

9

ACADEMIC SURVIVAL

Troubling the tensions between race, gender, and class in a predominantly white academic institution

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In the following pages, I come to terms with *points of contention*, teaching-related situations that have rubbed me the wrong way and occupied space in the back of my mind without paying rent. These situations have tested my inner strength and my patience; they have made me question my understanding about who I am and how my race and gender shape my teaching experiences. My race and gender are intrinsically connected to and reflected in the world. In other words, these are aspects of my personhood that interact within me as well as externally with the environments I encounter. I found it impossible to let these points of contention go.

Points of contention

In many cases being “the first” is considered a good thing. Synonyms for the word “first” include “greatest,” “original,” “foremost,” “utmost,” and “outstanding.” From the time we understand the meaning of the word “first,” we have been socialized to believe it’s an admirable and highly valued thing. But there are times when I have loathed the word, hated its cheery and optimistic attitude, bemoaned its high status, and cringed every time I thought about it in relation to academia.

Being first was never my intention when I accepted an assistant professor position at a predominantly white university (PWI). I began teaching in the faculty of health because, besides enjoying learning from and shaping student health science practice, I didn’t see anyone in health science academia who looked like me. It never occurred to me that a career in health science education would be the beginning of many questions about “firsts.” I was

the first Black person to teach in the health science faculty, first Black teacher for many of my students, first Black woman to be a team leader within my department. Why was I the first Black faculty member at this institution? It was, after all, almost 2020. I couldn't have been the first Black health science instructor the institution came across who qualified for the job. Surely there were other Black academics prior to me, who were available and capable of teaching in the faculty. Why was I their first Black woman faculty hire?

These contentious race and gender issues were not new, but they occupied a new space for me professionally. I thought about the bondage of socially constructed labels like race, gender, sexuality, and class, and how socially constructed categories produce and protect whiteness (and access to certain academic circles), while for others, socially constructed labels are barriers. In my case, race and gender facilitated access to some academic circles and created roadblocks to others. I thought about the ways in which institutions are powerful places of *belonging*. That is to say, universities categorize and sort who *belongs* in certain academic environments and who does not. Universities embed sorting systems that are not only self-serving but also self-sufficient. An example of this can be found in university hiring practices. At many universities, hiring policies and practices act as academic gatekeeping systems resulting in systemic productions and reproductions of hegemonic hiring (white, male, straight, for administrative positions, white, female, straight for teaching positions). Despite there being laws to encourage *equal opportunity hiring*, most university administrators and staff fall in line with the dominant academic culture, yielding to the status quo (Cukier et al. 2021).

If academic faculty environments did not reflect me, where did that leave me? Where did I belong? Belonging is a matter of blending in. Blending in was heavily based on how similar I was in physical appearance, socioeconomic status, political ideologies, and so forth to most people in my faculty (Settles et al. 2021).

Think about the ways in which PWI hiring practices sort and categorize applicants, as well as the ways in which socially constructed categories like race and gender also sort who *belongs*. What does it mean to automatically belong or blend in? Conversely, what does it mean to automatically stand out or be “different”?

Belonging in the institution can be sticky business. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators are systematically sorted (through embedded hierarchies, relationships, associations, and roles) and designated insider/outsider status. As a health science faculty member, I was an insider because I belonged to the “academic world.” As a Black woman educator, I was an outsider within my own health science faculty. My gender made me an insider within a female-dominated work environment, but as the only Black woman faculty, I sat on the outskirts of a sisterhood of health science faculty. The reality is that in non-HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) settings,

the default is white, cis, straight, and economically advantaged (Cole 2020). For academics who do not belong to the default (dominant) group, academic life is a matter of drifting in and out of institutional consciousness.

Being part of and excluded from the institution's consciousness is a phenomenon I refer to as *insider/outsider politics*. Insider/outsider politics also manifest internal tensions. I struggled to navigate how much of my authentic self was safe to share, versus the inauthentic performances I presented to the institution, which were necessary to make it through each day. Any internal sense of belonging was drowned by the constant reminders that my racialized body dwelled in a sea full of white coordinators, managers, receptionists, professors, department heads, deans, and students. The stares, comments, assumptions, misperceptions, stereotypes, and off-color jokes were my new norm. Inside I raged in perpetual frustration while my outer persona tried desperately to blend in, hide, and become invisible, as if blending in or shrinking would change the constructs of whiteness.

Historical and social contexts of race in education

How did we get here? I can't reflect on my challenges as a Black woman faculty without reflecting on many of the historical battles between US civil rights activists and education systems built from white supremacy. My reflections turn toward the historically significant case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Weinstein et al. 2004). *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a landmark case in the civil rights movement that made school segregation unconstitutional because education provided to Black students in Black schools was not equitable compared with education provided in white public schools. "Equal protection under the law" was guaranteed to *all* US citizens under the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment. Black teachers who had a long history of education for emancipation, institutional opposition, and equity-seeking education activism were central to desegregation (Baker 2011).

Milner, Delale-O'Connor, Murray, and Farinde argue that desegregation led to a loss of relevant cultural, political, and social capital for African Americans (Milner et al. 2016). For example, in states like Alabama and Georgia, Black teacher activism focused on ways to improve the conditions of Black schools within the Black community (Baker 2011). These teachings and political curricula were lost when school desegregation took place.

Pioneers like Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson developed Citizenship Schools all over the South, focused on socio-educational mobilization (unschooling of Black students, teaching about Afro history, social justice, and Black pride on university campuses across the country) while fostering Black community leader development—instrumental pillars of the civil rights movement (Ling 1995). These Citizenship Schools were part of the Citizenship Education Program originally launched in Highlander School in South

Carolina and contributed to the development and training of generations of Black teacher activists like Esau Jenkins (Ling 1995, 400).

The educational equity and desegregation work that civil rights activists fought for (and continue to fight for) have a place in today's post-secondary environment, since post-secondary institutions continue to be inequitable spaces (Milner et al. 2016).

Politics of opposition

A path to institutional emancipation could not open for me without my acknowledging the emotional and intellectual impacts insider/outsider politics have on my self-perceptions, self-confidence, and ability to oppose the institutional forces that manipulated where I belonged. I experienced increased anxiety, fear, and depression. It became my ritual to give myself a pep talk while walking from the car to the building entrance. My pep talk was an exercise in self-monitoring and self-policing—how I should walk, what my resting face should look like, and how to engage in conversation. It was all so painfully exhausting.

Opposing and resisting institutional forces was a relentless job. A Black woman faculty's presence at a PWI *was* resistance. Protective practices (such as self-talk and deep breathing) are resistance. Wearing my natural hair was resistance. Speaking up when stereotypes and tropes were reinforced in conversations, teaching materials, anti-Black racism, and institutional culture was resistance.

Institutional resistance was and is political. It is important to understand the risk of political fall-out in academia, which, for Black women faculty like me, is loneliness, further isolation, and institutional disenfranchisement. As the first and only Black woman faculty in my department, my acts of resistance became a routine part of my academic life. Maintaining the vigilance, self-monitoring, and inauthentic performances was just not sustainable.

Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012) describe post-secondary teaching environments as antagonistic spaces where women of color face the harsh realities of historical and societal ideologies supporting structures of racism in the academic world. That is to say, to map the structural and generational pedigree of whiteness in post-secondary education, we need to look no further than to the institutions themselves, paying close attention to the structural, functional, and systematic ways in which race and gender are formulated to produce structural and functional barriers for Black women faculty.

The following is a short list of instrumental ways in which I have experienced barriers as a Black woman faculty in Canadian academia:

- 1 The campus environment has very few to no symbols, artifacts, or work developed by, for, or about Black people. The absence/erasure of *Black*

- presence on campus* renders Black faculty and students invisible. I found myself wondering if I was welcome on campus.
- 2 Faculty–student relationships are often strained. Students’ negative perceptions of Black faculty’s knowledge and credibility is common. Non-Black and Black students fall prey to a certain *presumed incompetence* of Black women faculty. *Students questioned the content and context of my lessons, although I had page references from my resources (just in case anyone asked, and they did). Students often debated their assignment marks, and my inability to understand what they’d written or were trying to say (despite providing all students with a rubric and opportunities to discuss the rubric in detail). I often found myself defending how I knew what I knew (answering repeated questions about my academic qualifications and about the quality of my information resources), something my white colleagues did not experience.*
 - 3 Tokenism. An academic environment barren of Black women faculty reflects insufficient and ineffective university recruitment and retention policies and practices (Cukier et al. 2021). It is also an indicator that the institution fails to recognize that *one Black woman faculty is not the definition of “diversity.” Being the first, the only Black woman faculty meant I was often perceived as the spokesperson for all Black women faculty.*
 - 4 Black woman stereotypes. My daily routine involved ditching, dodging, and confronting Black woman tropes and stereotypes, white perspectives of who I am and what I am capable of. I could never be upset, or *too friendly*, or *smile too much*, or be *too loud*, or be *too outspoken*, or *too soft-spoken* or—the list goes on and on. What I couldn’t be is myself. Being a *Black woman* in academia is to sit at the crossroads—at the intersections of different societal categories (race, gender, socioeconomic position, sexuality) designed to sustain institutional whiteness. *Common stereotypes of Black people (such as lazy, incompetent) converge with common stereotypes about gender (women are moody, emotional, irrational). Black women faculty face a combination of racialization and gendering, in addition to specific stereotypes of Black women (loud, overweight, obnoxious, pushy).*

My examples of structural, functional, and systemic formulations of race and gender in academia may sound familiar, because they are the same structures and mechanisms of systemic racism that have historically helped, and continue to uphold, white supremacy in general society (Lander and Santoro 2017).

Existence is resistance

Despite the enormous strides of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, very little has changed in academia. Historically speaking, *mainstream* educational institutions were never meant for racialized people, and, from

a faculty standpoint, they continue to alienate racialized faculty (Black, Indigenous and Peoples of Color, or BIPOC).

To confront and combat academic exclusion and marginalization I found it helpful to draw on important legacies of both the US and Canadian civil rights movements in education. Resistance in education—the fight for education equity—has come in many forms, including ideological resistance, resistive and empowering pedagogy, campus sit-ins, and scholar strikes (bell hooks 1994). Because educational institutions were never meant for racialized people, my very presence in racially impoverished academic environments was also a form of resistance (Matias and Mackey 2016).

Deckman's (2017) study of teachers in racially stratified high schools and middle schools reveals the challenges of being a racially objectified person in classroom environments. Of particular interest to me were the accounts from Black teachers who described their teaching environment as “race neutral,” where administrators, teachers, and students were encouraged to ignore historical and cultural aspects of race and to avoid any discussions about race, no matter what the context. This was also my experience at the university where I taught. The university fell silent on issues, conversations, and discussions even remotely related to race, culture, or non-eurocentric ways of knowing.

The problem with taking a *race neutral* position is that it is dismissive of the realities of the racialized world we live in, especially for those who are racialized. *Race neutral* is really *race absent*. How can we respect and honor the humanity of each other without acknowledging and honoring the racial, cultural, and ethnic aspects of personhood? Ignoring race and devaluing the significance of race, its historical, social, and political proximity to personhood, is to deny the realities of racialized people. It is dehumanizing.

Academic survival

Being a Black woman faculty in a PWI is not just a matter of resistance, but it is also a matter of emotional and academic survival. Black women faculty are forever the outsider looking in, trying to break down barriers, refute stereotypes, defend against questions about your academic and relational abilities, and be on guard against microaggressions that often pierce your emotional armor. Microaggressions can be described in terms of encounters I had with students and colleagues, most of them white, who incessantly questioned my competence (despite my clearly exceeding the qualifications for the position); it was also their attitudes, unspoken words, and body language that suggested I was not welcome.

Academic survival meant constantly proving to students and staff that my health science knowledge and teaching abilities were good enough (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012). Black women faculty are viewed with suspicion;

their qualifications and competence are scrutinized more vigorously in comparison with their non-Black peers. Academic survival requires a game plan. It requires careful strategizing to avoid the microaggression landmines ready to explode at a moment's notice. How do Black women faculty create a suit of armor to protect against the myriad of stereotypes, tropes, and microaggressions we experience in the academic world? The keys to academic survival includes code switching.

Code switching

I believe we have versions of ourselves that we present to the world depending on the circumstances and environment with which we are interacting. We flow in and out of identities depending on the situation and self-critique our identity performance (Alexander, Anderson, and Gallegos 2005). It is a struggle at times to understand my own code switching, so how on earth can I move past the constant internal turmoil resistance brings?

Code switching is an academic survival strategy I adopted on my first day at work. From day one, I had a self-talk about which parts of myself I was able to reveal, how to navigate the stereotypes, how to create a path that balanced my love of teaching with my Blackness. Entering the university was like entering a car, getting ready to drive. I had to perform the *safety check*. Can I be myself? Can I share the “real” me with the people around me? Is it safe to show emotion? How much emotion is okay? Can I speak freely, or should I keep conversations very superficial? What about my resting face?

I would often pull into the parking lot at the university, park my car, take a deep breath, and envision my walk through the corridors up to my office. I would sit in my driver's seat thinking deeply about how I would walk down the hallways, whom I might see, the facial expression I needed to keep on my face, the positive mental attitude I needed to maintain, not just from the car to the office but from the office to the classroom.

Whether I had a good morning or not, whether my hour-long drive to work put me in harm's way or weather conditions rendered me late, I didn't have the luxury of getting into my feelings, because I was on display at all times, performing myself on campus and trying to avoid Black woman stereotypes at all costs. Put on a smile, think happy thoughts, I would tell myself. It was all part of my weekday ritual, putting on my emotional cloak to hide my authentic self. Then, I would open the car door and take a long, deep breath, taking in every ounce of that cool, fresh rural air. As I walked toward the institution, I thought about how comforting and uncomfortable it felt to be cloaked in an invisible external armor of politeness, happiness, and kind gestures that made me appear non-threatening and human.

Code switching salvaged my emotional and psychological well-being each and every day. In Hall et al.'s (2012) study of the experiences of Black

women in predominantly white workplace settings, participants recalled feeling like they were under a microscope, every move being watched in their white observers' efforts to confirm meanings which were often derived from stereotypes (such as "the angry Black woman," "the secretive Black woman," and "the exceptional Black woman" —exceptional because the way she speaks, her appearance, her behavior align with dominant culture expectations).

There were occasions when I attended committee meetings and sat in a sea of fifty to sixty faculty members as the only Black person and the only Black female in the group. I automatically switched to performance mode, acutely aware and sensitive to how the people around me perceived me. I used gentle, "non-threatening" language, attitudes, and behaviors at all times. When I managed to speak up at staff meetings, I shrunk my body language and used the gentlest of voices in a tone that was sweetly pleasant for fear of being perceived as angry or bitter. During class time, I switched things up by speaking in a very friendly tone and always monitored my resting face to make sure I didn't appear upset or frustrated. I switched my vocabulary, taking care to speak to colleagues, staff, and students with sterile and formal language, sanitized of colloquialisms and slang.

Code switching was an academic survival strategy that took up as much time as a part-time job—an unpaid, unrewarded part-time job in addition to my faculty work. It is work that my white colleagues were not burdened with. Inside institutional walls, the strategizing and navigation work made it hard for me to recognize myself. I always looked forward to just sitting in my car in the parking lot where I was able to remove the performative shell, lower my shields, and be free.

Living in contradiction

Turner (2002) described the ways in which women of color faculty must negotiate spaces between the institutional environment and personal/intellectual/emotional safety. Turner refers to this as "lived contradiction" (Turner 2002, 75). In other words, to survive in the institution, to be myself and be a presence in a PWI institution, is to be embattled—the institution versus my personhood. Whiteness is a battle of oppressive attrition, wearing down the resistor until that individual becomes a shell of themselves. Can self-betrayal be reconciled? What are the long-term effects of *war at work*?

What are the tensions?

It was exhaustingly difficult to live a double life at work. My daily work-life consisted of carefully coordinated code switching, self-monitoring, and measuring reactions to my behavior. On the inside, I really wanted to breathe

out, relax my shoulders, laugh, and shoot the breeze. In most cases, I was the fly on the wall, participating on the fringes of conversations, daintily nodding, not always having the strength to interject when I overheard a racist comment or culturally biased remark about a student—“They need to speak English even if they’re not in the lab, we speak English in Canada” or “Well, I think in their culture, they’re used to being in subservient positions, so they’re really lucky to be here.” Their racism was more subtle with me—the exclusion, questioning my knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Participants in Kelly and Winkle-Wagner’s (2017) study of Black women faculty in PWI described overwhelming feelings of isolation because they were the only Black faculty. Participants described difficulties connecting with white peers and tensions that arose due to dissimilar political and social views. One participant recounted her experience of finally receiving tenure, only to have peers and administration alike question whether university standards were lowered to accommodate her tenure appointment.

These tensions and stressors can lead to *racial battle fatigue* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012). Black women in the workplace who experience a barrage of microaggressions on a regular basis can suffer from physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms which can vary from tension headaches to memory loss (Hall et al. 2012). I regularly suffered from tension headaches and anxiety and was a little depressed. Avoidance was the tried and true strategy I used to cope. Sometimes crying during my hour-long drive home was another go-to method. My thoughts and feelings found no resolution; I carried them with me everywhere I went.

Tensions affect the mind and body, since they are inescapably connected. It makes sense that my responses to the social and emotional tensions at work had physiological consequences. My mind and body engaged the fight or flight cascade much too often, which was an unsustainable physiological solution to institutional oppressions. It was after gaining over thirty pounds, no longer being able to go on my regular jogs, and watching my diabetes go out of whack that I came to realize that I urgently needed a strategy to reconcile these institutional tensions. My physical health depended on it.

Troubling the tensions

The truth is, I don’t exist in a silo; I am part of an interconnected web of living beings. I felt uncomfortable and disconnected from my colleagues because I just wasn’t able to be my authentic self. It took a lot of emotional and mental *work* to keep up with the code switching, facades, performances, and pretense each day. I cannot change (nor would I want to) what I look like, and to a certain degree, I cannot change how I am perceived, so I thought about the ways in which I might reconcile the discomfort, the shell of myself, the untenable tensions I experienced at work.

We have been conditioned to believe different is strange, something to be feared. As such, each of us needs to take responsibility for our own biases and fears, and for de-centering our own ideologies and practices, even for just a moment. It takes a willingness to be vulnerable, open to discomfort and agitation, because dwelling in reflective discomfort often leads to self-discovery and growth.

I considered meditative and mind–body practices to safely reflect on, reconceptualize, and reconcile my internal and external institutional tensions. I wanted to take a stab at *troubling the tensions*. I reviewed a few popular meditative practices, such as Zen Buddhism. Bai (2018) makes a strong argument for the use of Zen arts as a transformative tool. Zen arts come from the Buddhist tradition of mind/body/spirit approaches to meditation. Zen meditation encourages certain postures, breathing techniques, and reflection aimed at improving focus, reclaiming thoughts and reducing stress. For example, an enlightening and physically satisfying way to work through some of these tensions is Neigong, which incorporates both physical and mindful elements. I used Neigong to reflect on various uncomfortable, disturbing academic experiences at the institution. In doing so, I was able, at least in part, to reconcile some of these tensions in ways that helped me manage my emotional and physical responses to those academic conflicts. I learned that being present in each moment and searching ways in which to connect with others within the academy is a habit worth forming, for my own mental, emotional, and physical health. When used purposefully, Zen can help reconfigure unproductive tensions into something more useful and less emotionally and physiologically damaging.

Zen meditation allowed me the freedom to reflect on my experiences without making it a purely intellectual exercise. Instead, I used all my senses when I replayed academic moments in time, going deeper than individual difference. My inner sight—replaying uncomfortable, painful episodes of structural racism, as though it were a movie someone else was starring in. I forced myself to remember as many details as I could see and sat in the discomfort. As I replayed various scenes, I listened for cues in conversations (as I recalled them). What was happening in the background? Who was there? What were the environmental “props” in the scene? And I sat in reflection on those key items, deep breathing as the painful parts rolled in and out of focus. Were there certain smells (in the cafeteria or break room) associated with the event I was recalling/replaying? What were they? I remembered, and breathed, and analyzed until the discomfort was felt but understood. The pain was more bearable, and had a place in my memory that I could control. Breaking down each episode into manageable pieces, analyzing in safety, facing the discomfort, breathing deeply through painful recollections by allowing my mind to have visceral exchanges with my body, gave me control, insight, and, in some ways, more peace.

I reflected on my faculty experiences through a meditative lens and asked myself important *who/what/where/when/why* questions. For example, when I reflected on my attempts to reach out to faculty colleagues, I asked myself *who* I chose to reach out to, and *why*. Was there something I missed? Did I assume certain colleagues would be more likely to connect with me more than others? *Why* did I feel that way? Were my assumptions based on facts or biased perceptions?

Combining a meditative mindset, reflection, discomfort, and discovery is one approach to troubling academic tensions that can be productive, to the point where those tensions might even be reconfigured. Meditative approaches and reflective practices were safe and productive ways for me to intellectually and emotionally interrogate my faculty experiences. In fact, other mind–body practices have the potential to transform what I experienced as hostility and negativity in the institution into more manageable interactions on campus (Kelly 2017). Over time, meditative reflection practices become habit-forming, and conditioned responses, especially those related to *racial battle fatigue*, give way to fertile tightness.

Transforming the tensions

Transforming academic tensions is a process, not necessarily a goal. Tensions are healthy when they give rise to positive and new understandings of ourselves and the spaces we occupy. Meditative reflection is one approach to reconciling academic tensions. Other interesting approaches also have implications for personal health and well-being.

When I was faced with marginalization and isolation at the institution, it was difficult to remember that my faculty position did not define me. Moving forward, I will gently remind myself that my job is not the only or most important aspect of my personhood.

One of my coping strategies will be to celebrate my identities outside of teaching (volunteer, mentor, mother, cos player). Kelly (2017) suggests social networks outside of work (family, friends) are a mainstay coping strategy for Black women faculty.

Other scholars who study Black women in academia offer multiple and multi-level strategies to help Black women survive the institutional environment while keeping their mind, body, and soul intact. Watson (2017) suggests a key strategy is to collaborate with other BIPOC professionals, within and external to the education sector, who are keen on addressing and confronting issues that affect Black women faculty. This collaboration could be in the form of conversations, coalition formation, symposiums, or policy huddles to discuss social justice practices in PWIs. Professional relationships with other faculty members who have similar social, racial, or sexual identities is another high on the priority list (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012). Additionally, Black

women faculty should form identity-based micro-networks enlisting friends and members of various social networks to engage in discussion and develop a community of practice around shared identities and experiences on a regular basis (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2012, 280).

Transforming academic tensions into manageable, livable, synergetic agitations without sacrificing my heart and soul is no easy task. I have chosen to combine what I have learned (and continue to learn) about the nature of being through meditative practices such as Zen to reflect on and deconstruct institutional oppressions and my responses to them. Furthermore, I have incorporated some suggestions Black women faculty as well as notable scholars have used to manage race and gender-based tensions on university campuses.

I used my toolbox of strategies, starting with some of the coping strategies I discussed previously. I did a lot of deep breathing. I reminded myself (during my daily affirmations) that my faculty position did not define me. I created a social network of friends and family with whom I talked and shared. It was a welcome relief, a much-needed catharsis. I found other Black faculty outside of the institution who were interested in taking action to promote equity in academia and counter academic oppressions.

Blending meditative practices with action-oriented relational efforts helped me to regulate my mind, body, and spirit. I focused my energies on being present and in the moment. I captured opportunities to transform tensions one situation at a time. For example, when faced with a situation where students questioned my competence, I immediately focused my attention on breathing and posture and reminded myself that my faculty position did not define me. I thought about the relational connectedness I had with students and side-stepped differences to find our mutual humanity. I then reached out to a trusted colleague outside of the university to debrief, exhale, and express my frustrations, concerns, and questions. I became better equipped at managing my responses to institutional tensions. At times I was able to transform these tensions; at other times the tautness remained, but I had an outlet, at least one person willing and able to listen, who allowed me to purge if I needed to.

Race, gender equity, and whiteness in academia are not my problems per se, it's a systemic problem that can't be fixed by one person. But I am responsible for the ways in which I respond to academic tensions, and the care I take to nurture (not torture) my mind, body, and spirit. It's worth the exploration to find the right balance (if there is such a thing) between academic oppressions and academic survival.

Conclusion

Black women who work in post-secondary institutions navigate multiple socially stratified spaces, including race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Kelly 2017, 12). Being intersectionally positioned in academia leaves Black

women faculty vulnerable to oppositional tensions between the authentic self and our code switching self, being an insider and outsider, our Blackness being hyper-scrutinized and invisible, playing the role of the resistor while also experiencing institutional oppression. Black women faculty often face questions about our competence from students and colleagues, undermining our authority (Turner 2002, 76). These microaggressions often lead to racial battle fatigue, emotional distress, and physical illness because of overstimulation of the fight or flight response.

Meditative practices were practical, sustainable ways that helped me to stand firmly and calmly in whatever space I occupied on campus. I used self-care techniques that allowed me to stand tall in the discomfort of oppressive forces, to encounter others' perspectives and be confident enough to interrogate perspectives that are based on stereotypes and false "facts" when the opportunity arises.

Self-care also meant seeking out communities of practice where I had opportunities to learn from and share with other teaching faculty who were intersectionally positioned like me. I befriended faculty and staff who had similar interests in social justice for Black women faculty and relied heavily on my social support network, which provided me with an outlet to express my frustrations and concerns. I used deep breathing often, and, while doing so, reminded myself that no matter what, my position did not define me.

You can reclaim and transform academic tensions, and traumatic racialized experiences by using reflective practices to guide healing. Meditative practices, as described in this chapter, compliment the anti-oppressive self-care work necessary to survive the academy. Academic survival requires making space for emotional, mental, and spiritual resistance downtime (Gorski 2019). Take an active role on committees responsible for hiring and retention, advocate for equity (not diversity) in hiring practices, promote the benefits of hiring culturally enriched women faculty. I cannot and should not be the only person actively advocating for this, but I do accept the prospect of being the first at my institution to do so.

Non-Black women faculty can and should be part of the supportive circle Black women faculty seek. Allyship is a responsibility which shouldn't be taken lightly. True allies initiate connections, seek guidance, take the time to do their own research about justice and equity for Black women faculty, speak up and speak out for equity and justice for their Black women colleagues, especially in academic spaces where Black women faculty are excluded.

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