The Danger of an Untold Story: Excerpts from My Life as a Black Academic

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People of color who choose careers in higher education may encounter microaggressions, marginalization, and other unpleasant situations. This narrative shares the experiences and perspectives of one African-American academic's experiences with the intent of encouraging academic professionals from underrepresented populations to persevere.

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I am both appreciative of and unnerved by the opportunity to share some of the experiences I have had while navigating a career as a black woman in higher education. I am appreciative because, as Maya Angelou is quoted to have said, "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." I have suffered in near silence for many years, turning only to close friends and select family members to ask them for their advice and consolation. Writing this article is unnerving because I fear that I will be seen as vindictive or, worse, a liar. I am neither. I bear no ill will to the people who have subjected me to the indignities detailed below. Further, I do not have a vivid enough imagination to fabricate the encounters I have described. I have offered these excerpts because they need to be shared in order to add to the collective record that presents the stories of my contemporaries, some of whom may never find the courage or have the opportunity to speak up. I realize that, even in writing my own truth, there may be professional consequences for breaking my silence.

KEY POINTS

- Higher education researchers and instructors who are members of marginalized populations often encounter microaggressions in their chosen profession.
- African-American women who work in higher education often face "double marginalization" that makes it difficult to discern whether mistreatment is due to race, gender, or both.
- It is vital that academics of color continue to forge paths in higher education in order to add diverse perspectives and help to pave the way for future colleagues.

However, the personal consequences—to my mind, heart, and spirit—for continuing to remain silent have become burdens that are too great to bear.

Rearview mirror: early experiences in academia

Not long ago, I found an essay that I wrote for an elective course in which I was enrolled during my doctoral program. The course focused on the history of women in higher education with particular emphasis on the experiences (many of them harrowing) that ultimately paved the way for women to thrive in modern higher education spaces in the United States. In addition to the course's required textbooks and scholarly articles, the professor also chose Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as required reading that all students in the class had to incorporate into an essay that addressed a unique perspective regarding women's issues.

I began my paper by musing about whether I was transparent—actually invisible—because of the many times that I was ignored in situations where my presence and contributions should have been acknowledged. I went on to detail what I now know to be instances of microaggressions—"everyday slights, insults, indignities, and invalidations delivered toward people of color" (Sue, 2015, p. 7) that left me concerned that I was the cause of or imagining my own mistreatment. I thought:

> Perhaps I was simply paranoid. . . .
>
> Was it possible that the seemingly disparaging comments of "You certainly are articulate" after I delivered a speech were sincere? . . .
>
> Could the memo and subsequent electronic mail I generated detailing a plan for the class in which I was assisting really have been misplaced . . . by all three of the faculty members I gave it to? (Franklin, 2002, p. 4).

As I re-read my essay, I was saddened to realize that the confusing and sometimes demeaning situations I described in a paper written in 2002 are still commonplace over a decade later at institutions across the United States and internationally (see, for example, Gabriel & Tate, 2018; Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017). More significantly, I was unsettled and disgusted by the memories of even worse situations that have happened to me in professional settings in the years since I wrote the essay. Even though the research I conducted for my paper indicated that "even once an African American woman has proven that she has the intellect required to successfully navigate a doctoral program, gender and ethnicity issues may prevent her from having an enjoyable experience as faculty in a predominately White institution" (Franklin, 2002, pp. 5–6), I was hopeful that my experience would ultimately be different. I was wrong.

Pardon me?: inappropriate interactions

After earning my Ph.D. but prior to accepting my first academic position, I began to reluctantly realize that even though I was no longer a student, not much was going to change in the way in which I was treated. During a conversation with a tenured professor during which I expressed my anxiety about interviewing for assistant professor positions, he assured me that I had no reason to worry because I was "young, attractive, and a minority," never mind my intellectual abilities, sound research skills, and years of preparation.

Weeks after that exchange, during marathon interviewing sessions at a professional conference, the dean of one prestigious iSchool requested a meeting with me. I was flattered! I had not signed up to interview with this particular school because I did not see an immediate fit between its courses and overall focus and my skill set. How was it possible that I had come to the dean's attention? Had I done so well at other interviews that word was spreading and I was now a sought-after candidate? When the one-on-one meeting began, my unspoken questions were answered almost immediately. After sharing the obligatory description of the school, the dean said, "I don't exactly know what we would do with you but we need faculty of color so we'll come up with something." Even now, over a decade after this particular incident, I still cringe in humiliation.

It has long been reported by members of marginalized groups who work in higher education and other professional settings that they experience tokenism and are assumed to have been hired to fulfill a quota (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). Actually being encouraged to view and offer myself up as a token was an unexpected and shocking experience.

The mentor mystery: hoping for help

Researchers in numerous fields have described the impact of strong mentoring on faculty success in general (some examples include Bean, Lucas, & Hyers, 2014; Kohn, 2014; and Smith, Martinez, Lanigan, Wells-Moses, & Koehler, 2018). Researchers have also noted the need for faculty from underrepresented groups to have effective mentoring. Specifically, "mentoring as a form of support is believed to be essential to the career advancement and success of African American faculty" (Wilson, 2012, p. 75).

During my time as a junior faculty member, I longed for mentorship. Having not been officially paired with a mentor as was the norm (I was told I'd "somehow slipped through the cracks"), one senior faculty member—a white female—volunteered for the role. Because we had similar research interests and she was well known and respected in LIS, I gratefully accepted her offer. It wasn't long before I realized that this arrangement was not beneficial for me. While I expected my mentor to act as a guide into my new career, what I experienced caused me to feel as though I had returned to graduate school. I was told what I should do as opposed to asked what my interests were; I was assigned various

tasks instead of engaged in a conversation about what my strengths were. My self-appointed mentor could never seem to find time to read and share feedback on my draft manuscripts but did not hesitate to request that I act as copy editor for her writing. Though I knew this was not a healthy relationship for me, I was at a loss for what to do.

I had not had a formal conversation with my mentor about either of our needs, wants, or expectations from our relationship, so I decided that the fault was mostly mine. Because I was young both chronologically and in my career, I lacked the courage and the savvy to attempt to reset the relationship by initiating a conversation to discuss what was not working, what I believed I needed in a mentor, and what she saw as her role and her limitations. Instead, I began to avoid all but professionally necessary interactions with her.

Years later, a second self-appointed mentor, this time a white male, at least took the time to have essential expectations-setting conversations with me. In fact, we met regularly to talk about my professional goals and the progress I was making on my research. He seemed so sincere about helping me find my footing in academia that I felt comfortable letting my guard down and sharing some of the insecurities and doubts I had about my ability to succeed in a tenure track position. I later learned that he'd shared what I had believed to be confidential conversations with at least one member of our administration. Additionally, after a meeting about a letter generated from my annual review that we interpreted very differently, he spoke to me so harshly that I retreated to my office in tears. Yet again, I did not have the courage to confront this mentor or to formally end the relationship. I did, however, stop arranging mentoring sessions.

While Niemann (2012, p. 492) cautions that faculty of color should "not assume that every negative experience or action toward you is grounded in racial . . . bias," Wilson (2012, p. 74) explains that "the double marginalization that African American women face can make it difficult to determine whether the reactions and behaviors directed at them are due to race, gender, or a combination of both." I have existed in that liminal space of uncertainty. On the one hand, I am not certain that the mentoring mishaps occurred *because* I am faculty of color. On the other hand, I am clear that they happened to me *and* I am faculty of color. I also know that my white colleagues who received mentorship from the same individuals did not report similar instances of dismissal, condescension, and overall mistreatment.

I never again sought formal mentoring but did reach out for advice on an as-needed basis from people with whom I felt a connection that I met in other parts of the university, at professional conferences, and during my visits to other university campuses. The members of this "network of mentors" (Wilson, 2012, p. 490) are not all people of color, nor are they all women, but they all have my eternal gratitude, as I am certain that I would not have persevered without their encouragement and guidance.

I am not my hair: impoliteness and insults

Very few—if any—refereed LIS journal articles make mention of hair. And yet here we are. Scholars and popular writers alike have presented accounts of African American people in general and black women specifically being viewed and treated as though they were exotic pets or objects of wonder (Brown, 2015; Robinson, 2016). Their writing describes instances of women who were subjected to being touched without warning or permission. I have been on the receiving end of such treatment in public spaces. Many were the times that people—usually white women and small children (the latter of whom I readily forgive)—had grabbed handfuls of my braided locks or patted my curly natural hair.

I was not, however, prepared to have similar things happen at an academic institution at which I was employed. I was certain that my colleagues were too enlightened, too refined to be so invasive to my person and to my personal space. Most behaved professionally and respectfully, but some could not resist their curiosity. I recall one particular incident when, just prior to the beginning of a meeting, a colleague who was a tenured, full professor simultaneously complimented and reached toward my hair. I could not recoil quickly enough to avoid her making contact; she pulled her hand away with it covered in hair oil. Neither of us quite knew what to do next and so we sat in silence, with me feeling somewhat embarrassed and quite violated and her feeling too awkward to leave the room to wash her hand. In no situation is it acceptable for any part of a person's body to be touched without permission. It is particularly inexcusable in a setting where there is the obvious and necessary expectation of professional distance.

Another, more unsettling incident involving my hair occurred when a colleague, another tenured, full professor, allowed her emotional support animal to freely roam the halls of our building. When I encountered the dog—a large breed with tightly curled black fur—I froze and loudly and quite frantically called out for help. When the animal's owner finally appeared to corral it, I thanked her and hurried away. As I made my way down the hall, she called after me to offer, "I'd think you'd like him . . . you have the same hair." Though I was speechless at the moment of that ill-worded parting comment, I later had a conversation with the colleague where she acknowledged her inappropriate words and engaged in a conversation about why what she'd said was offensive.

Conclusion: and miles to go before i sleep

Reflecting on some of the negative, racially related experiences I have endured during my academic career has been both painful and cathartic. As is often the case with traumatic memories, the ones I have shared caused me to remember others: I have been patted on the head as a colleague walked past me at a faculty meeting; I have been asked

to explain the behaviors of black students even though I had never met them; I have been bluntly told that the reason I was assigned to committee membership for something completely outside my expertise, interest, and ability was "we've gotta have a black person." Because I choose to search for the good in all situations, I can confidently say that—though I would not willingly relive the emotionally and psychologically traumatic instances I have described—I will always strive to use them to my benefit and the benefit of others. I am, after all, the sum of my experiences. I would not be able to show compassion for other marginalized and mistreated people had I not been subjected to exclusion; I might never have realized my passion for teaching had I not encountered professors whose dismissive behaviors toward me provided motivation for doing things differently. In fact, I am proud to have earned two teaching excellence awards as they serve as reminders that I do make a difference in my students' lives. Perhaps I would not be a fervent advocate and ally for higher education students, staff, and faculty (whether or not they share my cultural background) had I not personally experienced the alienating effects of having an ineffective mentor. I certainly would not be the unabashedly loving, fiercely supportive friend, spouse, and mother that I take pride in being had I not encountered situations that left me feeling confounded, devastated, and utterly abandoned.

Brilliant scholar Nicole Cooke (2017) describes a conversation she had with herself that helped her to fight through the fatigue and burnout that often accompany being a faculty member of color at a predominantly white institution. Cooke came full circle from questioning whether she wanted a seat at the table to pondering whether she should relinquish that seat, to deciding that she not only deserved to be at the table but that it was vital that she stay there (pp. 120–125). I admit that I am constantly in the process of having a similar conversation with myself as I continue to forge a path as a scholar and teacher of color in higher education. At times, the desire to push away from the table (and maybe even knock it over) is overwhelming. At other times, my drive to help make room at the table for other deserving faculty of color keeps me firmly planted in my seat.

I end this narrative with the quotation from civil rights activist Pauli Murray's testimony before Congress in 1970 that I used to begin the essay I wrote in 2002: "If anyone should ask a Negro woman in America what has been her greatest achievement, her answer would be, 'I survived'" (Testimony before Congress . . ., 1970). I now believe in my academic abilities. I no longer blame myself when I am mistreated. I speak up for myself and for others. I do not allow other people's opinions of me to cause me to question my worth. By continuing to move forward, I have not merely survived—I have found a way to thrive!

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