Betwixt Safety and Shielding in the Academy: Confronting Institutional Gendered Racism—Again

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Abstract

This article represents a critical reflection of a Black African American female associate professor who, while teaching a diversity course, unknowingly enabled systems of power and privilege to undermine her faculty role in the course and in the academy. The author revisits a story of this experience and its vestiges using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and an autoethnographic approach. In doing so, she comes to terms with her complicity in supporting White supremacy and patriarchy and reclaims a voice previously suppressed yet still vulnerable in the matrix of institutional power. Two significant shifts are captured in this account—a narrative shift from the individual to one that includes the institutional and a political shift from a position of naiveté to critical consciousness. These shifts, illustrated by the metaphor of safety, reflect the dissonance experienced by the author in seeking to negotiate a balance between the personal, professional, and socialized traditions of academia.

Introduction

This counter-narrative represents the unguarded and unsafe version of a case study written about and published four years ago. In revisiting the case and providing an in depth analysis, I counter its previous crafting through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Feminism (CRF). The incident, previously framed as an issue of a student’s cognitive dissonance, is reexamined and (re)storied here through my analysis and reflection to provide a counter-narrative in which I reclaim a voice once suppressed in the academy concerning the case and my career. This counter-narrative of a Black African American associate professor in a predominantly White institution (PWI) is a lesson in power, White privilege, and voice.

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The writing of his article has been troublesome at best for it has meant reliving thoughts painful to bear and recognizing that I have been in agony. My counter-narrative is a testament to what Maya Angelou has poetically stated, “there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” (Maya Angelou, n.d.). I entered this writing to revisit a previous incident I once believed was only a matter of race. However, in my (re)visitation and analysis I realized that race and gender mattered. This realization reflects an awakening of an “Angry Black Woman Scholar” (Williams, 2001, p. 94). I became angry towards the end of the incident described in the following case; an anger that has intensified in the intervening years. Even while preparing this manuscript, my anger escalated.

Revisiting a Case: Past Meets Present

The following excerpt from the article “When the Dialogue Becomes Too Difficult: A Case Study of Resistance and Backlash,” co-authored by me and published in 2007 represents the summary of what occurred in one of my classes several years ago. At that time I was an associate professor with tenure and had been at my institution since 1997. My history and track record with the college and university was exemplary. I believed that I had carved out a space of belonging among colleagues who respected my research, service, and teaching performance. However, I found that I was not protected from the reach of White male privilege and patriarchy. The names in the following case are pseudonyms.

Dominique Stevens is an African American associate professor who has taught diversity related graduate courses in a predominately White institution for nearly a decade. She is keenly aware how racism shapes students’, particularly White students’, reactions and responses to her as a teacher and to her as an expert on how race informs college student affairs practice. Yet, she was surprised and frustrated by the events she endured one semester while teaching the Diversity in Education course.

After attending a few classes, a White male student, Kent Peterson, contacted Professor Stevens via email, indicating his discomfort with her course and the comments she and his fellow students made about race and racism. She invited Mr. Peterson to meet with her to discuss his concerns. Instead, Mr. Peterson sent another email, which he copied to her department
chair, stating that the classroom environment was hostile to White males and that he was “uncertain” about returning to class. Professor Stevens and her department chair, Joseph Hayes, requested to meet jointly with Mr. Peterson. During this meeting, Mr. Peterson asserted his belief that white privilege and racial discrimination do not exist. He cited his professor being an African American woman and Oprah Winfrey having a television program as evidence. He was also very upset that Professor Stevens allowed other students to directly disagree with him during class sessions. To address his concern, Professor Stevens suggested a new discussion policy, in which students do not direct comments to other students but to the class as a whole. Mr. Peterson agreed to return to class under this new guideline and remained in class for the semester.

Prior to the final class, Professor Stevens received an email from Mr. Peterson with a grievance letter attached. He alleged that Professor Stevens and other students had harassed him during class and that Professor Stevens graded him unfairly. In a separate email, Mr. Peterson requested the department chair assign an observer (a campus police officer) to attend the final class because he feared for his safety. Mr. Peterson was scheduled to discuss an article on White privilege during the final class.

Professor Hayes and Professor Stevens decided that an observer was not warranted because this would send a bad message to other students about their freedom to express their views. Mr. Peterson had also forwarded his allegations and request for a campus police officer to attend the class to several offices in university administration including the Provost’s Office and the President’s Office. Simultaneously, the Provost’s Office indicated that inviting an impartial observer was a reasonable request and the department chair, who was scheduled to be out of town the night of the class, recommended another full professor, Professor Randall Cartwright (an African American male), attend the class. After sensing hesitancy on the part of central administration with his choice of observers, the department chair asked a White female associate professor, Professor Stacy Mathews, to observe as well.
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Professor Stevens, deeply offended by this decision, informed the associate dean of the college that she would not permit her colleagues to observe her class, but she did agree to permit campus police to be stationed near her classroom. Professor Mathews agreed to meet Mr. Peterson before class and inform him of the police presence.

Mr. Peterson made his presentation without incident. However, it was clear that other students were confused and concerned by the presence of campus police outside the door to the building. Professor Stevens felt the other students withheld reactions to some of Mr. Peterson’s more outlandish comments because they sensed the tension.

The ordeal with Mr. Peterson took a tremendous toll on Professor Stevens both professionally and personally, and Mr. Peterson’s behavior raised serious concerns about his ability to work within a diverse setting. The situation raised additional concerns about the university’s approach to address the complaint submitted by the student (Henry et al., 2007, pp. 161-162; see whole article).

The case described above reflects an episode in my experience that was fraught with examples of White male privilege, institutional discrimination and notions of safety. Now it has literally come back to haunt me, reawakened when a colleague in the beginning of her career in academia (she describes me as a mentor) challenged me to defend how I could co-author an article (see Henry et al., 2007) that offered little in terms of critical discourse, my voice, and recommendations for others - especially new scholars. In confronting the interplay of race and gender in the writing of the article six years ago and my written contributions virtually absent (although a co-author) in that process, here I aim to provide new scholars with useful information for their trek through the briar patch of the academy-successes, challenges, and opportunities.

I have watched a few women from underrepresented racial groups leave the academy and often thought perhaps they had not worked hard enough or just wanted to move on. However, in hindsight I knew that in many cases their leaving the academy was related to institutional discrimination and the toll that an unsupportive academic culture takes on persistence. I was more comfortable believing that the problem was with the women rather than the institution for if I was surviving academia it could not be all that bad. To face the reality of a system embedded with privilege and domination meant I had to acknowledge
my own pain and discomfort with the environment. I was not prepared to do that when the case was published. In other words, my shift from naïve notions about the institutional workings of power and privilege toward critical consciousness involved a shrinking of my safe space. I turn to the literature that describes the experiences of Black and other non-White women in academia in order to situate my story of lost voice reclaimed through writing and acknowledge my complicity in supporting the systems of privilege and power that undermine them, me included.

Experiences of Non-Whites in Academe

The literature concerning Black and non-White people and particularly Black women in academia is replete with examples of their marginalization, isolation, and compartmentalization (Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2002; Turner, Gonzalez & Wood, 2011). It delineates a clear pattern of institutional and interpersonal oppression within the academy, as they try to fit into an environment steeped in White male privilege. The literature also illustrates how gender and race affect the experiences of non-White women in the classroom and within the academy. Discussions of the experiences of Black women specifically, are relatively sparse. Although the numbers of non-White women in higher education have risen over the years, their experiences still reflect barriers to their success and persistence in academe (Aguirre, 2000; Turner, 2002; Stanley, 2006; Ford, 2011). Black, Asian, Latina and White women comprise respectively, 2.33% (10,879), 2.34% (10,944), 1.20% (5,606), and 28.9% (135,158) of the full-time tenured or tenure track faculty (467,325) in the United States (Pittman, 2010). The low numbers of women from racially underrepresented groups call for further investigation into their recruitment, retention and persistence (Turner & Myers, 2000). Barriers or challenges to these women, in this case Black women, regarding success and opportunities in higher education may include but are not limited to issues of legitimacy (Harlow, 2003), tokenization and cultural taxation (Baez, 2000), balancing personal and professional obligations (Cozart, 2010), insider-outsider status (Collins, 1991), and gendered racism (Turner, Gonzalez & Wood 2011). Women who are Black and are of other non-White origins in higher education face a myriad of challenges when meeting their professional responsibility have described academic environments that are isolating. Women in general are victims of sexism and vulnerable in the academy, especially if they speak to the discrimination they encounter based on their gendered position (Pittman, 2010). Non-White Women experience a double bind of discrimination related to race and gender in academe and the classroom (Aguirre, 2000; Harlow, 2003; Myers, 2002). Black women are further marginalized by biased and prejudicial responses to their race and gender
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While a sense of vulnerability may suggest the need for a safe or protected space, there is a need to resist the urge to uncritically accept this language for as Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue, safety and protection can be constructed as façades to dis-empower and keep those considered lesser in line.

Theoretical Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism (CRF) are employed to situate my study examining race and gender in academe. Further, autoethnography is used to offer a holistic approach to the examination of lived experience in the academy where race and gender matters. Although these perspectives have similar philosophical underpinnings, I find it necessary to name both when framing this work as I realized that gender as well as race were elements of the case that required interrogation. I employ both CRT and CRF as my experience is made clearer by both.

CRT as a theoretical framework was born out of the desire for a more targeted response to the role of race in legal analyses. It was originally articulated by Derrick Bell in the early 1970’s and later in his book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992) where he uses stories that take the form of counter narratives to expose the role of race and its position of permanence in American society and subsequent legal decisions. This framework established the groundwork for Critical Legal Scholars (CLS) to further the discourse on race and the law. As Closson (2010) has pointed out, legal non-White scholars clearly agreed with the tenets of CLS, but acknowledged that “race held a material dimension in people’s lives” (p. 264). This critical lens directed at issues of race led to the development of CRT (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). Further extension of this work grounds CRT in the field of education and provides some practical parameters for its use (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRF, employed as a theoretical framework, draws from the tenets of CRT. CRF emerged from CRT when a group of women legal scholars from diverse racial and ethnic groups articulated their dissatisfaction with their exclusion from the discourse being promoted by their male and White female colleagues (Few, 2007). CRF provides an opportunity to remove essentialist labels of what it means to be in the minority, a woman, or a person from a non-White racial group. CRF provides women, in this case, a Black African American female, the privilege of naming experience that is predicated on race and gender. Wing (2000) made a strong case for the use of CRF when she...
stated, “our anti-essentialist premise is that identity is not additive. In other words, Black women are not [W]hite women with color, or Black men, plus gender” (p. 7). CRF responds to the need for racially and ethnically non-White women to name their location and position in social and political structures.

**Method**

Autoethnography allows me to place myself as a Black African American female academic at the forefront of how race, gender, and privilege impact my work and perceptions of self in the academy by providing access to my voice, authority over my story, and a lens that allowed me to craft a counter-narrative (Spry, 2001). Autoethnography provides me the opportunity to name my experience specifically as opposed to accepting the docile position the academy has selected for me (and for years I had selected for myself). It also pushes me to ground my experiences intellectually and rigorously so as to satisfy the expectations of the research community and my colleagues (of all racial and ethnic backgrounds) from whom I seek acceptance. My intention in doing this work is to be open, honest, and reflective in interpreting my experiences. As I attempt to regain my voice and strength, I find that I am still restrained by my intellectual voice and training (Spry, 2001).

Autoethnography has been chosen to answer and address questions related to my anti-confrontational (safe) space for it is an appropriate method of inquiry through which to connect the personal lived experiences to the cultural context. The rigor of my work should be judged not by methodological elitism but by my ability to construct a narrative that paints a thick, rich description of my academic life and experiences, through which the reader can personally connect with my interpretation and understand at how I arrived at such an analysis (Miller, 2008). In other words, the use of autoethnography does not absolve the writer from rigor. Instead it requires using self as center to discuss and interrogate sociopolitical events that connect the personal to the professional (Spry, 2001). Memories and narratives are often devalued in the academy and perceived as lacking rigor. This article attends to the question of rigor through the (re)collection of experiences and interactions between others (e.g., student-faculty and/or colleagues-administrators).

**Data Sources**

The data sources are recollections of my experiences over a span of six years. Other data sources for this work are in the form of emails (i.e., from students, administrators), notes for the published article on cognitive
dissonance, the published article (see Henry, W. et al., 2007), field notes, and a semi-structured interview of the researcher by a colleague. During the interview conducted by a colleague/mentee, I responded to a series of questions regarding confidence, instructor preparedness, course dynamics, creating safe spaces for students and what I could have done differently.

Each question seemed to carry an indictment of my professionalism and performance (i.e., quality of teaching) so I was careful in my responses. I felt I had to protect my reputation, sense of integrity, and self-esteem. I considered questions such as how much do I share, how will I frame this work, what will my colleagues think of this work, and how will they respond if/when they come to find that I felt disappointed, unsupported, and victimized by institutional discrimination. These recurring questions can be summarized as such: How do I continue to fit in (only speak to the glaring racism) at my university (and sit silently for that which is less obvious)? The pressing questions wore away at me as I attempted to reconcile within myself the notion that I was complicit in supporting White privilege and patriarchy. Even during the interview process, each question carried the subtlety of how could you let the course spin out of control. At that point her questions were no different from the questions, conversations, and responses from colleagues and administrators. My internal dynamics during this interview were quite disconcerting as it reawakened my anger and agony.

The interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed. After the interview, I was able to review the transcript, share my perceptions of what was discussed and how I felt during the interview with my colleague, in subsequent debriefing sessions.

Revisiting the Case

The Course

Invariably my presence has been troublesome for at least one student in every course I have taught in higher education. That semester was no different. However, the exercise and support of White privilege demonstrated by the institution was new and sobering for me. I sensed early on that my race and gender could become problematic for a student. Bonilla-Silva (2006) articulated the position that race is socially constructed as well as a lived experience and reality. My race and gender has often created discomfort amongst students, I was asking them to critique systems of power and privilege for which I was a victim,
yet authority figure in the academic classroom. It was indeed a slippery slope—
asking them to forgo their safe havens of privilege in an effort to struggle with
notions of injustice. I was unprepared for the emotional upheaval this semester
would produce then and now as I revisit the story.

In my class I purposefully attempted to create a space for all students to
express their thoughts, concerns and critiques, related to the literature. Megan
Boler (1999) discusses the values of a pedagogy of discomfort, which was my
intention to disrupt comfort and privilege in my teaching. My notion of safety
meant that no one was verbally harassed or intentionally marginalized and that
a forum was provide to students in order to support their critiques of systems of
power and privilege. The discourse was not intended to provide a safe haven for
color-blindness or to advance and support White privilege. Leonardo and Porter
(2010) discuss the role of color blindness and how it perpetuates privilege and
provides White students with an escape from race dialogue. This was not my
intention, in fact I wanted to expose the systems that marginalize people in
society and create an environment in my class where we would critique, and
bring discomfort through dialogue around injustice.

At the start of every course I engage students in an introductory exercise
in which they discuss who they are, from where they come, and their core
values. I employ a fictitious story and they have to rank order people’s behavior.
Mr. Peterson (pseudonym for the White male student described here) began his
introduction by stating “I’m just your average White guy born and raised in
Tampa, which is rare these days…I’m, really open-minded, liberal, you know,
want to teach in diverse areas, which is why I’m taking this course and I’m
open to learning everything.” His statements struck me as strange—he seemed
too intent on characterizing himself as liberal. During another class session
he provided an example of social equality in education that included me. He
commented to the class, “Look at our professor, she’s Black and female. Then
you have Oprah Winfrey.” When other students challenged his perspective he
replied, “But honestly,” he asked the class, “When’s the last time you had a Black
female professor?” How was I, a Black female to respond without coming off
as defensive, and thus threatening my comfortable position? I knew from that
moment on my race and gender was placed on display in ways not previously
experienced in a course. He and I were walking two very different walks, based
on race and gender. I could have empowered him by making identity an issue
or conduct class as usual, refusing to allow his disruption. I thought I chose the
latter.
Early on when Mr. Peterson complained about students attacking him when they disagreed with his comments related to a disappearance of privilege, I retreated and reiterated the discussion policy. My retreat was intended to be an indication that I was working to ensure that he felt safe. Safe in terms of his being able to have voice in the class, but not that he would be shielded from a critique of privilege that students were offering in the course. I wanted him to know that his concerns were heard. However, in the initial article it was written that I instituted a new discussion policy requiring students to direct all comments to the class and not a particular person. Initially I felt that restating the course ground rules was adequate. In retrospect I realize my restatement provided a place for him to feel safe in his ability to articulate how good things are now in society and have those ideas remain unchallenged. I sacrificed the progress of the class for his safety (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

Initially, I listened to and attempted to address his concerns by making efforts to assure him that he was safe in class. After his continued behavior that seemed to me was his attempt to undermine my position in the classroom, by subverting protocol, by speaking with my supervisor, by contacting the president’s office, and then by witnessing the institutional response; I no longer cared about his level of comfort or his space or intellectual development. In retrospect, I wondered if it was still my responsibility to make him feel as safe as I had made other students feel. I think not. I also don’t know how comfortable I should have made him based on what my job required of me and the course demanded. After all, the course is designed to examine and disrupt (in some instances) traditional notions and ways of doing. I was complicit in promoting his privilege, White male privilege.

During this time I was in constant communication with my department chair, by email, phone, and in person. When an upper level administrator suggested I have an outside observer, he asked me how I felt and said the decision was mine; he would follow my lead. When it was suggested that the police attend my class (a student request), my department chair thought it absurd that the student felt unsafe and expressed his concern for my safety. He said if I felt I needed police presence, he would be supportive. He met with me and the student to ensure my safety and as an administrator that could vouch for what was said during the meeting. I believe that he was well intentioned, but in retrospect I wonder if he understood the dynamics of power; that my account of the meeting would be more credible if he were there and could speak to what occurred. Where was my agency in this case of student resistance and privilege? How do I maintain credibility and authority in my classroom if I need the voice of my department chair, the presence of the police, an outside observer? Perry, et al.
(2009) argue that the notion of presence and authority for non-White instructors in the diversity classroom is complicated. For instance, support given by White faculty and administrators to students who challenge non-White faculty can help to diminish the authority of that faculty in the classroom.

Even when I vacillated on what to do, and changed my mind after speaking with the two most trusted men in my life, my father and husband, my department chair was supportive. There were several occasions when the university checked in with the student. They provided an audience for his concerns, suggested that an outside observer attend my class, and to my knowledge (through email exchanges between administrators which were copied to me), were willing to have university police in my class during his presentation. With the exception of my department chair no one directed him to follow the established protocol for grievance. Although at one point he attached a letter of grievance to the paperwork he generated, the content was related to what he described as unfair treatment—that he might not receive a fair grade and he feared for his safety. This prompted the administration to suggest an outside observer and a police officer to attend my class on the night of his presentation. The administration made these suggestions prior to conferring with me (a trusted and diligent colleague). This signaled for me an apparent lack of trust (Jefferies & Generett, 2003), and I began to doubt myself.

Initially I felt as though there was more I could have done to make the student feel safer. While reflecting on the first article’s recommendations I asked myself if it was my pedagogy that was problematic. I wondered if I had created a safe space for each of my students, and if I had guided them through the emotional landmine often experienced while interrogating systems of power and privilege. Now I wonder why was I so unwilling to entertain the thought that the student’s behavior and the university’s response were evidence of institutional discrimination which is often elusive and can be more damaging than other forms of discrimination. I wonder why I was unwilling to insert my voice in the article on the case. I could have retained ownership or co-ownership of the case with my colleagues and named this experience as racist and sexist. At that time I did not center my experience. In fact I was unaware that I needed to be an advocate for myself. Now I acknowledge as Abrams and Moio (2009) points out, that I can center my experiences using CRT and advocate for my values in oppressed situations.

**Shielding as silence**

While revisiting the published article from which the above case is
extracted, several things became apparent that I had either been unaware of then or unwilling to acknowledge. First, when re-examining the first article I became increasingly aware of my absence. I had merely let it be written about, sanitized, and absorbed into the larger liberal discourse that often plagues higher education. Second, in revisiting the experience I relive some of the physical and emotional toll, racial battle fatigue (RBF) (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006), that resulted from a variety of micro-aggressions or seemingly minor racial insults I endured (Hughes & Giles, 2010). Anger and confusion surfaced in the collaborative writing of the article on cognitive dissonance and difficult dialogues with my peers, some of who were White male, White female, Black male, and Black female. Feelings of discomfort emerged as I had to constantly (implicitly and explicitly) explain my presence as a professional and demonstrate my credibility as a scholar in spite of a lack of collegial support. These factors would become a part of my reality in higher education.

Marginalization of Black American women in the academy exists in various forms and comes from unsuspecting places, a virtual outsider-within (Collins, 1991). I was marginalized in the writing of the initial article. Initially I saw my handing over of the article to my co-authors as my decision. After the semester ended and it was determined that I did not have enough evidence to have the student brought up on disciplinary charges. I was deflated. A trusted colleague suggested that I write about the incident as a case study for a themed issue in the area of student affairs as a way to heal and seek some solace. At the time I thought it was a great idea. I took my notes, email communications, and draft letter to the student disciplinary committee. I shared my draft with a few colleagues who all said that they felt bad for me. But they also told me that what I had written was too emotional, and therefore was not very academic. I heard their words and was reminded of my mainstream academic training where scholarly writing is rather narrowly defined. I handed my work off to be re-written by a colleague who had no personal attachment to the topic. I am now aware that the use of autoethnography and CRT allows for writing that can be scholarly and personal. It can also represent a broader, more inclusive notion of academic training.

Autoethnography creates a vulnerable space for me. In my reflective writing I am increasingly aware of my complicity in this case and in other cases of institutional discrimination. This methodology exposed the mixed messages that harbor in a classroom discourse of safety. For years I worked to create a space (climate) in which my students would feel encouraged to share, explore, and critique. However, in this creation I also enabled privilege (the very notion I was fighting against and working to expose) through my courses. Working
on this article has been a constant reminder of my tenuous and uncomfortable (yet fruitful) space revisiting this case and in the academy. I now recognize a series of mistakes which all contributed to my vulnerability and subsequent awareness.

The first mistake was allowing my voice to be rendered absent through the lack of dialogue in the decision about where this case should appear and how it should be written. I was not portrayed as a victim of gendered racism but as a professor who made some mistakes and then learned through the experience how to better teach and handle difficult discussions in a class setting. The purpose of a student affairs office is to serve the students not the faculty. Thus to publish the case in this themed journal issue provided another institutional forum for the student to exercise his privilege and suggest to readers that pedagogical errors had been made in how I conducted the class and caused discomfort for him. I believe I made another mistake. My course was aimed at providing a space for complex and difficult discussion about issues related to cultural difference. I believe that participation in such discussion goes a long way in working towards an education that is socially responsible and just. The case was not a simple situation of a student experiencing cognitive dissonance with the introduction of new material that challenged his way of thinking. This was a case about the exercise and institutional support of White male privilege. Further the co-authoring of the first article was not a case of shared collaboration, my story was reinvented to discuss what professors should do in class as opposed to how privilege can operate and be facilitated in courses. Both instances represented the exercise of individual and institutional power which I helped to facilitate with my silence.

My silence and my complicity is my own; I accept full responsibility. However, I must interrogate from whence this silence came. I learned how to be silent, perhaps unintentionally from those who shielded me. I learned from being shielded and protected in my personal and academic life. The first article was one instance of shielding. My colleagues attempted to shield me from being “unscholarly” by pointing out the personal aspect of the article. I allowed them to reinvent my experience. I was complicit in shielding the university from an honest appraisal of White privilege and the role of safety in the classroom and beyond. My academic preparation was also an act of shielding; my advisor shielded me by providing a protective cover from the injustices that the academy imposes on non-White faculty members. The acts and consequences of shielding need to be addressed by those who prepare Black women for careers in the academy.
On Writing His Experience, Not Mine

I was a scholar who considered herself to be a race neutral scholar when co-authoring the first article. I was absent, silent, and complicit. I was unwilling to assert my right to tell my version of the story. The possibility of a published article was an idea shared with me by my department chair. My chair read a call for manuscripts for a journal in student affairs and forwarded it to me. He suggested that writing about my experience would provide some professional comfort. I believe that my discomfort with the events and the fact that there seem to be nothing at my disposal to ease the sense of betrayal I felt led him to propose this. He had initially encouraged me to review the student discipline code to see if there was something in the student’s behavior or actions that would cause him to be brought up on disciplinary charge. When there was not, I was devastated. It seemed as though the student had played the perfect role and knew there was nothing that would stop him. He had garnered university resources, placed me in a position of having to challenge the administration, and zapped my emotional energy. I respected the opinion of my chair and welcomed the opportunity to write. I reasoned that writing and sharing my experience would be therapeutic for me and helpful to others.

My approach to the writing of the article was the same as I would have done in preparing any other manuscript; I adhered to the standards of the discipline, but yielded control to a colleague—an expert in student affairs. I was unprepared for my colleagues (co-authors) to advise me to tone down my story as they argued that it was too strong for an academic journal. I suppose they failed to understand this was not just an article, but was also my personal experience. Although I doubt that they knew the pain their response created in me, my response was, “That’s fine. Here’s the story. Feel free to edit as appropriate.” Once I started to read drafts of it I knew that it was changing and I was angry. But at that point I just wanted to be done. I did not want to think about it anymore because I realized that whatever came out of this still did not satisfy what I wanted to see him held responsible for. Yes, there would be a published article and perhaps some people would read it and try to use some of the recommendations, but that had nothing to do with him and it had nothing to do with how I felt regarding the lack of institutional support at some levels. The article that was to be therapeutic became another dimension to the problem, so I turned it over and gave it up; I was done. I closed that professional chapter and hoped to never discuss the situation again. However, as fate would have it, two years ago I read it again because a student chose to do a presentation about the article in my class. This would represent the second time I was confronted with my own complicity, my silence. Again, I had to decide how to respond.
Would, or should I share the painful experience and the mistakes I made by not confronting racial privilege, patriarchy and the complexity of institutional power?

The original article offered recommendations on what should or could be put into practice in classrooms, as if those suggested activities were absent in this particular case from my classroom. The implication was that the professor, me, could or should have done more in terms of collaboration, clarity of expectations, and pedagogy. I would realize much later the problem was with him (the student) and his issue with my race and gender and not my performance and professionalism. I began to resent the subtle accusation that my teaching was ineffective, that I was not a victim of institutional racism and sexism, and that he could potentially graduate and work in any educational environment and especially one that was diverse. I lament the fact those recommendations are available to other scholars who are perhaps looking for legitimate solutions for their experiences with cognitive dissonance, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and all the other “isms” associated with “otherness.” I have begun to understand how I, in turning my work over to others, allowed my story to be water-downed and sanitized. This act was yet another example of my marginalized experience in the academy.

**Discussion**

For years I had convinced myself that I was member of the ivory tower “club.” I possessed the appropriate credentials, earned student evaluations that were competitive with some of the highest in the college, and served on several service related committees (too many). Why should I not be supported in my reported case of a disgruntled student? The message sent from the university to me was very clear—the only person who mattered was the student and the only issues that mattered were the student’s-perceptions and needs. The institution was successful in furthering his development and position of privilege by attending to him. I began to bear my painful existence in the academy, and more specifically bear the acknowledgement of having been in pain for too long. Prior to this experience I had been totally unaware, or at the very least unwilling to name my pain and discomfort as an outsider. I never imagined that I as a tenured faculty member with an untarnished record and years of recognition for my outstanding teaching, research, and committed service, would be unsupported and treated as an outsider. I never thought I would fall prey to institutional discrimination within the ivory tower and have my complicated and complicit existence within it publically exposed.
Critical reflection forces me to reconcile the fact that teaching the diversity course offered me some refuge from the institutional racism and sexism I endured in the academy but never openly acknowledged unless in the company of trusted friends. I wish I could take the credit for exposing the lack of institutional support I received and my complicity, but unfortunately I cannot. In fact, it was during the interview for this article that it came to my attention. My colleague asked, “When did the shift in your thinking occur, and when did you decide you would not allow the police or an outside observer to attend your class?” At that moment, I realized it had come when talking to my father and husband. They had recognized the safety issue for me and pointed out the inconsistency of the university. They reminded me of my professional record and asked me what I had done wrong? When I responded with “nothing,” each provided me with some direction. Simply put they scolded me. “Then act like it!” they said.

The males in my life responded to the issue from a male centered perspective. Their first response was to check in with me to see if I was ok, if I was safe. They were shielding and protecting me from harm—not physical but psychological harm. Their idea was to confront the injustice I was experiencing—to confront White male privilege. I trusted them and they knew me and how I often responded to adversity. In many respects they were better equipped to deal with institutional discrimination directly. They were more adept at this. It took a sleepless weekend for me to come to terms with the harsh reality they presented. I was being marginalized by the university’s response and the student was being further privileged. They provided the fuel I needed to challenge the administration.

In my class I purposefully attempted to create a safe space for all students to express their thoughts, concerns and critiques, related to the literature as long as no one was verbally harassed or intentionally marginalized. Megan Boler (1999) discusses the values of a pedagogy of discomfort. It was my intention to disrupt comfort and privilege through my teaching. Safety was about providing a forum for students to critique systems of power and privilege. This discourse was not intended to provide a safe haven for color-blindness, which can perpetuate privilege and position White students to escape race dialogue (Leonardo & Porter, 2010), nor to advance and support White privilege. I wanted to expose those systems that marginalize people in society and create a safe environment in my class where we would critique, and bring discomfort through discussion and dialogue around injustice.
However, I felt this particular student had pushed me to the realm of “other” in his mind and was using the class as his personal space to make his case. In reflecting back on the notion of safety I have come to realize that my intentions were in direct conflict with the message I sent the moment I privileged the student’s complaints to university administrators. In retrospect, my comments on creating a safe environment were unclear and lead the class down an unintended road, essentially helping to facilitate the power of privilege. A safe haven had been created in my class for White students (Mr. Peterson in particular) to critique my credentials and pedagogy. I was complicit and the institution was supportive of his complaints and subsequent requests.

This incident reflected White privilege in an escalated form and led me to question whether I and other students in class had any recourse. The willingness of university administrators to disrupt the educational experience of 25 or so budding scholars to appease one student is incredibly problematic. The institutional response degraded and discounted my expertise. It also reassured him that the world continues to serve his needs without concern for others. Further, he was allowed to maintain the control over the process. This incident reinforced his position of privilege and undermined my position as tenured professor teaching in my area of expertise. He was not to be made uncomfortable for any reason or at any time (at least not without repercussions), even if it was for his betterment and growth.

When answering my colleague’s initial questions I became keenly aware of my gender and what many would refer to as a gendered response. I was dealing with an institution that was less concerned with how I felt, my record, or the fairness of the situation. Their concern was protecting the institution from a potential lawsuit. In their effort to subvert a lawsuit, they further empowered this White male student while further marginalizing me in the process. They did this by providing an audience. There were no other students complaining about how the course was conducted. Other students had not questioned my behavior, my treatment of students, or my professionalism. I had not given him an unearned grade. There was nothing in my history that suggested my behavior was consistent with needing police presence as I conducted my classes to protect a student. However, none of this history mattered. My initial silence made me complicit in empowering this student. In addition, it further perpetuated privilege and reproduced the same privilege by leading me to co-author an article highlighting his experience. CRF provided the lens needed for me to understand the students’ inability to accept my race and gender as the center of this situation. The case was not about my deficiency (inability to keep
him safe in the course). It was about the perspective of the student who had been socialized to believe he was right because he was White.

My years of committed effort to expose and critique privilege and injustice were undermined that semester. I had assisted the university in providing a safe space for a student not to learn instead of ensuring that he learn in spite of possible discomfort. What was lost in this process? As he was being shielded and protected by me and the university, he lost the opportunity to learn (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008). I lost the opportunity to teach and engage in discourse around safety by providing a haven for privilege to flourish. My training and upbringing made me an accomplice to his mis-education. He was shielded from acknowledging and owning his privilege within the university that protected him from a valuable, but lost experience.

Conclusions and Implications

My institution has done fairly well at recruiting a racially diverse faculty, especially in the College of Education. The question of retention is another story. I recall losing Black women over time and not fully comprehending the significance of their departure (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen & Han, 2009; Iverson, 2007). For some departure from the institution was signaled by the denial of tenure and promotion, for others it was more promising job opportunities. But it was not until recently, after my experience, that I began to question if they had experienced the institutional discrimination by virtue of empowered White privilege. Or was the climate such that they were set for failure from their initial hire date? Not once, early on, did I allow myself to consider their departure being the end result of a lack of institutional support. Recognition of the truth, disruption of one’s comfort zone, admission of one’s complicity can be a painful process. In recollection I saw their departure in terms of what they had chosen, a better opportunity. I was oblivious to the institutional cues (power, privilege, invisibility) that signaled a threat to these women and myself based on group membership (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann & Crosby, 2008).

Conversations with colleagues have revealed so much of what has been suppressed—my silent complicity. But I have to ask myself, why so silent, why the unwillingness to challenge power and privilege, or at the very least why at such a superficial level? I believe it is because I am: resistant to change, slow to change, socialized into the academy tradition of doing no harm, not speaking out when I feel I am the only one, and a deliberate and slow thinker with the need to process information fully so as not to make a mistake (one that will cost me my position, reputation, hard work to get to this particular point). Clearly I
am not comfortable in my position if I fear a loss of it over advocating for what is right, socially just, and against racism and discrimination. How can I teach those values, behaviors and not practice them? Was I hypocritical?

What I learned that particular semester was clear, being female and a Black African American faculty member rendered me powerless as long as I continued to maintain my safe position. The position of good colleague and instructor came with a cost, especially when “good” was defined by the institution and not by me. Until this particular semester I taught well, published in the appropriate journals, served on a variety of committees and worked with students. I even challenged colleagues on their biased positions in a nice, quiet manner. I never openly accused anyone of discriminatory behavior but I always found a way to positively reframe an uncomfortable situation. In retrospect, I can understand why my colleagues supported a comfortable approach (hearing the student out, addressing his concerns, providing police presence for his class presentation), as opposed to seeing his behavior and their response as supportive of institutional power and privilege. What institutional support was I provided? What was done to make me feel comfortable? Where was the recognition of the discriminatory way in which this case was handled? These questions remind me of what may have been the experience of other faculty at a time when there was less campus diversity.

I did not begin to realize I was lonely until fairly recently. I am and have been (in my first 13 years) one of two Black American women in a department of about 25 faculty. For the most part, my colleagues have been cordial, welcoming, and mostly White. Although I had not been confronted with blatant racism, prejudice or sexism from colleagues or students, there were subtleties that could not be ignored: The large number of teaching assignments in addition to the unrealistic expectation to publish as much as others with much lighter teaching loads, being pressured to serve on doctoral committees of Black students even when their dissertations are not in my area of expertise, and fielding student questions like, “how long have you been a teaching assistant?” Further, collegial slights include not being invited to join research and writing groups and having fellow faculty ask how things are going but walk away before my response was rendered. I was a virtual outsider within the academy (Collins, 1991). The fact that I was present at the university but was not truly perceived as significant and valued was a realization that came later in my career. Up to that point I accepted my invisibility and embraced the moments of visibility along with the few authentic, trusting relationships I had formed at the academy. The subtleties had not provoked a response from me and I was choosing my battles.
in this minefield so as not to disturb the order of things. This reflection would be less than accurate if it failed to acknowledge those supportive colleagues who saw me as a scholar, colleague, mentor, and friend.

I have been hesitant to name this case as an example of institutional discrimination. I wanted to protect myself as well as my colleagues. I did not want to bear the ugly truth of how the institution supported this student in the exercise of his White male privilege. However, my critical reflection now leads me to believe I was seeking approval, and had not found an issue of enough importance to generate the energy needed to engage in battle. However, in my refusal to confront the racism and sexism, I became a victim and accomplice in my marginalization.

As a qualitative researcher I fully comprehend the tension associated with research that involves telling stories. In fact, it is my contention that the very nature of telling stories is uncomfortable for many, methodologically and personally. Throughout this writing, I experienced much internal conflict. My comfort level is in telling the stories of others—historical stories, archival research—those that can be seen as relatively benign in the contemporary sense. Those stories are important, but are far enough removed from the individual actors so as not to embarrass, harm or compel a strong emotional response from anyone. They are simply historical accounts, counter-narratives, a distant disobedient cousin. While pondering what I could contribute to this the literature I was unsure of sharing this story. I am still unsure.

While crafting this narrative I learned lessons on claiming one’s voice, taking an uncomfortable stand, and soliciting advice from a variety of allies when confronted with events that are challenging. I have come to see the importance of sharing with others who also work to tell their story and struggle with the competing forces of conducting benign research and naming and critiquing systems of power and privilege. At no point in this matter had the administration checked in with me for response or “protection.” Who protects me from students and colleagues like the one mentioned in the case? What does protecting him really mean? What does it mean for the rest of the students? While the protection is for one student, it is also a silencer for many others. This in itself is an injustice! It is indicative of how society continues to use the facade of protection as a way to disempower and keep those considered ‘lesser’ in line (Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

On claiming my voice, this experience and more importantly the crafting of a counter narrative has taught me the importance of naming my experience.
If I had taken a stand earlier in my career, perhaps it would have been more difficult for the administration to marginalize me and privilege the White male student. Having a voice means standing up and speaking back to power and authority, that is what one does, even when many are trained to do the opposite. It is only through discomfort and critique, that systems of power are unveiled. Otherwise power and privilege can run rampant and unchecked. Through this process many can then support other women who may be suffering similar experiences. I think back to the women who departed the academy and wonder if they had known of my experiences or those of others if their experience would have been different. Would they have felt comfort in sharing their challenges in an environment with others who understood and could offer support and advice? Would they still be here? If Black American women do not share, support and create the space for such discourse it becomes a situation where you can run but not hide.

Our efforts as Black women to maintain balance in our personal, professional, and socialized traditions of academia are complicated. We must find the space to achieve that balance. In our creation of space we send the message that we are here, unafraid and willing to confront injustice. Our goal should not be that of fitting in but creating spaces for authentic dialogue and action with allies around creating justice within the academy. If not, our efforts to fit into a prescribed space will eventually serve to our detriment. If we do not stand up, who will stand for us?

References


