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Pushing Back From the Table

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PUSHING BACK FROM THE TABLE: FIGHTING TO MAINTAIN MY VOICE AS A PRE-TENURE MINORITY FEMALE IN THE WHITE ACADEMY

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Abstract

Part autoethnography and part literature review, the first year of an African American female's journey on the tenure track is documented. Detailing personal struggles with microaggressions, tokenism, invisibility, and hyper-visibility, this account aims to highlight personal stories in the literature in an attempt to increase the retention rate of minority faculty by raising their awareness and therefore their preparedness to deal with the precarious positions in which they will exist. Such stories facilitate understanding, encourage strategy development and coping skills.

Introduction

"African American women in the academy differ in experiences, background, and beliefs; however, they are connected in their struggle to be accepted and respected, and to have a voice in an institution with many views" (Harley, 2008, p. 20).

The academy "is not an easy space" (Brewer, 2011, p. 149); it is a space that has been historically oppressive and unwelcoming to those not in the majority, those not on the "right" side of gender (patriarchy), sexuality (heteronormativity), class, or race (p. 149-150). After having worked so very hard as a practicing professional, in that time earning a second master's degree and a doctorate, I found myself at a highly ranked and respected school as a tenure track assistant professor, at a Research 1 institution, the top in my field. Metaphorically speaking, I had earned a seat at the table. I was an expert in my field and had been invited to participate in key discussions and decisions, and provided an opportunity to make contributions through my teaching and research. In higher education having a seat at the table is important, and especially significant for minority faculty as it portends some level of achievement and hopefully equality.

Amazingly enough, this magnificent table at which I was now seated consistently served up some rather complicated dishes and at times made me question whether I had arrived at the right house for dinner. Certainly some of the discomfort at the table can be attributed to entering a new institution and joining a new faculty as an assistant professor. However, it became clear that part of the problem was the fact that I was a fairly young African American female in a larger academic environment that is not entirely used to, or appreciative of, faculty members who exist outside of the status quo (i.e., white males). I lived with multiple marginalities (Turner, 2002) or multi-marginality (Thompson & Dey, 1998) and seemingly did not fit with the traditional imagery associated with the ivory tower of academe.

Defying the expectation of being an older white, straight male in the front of the classroom elicited double takes from both other faculty and students. This marginality took time to identify, name, and acknowledge, since a published goal of most institutions of higher education is to increase diversity among faculty ranks, which should have meant that I was an appropriate and desirable hire, one that should be valued. The irony here is that while diversity is desirable on paper, it is often resisted in practice. This marginality and irony were not noticed or appreciated by the institution that thought hiring an African American female was enough to fulfill any larger organizational diversity goals. The care and retention of such a hire did not appear to be of consideration or concern.

After my first full year at the table, I had the pleasure of hearing Dr. Todd Homna speak at a conference[1] where he discussed the status of race and racism in the field of library and information science (LIS). Despite years of talk and various well-meaning and successful recruitment initiatives, the field still has a long way to go in regards to integrating, retaining, promoting, and celebrating librarians of color (Peterson, 1999, 1996, 1995). And clearly this applies to faculty of color in LIS schools and departments. Homna's talk was both humbling and validating; but what was most striking was Homna's suggestion that *"maybe we don't even want to be at this table"* (Homna, 2012), meaning that maybe we don't want to be, or even belong, in this field. The remark was sobering and devastating, and provided me with serious food for thought.

After experiencing a year of consistent microaggressions (from the unsolicited and continued insistence that I am "so articulate and well spoken"; to being challenged by white students not used to and uncomfortable with the first African American professor in their academic careers; to calling me by the name of another African American female; to being subject to a physical attempt at intimidation designed to figuratively put me in my place; to being alluded to as a "slack hire" in a meeting), I was beginning to wilt, chafe and become uncomfortable in my new environment. According to Sue et al. (2007), this type of comment is considered to be a microinsult; microinsults are unconscious "behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (p. 278). This type of comment speaks to the "ascription of intelligence (assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color based on their race"), indicates that the people to whom the comment was directed are considered "second class citizens," and subsequently treats them as "a lesser person or group" (p. 278).
I thought: Does Dr. Homna have a point? Do I want to be at this table?

Being approached in a physical way and being referred to as a "slack hire" were by far the two hardest blows I experienced in my first year. In my first semester, it was suggested that I (along with another colleague) were "slack hires" in a meeting. When considering an upcoming hiring process, only white men were being considered for the position ostensibly because not enough minorities conducted research in the area of interest. Furthermore, the person speaking in the meeting felt the search committee should only consider quality candidates who could advance the department with their scholarship and expertise. The department did not have the luxury to "make any more slack hires." I have never heard a louder silence in a meeting. The operative words here are **any more**; and since I was the most recent hire, could this person seriously be talking about me, and in a meeting at which I was present? And what exactly is a slack hire?! Although I've never received confirmation, slack hire is understood to mean that while my hiring was recognized as fulfilling a social, cultural, and diversity need, perhaps some people did not consider me the type of serious academic hire that would propel the department forward intellectually. In the minds of white colleagues, was I really no more than a "maid of academe"? (Harley, 2008). Or as Lugo-Lugo (2012)[2] suggests, "a servant and customer-service representative"?

Approximately one-third of the way through my second semester a departmental ally distributed an email in part reminding people to have respect and collegiality for new colleagues by referring to them by their proper names. After the fact another person was overheard calling me by another name and in subsequent discussion of the email, their alleged response was "what difference does it make what we call them?" (referring to me and another African American female). The remark spread like wildfire and landed outside of my academic unit (the students who overheard the remarks were uncomfortable reporting this transgression in-house), and resulted in me receiving a phone call at 10 p.m. on a Friday night from a colleague in another department. In her outrage on my behalf, this colleague had already alerted my administrators. After a reprimand from the adminstration, the person in question came into my

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[1] Homna has a degree in library and information science, but now works in Asian American Studies department. His 2005 article, *Trippin' over the color line: The invisibility of race in library and information studies*, upon which this presentation was based, has emerged as seminal reading in LIS as it pertains to study of race and diversity.
[2] The entire text of the 2012 *Presumed Incompetent* anthology (y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris) is powerful and representative of what this paper is about, and was the first thing I read in my quest for validation and normalcy.

office, shut the door, and reprimanded *me* for misjudging them. The lecture, which included the suggestion that I did not understand the nuances between "intent and perception" (they didn't mean to offend, so I shouldn't be offended), was accompanied by red-faced rage, a shaking voice, and balled fists. I was at the time without a working office phone, I couldn't locate my personal cell phone, and my office door was locked. Within 5 minutes I found myself in an uncomfortable and hostile environment, one in which I felt physically threatened. I was simultaneously alerted that I didn't fit into this environment and perhaps was even unwanted by some. At that moment it became crystal clear that remaining and being academically productive was going to be a challenge and require extra work on my part. Another realization was that I was going to have to get my voice back, if only to regain my physical and mental well-being.

No, I don't want to be at this table.

After internalizing such comments and experiences I realized that I no longer wanted to participate or speak at meetings or engage with people outside of a small and trusted group of established allies. I simply wanted to teach my classes and do my research as I contemplated the idea that I had made a mistake by coming into academia. I was losing my voice. No stranger to stress and stress related illness, my symptoms of anxiety and exhaustion were becoming chronic and manifested themselves in new and unwelcomed ways. I was physically and emotionally spent after my first year in the academy. My physical distress was equally matched by the emotional strain, much of which was a result of the verbal microaggressions and the seemingly unending discussions about my situation. It may be a cliché, but words absolutely do hurt and do harm.

Despite knowing myself to be a competent scholar and an award-winning practitioner, I began to consider whether I had what it takes to survive and thrive in this environment. It's not unheard of that scholars, even those with tenure, will leave academia (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008), but I was not sure if that was the right decision so early in my career as a professor. By speaking up would I become known as a "rabble rouser"? Would I have to lose my voice in order to remain in this environment? Harley (2008) suggests some of these same issues and questions:

> African American women faculty often observe that when they voice their opinions about issues, they are labeled as trouble makers, a special interest group, or as crying wolf. Conversely, when African Americans seek **"social separation"** (i.e., the separation of the workplace from personal lives) they are viewed as nonconformist and antisocial. (p. 23)

Should I push back and relinquish my seat at the table?

In an effort to re-center myself and understand what was happening, and to ensure that I wasn't just being naïve, sensitive, or simply in over my head, I started reaching out to my still small academic network (many peers and mentors from my doctoral work, and new peers in similar predicaments) and I started reading and researching, networking and building connections with people I haven't met but who have shared comparable stories. While the literature did not disappoint in the sense that I saw myself over and over again in the accounts of minority faculty, it did emphasize the truism of mother wit in academia: "the more things change, the more they stay the same." Minority faculty members are still marginalized and face additional challenges in the academy. However, I was and am in good company. There are many brilliant women and men of color surviving and making strides in the academy (Turner et al., 2008), and their stories provide much needed strength and validation. These accounts in the literature help to combat the "crisis of representation" experienced by faculty of color (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733).

Article Framework

This work aspires to be an autoethnography in addition to presenting a review of the literature. I share the goal of other authors (Niemann, 1999; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005) who present their stories in the literature in an attempt to raise awareness of the precarious positions in which minority faculty currently

exist. As Niemann (1999) so astutely points out, sharing such anecdotes and experiences is a risk (one I am feeling as I write this piece), but an important one. Such stories facilitate understanding, encourage strategy development and coping skills, and they forewarn and forearm colleagues in similar situations. About putting her experiences in print Niemann says,

> While publishing this personal essay represents a certain amount of personal risk, I believe it is important to openly discuss the effects of what is a reality for many people of color in academia. It is my hope that this article will help illuminate these processes such that others either just entering academia or struggling to survive in the academy may benefit from enhanced awareness of pitfalls associated with being a scholar of color. Awareness can lead to prevention and facilitate coping. Institutions attempting to recruit and retain minority scholars may also gain insight on the undermining processes that might occur for faculty of color at various levels of the institution. (1999, p. 112)

Fries-Britt and Kelly concur by stating, "Understanding the challenges faced by African Americans in higher education is important because it points to ways in which the academy can create a more just and equitable environment for all of its members" (2005, p. 222).

Niemann, Fries-Britt and Kelley, and many others telling their stories are participating in a qualitative research approach Ellis and Bochner (2000) refer to as autoethnography. Autoethnography "make[s] the researcher's own experiences a topic of investigation in [their] own right" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733). Autoethnographers "ask their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging in storyline[s] morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). This style of investigation and writing gives credence and importance to my own "physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). This approach to the research has been profound in my understanding of my own experience and has given me permission to write about the connections I have noticed between my own life and the lives I've read about in the literature. Ellis and Bochner (2000) talk about the risk, beauty and importance of autobiographical work by saying, "There's the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being about to take back what you've written or having any control over how readers interpret it" (p. 738). However, "you come to understand yourself in deeper ways. And with understanding yourself comes understanding others. Autoethnography provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738).

Support from the Literature

When searching for literature about and accounts from African American faculty, several themes emerged, including microaggressions, invisibility and hyper-visibility, tokenism, and double consciousness. There is also an abundance of more general articles chronicling the experiences of minority women in the academy.

Microaggressions, Invisibility and Hyper-Visibility

I realized early on that what I was experiencing could be categorized as microaggressions, which Pierce et al., define as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders" (1978, p. 66). Davis concurs by stating that microaggressions are "stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority" (1989, p. 1576). Microaggressions emerge from the literature and phenomenon of racism, which Marable defines as, "a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color" (1992, p. 5)

Certainly I had experienced these behaviors and comments before, but not so consistently and not in such a subtle and nuanced way, which in and of itself is an element that makes these comments even more offensive and damaging. The facts that I was in a brand new environment, in a new job, in a new part of the country, in an entirely new world made the microaggressions much more acute and difficult to

discern. It is because of Sue et al. (2007) that I came to understand how pervasive and complicated microaggressions are; they are part of the structural and institutional racism that is so tightly woven into the fabrics of organizations (those of higher education, business, etc.). Sue and colleagues (2007, p. 278) state that the various manifestations of racial microaggressions, which occur at both the micro (personal) and macro (environmental) levels, include:

- microassaults, which are often unconscious "behavioral / verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity";
- microinsults, which are often conscious and "explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attaché meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions"; and,
- microinvalidations, which are often unconscious "verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential realties of a person of color."

Understanding microaggressions provided a framework for understanding and coping with my own situations, better negotiating the stories appearing in the literature, and provided a language for conveying my concerns to others.

The nuances of microaggressions provide insight in the phenomena of invisibility and hyper-visibility; the stereotyping and assumptions that come along with microaggressions serve to make their targets invisible in some instances and super or hyper-visible in others. For example, it is easy to ignore a minority faculty member in a meeting, but when a "diverse perspective" or "diversity representative" are needed, said faculty member is put on the spot and asked to represent an entire race, ethnic or minority group (i.e., the disabled, LGBTQ, etc.). Alfred (2001, p. 121) states, "Although Black women are rendered invisible by virtue of their femaleness and their Blackness, successful Black women are rendered highly visible by their institutions." Invisibility can include being left out of social occasions, being passed over for promotions and other professional opportunities, and generally being made to feel like an outsider. Hyper-visibility can result in extra service work (because the committees and organizations need a diverse perspective) and can also result in minority faculty becoming a beacon for any and all students of color, even for those outside of their discipline. This extra work is often uncredited and is done for the good of the order. But this extra work can be draining and ultimately takes time from the things that count for tenure and promotion. Harley (2008) beautifully and specifically extends the tension between invisibility and hyper-invisibility with the following:

> African American faculty members feel and live with the weight of both white invisibility and black visibility. In essence, African Americans are not seen as native in the academy, and black bodies are imagined politically, historically, and conceptually circumscribed as being out of place. However, African American faculty may be given a sort of diplomat status in certain disciplines in academe (e.g., fine arts) because they can perform (i.e., sing and dance) for the enjoyment of others. This is not to say that talents of African Americans are not to be acknowledged and appreciated but to illustrate, within a dichotomy, how African Americans are simultaneously valued and stigmatized. (p. 23)

Certainly African American faculty in all disciplines have struggles and find the need to perform, in whatever form that "performance" takes. Pollak and Niemann (1998) also discuss hyper-visibility, instead referring to the phenomenon as "distinctiveness" (p. 954). Krusemark (2012) and Phelps (1995) concur. Phelps specifically talks about the curse of being "special"; minority faculty members are often the only ones in their departments. This not unique status can result in faculty being put on a pedestal and being sought out for particular areas of expertise, but more often results in cognitive dissonance, undue service expectations, isolation, burnout, and the other negative qualities that come with hyper-visibility (Phelps, 1995, p. 256).

Tokenism and Double Consciousness

In her research in the business world, Kanter (1977) discusses the notion of women being tokens, as exceptions to the rule in a male-dominated environment. Her assessment was based on the idea that based solely on the number of women employed in corporations, women were "numerical minorities" in the workforce (pp. 206-242). Kanter's discussion of Numbers: Minorities and Majorities in *Men and Women of the Corporation* provides an excellent background on the phenomenon of being different in a larger group or context.

Kanter characterizes tokens as being pressured to conform and be exceptional; becoming invisible and unnoticeable; feeling lonely and excluded from the larger group(s); having limited social capital; being stereotyped and/or discriminated against; and, having higher levels of personal stress (1977, pp. 206-209). While not explicitly talking about women of color or academia, these characteristics of a token are wholly applicable to the life of minority in the academic environment. Arguably, such is the life of a minority faculty member in a predominantly white department or institution. Being a token because of race or gender is not a new phenomenon, and many scholars are used to being in this predicament and act accordingly, however it doesn't mean that this role ever becomes comfortable. In personal experience, sometimes more damaging than being stereotyped is the loneliness and exclusion that comes with this role. Being excluded from social activities and the powerful office "grapevine", despite earnest attempts to get along, can be demoralizing and reinforce the status quo. This exclusion also reinforces the idea that minority faculty members are "symbols of diversity" (Phelps, 1995, p. 256) and are to be seen and not heard.

Kanter's conclusion is that anyone who is "rare and scarce" (1977, p. 207) in a given environment can have these feelings. The characteristics of tokens discussed by Kanter appear often in the literature, typically about minorities in various environments and professions – minority faculty, minority students, minority executives and managers, minority teachers, minority librarians, minority social workers, minority lawyers, minorities in science and technology, and the like.

Niemann (1999) writes specifically about the tokenism faced by minority women in academia. As a Latina woman her experiences resonate as she describes negotiating numerous obstacles even before entering the academy. After defying cultural and gender roles that discouraged the advanced education of independent women, women of color faced institutional racism and socioeconomic barriers while pursing education. Then they have the "privilege" of facing

> …yet another set of obstacles, including experiences of racial tokenism, overt and covert racism, and stigmatization. These experiences are generally grounded in the undermining attitudes and behaviors of people within the institution. Largely as a result of these experiences, faculty of color may also undermine their own competence (Niemann, 1999, p. 111).

Tokenism is not unrelated to the concept of double consciousness, which was discussed by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903. The basic concept of Dubois' double consciousness is that you cannot remove your primary identity, but instead you assume a second (or perhaps multiple) identity, one crafted and assumed to better fit in and hopefully not be so prone to stereotyping, racism, or other abuse. Women of color in the academy (as well as men of color, as well as LGBT faculty, disabled faculty and others in the minority) routinely assume dual roles and personas in an attempt to assimilate and gain credibility in the dominant culture of academia. Bell (1990) and Alfred (2001) concurs by stating that double consciousness is "the process by which women of color internalize their location within and their interactions with White-dominated institutional cultures" (p. 114). As Bell (1990) suggests, having a double consciousness involves existing as a "second class citizen" or subordinate by the dominant group (p. 461). Being called by the wrong name and then being chastised for being sensitive when you complain, or having to put on a happy face when you enter the classroom in spite of the anger and frustration that comes from being the target of physical intimidation, these are examples of operating within a double consciousness. Creating and maintaining a double consciousness can be a challenging and exhausting mental and physical endeavor.

Loss of Voice: Literature about Minority Women in the Academy

Much of the literature addresses the overall experiences of women of color in the academy and discusses a variety of issues, to be mentioned here. The 2012 publication of *Presumed Incompetent* (y Muhs et al.) was a boon to faculty of color at all stages in the academy. It was validating and affirming and made great strides towards creating an invisible college of minority faculty and allies. Certainly, this 600 page text only scratches the surface of the issues minority faculty face, and it is preceded by many substantive and equally powerful articles and books (Myers, 2002; Jones, 2001; hooks, 1991; Lorde, 1984).

The journal literature talks about minority faculty, specifically African American women, being an "outsider within" and "being disenchanted and ultimately becoming indifferent" (Allen et al., 1999, p. 256). Issues contributing to these feelings include "racism, sexism, isolation, alienation, tokenism, discrimination, role expectations, unsupportive environments, lack of mentoring and networking opportunities, tenure and promotion issues, and difficulties in conducting research" (Allen et al., 1999, p. 256).

The situation begins with a "chilly climate" which is an overall environment that fosters exclusion and isolation (Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2002; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Olsen et al., 1995). Such an environment features the aforementioned invisibility, tokenism (Thompson & Sekaquaptewa, 2002; Baez, 2000), and microaggressions, and encourages feelings of disrespect, invalidation, and illegitimacy as a teacher and scholar (Harlow, 2003; Gregory, 2001; Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998). Such climates also house hostility (Stanley, 2006) and salary inequities (Patitu & Hinton, 2003), which are things that are personally damaging but could also lead to legal action (Harley, 2008). Subsequently, such environments also feature a lack of mentoring (Gregory, 2001), a lack of collegiality (Stanley, 2006), increased levels of physiological and mental stress (Harley, 2008), and a lack of other necessary support systems for junior faculty, particularly those of color.

As a result of these issues, minority females in the academy can suffer from a lack of confidence (Niemann, 1999, p. 111), and can suffer from race fatigue, which Harley (2008) describes as "the syndrome of being over extended, undervalued, unappreciated, and just knowing that because you are the 'negro in residence' that you will be asked to serve and represent the 'color factor' in yet another capacity" (p. 21). It was race fatigue that ultimately led to my temporary loss in voice. It was the fatigue of constantly trying to "fit in," trying to remedy racial climate problems not of my making, and the painful and sometimes cruel rejections of my very being as a person and a scholar that temporarily took away my voice, my soul, and my passion for my profession. This fatigue is real and leads to utter exhaustion and indifference.

Conclusion: Maintaining My Voice

Audre Lorde said "It is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" (1984, p. 44). And Harley (2008) states that the "survival of African American women in the academy is contingent upon many variables, but none as important as their own self-worth, self-reliance, and generating support networks inside and outside the university setting" (p. 33).
I do not have to relinquish my seat at this table; I have to resituate myself at this table and make myself heard.

The statements by Lorde (1984) and Harley (2008) emphasized to me that my continued presence at this specific table was up to me; the microaggressions and varying levels of racism and hostility may never change or go away. What have to change are my reactions and responses to them, and whether or not I choose to internalize the remarks, actions and the pain they cause. It is not to say that I no longer want those around me to become more sensitive and welcoming, but I am the one who ultimately determines how this environment will affect me.
I deserve to be at the table and I need to stay at this table. How do I make this happen?

Harley devotes a great deal of discussion to the idea of coping. Specifically she discusses: singing our own praises (don't wait for anyone else to do so); recognizing our own limitations; maintaining mental, physical and spiritual health; and, recognizing our institutional culture (i.e., the chilly climate) (Harley, 2008, p. 33).

Reclaiming and maintaining the voice I was losing would take not only learning to cope in this new environment, but it would take a great deal of internal and external work. It would take introspection and reflection, and talking often and candidly with others in my network. This process also meant soliciting and listening to lots of stories. It's easy to gather facts and statistics on the lack of minorities in the academy, or the retention rates of African American females in a given discipline; it's the stories that imbue strength and reason. Reading, networking, and seeking out mentors have facilitated this story-gathering.

In order to expand my internal and external support networks (Harley, 2008; Alfred, 2001; Atwater, 1995) my networking efforts became systematic as I sought out women in my same situation, women who are still students, and women who have retired. I needed the sympathy, empathy, wisdom, and ideas for strategies and self-care. I needed physical and mental safe spaces[3] (Alfred, 2001) in order to have the "freedom to think out loud" (Fries-Britt and Kelly, 2005, p. 238) and have the ability to be vulnerable with like-minded friends and colleagues. Ward says "the safe space serves as a prime location for the Black woman to resist objectification as the Other" (1995, p. 153). I also joined a writing group with other women of color at my institution and I joined an accountability group through a national faculty development program; these have been profound and powerful experiences as they are safe spaces which are also productive for my writing and scholarship. It is through the writing group and the accountability group that I discovered my professional counter-spaces. Counter-spaces are sites where "deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70). I have come to rely on these counter-spaces and sincerely value my colleagues' insight and camaraderie.

To complement the notion of counter-spaces, hooks says:

> It is impossible for Black female intellectuals to blossom if we do not have a core belief in ourselves, in the value of our work, and a corresponding affirmation from the world around us that can sustain and nurture. Often we cannot look to traditional places for recognition of our value; we bear the responsibility for seeking out and even creating different locations. (1991, p. 161).

I have also sought out new mentors, from among my peers and with more senior colleagues, in addition to maintaining connections with existing mentors (Stanley, 2006). Mentoring relationships have been particularly helpful because many of my mentors have had similar experiences and are proof positive of survival, and where there have been missteps or ill consequences in their lives, it is magnanimous of them to share their wisdom, strategies, and hindsight with me. I envision my mentors and peers as enabling me to shore up my foundation, giving me the tools and fortitude to move forward though the tenure track process.

Final Thoughts on Being a Professor

While a painful experience, it has been cathartic to use the literature and my networks (both near and far, those I know and those I don't know personally) to explore, process, and navigate my way through the beginning years of the tenure track process. I am relearning the importance of story and self-care. This

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[3] Recognizing the theory of intersectionality, there are scholars and writers that challenge the notion of a safe space (McInnes & Davies, 2008; Rasmussen, 2004) because no one space is safe for every marginalized group or individual. And even though safe spaces can be considered an "illusion of inclusivity" (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 162), I talk about spaces that provided safety, security, bonding, and support for me as an individual.

process has also brought me to a new research area (or rather a rebirth and extension of diversity work I began as a student) and exposed me to new theories and schools of thought. But most importantly, this process has renewed my commitment to succeed in this space even at the expense of forgoing a space in the community. It's acceptable not to change the world by myself, it's reasonable to step back, but it's essential to put myself first. I will preserve myself and work towards making incremental changes in the lives of my students and in my profession. Those are good, attainable, but absolutely necessary goals. ***Maybe instead of pushing back from the table, I will just occasionally lean back in my seat.***

So I remain at the table – I, and those before me, have worked too hard to earn this seat. However, I'm now at the table with revised intentions and goals. And perhaps I will even occasionally and temporarily excuse myself from the table from time to time in order to regroup, reconstitute, and renew. But I will not give up the seat and I will perform well while at this table. ***I'm staying at this table.***

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