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# **We can't change it Until We Face it: A Counternarrative for Racial Justice**

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## **Abstract**

This paper extends on a recent book I co-authored which documented struggles of racialized faculty in academia. This autoethnography offers further observations about racism in academia. *Keywords:* critical race theory, adult education

## **Purpose**

This empirical research extends upon findings from a book I co-authored which documented experiences of racialized faculty at predominantly white higher education institutions (PWI) within North America (Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). These narratives were intended to support racial justice for newer under-represented faculty through the tenure process and beyond (and anyone else committed to justice in higher education). The starting point of that project was my lived experiences as a racialized woman having successfully navigated the tenure process after being denied a tenure recommendation from my dean. More importantly, the book emerged out of collective struggles of many racialized faculty whose backs have been my bridges and whose anti-racist organizing not only nurtured but saved me. I extend on those findings in this study, demonstrating, through autoethnography, how as senior racialized faculty (I was promoted to full professor), these struggles continue. Utilizing examples, I demonstrate how racialized faculty are only allowed to be part of universities because of our race and gender rather than despite them. As long as Black and Brown people continue to suffer, this suffering must be documented. The purpose of this paper is to support and continue truth-telling efforts...

## **Research Questions**

- *In what ways can documenting struggles of racialized faculty regarding institutional racism support change?*
- *To what extent does the embedded culture of white supremacy in academic institutions promote a harmful climate/culture for racialized faculty?*

## **Theoretical Framework**

Drawing on Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), and critical, feminist, and auto-ethnographic approaches, this study centers my voice as a racialized scholar, interrogating my everyday lived experiences and struggles within academia. Delgado (1995) highlights five tenets comprising CRT of particular relevance to systemic inequities in higher education: counternarratives (stories centering voices of the oppressed telling their truths and experiences), whiteness as property (legacies of Black lives as white property and the ways in which this currently manifests), interest convergence (ways in which change seems to occur if it benefits non-racialized people), the permanence of racism (because higher education ignores systemic racism upon which the US was built, diversity plans in universities can often reinforce and support institutional racism), and colorblindness (which allows society to ignore racist policies and laws).

Curry (2009) says “we can no longer afford to educate ourselves and live our lives on the proleptic delusion of an integrated and nonracist white America, when we know that our reality is fundamentally determined by white racism” (p. 37). As a whole, African Americans/racialized

groups, according to the literature “are not seen as intellectually native in the academy, and Black/Brown bodies are imagined politically, historically, and conceptually circumscribed as being out of place” (p. 23). Consequently, we are consistently victimized by stereotype threat when there is a negative attribution imposed on all members of the *othered* group that positions the *othered* group as inferior. Race fatigue and isolation are frequent manifestations of the institutional violence and cruelty we face.

### **Methodology**

Autoethnography utilizes personal experience to reflect and examine cultural experiences in self-reflexive ways. Ellis and Bochner (2006) says in this form, one can work and write in spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, passion and intellect, autobiography and culture, primarily to understand a life lived in a cultural context.

Ellis and Bochner’s (2006) evocative autoethnographic style emphasize storytelling and narrative presentations written from the heart to capture feelings and struggles. The aim is to start conversations that evoke empathy which can support change. Like Ellis and Bochner, I believe that there need not be contradictions between research that is `rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and research from the heart that highlights personal aspects – autoethnographic research has the potential to be both simultaneously´ (p. 283).

Though I was skeptical of focusing on the personal (and perhaps diminishing the importance of the collective), I found myself moving fluidly from personal to cultural analysis and back again. Sparkes (2018) reminds us that ‘our stories are not our own´ (p. 485) and writing about one's own experiences inevitably means writing about others. We, as autoethnographers, never own the story. As such this text brings others into being.

I have recorded memories, conversations, and events in journals since joining academia (and since promotion last year). These records serve as my ethnographic fieldwork and the basis for this study. By interrogating/analyzing specific incidents, I highlight how white supremacy continues to harm all faculty but particularly racialized faculty.

### **Findings**

In the white supremacist culture embedded in academia/society, racialized faculty exist in various states of unbelonging. As a racialized woman from Guyana, my unbelonging to the university is intertwined with structures and histories of colonialism and racism that continues to shape all institutions (the state, schools, our justice system). Like my racialized faculty peers, I use my body and psyche to extinguish institutional fires daily. The trauma continues to haunt us in all spaces and places in academia but we also continue to resist...

#### **Excellence and diversity remain separate concepts**

By excellence and diversity remaining separate, we, as BIPOC (diverse) faculty continue to be viewed through deficit driven lenses where we are often perceived as undeserving charity cases. As a colleague once stated, we make the university look good, but they don’t know what to do with us once we’re there. Assumptions of incompetence continue to follow us wherever we go. Last year, in my school vote for promotion, I received 22 votes supporting me, 7 no votes and 2 abstentions. Other non-racialized faculty who had done significantly less scholarship, service, and leadership received almost all positive votes. I’m led to conclude that either several of my peers couldn’t be bothered to read my portfolio and voted based on my perceived deficits

or they had read my portfolio but remained unconvinced I had the right to take up space they assumed belonged to them. I therefore continued to be an intruder and interloper. The only other faculty member who received 7 no votes was a Black woman. The administration ended up granting promotion to everyone from my school who applied for promotion. In doing so, they avoided conflict with any potentially disgruntled faculty, an incoming president, or grievances with the union. However, this decision ended up endorsing the myth that BIPOC faculty who did receive promotions were undeserving. Because our academic competence is continuously questioned, an additional layer of complication was that there were a few BIPOC faculty who requested promotion who may not have met all of the qualifications in the Faculty Handbook. Each year, many non-racialized faculty fall into this category. However, in this case, the administration would have been challenged to explain why they were denying BIPOC faculty promotions when here are so few of us who are at the rank of full professors. Several allies and accomplices (Merriweather & Isaac-Savage, 2021) have shared with me the persistent murmurs around the university that several of my racialized colleagues should not have received promotion. Yet, I should point out that being promoted to full professor of adult education has not shielded me from daily onslaughts of microaggressions/invalidations that are part of the everyday for racialized faculty. My knowledge and expertise still get discounted daily by students and peers. At meetings when I speak up, there is often no acknowledgement but when a non-racialized faculty makes the same points, they're told how brilliant and profound their words are. This is the jarring, unsettling landscape in academia in which me and my racialized peers walk.

### **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is killing us**

Academia, in all its toxicity is killing us. So is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). As Garcia Pena (2022) rightly says, the project of diversity and inclusion that many of us are forced to represent in universities does not lead to equity and justice. The ways in which DEI is currently framed contribute to the issue. Currently, DEI is grounded in white domination. Ahmed (2012) adds that though the term diversity is used more, it means less. She adds that if the landscape is one of comfort, softening the edges of critique, it allows institutions to be reinhabited as softer and more palatable. Documenting inequities isn't the same as challenging them. In fact, it can protect these inequities; by checking the box, the administration allows the injustices to continue. By celebrating superficial differences like celebrating holidays or reading land acknowledgements, there is an absence of action implementing institutional practices that would redress the pain of marginalized groups. We continuously "move chairs around on the titanic," but what actions are then taken? Instead, we reproduce pain by minimizing the trauma these policies continue to have on already dispossessed communities. In the last year, the DEI council was divided into groups (policies and practices, etc.). We were asked to offer critiques and suggestions which participants did. At the end of many meetings and significant labor, no action was taken. Squire, Williams & Tuitt (2021) liken universities to plantations saying strategies utilized in universities have the goal of repressing, controlling and surveilling Black people and their resistance. In such a climate, universities are able to count Black bodies as being present without making any of the necessary changes to ensure Black and Brown people are safe and treated equitably.

### **Erasure of justice and personhood**

For me, one of the most explicit acts of erasure, an act that nearly caused me to disappear, was when my then dean didn't recommend me for tenure. Even though I'd met all of the requirements, I still found myself in this precarious position, fighting for my livelihood. And

though I was shaken to my core, I wasn't shocked. As a racialized woman in academia, I knew, suspected, expected something could go wrong. I didn't trust the system. I had witnessed all of the ways it engulfed, chewed, and spit out other BIPOC scholars. So many people supported me during this time...my allies and accomplices...people who looked like me and people who didn't look like me. I had to consistently remind myself that I was in this position because I had not played by the colonizing, racist rules and kept silent. I spoke up, questioned policies, practices, and actions of senior faculty which made me vulnerable to retribution. I subverted their white savior narratives by demanding to be treated as an equal and in the process angered many senior non-racialized faculty who preferred Black and Brown bodies to be silent and submissive. Ahmed (2012) says, to point out ways the university is unjust and racist jeopardizes our own success. In naming institutional issues, we are seen as the problem. Our fit begins to be questioned. If someone is the wrong shape, size, or color, one must after all, make more of an effort to fit. It's an uneasy fit. If one cannot fit, they are labeled unfit or misfit (Ahmed, 2012). They/we are seen as damaged and deficient by the institution. And, as a faculty member writing about racism in the university where my scholarship merged out of my activism, I heard remarks essentially saying that what I was doing wasn't scholarship. A dismissing, minimizing, and denial, that these issues existed. Issues which have and continue to traumatize us, living in our bodies and making us ill (Menakem, 2017). During my promotion process, I was evaluated by colleagues unfamiliar with adult education as a field and as a result were unable to evaluate my accomplishments meaningfully or accurately. The fact that I wasn't a "good Brown girl" further jeopardized my success. Often when I spoke out against racism in relation to BIPOC faculty, I would receive private notes of agreement but very few (if any) would speak out and stand publicly with me and other racialized peers. Garcia Pena (2022) says community is essential. In order to have community, we must commune and in order to do that, we must find our people. We cannot force people to be allies or accomplices, but we need to find people who are committed to dismantling institutional/structural inequities and to co-create tribes. People who will hold and hold on to us and that we can reach for to hold us close, to engage in resistance with us, and to celebrate us in our joy. We need allies, advocates and accomplices to publicly stand with us.

### **Espoused values translated into accountable practices**

In the recent book I co-authored, faculty pointed out how critical it is to have espoused values translated into accountable practices. I have returned to that profound phrase repeatedly in the past two years. Essentially, there must be an institutional mindset for equity and racial justice from the highest levels of the institution along with multiple strategies and points of entry. In 2020, with worldwide protests in defense of Black and Brown lives, institutions were eager to display their own social justice street creds. Forming yet more DEI committees, inviting speakers on racial justice, etc. there were cracks and crevices beginning to open up with spaces for possibilities for change. But we have since witnessed nothing substantive really changed for Black and Brown faculty; it was little more than an exercise in branding. Now in 2023 with significant backlash against racial justice work, attacks on critical race theory, bans on books and erosion against any minute steps of progress, racial justice has once again receded from the fore and racialized faculty are again encountering ever more hostility as punishment for raising issues either through scholarship, public forums, curricula, etc. Many of the same organizations who

had previously rushed to declare their lifelong commitments to racial and social justice are now noticeably silent.

In the institution in which I work, we had a fiercely committed Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) who worked closely with the Racialized Faculty Caucus (RFC) which I co-convene. It was through his foresight in applying for PRODiG (a SUNY wide initiative to recruit and retain underrepresented faculty) for Empire State University that the RFC was born. In 2021 after he left the institution, there has been a steady erasure and rollback regarding institutional social justice policies and practices. Sub-committees responsible for implementing shift in policies regarding PRODiG are being dissolved. Faculty (including myself) who have spoken up and out against institutionalized racism have been silenced in different ways, racialized faculty feel more isolated, and narrow frameworks of DEI privileging cosmetic measures that leave structural inequities untouched have been embraced. We witness underlying structures that produced and reproduced unequal distributions of power, resources, and opportunities in relation to marginalized groups remain intact. Ahmed (2012) reminds us that though racialized faculty as diversity workers attempt to develop new processes to halt reproduction of harm, those can be used to enable the very reproduction of harm it seeks to prevent. The sub-committees which have focused on issues of recruitment and retention have raised issues embedded in hiring (though there have been faculty hires, an increase in racialized faculty hires hasn't resulted). The institution still remains 86% non-racialized. Since 2020, I have noticed when racialized faculty raise critiques regarding this and other issues regarding racism in the institution, the response is almost always a variation of, "we're working on it." Another more recent phenomena is the explicit "digging in" to the orientation that documenting inequities is the equivalent of solving them. At meetings, there has been a steady stream of reports being written and data being collated as if somehow that will camouflage the abysmal dimensions of this data in relation to racialized faculty. I have also realized that having racialized administrators means nothing unless that person has progressive commitments and is willing to push the administration to implement equitable policies. But this is not a safe time, and we must work as part of a collective. So, to be the only one pushing for these changes is to be in a precarious position. We must work as part of a community and be committed to village victories (when one of us is lifted up, we are all lifted up). The documentation of the injustice cannot be the work, if the injustices are left untouched. Ahmed (2012) says equity isn't a credential but a task. It is what we have to do because we are not there yet.

### **Implications**

We must always remember that universities exist as space of structural violence for racialized faculty (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). One of the main points of my work is to contradict/challenge the university the way it is and that offends those who benefit from current structures. At the rank of full professor, only 2% are Black women (NCES, 2020). Because academia is grounded in models of individual success, with histories in colonialism, violence, and legacies of oppression, building community is challenging. It is urgent to unequivocally strengthen and support communities of color in the face of white supremacy. As underrepresented faculty, we are both hypervisible (on every diversity committee) and yet invisible (absent from decision-making power committees). Because racism and trauma can't be separated (Scott, 2017), healing can only be developed in community with other racialized people who are

politically-like-minded. Together we can work together to open up the social imagination and restore justice to spaces. The love that Black and Brown people have for each other emerges from shared lived experiences of being in bodies that recognize that to survive systemic oppression, racial capitalism, and white supremacy, mutual care is as important as self-care (Garcia Pena, 2022). It is racialized scholars committed to social change who understand the importance of collective village victories. Resistance is both our heritage and our healing (Kelley 2021).

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