

Articles

From Cohort to Family: Coalitional Stories of Love and Survivance

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This essay provides insights into how one cohort of four scholars established a community of support (in other words, a family) that began during graduate recruitment week at their PhD institution and now extends deep into their tenure-track careers. Presenting stories that chronicle an academic trajectory, these scholars describe how, despite having very little difference in academic “rank,” they have mentored and supported each other. Through connected stories of mentorship and familial support, the authors suggest new scholars build coalitional families in the academy to support each other and continue learning throughout their careers.

In the summer of 2020, amidst a pandemic that is disproportionately killing Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, through ongoing uprisings prompted by persistent and sanctioned anti-Black violence in and beyond the US, on the verge of the 2020 election, the four authors of this paper each navigated our individual situations while also doing what we have done since meeting in graduate school: relying on each other. Through phone calls, Zoom happy hours, text messages, mail deliveries, work collaborations, and much more, we came together to process what was happening in the world and to find strength to push through an academic grind that likes to pretend everything is normal. Upon seeing the call for contributions to this special issue, we also began reflecting not only on what got us through 2020, but also on what gets us to thrive (not just survive) in academia—a space that lacks formal mechanisms for sustaining the lives, experiences, needs, and possibilities of BIPOC scholars (Báez and Ore; Kynard; Niemann et. al). As Kristiana Báez and Ersula Ore remind us, while academia claims to “welcome” or “invite” diversity, behavioral norms, communication styles, knowledge-making practices, and ways of being, academia remains dominated by white supremacy. For students from marginalized backgrounds, graduate school begins a long process of attempted indoctrination into an oppressive system that centralizes “very white fields, very white disciplines, and very white departments,” and the ways in which these interact with each other (Báez and Ore 332).

As we reflected on our experiences from grad school recruitment to our current positions as tenure-track assistant professors at research-intensive universities in Florida and North Carolina, we took note of the various strategies that we used to lift each other up, push each other forward, and stand together amidst institutional infrastructures that were never created with us in mind. We draw inspiration from other BIPOC scholars who share “culturally specific mentoring model[s]” that foreground a “trusting kinship and relationship” over competition (Ribero and Arellano). In this article, we illustrate our own process for “etching out space” in the academy, specifically by describing how we—Ronisha, a Black woman from Florida; Esther, a Black Indigenous transnational woman from Kenya; Victor, a Chicano from the El Paso/Ciudad Juarez borderland region; and Laura, a Latina transnational woman from Bolivia—came together in graduate school to develop a longstanding familial relationship that can be identified as a mentorship network, a support group, a peer-review circle, but is always first and foremost a family (Okawa).

In this article, we share grounded stories and collective strategies of what Natasha Jones describes as “coalitional learning,” or learning that happens through “an acknowledgement of interrelatedness and interconnectedness” outside of academia’s hierarchical structures (518). We weave our voices together to illustrate different points of an academic’s career, including getting through graduate school, moving our families to start a tenure track career, and navigating the tenure track. In each section, we illustrate both what we navigated as individuals in these situations and also how we supported each other as a family throughout this process. We hope that other BIPOC scholars can learn from and build on the strategies we share as we all continue carving out space and shifting the landscape of academia (Royster).

Grad School: Surviving with Heart-to-Hearts

In their introduction to *The Crunk Feminist Collective*, Brittney Cooper (Crunktastic), Susana Morris (Crunkadelic), and Robin Boylorn (Crunkista) describe the early days of their feminist perspective and practice: “In the beginning, we got CRUNK. At house parties...In the club. And in the classroom. Crunkness was energy and life, fire and resistance, swagger and verve, going off and showing out. But it was also about showing up, for ourselves and for each other, in spaces that didn’t love us” (1). Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn describe these acts of crunkness that include moments of fun and play, along with self-affirmation and solidarity as practices that helped to sustain them through graduate school. In reviving their project as academics, these same strategies of survival and action are what they looked to reclaim. If “getting CRUNK” is how the Crunk Feminists named their graduate experi-

ence, within our family, heart-to-hearts were an integral part of our collective survival and success.

Throughout our graduate experience together, we each hosted social gatherings (some intimate—with only us four in attendance—and others larger with extended family). These “get-togethers,” meant to “turn-up” in celebration or “wind down” from stress, became important support spaces for our family, while serving as a foundation to our long-term friendships (Cooper et al.). Laura introduced us to heart-to-hearts, casual open forums where anyone present could share how they were feeling with the larger group. Stories of personal struggles, insecurities, frustrations, and pains, many of which arose out of experiences within academia, were shared within heart-to-heart sessions.

This space was important because it allowed us to speak freely without judgement, but also to be able to listen to each other—to hear each other’s different perspectives and ways of coping, navigating, and negotiating the daily obstacles and expectations of graduate school. Although we were all graduate students of color within the same doctoral program, our journeys for getting to that place in that particular moment, and our individual identities, were different.

For example, Ronisha arrived at our Midwest institution from Florida less than two months after completing her MA. As a first-generation college student, she had limited guides on how to navigate higher education, although she had the constant support of her parents and long-time partner. For her, pursuing a doctorate degree meant achieving an educational milestone that no one in her immediate family, extended family, or social groups had ever done before, and the realities of being *The First* weighed heavily on her. It also meant moving away from home to an unfamiliar environment and entering into unknown territory within her educational career. For instance, although she had a clear interest in cultural and Black rhetorical studies, she did not see herself as an aspiring scholar at that time nor fully understand writing and rhetorical studies as a potential profession and not just a disciplinary subject in school. Because of this, much of the assumed knowledge of academia, such as building a CV, attending conferences, conducting research, and publishing, were unknown to her at the time; yet, she did not let her lack of knowledge prevent her from seeking the opportunity to learn and advance.

Victor arrived in the Midwest ready to escape the oppressive heat of a major southern state university. Although he had a strong community of peer-mentors, including his older brother, to support him at his master’s institution, the department and college culture of that institution was heavily influenced and impacted by the right-wing conservative state government. Skipping summer commencement to attend new student orientation in the greener pastures of a Midwest state school could never be worse than what

he had just experienced. On top of that, during the recruitment process, he got the chance to meet Ronisha and Laura, who would be in his cohort, and Esther, who was his recruitment buddy. He felt like walking into his first day of PhD school, he already had a community to take on the next four years.

For Laura, starting a PhD program was the first time she got to go away to school. Laura immigrated to Orlando, Florida from Santa Cruz, Bolivia with her parents when she was in elementary school. Going away from Orlando for college as an undergrad was not an option due to financial and familial issues. After her parents moved back to Bolivia following the 2008 financial crash in the US and her baby brother's graduation from high school, Laura decided to apply to PhD programs across the country. To her, moving to go to school and being in academia was a privilege, something she never imagined being able to do. Having worked at a grocery store to support her household through her master's program and previous position as a college lecturer, Laura started her PhD program excited to have the privilege of only having to read and think and write as her source of income. She had never had just one job, and she didn't understand why people took academia so seriously when being in the books felt very much detached from the so-called real world.

Esther joined graduate school from a very different cultural and educational background: Kenya. Although she felt educationally and professionally accomplished, having earned two postgraduate degrees and having a promising career as a probation officer, as she quickly learned, her previous educational and prior literate experiences in Kenya did not translate to anything much in the US. From the get-go, she began sensing that she was "presumed incompetent" as a Kenyan woman attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest, a space that privileges white/Western education, backgrounds, and people (Niemann et al.). Esther had not initially planned to attend graduate school in the US; she had come to America to support her husband who was pursuing a PhD in Agricultural Economics. But, finding herself idle with an F2 dependent visa, she decided to apply to the PhD program in the Department of English because of her background in literature and teacher education. She was rejected. She tried her luck in the rhetoric and writing program and also got rejected. However, the rhetoric and writing graduate admissions committee advised her to apply for their MA degree program. Esther did as advised, and a few months later she was pursuing a graduate degree at a major research university. But the feeling of being presumed incompetent due to her race and her nationality continued to bother her.

While Esther was excited about the opportunity to study in an American university, she was not prepared for the culture of individualism and competitiveness or the liberal individualism that characterizes American higher education and American society in general. She observed with shock that her

colleagues were always anxious that someone was going to steal their ideas; or they bragged about having access to the best academic mentors in and beyond the department (some called them academic mothers and fathers); or they speculated about whose research was likely to make the greatest impact in the field. This experience contrasted sharply with her previous graduate school experience in Kenya, where everybody helped each other. In Kenya, the goal was for everyone to do well. This academic culture of collaboration, solidarity, and support in African universities is well described by Mary Muchiri et al.: “African university students are first of all members of groups: of a small band of students with whom they survive the university, of the body of students as a whole, and of a community beyond the university, of family, village, and tribe. These loyalties are embodied in daily practices of academic life” (180).

One of the researchers in Muchiri et al.’s study, Mary, studied students at Kenyatta University, where Esther completed her post graduate certificate in education. According to Muchiri et al.:

Mary wanted to know how students at Kenyatta came to know just what was expected on an exam, since the exam questions themselves did not provide explicit guidance. They were getting much of their information, she found, from what they call “survival groups.” Students band together, sharing notes, sharing knowledge of lecturers, so that the strong help support the weak. (180)

This is the culture of support Esther expected to find in her graduate program. Instead, once she entered her US graduate program, Esther struggled to find a solid “survival group”—a family, a tribe. She remembers a hostile experience when she once tried to shine in the department. It was her third year in the MA program when she finally decided to re-apply to the PhD program that had rejected her three years back. Four colleagues in her MA cohort also applied. Before they received official communication from the graduate admissions committee, word leaked out that only Esther and another student of color had made it, and that Esther had also been ranked the top candidate from the pool of applicants. White colleagues, who had not been accepted, went berserk. One, who had been Esther’s closest friend, told her that she did not believe Esther was more qualified than her and that she would demand to see application materials for all the candidates. Of course, this shifted the relationship between Esther and her colleague and reaffirmed the fact that when it comes down to friendships and relationships in academia, whiteness continues to prevail. This is why coalitions of BIPOC scholars are so important.

From then onward, it was not the same for Esther. The colleagues, with whom she had worked, studied, and laughed, were suddenly beginning to ques-

tion her competency, and Esther felt this questioning directly. Esther wondered, why would they not want her to win? She started withdrawing, isolating, and becoming more guarded about her academic friendships. During her first and second year in the PhD program, she yearned for a sense of real and authentic academic relationship, where colleagues would actively listen to her ideas instead of having a one-sided relationship and where Esther's role was to listen or offer feedback. Esther's search ended when she met Ronisha, Laura, and Victor. For Esther, this trio represented what Pamela Hoff calls "real folk in the academy," noting that such people "are few and far between" and if you ever find them, "holding onto them is essential" (41). Drawing from Black cultural norms, Hoff develops a theory of "realness" in the academy and identifies some basic tenets of "real": putting the community first; privileging we over I; reciprocity over "accumulation of transactions"; and resisting standards of achievement and progress measured using white cultural norms (41).

Hoff writes that "realness comes from culturally grounded, regular folk, flawed and vulnerable yet purposeful in trying to be better, though not at the expense of another" (41). As Esther came to learn through her interactions with Ronisha, Laura, and Victor, they were just like her: regular, flawed, vulnerable, and struggling to make it. They would put their community first, making sure to look out for one another in graduate seminars, at conferences, and when opportunities came up in the field. They said (and continued to say) each other's names in the right rooms and spaces, instead of just looking out for themselves. In them, she had finally found a "survival group," her tribe, a brother and two sisters who were determined to see her win, in word and action.

Coming from such different backgrounds and places, for us, heart-to-hearts were a space to sift through the complexities and contradictions of our different realities as graduate students of color. Given that we all came to graduate school with different levels of experience, goals, and stakes, mentorship that acknowledged those differences were important, which is what made these intimate moments of reflection, storytelling, and sometimes just plain ol' venting so important. Along with being a space for recognizing our various voices, heart-to-hearts also served as productive spaces to practice rhetorical listening, where we listened without judgement and offered each other comfort and solidarity (see Ratcliffe). These opportunities to listen critically to each other's stories and thought processes were useful in revealing our differences in points of view, priorities, and positionalities, and these continue to be helpful as we navigate our work at very different institutions who all function under white supremacy.

These moments of talk-back were (and are) less about asserting one solution to a problem and more about pooling several possible solutions and strategies for navigating an issue. Our differences gave each of us access to multiple ways

of seeing and responding to potential conflicts and stresses we faced as graduate students. For example, we helped each other navigate tensions among our dissertation committees by providing different perspectives on the issues we were facing. We also provided each other with different perspectives on our research interests, serving as empathetic but rigorous audiences during mock interviews, practice research presentations, and more. Often, heart-to-hearts were the spaces where we had the discussions we couldn't have in class in front of white peers and white faculty who would not understand where we were coming from when raising questions or resisting particular points of view.

By making space for diverse and under-represented voices within the academy, prioritizing listening to understand, and combining our resources to assist each other in time of need, our graduate family engaged in our own version of co-mentoring (Bona et al.; Godbee and Novotny; McGuire and Reger). Unlike traditional, master-apprentice mentoring models, co-mentoring offers an alternative to the top-down exchange of knowledge within traditional mentoring. Through a reciprocity that acknowledges how power may impact the effectiveness and sustainability of a relationship, co-mentoring, especially a feminist co-mentoring model, advocates for shared power amongst peer mentors. As discussed by Beth Godbee and Julia C. Novotny:

Through emphasizing the willingness to be in relationship and through welcoming partners to bring their whole selves into mentoring, this model transforms mentoring from a relationship out of necessity or coercion into one that is willed and mutual. At its best, co-mentoring allows individuals to build group solidarity, and solidarity gained from the stance of *power with* enables shared empowerment—making the whole stronger than its parts—so that both co-mentors gain from the relationship, even when those gains are different in degree or kind. (180)

By understanding our power as shared, we were able to use our power to support and assist each other intellectually and professionally, as well as personally, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. In other words, our responsibilities to each other extended beyond the realms of academia; instead, our mentoring was holistic, and, as Dr. G explains in Gail Okawa's study on senior mentoring, "helping the whole person to the extent possible" (512). By affirming and supporting each other as whole people, we asserted our individual and collective rights to belong in academia despite moments of uncertainty and doubt (Godbee and Novotny). These practices of "showing up, for ourselves and each other" sustained us through graduate school and continued to empower us as we progressed in our academic careers (Cooper et al. 1).

Job Market: You Got This!

Going to graduate school in a program considered top-tier meant that there were certain expectations for us to follow when it came to graduation and the job market: we would graduate based on our department's estimated timeline and would secure those coveted tenure-track positions at research-intensive universities. However, since we all got to graduate school for different reasons and with different purposes, these differences led to various paths within (and out of) our graduate institution.

In *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, Angela P. Harris, Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs, Yolanda Flores Niemann, and Carmen G. Gonzalez, as well as their contributors, illustrate the many ways through which academics of color, particularly women of color, have to perform to meet white academic standards that always presume BIPOC academics to be lesser than their white counterparts. The job market is a space where this presumed incompetence, and the performativity needed to counter these presumptions, are greatly exacerbated. Formally, what this meant for us as graduate students is that we got told—often by white mentors who had extensive experiences navigating these processes—what to wear (and not wear), how to talk (and not talk), what to eat (and not eat) in order to be successful throughout this job market process. Informally, what the job market also meant for us is that we needed to establish spaces where we could be ourselves and where we could really see each other through this chaos.

For example, we set up spaces to interview each other and practice video interviews and campus visits outside of any formal job group, in spaces where we could mess up, ask hard questions, and support each other without having to perform for others. Because there is no time for, or interest in, competition within this family, when we were invited for interviews at the same schools, we shared interview questions and tips, taking turns sharing depending on who was interviewed when. As we decided where to go, we helped each other think about other faculty of color who were (or were not) at our new institutions, asking each other the tough questions about sustainability and support that white mentors in the academy may not know or care to ask.

Each member of our family played different roles throughout this process. For example, Victor helped strategize the best ways to practice video interviews. He would keep track of when everyone was interviewing and would then gather the rest of us, draft and share the questions, recruit other grad students to join the calls as needed, and make sure that the person practicing was ready during their scheduled date and time. Esther was the one who brought us together, opening up her home and allowing us to spend time with her children and family when we needed important reminders of what it means to be a human

outside of academia. Ronisha was the person who could, and can still, look at any one of us at any moment and know exactly what we are feeling and what we need to hear. Often, this is a good wake-up call and a reminder of our mantra: You KNOW you're good. You KNOW you got this. What are you worrying about? Be YOURSELF. Laura will always make sure you remember that you are loved and that you have your family standing with you, no matter where you are.

This type of support was critical to our success, but it definitely didn't make things easy. For example, because universities want to claim that they welcome diversity, the four of us found that, on the job market, we were sometimes the only scholar of color to be invited to an on-campus interview—often in order to fulfill university diversity quotas. Universities will sometimes include a model minority candidate on their list of campus interviewees in order to say that they tried to hire diversity. Meanwhile, the intent is usually to hire a white candidate and claim that they are a better fit or more qualified. For instance, on the job market, Laura found out that she was invited to a campus interview against a white woman who already had connections at the university and who had been told that the job was hers. Essentially, Laura was brought in as the diversity-on-paper candidate to help the committee check off the diversity requirements. There were only two candidates invited to campus for that position—Laura and the white woman who had already been promised the job. Both candidates were PhD students with similar qualifications and experience. When Laura visited campus, her research talk impressed the faculty and dean to the point that they overrode the recommendations of the search committee and advocated for Laura to be offered the position first. While Laura ended up declining that job offer, she later found out that the white woman, who ended up being the second-choice candidate, was offered a starting salary (before any negotiations) that was \$28,000 higher than Laura's original offer. The search committee chair had manipulated the offer to make it less appealing to Laura, or to make her choose to accept this position without a livable wage in an expensive city.

For Esther, during her first campus visit, the search committee chair had made it very clear to her that her work attracted a great deal of interest among the faculty and graduate students. This lifted Esther's spirit, especially because this school was moving very fast in scheduling initial interviews and campus visits for the finalists. During Esther's campus visit, the faculty members and students seemed fascinated in her work to the point of fetishizing it. However, throughout the interview process and conversations especially with faculty, Esther got the general impression that though they admired the complexities of the research she was describing, they could not understand its scholarly value and implications to the field.

What also struck Esther during the campus visit was how white the department was: there were no more than three faculty of color. In fact, after her research talk (which was jam-packed) Esther was chatting with faculty and students when the only Black student attending the talk pulled her aside and asked: “What in God’s name are you doing here? Why would you want to work in a place like this?” Noticing that Esther was confused by the question, the student tried to help Esther understand: “Look around. How many Black folks do you see in this room?” For sure, it was only Esther and the student. At this point, Esther realized she might not have a real shot at being hired. Had she just been invited to campus for the search committee to check the diversity box—to show that they had invited a diverse pool of applicants to campus? Did they really value her research? A week later, she got the rejection letter. Of course, she knew she was not going to get every job she applied for, but there was something about this job that made her feel she had it on lock. One senior faculty member had even whispered to her after the talk: “we really want you here; we hope the dean does not screw this for us.” After receiving the rejection, her spirit was crushed.

Building on the work of critical race theorist Patricia Williams, Bettina Love notes that “spirit murder” for BIPOC is real in academia. Spirit-murdering denies inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things a person needs to be human and to be educated (Love 302). In “Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition,” Love describes spirit murder as a “slow death, a death of the spirit . . . a death that is built on racism” that is meant to humiliate and destroy people of color (1-2).

From here on it was a downward spiral for Esther. She questioned her scholarly interests, even growing to hate them. She wanted to abandon her research on translingualism in Kenyan Hip-hop altogether. What did she do wrong? Was it the dean? Was it her research? Throughout her dissertation writing process, she had tried to change her methodology to sound as scientific as possible and to write in a way that would appeal to the predominantly white and monolingual audience in the field of rhetoric and composition, but her experience during this interview left her feeling that this still wasn’t enough. Esther decided to shelve her research about Kenya and Africa and map out a different research trajectory to which most writing and rhetoric instructors would relate. This shift posed a real risk, because it would mean slowing her progress.

It was at this point that her co-mentoring family stepped in for an intervention: to remind her that her work was valuable, that our work as BIPOC scholars is first and foremost for us and our communities, and that the field is secondary. Victor, for example, went out of his way to find and share resources that could help Esther see her research differently. One notable resource was

Bagele Chilisa's *Indigenous Research Methodologies*, a book on African Indigenous methodologies that changed Esther's perspective and rekindled her spirit to research guided by frameworks that are relevant to African communities. Ronisha reminded Esther of the importance of highlighting our identity as Black people in our research and of the value of drawing on Black rhetorical and cultural traditions in our work—like storytelling, emotion, and spirituality. Esther and Ronisha have met regularly for the last ten years to just talk about Black Language and African rhetorical traditions—from Africa and the African diaspora—and also to strategize about how to practice these traditions more in our research. Laura offered to read draft after draft after draft of Esther's work, offering her feedback and encouraging her to write in a way that revealed her voice and met the needs of the field; but, most importantly, Laura encouraged Esther to highlight the work of the Kenyan/African communities she researched.

Through all of this, the four of us managed to graduate and secure tenure-track positions, moving positions when necessary, and always relying on each other when we need a reminder of who we are, where we come from, and why we do what we do.

Navigating the Tenure-Track

In addition to the fact that family comes first, there is also something else we should make clear about our family: we refuse to just get by. Tenure is a check on the list, but our personal and collective goals sit much higher. We recognize that academia will knock you out before it lets you get by, and thus it is our job to always stay on top of things to ensure that we stay current, stay mobile, and stay successful beyond the limitations of any single institution. As Carmen Kynard explains in "Letter to my Former President and Provost: Why I Left":

For far too long, the conversations about retaining BIPOC faculty at the college have centered on support for tenure. This logic assumes that tenure and promotion are something difficult for us. I assure you that this has not been the case for me or my peers. My generation of successful Brown and Black professionals are a mobile generation and the most decorated amongst us do one thing when an institution continually devalues us: *we leave.*"

This is a lesson Victor learned when he was given the chance to return to his home and work in a tenure-track position at the university in his hometown. He achieved the dream of many Chicax scholars: to teach and research at home, where you can work with the students that you literally used to be,

where you can make a difference every class period by connecting with a different student, and where every reading is a chance to open a student's mind.

That is, until he was laying on his office floor between classes because his back has totally given out on him. He struggled to walk the fifteen feet to the seminar room from his office. His graduate students watched him walk by them, hunched over, as he arranged two chairs next to each other so that he could lean as he sat to conduct class. His body was completely clenched and aching because stress had not only completely taken his back, but had also given him shingles. His students, concerned and slightly horrified, watched Victor immobilized in pain as he tried to conduct class through clenched teeth. Victor ended class early and appreciated students' concerns, but waited for them all to leave so that he could once again make the painful journey down the hall back to his office.

At the time, you could not have convinced Victor that institutional stress was the main cause of his pain. But as he looks back at how completely broken his body became after 1.5 semesters on the tenure-track, he realized the overwhelming burden that came with being junior faculty at the school where you are continually fighting uphill to get by. It was hard to leave, but he would not have survived if he stayed. You cannot fix an institution that does not want to be fixed. You also cannot do it before tenure. The lesson learned here is there is a lot of latitude between making a difference and fixing an institution that had no problem burning you out in fifteen months. And your family will always be here to remind you of this.

Besides providing the support you need to leave an institution when you need to, having academic family across various institutions can also lead to collaborations that both challenge and sustain you. This practice of making space and collective sustainability that serves multiple functions can also be seen in the collaborative work between Esther and Ronisha.

For me, Ronisha, some of the realest conversations about my experiences as a Black woman in academia have happened between Esther and me. A recurring topic between us is finding our own voices and place within a disciplinary field that often feels like it doesn't know us, love us, or want us. As scholars who are personally and professionally on the fringes of our subfield of African American rhetoric, it can at times feel like if your voice, experiences, and research do not look, sound, or perform a certain way, you and it have no real place. Although folks are cordial, there is a difference between being invited to the party and being a +1.

In claiming and affirming our identities as "sister outsiders within" our discipline, we—Ronisha and Esther—have found ways to empower each other to speak up privately and publicly on intra-racial conflicts and prejudices within Black communities, our everyday lives, and academia (Lorde). These

conversations began with a car ride to Detroit in 2014. During our drive, our conversation somehow shifted to discussing misconceptions Black people from different ethnic and cultural groups have about each other and how these problematic stories plague Black people collectively. As two Black women—one Kenyan and one African American—we spoke from two different experiences of Blackness. The level of vulnerability it took on both of our parts to even have that first conversation, to divulge the prejudices and ignorance that we held within ourselves as stories about the other (not each other personally, but stories from Black America about the “Africans” and stories from Africa about “the Black Americans”), was both uncomfortable and healing. Over the last several years, we have continued to engage in these conversations, and they have strengthened our understandings of each other and (at least for me, Ronisha) have made me more cognizant of how these stories—even when they are private and hidden within my distant memory or subconscious—affect how I act and interact with non-African American Black folks. It is only through acknowledging that these stories exist and doing the personal and intellectual work of re-educating myself that I am engaging in the process of decolonizing my mind and resisting the internalized oppression that has created an illogical distance/hierarchy between myself and sisters, brothers, aunties, and cousins across the African diaspora.

Furthermore, we have worked to translate these personal conversations into scholarship. We have collaborated on a project that calls for extending African American rhetorics, particularly in ways that recognizes African continuity and strives for more inclusive practices that more thoroughly recognize the identities, experiences, and rhetorical practices of all Black people across the African diaspora. In other words, we want a globalized African (American) rhetorics, which requires interrogating many of the prejudices and “private stories” that we both know exist—because we talk about them—but remain undertheorized or recognized within public and scholarly discourse (see King). In other words, we air the dirty laundry.

The stress, isolation, and anxieties of the tenure-track have challenged our family—Ronisha, Esther, Victor, and Laura—in many ways, but our core principles of caring for ourselves and for each other remain constant. A major practice that has extended our mentoring of each other is engaging in practices of making space for each other. This includes creating opportunities for each other through our own connections and scholarly endeavors. In other words, we have had to develop practices of care that are visible and valuable to us and academia.

Looking Forward

Students don't know what to make of me. I wear jeans and Converse. I have tattoos up and down my arms. I'm tall. I am not petite. I am the child of immigrants. Many of my students have never had a black teacher before. I can't help them with that. I'm the only black professor in my department. This will never change for the whole of my career, no matter where I teach. I'm used to it. I wish I weren't. There seems to be some unspoken rule about the number of academic spaces people of color can occupy at the same time. I have grown weary of being the only one. (Gay 22)

The transition from a graduate program with robust recruitment of graduate students of color to faculty positions within departments with limited diversity is an under-discussed reality of being a junior faculty of color on the tenure-track. The network, community, and family that we were able to establish as graduate students shifted as we moved into spaces where resources were lacking, and access to our previously established support systems became strained as we started our careers at different universities across the country.

As we reflect on our own experiences, we realize the unfortunate reality that there is no perfect graduate program and no perfect institution. The way the academy is set up, a perfect or culturally-sustaining graduate education just does not exist for marginalized scholars, especially at PWIs (Alim and Paris). Understanding this, we have tried to cultivate what we need, and what we express in this article is in solidarity with what we have seen and heard from around the way.

In *A Third University is Possible*, La Paperson explains that while universities are always tied to colonialism and slavery—and thus cannot be decolonial—people within these institutions can participate and foster the work of decolonization. Paperson directly “refuse[s] to offer a utopic description for a strategic decolonizing machine,” as there is no perfect formula for decolonizing universities, but he also clarifies that not all is lost:

I am sure that many readers are involved in university projects with decolonial desires to implement change pragmatically, readers who have appropriated university resources to synthesize a transformative, radical project. These formations may be personal, even solitary; they may be small working groups of like-minded university workers, research centers, degree programs, departments, even colleges (n. pag.).

Like Paperson, we also refuse to provide or believe that there are concrete formulas for fighting anti-Blackness and racism in the academy. Yet we share stories about how we have navigated, and continue to navigate, our work in community. Most importantly, we emphasize that finding your family in the academy—your coalition, your heart-to-heart group—is essential for survival, particularly for BIPOC scholars. Find a family where you can be vulnerable, ask questions, get feedback, and continue reading and learning the things you wish you had learned in grad school, even when you are many years post-graduation.

It's also important to emphasize that all of the authors of this article and members of this family inhabit very different positionalities and spaces. We were all recruited to our graduate program and our current jobs under the pretense that we were exceptional candidates for the program with unique experiences that would help make the program(s) better. However, students and faculty of color are treated with a one (white) size fits all approach. What has been brought to light through this experience is how wholly unprepared graduate programs and academic departments in general are to support graduate students and colleagues of color. There are very few of us who do not have other responsibilities aside from academia. There are very few of us who can work with other faculty who have direct knowledge of the work we are interested in doing. These have been the conditions for BIPOC students and faculty well before any of us entered graduate school, and there seems to be very little progress on this at the institutional level.

Collectively, we know that not a single one of us will experience the same successes or struggles. What we can share is how each of us understands, leverages, or navigates our identities. Sometimes, there is crossover, and we are able to build on each other. Other times, we recognize our privilege and do our best to leverage it for others. These realities are always in flux and being able to move with this fluidity is critical to self and community survival.

As we navigate our careers as tenure-track faculty, we all deal with loss, grief, and distance. We have also needed to make difficult decisions to move our families to find a better fit. Through each difficulty and circumstance, we have been able to rely on each other and to remind each other that we are worthy of adequate compensation and humane treatment. Even when we have been too busy and overwhelmed to talk regularly, even if a few months have passed, there is love and relief when one of us answers the phone or opens the video call. Through all this, we continue to do what we have learned through our experience, except now we have the benefit of multiple institutional literacies. We can speak confidently in our collective consultations. We share our expanded resources as each of us gains a different experience. We want to end by echoing Victor's favorite mottos for academia: "no loyalties to institutions"

and “if it feels racist, it is racist,” as we continue our family heart-to-hearts and look toward the future. To other scholars seeking to find family in the academy, we reiterate: You KNOW you’re good. You KNOW you got this. Be yourself.

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