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### The Black Feminist Mixtape: A Collective Black Feminist Autoethnography of Black Women's Existence in the Academy

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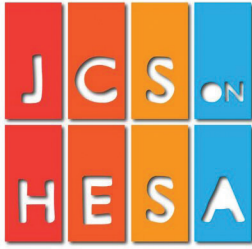
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# The Black Feminist Mixtape: A Collective Black Feminist Autoethnography of Black Women's Existence in the Academy

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## The Black Feminist Mixtape

### A Collective Black Feminist Autoethnography of Black Women's Existence in the Academy

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#### — Abstract —

Seven Black women graduate students from across different functional areas of higher education work in solidarity to write a collective Black Feminist Autoethnography (BFA) (Griffin, 2012) about our experiences at our respective colleges and universities. BFA is a “theoretical and methodological means for Black female academics to critically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood” (Griffin, 2012, p. 1). This article centers Black feminist scholarship as a framework to reflexively interpret how we as seven Black women navigate within, against, and beyond the academy to address dominant narratives that affect our professional and personal experiences. We use contemporary music lyrics and poems by Black women to actively illustrate and interrogate our individual and collective positionalities to promote critical literacy. Together, we are seven Black sista scholars who reclaim our voice as legitimized epistemologies in academic spaces. Hear Our Voices.

Keywords: Black Women, Higher Education Professionals, Black Feminist Autoethnography, Black Feminism

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### Track 1 – Intro (Roll Call)

We are seven Black women graduate students enrolled in various programs in a school of education at a large, historically white but minority-serving public institution in the South. As also higher education professionals at various institutions, we recognize that we cannot separate theory from practice, and we put our knowledge into action in various spaces throughout higher education, including teaching, residence life, multicultural affairs, experiential education, advising, TRiO programs, and first-year experience programs. We write this statement to acknowledge our social, political, and cultural contexts and to reflect on the ways these contexts influence our scholarship and practice.

We represent various social identities that impact our experiences navigating within, against, and beyond the academy. Although we all racially identify as Black, we recognize that Blackness is not a monolithic experience and acknowledge the wealth of diversity within the African diaspora. We are all cis-gender women; however, we hold different sexual orientations, with some of us identifying as straight and some of us as lesbian. We come from various parts of the United States. For some of us, our Christian identity recharges our spirit. And, for some of us, our identities as first- or second-generation college students, or our low-income family backgrounds, provide us with an array of knowledge, skills, and abilities for survival and resilience. We are in relationships with those around us in various ways—as wives, mothers, daughters, mentors, sisters, and friends. We are lovers of the arts, humorists, introverted empaths, and members of Black Greek-letter organizations.

As co-authors, we situate our experiences navigating within, against, and beyond the academy within the critical framework of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009) in order to collectively examine and interrogate power, privilege, and oppression in the academy from a Black woman's standpoint. This approach is coupled with what Glesne (2016) calls crit-

ical reflexive elements of autoethnography to narrate our experience through a collective Black feminist autoethnography (BFA) (Griffin, 2012). BFA is a “theoretical and methodological means for Black female academics to critically narrate the pride and pain of Black womanhood” (Griffin, 2012, p. 1). We engage in BFA as a means of solidarity with each other and other Black women in the academy and as an act of resistance against the dominant narratives of how we should exist within the academy. Griffin (2012) states that,

Black feminist autoethnography also offers a narrative means for Black women to highlight struggles common to Black womanhood without erasing the diversity among Black women coupled with strategically “talking back” (hooks, 1989) to systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, ableism, heterosexism, classism). (p. 143)

As Black women, our collective stories highlight the intersectional experiences and oppression of Black womanhood in the academy. Our individual stories give insight to the unique ways we make meaning of and address oppression without suggesting our narratives are monolithic. BFA challenges the dominant discourse within the academy and creates space for our voices as a form of critical literacy scholarship. Dillard (2006) argues that,

While there is no easy way to analyze these narratives, embodied within them are specialized knowledges that theorize a dismantling standpoint of and for African American women and that encompasses a coherent and dynamic epistemology: A place from which to theorize the leadership and research realities of Black women through situating such knowledge and action in the cultural spaces out of which they arouse. (p. 15)

Therefore, our collective BFA enables us to promote critical literacy through centering ways that Black women work within, against, and beyond the academy.

This piece contextualizes our narratives as Black women in the academy using the words and lyrics of fellow Black women academics, poets, and musicians. The Oxford Dictionary defines a *mixtape* as “a compilation of favorite pieces of music, typically by different artists, recorded on to a cassette tape or other medium by an individual” (Mixtape, n.d., para. 1). Beginning in the 1970s, mixtapes were instrumental in launching hip hop as a genre of music (Douze, 2019; Kawaida, 2020). Mixtapes promoted upcoming artists and DJs before artists signed with a label (Douze, 2019; Kawaida, 2020). In an interview with National Public Radio (NPR), Chance the Rapper referred to mixtapes as “a guerilla-style means of moving music” (Yenigun, 2017, p. 1). Mixtapes were, and continue to be, an organic and accessible way for artists to promote their art and voice as well as the art and voices of others in their communities. Mixtapes continue to be a means of creative freedom, giving artists an outlet not under the oversight or influence of a label. At the same time, mixtapes are also becoming more mainstream and commodified. Our collective BFA, is a written mixtape to voice our experiences as Black women in the academy.

Although music is primarily considered an auditory experience, it is a holistic sensory experience that includes feeling the vibrations of music and reading and understanding lyrics. Music evokes emotions. In our mixtape, we identify what it means for us as Black women to work within, against, and beyond the academy. Anchoring our experiences with the words and lyrics of Black women academics and artists, we honor the multiple ways of knowing and expressing knowledge that are essential to Black feminism. Although we provide space for our individual voices, we also acknowledge and value the connectedness of our experiences. We conclude our piece by discussing where we go from here and our place as public pedagogues

within the academy.

We dream of a day where our stories are centered without the work being on our backs. A day when our very being and existence as Black women is celebrated within and beyond the academy. For these prolonged acts of resistance are exhausting, draining, tiring, as a Black woman in the academy. “*All the women. / In Me. / Are Tired*” (Waheed, 2013, emphasis added).

### Track 2 – We Belong Here: Working Within the Academy

My skin is brown  
 my manner is tough  
 I'll kill the first mother I see  
 my life has been too rough  
 I'm awfully bitter these days  
 because my parents were slaves  
 What do they call me  
 My name is PEACHES.  
 (Simone, 1966, track 2)

Higher education centers the white, cis-male experience (Wilder, 2013). As Black women, we occupy two marginalized identities that challenge this problematic norm—race and gender. Our sheer existence is a powerful challenge and counter to higher education's culture. Track 2 pushes against paternalistic, male-dominated expectations and infuses tenets of Black feminist theory as a vehicle counter to the biased norms. This track is penned by two Black women who hold mid-level professional positions at historically white institutions and who bring their whole selves into their scholarship, work, and communities to push the boundaries of systemic oppression and create opportunities for those alongside and in front of them. A historically white institution (HWI) is defined as one that is either currently or formerly a predominantly white institution where “white students account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment” (Brown & Dancy, 2010, p. 523).

Patricia Hill Collins (2009) discusses controlling images as specific stereotypes that represent various

Black women's experiences. Within higher education, the images of the Black lady and the mule highlight conflicting images of Black womanhood (Collins, 2009). The mule is a more common stereotype highlighting Black women's resilience and hardworking nature that can be exploited. Collins (2009) defines the Black lady as "middle-class professional Black women who represent a modern version of the politics of respectability...educated Black professional women who more often than not are unmarried without children and whose career came first" (pp. 88–89). Black women are often touted as the most educated group in the United States, and in some ways, the authors of this article represent this as we are all currently pursuing a terminal degree. Yet, we often face challenges navigating our institutions with the added stress of daily encounters with racism and sexism, while not to mention balancing both personal and professional aspirations.

In *Respectability Politics*, Cooper (2017) writes about this conundrum as she deconstructs the experiences of specific "race women" fighting to be seen within issues of race and gender (p. 12). Anna Julia Cooper, for example, encountered this debacle as she once navigated train station restroom signs labeled "for ladies" and "for colored" (Cooper, 2017, p. 7) and did not know which restroom to enter. This example is one of many that demonstrates how Black men were the face of racial issues and white women the face of gender. Where does this position Black women? Black women in higher education still face many of the same issues women like Mary Church Terrell and Pauli Murray encountered during their times (Cooper, 2017). The notion of respectability politics, while not the focus of this track, becomes an issue again as Black women navigate HWIs. Our identities as both Black and woman in conjunction with our other identities force us to think about how we navigate our institutions. What does it look like for Black women to resist within the academy? How do we, as Black women, navigate controlling images placed upon us while advocating for students and

ourselves, serving on committees as the token Black person, engaging in difficult conversations, or interacting with a challenging colleague? There is no one answer. Black women are not monolithic.

*My skin is black  
My arms are long  
My hair is woolly  
My back is strong  
Strong enough to take the pain  
inflicted again and again  
What do they call me  
My name is AUNT SARAH.*  
(Simone, 1966, track 2)

### J'nai's Interlude

I grew up in a racially diverse city in North Carolina, where neighborhood zoning policies mask still present school segregation. As a middle schooler attending a community Black youth retreat, I learned the meaning of the Sankofa bird—to look back and understand the past in order to move forward. I come from parents who were young adults by the end of Jim Crow. Their lived experiences have shaped who I am to this day. I look back on the lives they have lived and continue to live and know that I am standing on the shoulders of my parents and ancestors. They affirmed my Black girlhood (now Black womanhood) when classmates and teachers did not. Like many, I often found myself in spaces where I was the only, if not one of the very few Black students in classes and co-curricular activities. These elementary and secondary school experiences coupled with college, ultimately informed my decision to work in higher education.

Now a mid-level student affairs professional at an elite, private HWI with almost 7 years of experience, I can say that my professional experience, in many ways, has been the opposite of my educational experience. I work at an institution where I see my identities represented from entry-level to senior-level administration. Similarly, as a third-year doctoral student, my cohort is made up of all Black women. As

I have navigated and continue to navigate my Black womanhood journey in education, Ledisi's song *Bravo* resonates with me:

*I've got a new walk and a new point of view  
A new purpose for everything I do  
I got a, a new rule on me, real folks around  
If you're wondering, I'm about to tell you now*  
(Kelly and Webb, 2011, track 3).

I see myself most reflected in the Black lady image as a mid-level student affairs professional. However, I, along with many other Black women in higher education have experienced being perceived as the mule; we become burned out trying to be everything to everyone, personally and professionally. As we resist within the academy, it is important to note what Hope (2019) deems as the “lack of critical mass” (p. 7); “whether employed as faculty, administrator or staff, Black women are confronted with countless issues related to their underrepresentation in the academy” (Hope, 2019, p. 7). However, after dismantling racism, one way we can confront this lack of critical mass is by bringing other Black women into the fold when given the opportunity via hiring, collaborative programming, committees, general meetings, and presentations. While racism is ordinary and ever-present, possibly when there is a larger critical mass, especially in senior-level administration, these narratives will begin to expand (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

While I am privileged to work at an HWI where many Black women work in my division and have been since my arrival almost seven years ago, I cannot help but notice that in spite of seeing myself reflected in a number of Black women employed from director to senior-level administrator, the numbers begin to wain the higher up I go. According to the American Council on Education (Espinosa et al, 2019), “more than one in four student affairs professionals” identify as a Person of Color, but white individuals still represent the majority of all senior-level administrative positions (p. xvi). India Arie's song, *What If*, is ever so

meaningful when analyzing the lack of Black women in academia when she sings, “We are the ones we've been waiting for / We can change the world” (Butler & Simpson, 2019, track 2).

### Coretta's Interlude

I am more than what you see. I am a contradiction—a juxtaposition. I grew up in a rural, racist small town in North Carolina and was often the only Black person in many settings. I graduated valedictorian of my high school class and viewed by my white counterparts as a “safe Black girl.” They were wrong. There's a fire that embers and grows when they are not watching. As a scholar-practitioner, I have worked at three public HWIs for over 12 years at the departmental and divisional level, advocating for the presence of those who look like me.

Opening the door for what may appear to be a docile, meek woman is actually the entrance of an indomitable force. I am humbled by the strength of my ancestors and empowered to be aspirational for the two young Black queens who call me Mama. I am reminded that there is plenty of work to do to sit at tables and create spaces for my sisters to either side of me and open the door for those behind me.

I am driven by my faith, my commitment to my husband, and my desire to ensure my two daughters are proud to call me their mother. I want to shift my campuses to look in the mirror and ask the tough questions as we all strive to be more inclusive. Any accomplishment, small or large, is a debt paid to my ancestors and the many people who have poured into me. I will ensure their investments are not in vain. Beyoncé—who always inspires me—hypes me up to remember:

*'Cause every day above ground is a blessing  
I done leveled up now, view panoramic  
None of my fears can't go where I'm headed  
Had to cut 'em loose, not lose, break the levy, yeah I'm  
bout to flood on 'em, flood on a sinner  
The rain and thunder, go Mutumbo, no, no, center You*

*can't dim my light.*

(Mnyango et al., 2019, track 12)

As a Black woman, I recognize that the academy was not created for me. Instead, I must actively work to carve out spaces and find opportunities to stake my claim that I, indeed, belong here. My culture, my hair, my melanin—they all belong here. And, in those moments where the systems of oppression rise up to contradict the confidence I hold so dear, I fight. I fight for those who never had the chance to learn how to read and for those who died because they did. I fight for those who dreamed of the opportunity to go to college only to have the hands of Jim Crow shred their hope. I fight for those who stepped onto chilly campuses during the Civil Rights era and endured a chilliness I can only imagine to ensure that I could one day graduate from, and serve as a leader in, higher education.

*What if Maya didn't speak out?*

*What if Langston Hughes didn't write it down? What if Josephine Baker didn't dance it out? (No) Tell me where would we be now?*

*What if Sojourner never told the truth?*

*Or Ida B. Wells never printed the news?*

*Harriet never went underground?*

*Where would we be now?*

(Butler & Simpson, 2019, track 2)

Higher education can be a place of knowledge generation, a place to train the next generation of leaders, and a place to push the boundaries of what is possible. Universities tend to be very visible and can also be economic engines in their local and regional communities. It is no secret that the leaders of these institutions are powerful and can serve as possible models for minority communities.

When it comes to the highest levels of higher education leadership, there is a great amount of homogeneity and a singular dominant narrative. They are almost always white men. Black women are present at

every level of higher education but are noticeably absent at the top. Senior-level administrators are defined as those at the director or executive level (Bertrand Jones, Scott Dawkins, McClinton, & Hayden Glover, 2012). In 2009, Black women led 22% of the United States' Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) compared to only eight PWIs (Bower & Wolverton, 2009). Why is it so hard for women to reach the highest levels of the academy?

Black women's career progression is stagnated for reasons that include limited control over financial resources, limited access to committees that control finances and planning oversight, and a lack of opportunities for senior-level career development (Bertrand Jones et al., 2012). In addition, Black women also report a lack of fitting in and social capital in the form of recommendations, contacts, and referrals (Guillory, 2001). Higher education serves to reproduce docile bodies that do not challenge white supremacist foundations (Stewart, 2017). Those who choose to reproduce white supremacy are rewarded. On the whole, Black women are strong and resilient. Leadership is an active site of resistance where one can choose to face the systemic barriers of racism and sexism head-on or actively try to avoid the reality of these barriers. Black women's contributions are often in direct conflict with archaic masculine leadership models. We are collaborators, advocates, and bridge-builders and challenge organizations to represent the diverse communities they serve: "Oprah, Kamala, Ava, Tariana and Lena / Serena, Viola, Opal, Patrice and Alicia / You and me, are the chosen / Right now, this is our moment" (Butler & Simpson, 2019, track 2).

### **Track 3 – Nevertheless She Resisted: Working Against the Academy**

Why do we even choose to situate ourselves within the academy—a space inherently against us? Higher education institutions were intended for elite white men, to prepare them for leadership in order to maintain the social order (Levinson et al., 2015; Wilder, 2013). Today, higher education often privileges the



voices of elite white men while silencing the voices of Black women (Collins, 2009). As Black women, our lived experiences and many of the beliefs and values we carry from our cultures of origin conflict with the dominant narrative. This contradictory consciousness allows us to see education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1984), instead of conforming to a form of education that merely strives to reinforce domination. To quote sista scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2009):

When it comes to the disciplinary domain of power, resistance from inside bureaucracies constitutes the overarching strategy. Ironically, just as organizations may keep Black women under surveillance, these same Black women have the capacity to keep organizations themselves under surveillance. (p. 300)

While we may exist within the academy, we operate against the academy. As Black women in the academy working against the academy, our roles involve “working the cracks” (Collins, 2009, p. 300). If we view our institutions as eggs, “[f]rom a distance each egg appears to be smooth and seamless, but, upon closer inspection, each egg’s distinctive patterns of almost invisible cracks become visible” (Collins, 2009, p. 300). Our positions within the academy allow us to see those cracks and expose the academy as “a well-oiled bureaucracy that was impervious to change” (Collins, 2009, p. 300). These cracks become opportunities to chip away at “the master’s house” (Lorde, 2007, p. 112). Cue our sista songbird, Lauryn Hill, “Ready or not / here we come / you can’t hide” (Jean et al., 1996, track 3).

In Track 3, we are three Black women professionals working at HWIs, who use both voice and silence as means of strategic resistance and agency to expose the cracks of neoliberalism and white supremacy in higher education (Luke, 1994; Collins, 2009). We choose to deconstruct dominant norms and narratives by constructing our own knowledge and counternarratives. We “claim an intellectual space not only by

complaining and deconstructing but by being fruitful and multiplying” (Hurtado, 2003, p. 219). Our ultimate goal is not to destroy, but to emancipate. ‘Cause isn’t that what we’ve always done—work towards liberation? It is our spiritual, historical, and intellectual legacy as Black women.

### Erica’s Interlude

*you can not  
remain  
a  
war  
between what you want to say (who you really are),  
And  
what you should say (who you pretend to be). your  
mouth was not designed to eat itself.  
(Waheed, 2013)*

A war, split, double consciousness (Dubois, 1961), fragmentation -- this is often how I experience being a Black woman within the academy. I endeavor to use my position, knowledge, and skills to amplify the experiences of the marginalized and help facilitate critical consciousness. But “working the cracks” (Collins, 2009, p. 300) doesn’t come without a personal cost.

It can be a struggle to be seen in pieces and parts instead of in the fullness of the totality of who you are. I’ve learned from sista scholar Cynthia Dillard (2000) that coherence in my personal identity—authenticity—does not negate the experience of fragmentation in my social identities. As Hurtado (2003) writes, “[F]ragmentation and the struggle to make oneself whole happens primarily when social identities are devalued” (p. 221). I resist the mask of controlling images (Collins, 2009) by embracing authenticity, while also acknowledging that wearing a mask can protect my authenticity from fragmentation. Lorde (2007) states:

In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar

with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection. (p. 114)

I embrace the authenticity of my silence, and I embrace silence as one of my tools for survival. Dominant narratives of women's development position women that are silent as voiceless, obedient, and under the coercion of authority (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). My silence is not submission but strategic engagement and strategic resistance. Silence creates space and time for me to critically reflect on my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, so that I can productively respond to racialized assumptions and stereotypes instead of hastily reacting to them. . Silence is also a tool for self-preservation that protects me from the abundant racism and sexism that exists in the academy and the stress because of those experiences (Ladson- Billings & Tate, 1995; Mabokela & Green, 2001). This performative conformity allows me and other Black women to protect our personal identities—our self-defined identities, our authentic selves—from the damage done by the gendered racial battle fatigue that we experience daily. To quote a famous poem about Black resistance and survival, “And why should the world be over- wise / In counting all our tears and sighs?” (Dunbar, 1895, p. 71). Nah, I'll only let them see me while I wear the mask.

### Carla's Interlude

For some Black women, silence is strategic resistance to the academy. For me, using my voice is a form of liberation and resistance. “When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone anywhere who lives in silence” (hooks, 1989, p. 18). Verbalizing my thoughts and experiences is a source of empowerment. Yet, there are (un)conscious or (un)intentional bureaucratic practices or interpersonal interactions—like performance evaluations used to police communication styles or that concerning glance from colleagues after vocalizing observations that counter the dominant norm—

that silence Black women's voices. Black women's ability to voice their lived reality is a positive form of self- definition when working against challenging experiences in higher education (Collins, 2009).

When I think about my professional experiences over my career and how I use my voice, the lyrics from “Listen,” a song Beyoncé performs in the motion picture adaptation of the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls* come to mind:

*Listen*

*To the sound from deep within*

*It's only beginning to find release...*

*Oh, the time has come for my dreams to be heard They will not be pushed aside and turned*

*Into your own, all 'cause you won't listen.*

(Krieger, Cutler, Preven, & Knowles, 2007, disc 2, track 13)

Black feminist and womanist theories have helped me rediscover my voice, which I use to work against marginalization and isolation in the academy. As a professional with a Haitian American accent, who often uses speech mannerisms influenced by my Brooklyn, New York upbringing as well as other Black women colloquialisms, I make an intentional effort to remain authentic while navigating acceptable communication standards within professional roles. Some may perceive how I communicate and what I communicate as antagonizing to the dominant culture. It can be tempting to conform as a sense of survival. Yet, I recall a quote attributed to Zora Neale Hurston when choosing to use my voice, “If you are silent about your pain, they'll kill you and say you enjoyed it” (Goodreads, n.d., para. 7).

There is a perception of a preferred way to perform and communicate within the dominant white male gaze of the academy in order for Black women's voices to be heard and taken seriously. I channel sista scholar, Brittney Cooper, and say, “fuck all that!” (Cooper, 2018, p. 215). Exercising communication strategies unique to the intersections of Black wom-

anhood that do not align with the hegemonic culture of colleges and universities is a form of resistance. There is power in the voices of Black women in higher education. As a seasoned professional and emerging scholar-practitioner, I am reclaiming my voice. I will continue to unapologetically use my voice.

### Brandy's Interlude

"I do not always feel colored...I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background...I feel my race" (Hurston, 1928/2014, p. 1041). I am an unapologetic Black woman who has worked tirelessly to not feel colored against a sharp white background like that of the academy. The academy, which was built upon and continues to function behind the veil of white supremacy (Wilder, 2013), was not built for me and my sistas led to careers in higher education. Acknowledging that we are "outsider[s]-within" (Collins, 2009, p. 13) the academy operating against the academy, as Black women, we understand the critical role we play in dismantling the master's house (Lorde, 2007). Audre Lorde (2007) professes that "those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women...know that *survival is not an academic skill*...It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths" (p. 112, italics in original). Our mere existence in the academy as Black women is a symbol of survival, resistance, and strength. This symbol resonates as we show up on historically white campuses with our daily armor of melanin, twist outs, and shea butter. Showing up authentically as ourselves within the academy causes disruptions to the whiteness that surrounds us. It is Black feminism that taught me to question the ways in which our voices and our bodies are not included in the academy. Many times, I find myself questioning the academy by identifying pressure points and "working the cracks" (Collins, 2009, p. 300), as the only Black woman in the room during cross-divisional meetings, search committees, and daily appointments where I engage with students and their families. But I am not a token, a mammy,

or a mule selected to simply fill two checkboxes. I am here, and my presence will be acknowledged. My voice will be heard, and I will be listened to.

*it's not about making you uncomfortable.*

*it's about making me comfortable.*

(Waheed, 2013)

"Black feminism is about the world Black women and girls can build, if all the haters would raise up and let us get to work" (Cooper, 2018, p. 35). While working with members of the dominant culture—mostly white women—I, like many Black women, consistently lean on Black feminist praxis to guide my interactions, decision-making, and strategic vision in my role as a senior-level administrator. This manifests in questioning the existence, or lack thereof, of programs for marginalized populations of students, acknowledging the work of other Black women on campus not in the room to speak for themselves, or calling out the presence of whiteness in strategic planning and funding structures utilized to move the institution forward. In doing so, I am perceived as angry or aggressive when my less melanated counterparts are viewed as passionate and assertive. Miss me with that bullshit! This does not create fear in me or hinder the work I came here to do. In the words of sista scholar Dr. Lori Patton Davis (2016), "I am unmoved" (para. 7).

### Track 4 – Choosing the Margin: Working Beyond the Academy

Advocating for one's own authentic self-presentation and actively practicing self-care may not seem like a revolutionary act, but for many Black women, the ability to advocate for themselves is radical. When it comes to Black women and their ability to advocate for themselves, the dominant narrative is that they are unable to advocate for themselves in ways legible to their white counterparts. Because they are deemed "strong," this allows others to believe they can take on added stress or face greater adversity without harm

(Davis, 2015).

Working beyond the academy means surpassing the confines of the academy and showing up how you choose to show up. It means owning the space and physicality you possess. Working beyond the academy means celebrating and embracing yourself without the applause of the academy. Working beyond the academy means not creating for the academy. It means advocating to be your authentic self unapologetically. Black women continue to dispel these myths both within and beyond the academy.

### Camaron's Interlude

*I owe you nothing  
I be myself and I ain't fronting*  
(Lidehall, Al Fakir, Sey, & Pontare,  
2018, track 1).

Being a Black woman in higher education means navigating the constant reminder of double consciousness (Dubois, 1961), constantly seeing yourself in spaces while simultaneously outside of yourself. The reality being that you are potentially there to fill a quota for the department, while understanding you wouldn't have been selected unless you were overqualified. You wouldn't have made it into the applicant pool if it was not for your resume being stacked higher than the rest and being twice as good to receive the same consideration. It means moving within a university being celebrated for its diversity, yet still facing exclusionary conditions. You are under the perception that people are relatively well-meaning but unsure of their true intentions. You think you are accepted for who you are, but then, their true colors begin to show. Being a Black woman in higher education is filtering yourself to blend in just enough to be accepted.

As Black women, hair is important to our identity and Black culture. Our hair is the way we express ourselves through versatile styling, and we build community through hairstyling in salons and kitchens. It influences our interactions, careers and how we are

perceived by the world. Higher education politicizes and regulates our hair as we face microaggressions and discriminatory expectations that challenge our ability to be completely authentic to our Blackness in academic spaces (Mbilishaka & Apugo 2020). From "I didn't recognize you today," "I liked your hair better yesterday," or "Can I touch your hair?," we are reminded that our hair is a part of our performance and daily interactions with our colleagues through policies stating, "professional hair," "natural colors," or "neat." The expectations of professional hair and presentability influence our ability to show up as we fight the expectation to alter ourselves.

During my time as an outdoor experiential educator in higher education, I have experienced a lack of understanding for Black women and our intersectionality. There are not a lot of professionals that look like me or understand my perspectives. Being open to conversations about my experiences as a Black woman and standing in my truth was one of the ways I pushed beyond the academy. For example, I recognized a problem with the institution's helmets; they did not accommodate different hairstyles, such as afros, braids, or anything not flat, and this created a problem for me and other Black women participants. Bringing attention to this issue and explaining my experience activated change to purchase larger helmets that accommodated Black women's versatility. Advocating for bigger helmets and exposing my colleagues to Black culture was one way I chose to engage. Without verbalizing my experiences, I fall into the pattern of silencing my voice. Vocalizing my needs allows me to push beyond the academy.

Showing up as an unapologetic, authentic Black woman is a radical practice. Taking space without reducing myself by code-switching and all of my Blackness is radical. Physically taking up space is a practice of resisting existing systems and structures created to diminish our light. Wearing my Black Lives Matter shirt with African earrings and an afro to staff meetings is seen as a statement and not as my existence. Vocalizing how policies in place are oppressive is seen

as a radical act. Therefore, Black women existing in higher educational spaces not only creates space for others to exist but creates space for social change in an environment that was not intended for us to thrive.

### Erica-Brittany's Interlude

*"You better do right by me, it's mandatory baby!"*

(Toby, Boyd, Davis, Harris, & Scott,  
2007, track 2).

As the sole Black woman full-time instructor in my department, I am often invisible despite my hypervisibility. Students and faculty members often pass me in the hallways without acknowledgment. On the rare occasion faculty members outside of my department approach me, it is often to ask if I need help finding something or someone. Other times, because of my hypervisibility, people know of me before they meet me. An upperclassman of color recently told me, "I heard about you, and I'm glad to finally meet you!" In my mind, I channel my inner Zora Neale Hurston (1928/2014), thinking to myself, "how can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me" (p. 1042). You could say my newfound superpower is to hide in plain sight. Some may see this superpower as disheartening, but I follow a long line of women who hid in plain sight. From these marginal positions, they were able to shapeshift in ways that opened spaces for other Black women to occupy positions within and beyond the academy. They created educational spaces through song, dance, and even comedy. But like many superheroes, they possessed a tragic flaw. They spent so much time helping others that they forgot about helping themselves and caring for their needs. Lorde (2017) writes, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 130). Black women must remember to take care of themselves beyond the academy; therefore, for me, working beyond the academy means stepping back from it to recharge.

"I want to trust you / I want to love you...I want

to have faith in you / but you just don't come through like you say you could" (Bear, Scott, Harris, & Davis, 2004, track 15). Though Jill Scott was talking about the complicated relationship between Black people and America, this also speaks directly to Black women's experiences within higher education. Black women and the academy have a volatile relationship where each learns to adapt to its dysfunction. As seen in trends from budding scholars of color, much of their scholarship seeks to reconcile or better understand racial and ethnic groups' lived experiences. For many scholars of color, conducting research on their minoritized experiences is therapeutic and transformative, but for others, it only reminds them of the ways they fracture their experiences to fit traditional academic models of scholarship. In these moments, self-care is necessary and starts with a sense of humor. If laughter is the best medicine, Dayle Cumber Dance (1998) gives the rationale for Black women's humor and its many side effects:

We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack...to camouflage sensitivity, to tease, to compliment, to berate, to brag, to flirt, to speculate, to gossip, to educate, to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change. (p. xxii)

To decompress from dysfunction, I find solace in friends, family, and mentors. In these spaces beyond the academy, I can be vulnerable, put down my shield, and even better, let out my joys and frustrations through laughter. Whether working within, against, or beyond the academy, advocating for yourself is self-care.

### Track 5 – Outro: Where Do We Go From Here?

*come celebrate with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed* (Clifton, 1993, p. 25).

Harris-Perry (2011) argues that Black women live in a crooked room in which they must negotiate the ways they are perceived by others with how they perceive themselves. Black women bend as they try to reconcile perceptions of Black womanhood, as seen in hair choices, language, use of voice, and attitudes, from their realities of Black womanhood. Despite these things, they stand firm. So, if these are the realities for Black women in higher education, where do they go from here?

As Black women in the academy, we must first remember who we are and the heritage we bring to the academy. We come from a long tradition of educators and thinkers. Black women have always conducted intellectual work beyond traditional academic spaces. We remember Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Moms Mabley, Fannie Lou Hamer, Queen Latifah, Oprah Winfrey, Grandmothers, Mothers, Aunts, Cousins, and countless others, as educators enacting various public pedagogies not confined by physical classrooms.

Coined by Carman Luke (1996) as the pedagogy of the everyday, Henry Giroux (2000) asserts:

Central to [public pedagogy projects] is the need to begin at those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested...public pedagogy in this context becomes part of a critical practice designated to understand the social context of everyday life as lived relations of power (p. 355).

Although not all the women mentioned found themselves in traditional classroom spaces, they push Black women today to consider the fluidity of intellect and the value of various forms of knowledge production while working outside of traditional academic spaces.

Black women as public pedagogues have opened and created spaces for all kinds of Black women to speak when they have been silenced within the academy. As seen in our use of music as a form of critical

literacy and a demonstration of public pedagogy as praxis, Black women continue to contextualize their experiences through song and poetry. From our marginal positions, we are able to find solace in our cultural communities, using theorists not recognized by the academy—Seinabo Sey, Nayyirah Waheed, Solange, Beyoncé...the list goes on. The mixtape we presented captures pieces of ourselves, while highlighting the nuances of Black womanhood. As mentioned, Black women are not monolithic. However, we often share similar experiences in combating dominant narratives, such as remaining respectable; maneuvering controlling images; knowing when, where, and how to use our voices; and demonstrating our strength even to our own detriment. Each track presented an alternate view of dominant narratives and, in its own way, readjusted the narrative for a more realistic depiction of Black women in the academy.

The seven of us subscribe to various theoretical perspectives including critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), public pedagogy (Giroux, 2000; Luke, 1996), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Collins, 2009), and critical pedagogy (hooks, 1984; Kincheloe, 2008). Yet, we are unified under the perspective of Black feminism (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1984; Lorde, 2007) and implement it as an interpretive framework to define ourselves for ourselves as a means of surviving, resisting, and articulating possibility. As Black women in the academy, we endeavor to actively generate alternative knowledge and practices from our lived experiences in order to foster our own empowerment. This collective BFA provided a space for us, as Black women in the academy, to share our experiences and group knowledge. As much as we aspire to challenge the norms of the academy, we find it equally valuable to build solidarity with one another for our work together is a living mixtape. Mic drop.

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