Navigating as an African American Female Scholar: Catalysts and Barriers in Predominantly White Academia

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Abstract

As a teacher-scholar, this autoethnography is an account of my personal journey in higher education at a predominantly White university. I recount childhood experiences that led me to critical incidents experienced as a doctoral student and tenure-track professor that served as both institutional barriers encountered and catalysts for growth. I examine the manner in which I was able to navigate within the borders they created for me as an African American woman and emerging scholar. The counter-narratives are grounded in critical race theory, guided by womanist epistemology, while offering insight into the ways in which marginalization is perpetuated in academia and how space was created to redefine and reclaim the self within these borders. My hope is that this article will bring more exposure to the voice of the African American in White academia and to add to the open dialogue that is needed with members from the central dominant group.

As a university professor at a predominantly White university, I have earned the "privilege" of being one of the insiders — degrees that adorn the walls of my office give me the rights and responsibilities therein. Yet even with these accomplishments, as an African American woman, I remain a member of the "others," who are the focus of my scholarly work. As an African American woman educated in White institutions, I have been trained in mainstream methodologies and epistemologies, but my cultural experiences and knowledge sometimes conflict with these very methods that marginalize me as a woman of color (Pang, 2006). Young (2000) describes the act of marginalization as "the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions…" (p. 42). Navigating the role as a (legitimate) scholar and someone who is Othered is an unyielding balance that often goes unnoticed and unacknowledged in the dominant academic culture.

This article exemplifies conscientization, a critical examination of my own reality that ultimately leads to transformation (Freire, 2000) at two levels: my own consciousness-raising, regarding what it really means to be marginalized and an effort to make those around me more aware of these power dynamics, and how the

view from the margin is different and needs to be treated as such. As I continue to evolve as a scholar, writing *from* the margin *about* the margin, those who are in the center can also benefit from my (and other women of color scholars') experiences and bodies of work. The aim here is not to provide more evidence from an African American scholar about the role of academic institutions as bastions of White privilege. Rather, drawing on Giroux's (1992; 1997) notion of critical praxis as border crossings, and border pedagogy as counter-text, I examine the manner in which borders are created, navigated, and crossed within spaces that engage in counter-hegemonic praxis at the micro levels of the institution.

Collins (1998) coins the term "outsider-within" as she describes African American womanist scholars' border crossings, of sorts. Womanism, a standpoint epistemology, was first written by Alice Walker in *In Search of my Mothers' Garden* (1983). In one of her definitions, Walker used this term to describe an African American woman who is a "black feminist or feminist of color" and who is committed to her whole self and everyone around her: someone who wants to know more (and in great depth) than what's "good for her" (p. xi). Womanism serves as a tool for powerful storytelling, defining who I am as an African American woman, creating space for new ways of understanding, and including my voice in the mainstream conversation. Womanists' believe a collective voice can lead to empowerment and, ultimately, social transformation.

Outsiders-within are able to gain access to the knowledge of the group (in my case, White academia) in which they are allowed access (*within*), but the power structure within the group remains unequal (*outsider*). As outsiders-within, African American women have a distinctive understanding of the paradoxes between the dominant group's actions and philosophies. Finding space within these borders where self-actualization can be discovered is the nucleus from which [African American] women derive the power to contest their marginal location… and to continuously renegotiate their elusive culture and identity to meet career expectations in White-dominated institutions. (Alfred, 2001, p. 114)

As a womanist emerging scholar in White academia, my outsider-within status enriches my capacity to appreciate and relate to other women of color and their narratives, while understanding the implications for those conducting research from the center. There is a constant struggle as the outsider-within in the bicultural world to which African American women must belong. In this article, bicultural is a term that describes the African American woman's career in the White world while having ties to the Black community and culture. Blackwell (1981) designates the term "compartmentalization" to describe African Americans' separation of the two cultures in which they daily exist. They are consciously avoiding assimilating into the White culture and choose to continue to reach out to their roots in the Black community.

Biculturalism is described by Du Bois (1903) as *double consciousness*, which requires dual identity developed for membership into a group of the White academia, and also exclusion from the very same institution by the mere fact of our

blackness. Double consciousness represents the notion of being oneself and seeing oneself from the viewpoint of others. "One never feels his twoness, An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two reconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 1903, p. 45). Establishing a bicultural existence often leads to a position of marginalization. According to Bell (1990), a person who is on the margins is one who exists between the borders of two divergent cultures; she does not have the sufficient background (race, gender, belief system, and such) to be fully admitted into the more powerful culture group. In other words, African Americans give up some of their culture to take on elements of White culture.

Positioned, Silenced, Marginalized: Finding Power

The marginalization of African American women faculty members at predominately White institutions is well documented (Alfred, 2001; Collins, 1998; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Moule, 2005). The educational system is a microcosm of the larger society in which dominant ideologies are present and in power. Turner (2002) describes the way in which women of color live with "multiple marginality." The more away from center she is, the more likely she will be affected within various frameworks. "Situations in which a woman of color might experience marginality are multiplied depending on her marginal status within various contexts" (p. 77). In the literature, women of color repeatedly discuss the barriers that lead to marginalization including: isolation (Alfred, 2001; Jeffries & Generett, 2003; Turner, 2002); personal "deculturalization" (McKay, 1997; Randall & Verdun, 1997); silenced in research (Jeffries & Generett, 2003; Moses, 1997; Pollard, 2006); tokenism (Randall & Verdun, 1997; Turner, 2002); and lack of mentoring and support (Etter-Lewis, 1997; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Myers, 2002). These barriers have significantly influenced the course of their academic careers.

African American women often experience a sense of isolation and social invisibility. Women of color are more likely to be excluded from informal peer networks, particularly by White women colleagues. Due to the low numbers of faculty of color, they are often spread throughout the university, having one or two in a specific program area (Jeffries & Generett, 2003). White ideologies in higher education devalue Black on Black research. African American women report the trivializing and lack of respect that they receive when their research focuses on other people of color (Moses, 1997). Often women of color feel deculturalized in the sense that they are covertly being asked, or sometimes forced, to give up themselves and their research agendas because they do not fit the mainstream peer-reviewed journals that are often needed for tenure and promotion (Turner, 2002). African American women historically connect with an ethic of caring (Collins, 1998; Pang, 2006; Thompson, 1989) and are generally committed to the praxis of social justice. But when ones research agenda is constantly questioned and trivialized, a sense of uncertainty begins to creep in and invade ones cultural

values' place in scholarly work. Internalized oppression is difficult to turn around. African American women begin to express self-doubt and question our ability and legitimacy in academia. How many times have they wondered if they are good enough? Every time they begin to teach a new course, every time they sit down to write, every time they speak at a conference, the overwhelming feelings of self-doubt surface. Jeffries and Generett (2003) articulated the connectedness of us and our research:

> Instances in the lives of Black female academics, where we are relegated to the status of the other by our colleagues, constantly erode our sense of self and our ability to trust and exercise the invisible power we have. When our research and teaching methodologies are seen as lacking in rigor and not generalizable, we lose trust in ourselves. When our writing is deemed unacceptable, despite our prior admission to the rights and privileges granted other doctors of philosophy, we lose trust in ourselves (p. 7).

African American women researchers feel the necessity to embrace research topics that will reflect more Eurocentric hegemonic thinking about the state of racism and sexism in our society. Although they were told that the institution accepted nontraditional methods of research (service-oriented, community-based), their research was not rewarded when it was time for tenure and promotion (Jeffries & Generett, 2003; Moses, 1997). After reading an earlier draft of this nontraditional article, my husband, who is Caucasian and afraid of the possibility of backlash for me, asked me if I was sure I wanted to publish it before tenure and promotion. Probing this question, coming from someone so close to me who *lives* multicultural issues (our marriage, our five children, my job) on a daily basis, I knew I had to write this article for the people in the center who do not have the *privilege* of understanding the experiences (both empowering and disempowering) of living with and loving someone who is from the margin.

Often, African American women faculty members are seen as the representative of all Blacks and Black-related issues and, therefore, are treated like tokens (anointed ones) instead of individuals. They are often asked to be the spokesperson for the entire race on diversity or minority issues (McIntosh, 1992), whether or not it is their area of expertise. African American women's qualifications are questioned by many faculty members and are perceived as less qualified due to Affirmative Action practices (Barrett, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2003; Moses, 1997), but are constantly called upon to address minority issues, such as advising minority students, mentoring students of color, and serving on the boards of underrepresented organizations. Trying to balance this with family and serving in the Black community leaves very little time for research and writing, which are the primary criteria for tenure and promotion (Jeffries & Generett, 2003; Moses, 1997; Pollard, 2006; Randall & Verdun, 1997).

Because of the limited numbers of African American scholars at predominantly White universities, African American women find themselves needing to

go outside of their department, college, or university to find support from other women of color. These support systems have served as the "saving grace" for most women's professional success. The advice from senior faculty members focused mainly on how to balance the demands of teaching, scholarship, service, and personal time (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). African American women also experience obstacles in White institutions due to the lack of knowledge or acknowledgement of cultural differences on the part of the institutional leaders. In spite of these barriers, African American women have continued to overcome and thrive in White institutional culture by redefining what being on the margin means to them and other women of color, and by using that space as a sense of power to educate and to be heard.

I draw attention to four significant critical incidents of my journey from being a doctoral student, to becoming an assistant professor at a predominantly White university. This autoethnography analyzes these critical incidents from a womanist stance and highlights the catalyst for growth and the institutional barriers that were present during a five year period of my life as an emerging African American female scholar. The need to examine the nature and impact of this academic culture on the lives of individual faculty members of color is one of the impetuses that drives this discussion. Such an examination will necessitate looking into how the culture of institutionalized whiteness is developed, sustained, or challenged by individual faculty members like me who are Othered, and how faculty members' professional lives are shaped by the struggles to perpetuate or challenge this culture. I attempt to offer insight to educators and administrators in higher education, many of whom in today's context are likely unaware of their own role in the perpetuation of Whitestream academic practices (Carter, 2003; Grande, 2000; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Pillow, 2003).

Delgado Bernal (2002) states that "[traditionally], the majority of Euro-Americans adhere to a Eurocentric perspective founded on covert and overt assumptions regarding White superiority, territorial expansion, and 'American' democratic ideas such as meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality" (p. 111). This represents my personal journey to empowerment, searching criticallyfor authentic voice and meaningful connections, and finding a safe space for the voice I was desperately trying to uncover. The struggles against the institutional marginalization and the fight to redefine and reclaim one's self are highlighted. However, it also brings to light the effects of positive support, mentorship, and collaboration with veteran faculty who share my critical perspective.

Redefining Self: Critical Race Theory and Autoethnography

Understanding the stance of African American women from the perspective of race-based theory, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), helps to recognize and celebrate the unique voice of African American women as *they* define themselves (not accepting mainstream images of who they are), and who are active in

changing how the world views them and other women of color who are rendered invisible in academic discourse (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 1998; hooks, 1990; Thompson, 1998).

CRT validates the knowledge-base that African American women bring to research and re-theorize Eurocentric male-dominated discourse that is often accustomed to describe the experiences of people of color (Collins, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). Traditionally, educational theories have ignored or silenced historically marginalized groups by not addressing their need or by responding to their needs from a majority vantage point. CRT sets out to expose dominant norms and assumptions that appear neutral, but systematically marginalize silences and misrepresent people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2009; McKay, 1997; Vargas, 2003). Harper, Patton, and Woodson (2009) describe CRT's usefulness to provide "a lens through which to question, critique, and challenge the manner and methods in which race, white supremacy, supposed meritocracy, and racist ideologies have shaped and undermined policy efforts for African American student participation in higher education" (p. 390).

Ways to legitimize knowledge is set by those in power in the dominant group. Narratives are not traditionally accepted in the dominant methodological canon, but are an essential component in

CRT. As an African American woman, narratives provide a stage for me to name *my* reality and to tell *my* story. The argument of counter-narratives is not to replace one narrative for another, but to give voice to the experiences and ways of knowing, regarding groups who are Othered (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Counter-narratives "serve as a pedagogical tool that allows educators to better understand the experiences of their students [and research subjects] of color through deliberative and mindful listening techniques" (Taylor, 2009, p. 10).

According to Delgado (1988/1989), counter-narratives can build a sense of community among marginalized groups by offering a voice to one another and space to be understood by others. The counter-narratives can then be offered as an alternative to the dominant's perspective, used to counter hegemonic perspectives that combat destructive stereotypes (Harper et al, 2009), to gain a deeper understanding of racial dynamics (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009), and to serve as a source of empowerment for the narrator and an audience that's Othered (Pollard, 2006; Etter-Lewis, 1997). This method of research is particularly important to African American women whose lives and stories have historically been neglected or misrepresented.

Connecting authethnography and Critical Race Theory (CRT), I present my critical incidents as counter-narratives (Delgado, 1988/1989) as a venue for reflecting on positionality and silencing that occurred for an African American woman at a White institution. McKay (2010) suggests that counter-narratives are used in two ways: to challenge dominant culture's notions about a group "by providing a context to understand and transform an established belief system" and "authentically represent marginalized people by showing them 'the shared aims of their struggle'" (p. 27).

This article is presented in the tradition of autoethnography, which involves the authors' analyses of specific aspects or incidents of their personal experiences as a way of gaining a broader understanding and interpretation of the sociocultural context. It is a form of critical reflective narrative that, according to Chang (2008), "enhance[s] cultural understanding of self and others" and motivates the self and others "to work toward cross-culture coalition building" (p. 52). Ellis and Bochner describe evocative autoethnography as a "systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall" (p. 737). The goals of evocative autoethnography include creating an emotional connection with the reader and engaging in emancipatory discourse that breaks the silence for people who are Othered. This methodology was chosen because of its alignment with CRT's counter-narratives, and in my case, is used to empower the experiences and voices of African American women in academia.

Critical Incidents

In the incidents that follow, I offer my personal counter-narratives as a research tool to uncover, examine, and challenge the Whitestream practices that exist in academics and to "highlight discrimination, offer racial different interpretations of policy, and challenge the universality of assumptions made about people of color" (Harper et al, 2009, p. 391). These incidents were chosen for two key reasons. First, the incidents highlight various power structures that are prevalent in academia, including incidents relating to advisor and senior colleagues (gatekeepers) and peers (who influence the collegial culture). Second, they draw attention to the invisibility of marginalization for faculty who operate from the center and who benefit (knowingly or not) from White privilege. Often these acts of marginalization may go unnoticed due to the master narratives that perpetuate, or at best, maintain stereotypical assertions of people of color. Solórzano & Yosso (2009) recognize the importance of White privilege in creating these narratives about people of color that "distort and silence the experiences of people of color" (p. 134).

In what follows, I offer an explanation of my experiences. Through the intersection of CRT and womanist epistemology, key barriers found in the literature regarding African American women and higher education are identified and addressed.

Incident of Deculturalization

After teaching in the classroom for ten years, I was both anxious and excited about the thought of going back to school. My teaching had always contained strong concentrations of social justice and critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008; Shor, 1992). My classroom was always abuzz and the students were encouraged to share their ideas and concerns. As a doctoral student in my first semester of classes, I was assigned to an academic advisor in my department. She was responsible for assisting me in building my program of study based on required courses and developing area(s) of specializations based on my interests. After spending considerable time with the advisor, I began to hold her views in high regard and to value our professional relationship. Based on my life experiences and experiences teaching in elementary schools with diverse populations/students, I was naturally drawn to the multicultural courses being offered at the university and was excited about Multicultural Education as one of my areas of specialization. My desire to take these courses was, at the time, an extension of my passion in equality and social justice as an elementary teacher. In addition, these courses represented my perspective and experiences as an African American woman. When I approached my academic advisor and expressed my desire to add the multicultural courses to my plan of study, I was told that I shouldn't include these courses because they were a "waste of time" and I was given alternate courses to add to my plan of study. In addition, I was told that all that children really need in order to learn is "real content." I immediately recognized the fallacy of this statement from my years in the classroom, but I didn't have the vocabulary to express the need for culturally relevant practices (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). At that time in my academic career, even with the theoretical foundation, I would not have spoken up. I recall feeling marginalized and powerless, but didn't have the words or the knowledge to express it. As Delpit (1988) noted, echoed by McIntosh (1992), those in the culture of power are frequently unaware of their power positions and consequent actions, frequently assuming that they know what is best for people of color. How many times have we contributed to our own oppression by merely remaining silent? What I didn't (couldn't) say spoke volumes.

Incident of Marginalization

When I began my studies as a doctoral student, I made the decision to take a leave of absence from the elementary classroom to attend school full-time. I was one of few doctoral students in my department who was available during the morning hours because most of my peers were teaching during the day and taking courses at night. The second semester of my studies, after declaring Literacy as one of my areas of specialization, the chairperson asked me if I would be interested in teaching one of the undergraduate literacy courses. Although it would be my first experience as a college instructor, I was certain the methodol-

ogy and critical pedagogical practices (Freire, 1970) that I used in my elementary classroom would greatly benefit pre-service teachers as well. With my ten years of classroom experience and my involvement in conducting in-service workshops, I was confident in my ability, excited with the opportunity to transfer my wealth of practical classroom knowledge to the undergraduate students, and looking forward to learning from them as well.

After receiving and reviewing the generic syllabus schedule from the chairperson's secretary, I approached the White professor who typically taught that course and, as was customary, inquired about audiovisual materials and handouts that were referenced on the syllabus. I introduced myself (name, rank, and serial number) and explained my enthusiasm for teaching the course for the upcoming semester. After looking at me for what felt like an eternity, in what I interpreted at the time as disgust and disbelief, she replied, "You…are teaching *my* course? *[pause]* I don't loan out any of my videos or materials to anyone!" The silence was completely deafening. "Welcome to the world of academia!" I said to myself. The pause seemed like an eternity, and for a few minutes, I just couldn't move or think. It seemed as if everything were moving in slow motion, but my mind was trying to process what this woman had just said to me, and was searching for an appropriate retort. Coming up with a response that would be suitable for this border-crossing moment from an outsider-within was completely impossible for me. The only positive reaction that I could come up with that would save me from her, and her from the code-switching me, was for me to keep my mouth shut (and no tears in my eyes) and to walk away with my head held high (as difficult as that was). And that's what I did.

This incident represents both the feelings of isolation and the lack of support. I attempted to go to the person I thought was a source of guidance and leadership, but found myself rejected by what I interpreted as someone who clearly operated from the *center* and who did not recognize how her reaction placed me on the *margin*. As infuriating as this encounter felt at the time, it served as a catalyst for me to begin to see and use my status in the margin as a source of power, a place where "useful knowledge had been and will continue to be generated" (Welch & Pollard, 2006, p. 3).

Incident of Disempowerment

During the second year of my doctoral program, I had the opportunity to be the last of three students selected to take part in an innovative program that was designed to hire minority faculty members and to hire their own doctoral students. As a candidate of the "Grow Your Own" program, I was guaranteed a tenure-track position upon graduating from the doctoral program, and was in exchange required to work for at least three years as an assistant professor at the university. The semester after graduation, I received a new contract as a tenure-track assistant professor, as my Grow Your Own contract stated three years prior to my gradua-

tion. During that same semester, another colleague, a White doctoral graduate from the university who was hired during that year, was offered a non-tenure-track instructor's line. On several occasions during the first semester, I began sensing that she appeared agitated when I was around. Finally, mid-semester, my White colleague appeared in the doorway of my office to voice her concern regarding the differences between our positions and contracts with the university. As I attempted to explain that our situations were quite different, she seemed to become disinterested in the specific facts, but continued to speak of how "unfair it was" and that "it didn't make sense" to her. The next week she returned to my office to inform me that she had done some investigation into *this* Grow Your Own program and heard I was a part of it. She continued to voice her perspective of the "unfairness" and her inability to really understand it. In my attempt to again enlighten her, or, according to her term, make it "fair," I tried to explain the college's intent in terms of recruiting faculty of color to mirror the growing number of students of color entering the university and that the contract was signed years before. After what appeared to be a breakthrough (she was at least listening), she began her line of thought with more of the same: that that it was still "unfair." A few weeks later, I saw this same colleague at the copy machine, and before acknowledging my presence, she quickly turned to me and demanded to know the number of conferences at which I presented and the number of articles I published. I knew exactly where she was going with this loaded question and I opened my mouth to once again explain, in the most polite and appropriate way that I had left in me (at this point I was running out of patience), how our situations were factually very different. But instead of expressing myself in that way, my mind began to work overtime. My mother's "act like you got some home-training" self wanted to explain to her again why our cases were different and how it's impossible to compare the two. The need to stroke her ego, at the expense of my own, was circulating through my brain (as African American women, we are raised to take care of everyone else; to sacrifice) and about to be communicated. But my mother's "I raised you to be a Black-independent-take-care-of-yourself woman" side of me wanted to say, "Who do you think you are, stepping to me like that?" I wanted to "straighten her out" so she would know not to cross me again. So my outsider-within self compromised and replied in the most nice-nasty way that I could: "If you are interested in my work, my vita is online. Look it up!" bell hooks (1990) describes the margin's potential of empowering and transforming. That moment, I connected with hooks.

Programs such as Grow Your Own, like Affirmative Action, are designed to create equality in the work place. The intent is to give opportunity to traditionally marginalized people based on the potential for individual and institutional racism. African American women in higher education view these types of programs as double-edged swords. They give opportunities, but it is perceived that the opportunities were only given because of the color of our skin, not by our intellect and ability (Barrett, et al, 2003). This was a reminder of the comment that my

dad always told me, "You have to be better than them." This environment creates additional stress and resentment, placing women of color in a scenario where we constantly feel the need to prove ourselves more than our peers, even when we know our expertise is beyond reproach.

Incident of Silencing

The first two years as an assistant professor, I was assigned various literacy courses to teach. I inherited the syllabi — textbooks ordered, weekly scheduled outlined, assignments created — of the senior professors (all Caucasian females). These prewritten syllabi were given to me as "tools to scaffold" me during the learning curve. As I followed the topics denoted for weekly discussions, I couldn't help but notice that specific components that represent my definition of literacy were absent from the syllabi: multicultural literature, critical literacy, culturally responsive practice. (Banks, 1997; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lewison, Leland & Harste, 2008; Shor, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1999). I was "encouraged" to follow the current plan and teach what was already on the existing syllabi "because there was too much content to teach already." Disappointed, I did what I was told and just taught what was provided to me without much questioning or debating, in spite of advocating for my pre-service students to become change agents at their school sites, and to not settle for what wasn't best for their students.

From a womanist perspective, Collins (1998) describes the first step of "coming to voice" is breaking the silence of institutional knowledge with the intent of making changes for the collective group. I became the depository of someone else's knowledge. There was no input asked of me regarding the section of the courses that I taught. I was simply given the material and instructed to follow it. I did not have the opportunity to be a "critical co-investor in dialogue" with my colleagues (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Again, by not speaking out, I was silenced.

Discussion

Certainly, one of the concerns of faculty of color, especially those at the beginning of their career, are the barriers erected that prevent them from achieving their goals. These barriers erected can be both intentional and unintentional. While these are often presented in terms of overt acts of racism that link with promotion or other opportunities for advancement, the analysis of my *Deculturalization Incident*, where I was denied the opportunity to include the Multicultural Education course in my program of study, highlights the ideological basis on this action. While it does relate to deep-seated racist perspectives about Multicultural Education as a legitimate field, my race, per se, had less to do with this advice, as it was given to all students alike. Its impact, however, affected me both at the professional and the personal level, as this was not only advice given about what field of study to pursue. It was an open denigration of who I am and the value of my perspectives. Again, this is an example of what Delpit (1988) and McIntosh

(1992) express regarding White people's assumptions that they know what is best for people of color.

Institutional programs created to help, like "Grow Your Own," could also be the genesis of adverse institutional climates for beneficiaries of the program. Opportunities for growth can also create climates that stifle women of color. Just as Affirmative Action has resulted in a negative backlash against many professionals of color (Barrett et al, 2003; Taylor, 2009), the same outcome could occur here. In my *Incident of Disempowerment*, my colleague's questions regarding my scholarship was an indirect way of questioning my ability as a scholar and my legitimacy as tenure-track faculty. While programs like these are necessary at the structural level, care must be taken by organizational leaders to facilitate the process and procedures that will support the scholars in these programs. Certainly, the presence of programs alone does not guarantee success. Organizational climate/culture that supports the institutional policy needs to be developed for total success. My example shows that institutional anti-racist action, while crucial, can also be undermined at the individual level.

Drawing on Freire's (1970) notions of biophily vs necrophily, these incidents remind us that growth represents a form of self-empowerment, whereas pedagogy of oppression leads to intellectual straight-jacketing that " attempts to control thinking and action, [leading] women and men to adjust to the world, [while] inhibiting their creative power" (p. 77). This was evident both in my doctoral advisor recommending that I stay away from Multicultural Education, as well as my *Incident of Silencing* surrounding the distribution of the syllabi with strict instructions not to deviate. As such, my academic freedom was hijacked and I ceased to engage in an environment that was liberating. Instead, I was a victim of the banking concept of education, where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). It is necessary that there is constant dialogue between the administrator and the faculty of color. There are often territorial issues with senior or privileged faculty members. Open dialogue and course choices will help alleviate feelings of marginalization among faculty of color.

However, sometimes the barriers erected actually become catalysts for growth. When a senior faculty member recognized that I was getting the "left over" courses, she advocated on my behalf to the senior professors arguing that I should be assigned other courses of interest, not merely the courses that no one else wanted to teach. This gesture created *space* for me to eventually develop a Special Topics course entitled Social Justice and Children's Literature, which highlighted critical literacy, multicultural literature, and culturally relevant practices. I was able to design the course and include the topics that had been denied me two years prior when I was instructed to "stick to the syllabus."

Seeking out individuals who supported my research agenda and who were willing to mentor me as a young scholar was essential to successfully navigating

the waters of the bicultural world in which I exist. As a doctoral student and first year professor, my office was located on a different floor from all of the other faculty members in my program area. In some sense, it was another example of isolation, but it also represented freedom. I began to pursue my research interests, focusing on marginalized children using critical literacy and multicultural literature. Pollard (2006) reflects on the moment when African American women can use the position of marginalization for resistance and reclamation. The margins serve as a place to resist the definition of themselves and their research by the center viewpoints and a place to reclaim power from the racism and sexism that they confront in academia.

Ironically, being on the "wrong" floor surrounded me with individuals from another program area whose active research agendas were very much aligned with my original interests. These professors were more than eager to (unofficially) mentor me and guide my doctoral studies. One of my mentors, another women of color, would call me into her office and ask, "What do you know about Paulo Freire, Sonia Nieto, Christine Sleeter, or Henry Giroux?" Before I could even answer, she began shoveling me books from her bookshelf and stated that I needed to read them. People who are catalysts for growth come in a variety of races; not all Black women are womanists and not all womanists are Black women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). My original "womanism team" included a Sri Lankan female, Cuban male, a White lesbian, and an Afro-Latina female. The constant encouragement, questioning, and dialogue that I encountered with the professors on my floor, who, coincidentally, were part of the Multicultural Education program area that I so desperately wanted to include in my doctoral studies, were a major impact on my growth as a student, professor, and emerging scholar. When it was time for me to defend my dissertation, four of the professors from the Multicultural Education program area were present, whereas the only person from my program area was my doctoral committee chairperson. This is an example of the impact that mentoring has on one's feelings of legitimacy within the academic walls. More of this type of acceptance and support is needed in order to retain African American women in higher education.

This unofficial mentoring would be the impetus for a controversial decision that I had to make, as an untenured faculty, to leave my original department to join another department where my research agenda was not only validated, but was encouraged and supported. Having the courage to seek *space* (mentoring, collaboration, acknowledgment, and acceptance), even if it meant going against the status quo, is the first step to empowering one's self in the margins. In my case, leaving a department before I received tenure and promotion to find *voice* in another department that supported and embraced my research agenda was instrumental in defining the trajectory of my research. It should be noted that there were members of my original department who did provide support and mentorship, and continue to do so.

Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) emphasize the importance of creating "an environment for each other that enables [African American women] to survive and resist our marginalized status in the academy" (p. 223). Finding this support system of others who share theoretical and pedagogical frameworks was a lifeline in an academic setting where there was a constant struggle against the dominant undertow. In addition to finding a support system within my department, I also sought solace in another African American female colleague from another university (although I am not the only woman of color in my department, I am the only African American). By collaborating with this colleague, we are able to share counter-narratives and are able to discuss cultural issues without editing and wondering if what we say will be misinterpreted.

Women of color are sometimes relegated to the margins in academia, which potentially can have detrimental effects on their careers. Instead of accepting this place as a negative position, women of color can see the richness and the freedom in guiding their work as scholars. Womanist researchers encourage women of color to *own* their personal power. It is important to actively *name* and *proclaim* their experiences and identities as legitimate and "good enough." Collins insists that "Black women's voices collectively construct, affirm, and maintain a dynamic black women's self-defined standpoint" (2001, p. 9).

One goal of this article is to stimulate conversations with those whose perspectives come from the center and ultimately see the importance of allowing me, and my sisters in academia, to share the stage with our counter-narratives. I have attempted to not only expose my experiences to reclaim my own power, but it is my hope that others who have felt the controls of marginalization will gain critical knowledge and collectively find their voice to name and proclaim their power. It the words of Paulo Freire (1970):

> The truth is that the oppressed are not 'marginal,' are not living 'outside' society. They have always been 'inside' the structure which made them 'beings of others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves.' (p. 74)

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