered a fictive kin relation from my Black church. Exemplary role models and elders taught me to find value and worth inside myself and not from outside oppressors. Even so, it was not always easy to hold this line. To transcend the structures, norms, and realities of White America, resilience quickly became a critical survival skill. I sought explicitly to live in authentic ways that did not compromise my Blackness. A Black male elder once told me that when introducing myself to White people, I should look them in the eyes and shake their hands firmly to convey confidence to them *and also to myself* that I am a strong Black man. He felt that shaking a White person's hand symbolizes internal confidence, and looking directly at them asserts equality. Another church elder, my older and now-deceased sister, corrected me anytime I held my head downward. At the time, I considered myself shy and was known to be very sensitive, though I didn't feel I lacked self-confidence. Even today that sensitive side remains very present. As a younger person, introversion was my comfort zone. As I reflect now, though, my introversion offered me a safe space of comparative protection from White people who could be cruel and othering. Perhaps not defending myself to the high school guidance counselor was connected to tendencies of shyness and introversion. Maybe that was a response choice of self-preservation: practical and active harm avoidance.

Whereas "naive" is a word my mother often used to describe me as a youth, I am today, of course, well aware of White American individuals and systems that hurt Black men consistently, physically, verbally, emotionally, and economically. I watch the news media regularly report incidences of Black males being physically harmed by police violence, yet police actors are not the only perpetrators. I wonder whether there was any way *not* to imagine that racial trauma would affect my life trajectory as a Black male. I subconsciously learned to become an invisible child, to blend into the room's decor without being seen or heard. Little did my sister know why I tended to hold my head and eyes down. She would say, "Hold your head up. Be proud and confident in yourself. You have nothing to be ashamed of." This was good advice, though it also taught me that even if it was racist assumptions or microaggressions that I might encounter, I

was to recover quickly and present myself without fear or shame. Self-pity was not allowed because wallowing in vulnerability could be exhausting and self-defeating. Yet, I've learned that sometimes a Black man should nurture his truths and permit himself to embrace emotional vulnerability. Other times, giving in to vulnerability feels like allowing White people to win, controlling and manipulating me by my very Blackness.

Another academic experience highlights such an outcome. I chaired a Black male student's doctoral dissertation committee four years ago (since the time of writing). It was my first experience in that vital capacity. The committee consisted of two White men, one White woman, one Black woman, and one Black male (me). I was the only dissertation faculty member of color for our doctoral program then. To my knowledge, the student on whose committee we served was the first Black male to be admitted to and graduate from the program. He asked me to chair his dissertation committee at the personal recommendation of his previous chair—one of the two White male committee members mentioned above—who could no longer serve due to other obligations. On the day of his dissertation defense, the student presented his project to his committee and guest with a slide show that offered brief narratives from the contents of his dissertation chapters. Once he finished, the committee directed questions to him. As is customary, after the questioning was completed, I asked the student and his guest to leave the room so the committee could convene and decide whether he would pass. I felt confident that the committee would pass him because of his clear presentation, responses to our questions, and flawless passing of each benchmark (e.g., comprehensive written and oral exams and dissertation proposal defense). To my surprise, the White male committee member who had been the student's original dissertation chair was reluctant to pass the student due to writing errors in the drafted dissertation that caused him to want more time to review the manuscript. He explained to the group that he was willing to give the student a conditional pass. When I mentioned that the student had been working with a professional editor on the dissertation document itself, the dissenting committee member became irate, insinuating that I was questioning *his* writing skills and abilities and was perhaps not as able to recognize grammatical errors as he was. In an explosive rant, this committee member demanded a public apology from me for what he described as my rudeness in explaining the student's use of an editor. I sat in silence as the other committee members did; he continued, with rage and for a second time, to demand that I apologize to him. I composed myself and moved the discussion forward, with the committee deciding to pass the student on the condition of that one White male committee member re-reading the dissertation and providing feedback.

In processing the event with some very close friends and colleagues afterward, I recognized that the verbal attack felt racially motivated and had been notably unprofessional and demeaning. I do not believe this committee member would have treated a White professor that way. I was then contacted by the other committee members, who indicated that they thought the White male committee member had implied quite directly that I could not write well. The White female committee member told me she had witnessed my composure and praised my professionalism and integrity. By not allowing the White male committee member to interrupt the committee's functioning with inappropriate behavior grounded in racist ideologies of superiority and entitlement, I held my head up—literally and figuratively. My late sister would have been proud to witness my resilience.

This was not the only time I had been challenged because I was administering and leading as a Black man. As a social worker and assistant director of an adolescent wellness program, I supervised an established three-person staff. I remember conferencing individually with each staff member for a friendly meet-and-greet. One was a middle-aged White woman who had been with the program for years. Our first exchange began cordially but took an odd turn when she interrogated me about my educational background and skills. I recall one straightforward question: "What makes you think you're qualified for this job?" Instantly, I knew my skin color was the real point of her query. At that point, I no longer experienced a colleague but an adversarial co-worker raising us-and-them divisions/perceptions/expectations by harmful racial stereotypes. I did not doubt by her body language, tone, and general attitude that her harsh questioning was race-related. I could not help but think that if I were a White man or woman, she would likely have had default respect, however unconscious, due to our common Whiteness.

This was thinking directly connected to past personal experiences. I have been part of hiring search committees where I witnessed some White individuals giving a person of color the third degree from a place of distrust concerning their qualifications. It is the case that exploring candidates' relevant qualifications is vital to a successful search, but when related queries come with a tone that's somewhat edgy, harsh, and disbelieving? I've only seen that from White decision-makers to candidates of color. It has been my experience that candidates of color often have to prove themselves worthy for interview in ways that White candidates do not. My White guidance counselor's message of "you're not college material" felt and still feels troublingly similar to my White colleague asking, "What makes you think you're qualified to do this job?"

Many of my interpersonal interactions with White people have no racial undertone or unsavory assumption of superiority. Yet, I also have a long history with the latter type of experience pattern and can sense when such a situation is about to arise. I am a Black male expert in this area; my senses are honed, and I can intuitively feel problems before they take precise shape. Perhaps the White female co-worker I just described had wanted my position and was not considered for the job, a slight that made her irritated or envious that anyone else was being considered. Perhaps she was upset that I was younger than her and believed I had limited experience while she had much more. Both or either of these possibilities may be true, yet the encounter I described did not *feel* like anything other than racial discord. Furthermore, ensuing encounters with her as a colleague also smelled racist, but I often left these alone, knowing it was her mindset, not me, that was at the root of her starting points. According to Kimberly Frazier (2011), "contemporary racism is defined as subtle forms of racial bias that is expressed in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that are considered acceptable by the White individuals who use them" (p. 6). I knew that addressing these dynamics head-on would require me to educate White people on something they have not experienced, could never fully understand, and might never believe anyway.

I experienced these encounters as triggers that raised older feelings of racial trauma and vulnerability. According to Young (2021):

> Acknowledging the impact of racism on your life is like walking into a dark, murky cave. You know that once you go in there, you're not able to see; you do not know where you're

> going or what you'll find. But you walk in anyway because you know there are things in that cave that you need to reclaim that have been taken from you. Despite the fear, you walk in to reclaim your ability to speak up and say what you need to be seen and heard and to take up space. (pp. 127–128)

While the specifics will typically differ in predictable ways for Black women, Black men, and Black queer and trans folks, the darkness of racism always remains fear-inducing and yet predictable in whatever paths we travel personally and professionally. While many people think being the first Black person to do something is prestigious and influential, many of us who are marginalized experience being a "first" as life-altering in primarily negative ways. It caught my attention, and it was not a surprise, that when President Barack Hussein Obama II became the first Black male to be elected to the highest office in the US, I observed that vast swaths of White America believed he was not qualified for the duties and responsibilities of the job, and that he may even have lied about meeting the birthplace criteria. I feel Black female Vice President Kamala Harris, also a first, has similarly received little to no recognition or respect from White Americans who perceive Black folks as not being worthy of, or fit for, such high office.

Black people born underprivileged economically and socially are especially expected to face and deal with debilitating and deliberate symptoms and systems of oppression rooted in American racism. Ruby Bridges was born five months after the US Supreme Court ruled against racial segregation in public schools in 1954, declaring such conditions unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). At the innocent age of six, Ruby became the first Black student to desegregate the all-White William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, LA (Michels, 2015). How could a six-year-old comprehend White Americans hating her because of the color of her skin? How could a six-year-old defend herself when White Americans yelled racist and hate-filled epithets as she walked to and into the school? How could her parents and community members prepare her for that brave and very vulnerable public experience? There were no criminal charges for hate speech at that time, and I suspect that one source of racial hatred and racial ignorance preparedness that I share with Ruby Bridges and other Black folks who became "firsts" was a proverb commonly attributed to African culture: "It takes a village to raise a child." Again, there is strength in numbers—and in Black community elders equipping us and supporting us and safeguarding us to survive and thrive despite all the interpersonal and structural obstacles to our inclusion and belonging.

My Black village included my parents, siblings, auntie, godmother, and many parishioners and elders in the church where I grew up. While many of them have passed away and are deeply missed, I am but one of many similarly raised adults who carry their legacy and memories in what we do, who we are as Black folks, and who/what we set out to do and become. My life honors the names and images of those who grounded me because I have survived and thrived long enough to become the first Black male chair in my academic department.

When this professional opportunity emerged, I suspected my three-year tenure as chair would mark a critical, pivotal time of accomplishment and lead to more than usual scrutiny and questioning of my leadership by some White colleagues. Again, every department chair is

challenged from time to time. This is as it should be, and faculty leadership tends to have hallmarks of democracy that can be hard for anyone to navigate. Yet, unlike all but one of my predecessors, I had been subjected to racist attacks and stereotypes as an administrator and faculty leader at higher education institutions—in my case, at three different institutions since entering the academy more than 20 years ago.

Racist/racial attacks early in my career primarily occurred when I had to express my reasoning and beliefs and truth-telling so as not to compromise my convictions as a leader. Yet my authentic voice as a leader in departmental meetings when discussing student concerns, especially those involving students of color, seemed to be dismissed or passively noted by my predominately White colleagues. Many seemed unable to contain their dislike of me being vocal and speaking publicly to point out their racialized actions and patterns. If I sought to hold them accountable for harmful approaches, perceptions, and stereotypes regarding the students of color in their classrooms, some White colleagues spoke to me with hate, using speech and tones that came across as derogatory and made clear that they did not think we were equaled, communications that might better reflect a master–slave/servant relationship. Among the comments I remember being aimed at me were these:

"How dare you speak to me that way?"

"Who do you think you are?"

"I've been here a lot longer than you in this school. I demand an apology."

The most consistent of the troubling quotes from White colleagues? "You need to stay in your lane."

You might say that these kinds of derogatory comments are common among colleagues in various fields and mainly aimed at junior faculty, perhaps a sort of ankle-biting. Fair enough. However, when a privileged, entitled White person is standing over me, and I am a representative of an underprivileged and marginalized racial group—when that person uses a forceful voice so close to my face that I can almost inhale the same breath—the experience feels more like a master–slave/servant confrontation than a collegial interaction in which two professional people diverge or disagree. These colleagues situated me as subordinate, reminding, cautioning, or threatening me not to get too big for my britches. In the spirit of self-preservation, I needed to prepare myself, consciously and with intention, for what could happen while I served as department chair. I knew all too well that subtle drilling and outright interrogation of my abilities and competency could be expected and that many White people who see themselves as "allies" perceive such happenings as permissible because they carry the good intention of supporting oppressed and racially marginalized people.

Let me say unequivocally that good intentions can accompany actions, words, policies, or signals that are, in fact, racist and very harmful. Researchers Gaertner and Dovidio (2005) described this phenomenon as *aversive racism*:

> Aversive racists, in comparison, sympathize with victims of past injustice, support the principle of racial equality, and regard themselves as nonprejudiced, but, at the same time, possess negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks, which may be unconscious. Aversive racism is hypothesized to be qualitatively different from blatant, "old-fashioned" racism. It is more subtle and is presumed to characterize the racial attitudes of most well-educated and liberal Whites in the United States. (p. 618)

Seeking, whether consciously or subconsciously, to give Black folks a "lane" and keep them in it causes estrangement and dynamics of superiority and subordination rather than collaboration, authenticity, and belonging. Some White academics have delivered feedback they undoubtedly had no idea was racist: "You are very competent when you write." Another subtle but racist attack referred to my speaking voice: "You are expressive and speak very well." Such expressions could be entirely appropriate and affirming to a graduate student preparing for a conference paper delivery or a dissertation defense but are in no way proper from one professor to another, especially with doctoral degrees each. This gesture of almost-praise, of aversive racism, is code that some Black Americans interpret as "keep up the good work despite your disadvantaged circumstances as a Black person"—and I note that the majority of the White colleagues in my department firmly identify and self-present as supportive White allies.

Films like *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming, 1939), *Driving Miss Daisy* (Beresford, 1989), and *The Help* (Taylor, 2011) dramatically portray racist traditions of Black people not being permitted to sit and eat at the big dining room table. Instead, Black folks were dismissed and authorized only to sit and eat in the kitchen, without the same abundance and comfort—after their serving jobs were completed. The dining room table represents power and privilege that Black folks did not have in the 19th or 20th centuries. In too many ways, Blacks continue to struggle and face barriers to getting a seat at the big table in the 21st century, as well. When I read Gaertner and Dovidio's (2005) article about aversive racism, I could not help but see metaphorically how some White Americans who identify as allies to Black folks or other people of color throw just enough breadcrumbs from the big dining room table to symbolize their compassion for our well-being. These breadcrumbs give Black folks just enough to taste but not fill our stomachs, representing hundreds of years of need and desire for individual and collective well-being, inclusion, equity, and justice. It seems clear that some White people default to stereotyping and seek to control and minimize Black folks and their potential to uphold their power and privilege at any cost—all while presenting a sanctimonious White ally image that obscures the continuation of ideologies, institutions, and interpersonal dynamics of White supremacy.

Tommy Curry (2017) states that "racist accounts of Black males depict them as lesser males who are lazy, unintelligent, aggressive, and violent" (p. 3), and it is hard to escape this stereotype in the US to this day. Black men continue to be challenged and expected to explain or defend their skills, expertise, and abilities. Many White people see Black men as threatening or, at best, *other*. The notion of othering is that "some individuals or groups are defined and labeled as not fitting in within the norms of a social group" (Cherry, 2023, para. 1), leading to some people being "in" and others being "out." My Black villagers prepared me to anticipate racial animus and possible acting out by White people who would scrutinize and judge my racial identity and Black male body. As I now know from experience, these Black villagers knew then

that I would be tested as I embarked on this academic leadership role as department chair. They schooled me well for unfortunate circumstances and patterns that I cannot escape as a Black man. They also schooled me to be ready for the day when I would have a seat at the metaphorical White dining room table of power and privilege as an academic department chair. No more crumbs to be caught and tasted. No more relegation to the kitchen. No more pretense of yes-ing and no-ing White colleagues who expect compliance because of their own power and privilege status. I had planned to model my entry into the chair's leadership role on Sidney Poitier's characterization of Dr. John Prentice in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Kramer, 1967). Prentice is an intelligent, educated, dignified Black physician character who is uncompromising yet collegial, honest yet unerringly polite, and strong yet kind. Though he is fictional, I am a real Black man with equally positive human and leadership qualities.

The weight of being Black and having administrative power and privilege has been an essential experience for me. Black friends, family, and colleagues express that my being in this leadership role was one more feather in my cap of accomplishments. Still, I also understood that my new role was another feather in the cap of all Black folks' pursuits of equity and inclusion. Though, significant administrative leadership roles such as "chief diversity officer" or "director of multicultural services" are insufficient for Black academics. These are typical positions for which people of color are hired. Hiring White academics in these roles can be considered detrimental to the unit's mission, which I imagine no school wants. Yet, as DeWitt Scott (2016) indicates, "being forced into these and similar positions can send a message that the individual is incapable of contributing to the governing of an institution outside of racial matters" (p. 42). Black academics need not just a seat at the big dining table but a seat at the head that requires everyone to take notice. Black academic administrators and leaders are not typically expected.

Unfortunately, and with sadness, I stepped aside as departmental chair after two long and fretful years of ankle-biting and outrageous harassment by specific White individuals. I reached the peak of my academic career through high standards and ambitions. Despite predictable shortcomings and roadblocks from some of my White faculty colleagues, I thought that post would be a pinnacle. Leaving the position a year early was hard, but a diagnosed physical illness and poor emotional well-being made it clear that I should—could—no longer continue. Departmental leadership is challenging enough, and compounded with chronic stress from the racist behavior of others, it has taken a heavy toll, mentally and physically. Sheila Wise Rowe (2020), author of *Healing Racial Trauma: The Road to Resilience*, cites Professor William Smith from a University of Utah study that found "mental and physical stress people of color face from racism is similar to what soldiers experience in battle" (p. 23). Consistent microaggressions and predatory actions from some White department members overwhelmed my resiliency and weighed heavily on my mind, body, and spirit. The constant battle of "them against me" was much like what Smith (as cited in Rowe, 2020) found, not dramatization from my imagination. Interestingly, a White colleague who observed my survival tactics and creative efforts to avoid this personal "war" described me as a "good soldier." I stood my ground until it became too exhausting to fight any longer. Something needed to give. I have sacrificed myself enough. I have not retreated because I wanted to give up the fight for equality and my rightful place as a Black academic leader. I am simply moving away from this position and to a new

department for self-preservation, an act that is also, though somewhat ironically, a mark of resilience.

A White woman once told me that some people in her racial group will not ever change their thinking about Black men. She further said that their beliefs and behavior are unforgivable. My work as academic department chair brought the challenges and benefits I expected and anticipated. Yet there is one opportunity I have not yet mentioned: My administrator and leadership role thrust me into active role modeling Black leadership for faculty and students of color and becoming an elder to them as others once were to me. I offer them my lived experiences as a case study that will hopefully better prepare and not deter or divert their self-belief and possibilities to exist and excel as administrative leaders in higher education. My presence and legacy as the second Black person and first Black male department chair *will* persist as a tangible pathway for more people of color to lead my now former department in the future. Although things did not work out as I had hoped, I am proud of this and expect more than one will count me among their Black villagers and that my Black villagers have been and will continue to be proud of me, too.

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