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It Just Got Real: Dissertating Under the Tripartite Pressures of the Covid Pandemic, Anti-Black Racism, and the Academic Job Market

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Dissertating During a Pandemic

Narratives of Success From Scholars of Color



edited by

Ramon B. Goings | Sherella Cupid

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CHAPTER 13

“IT JUST GOT REAL!”

Dissertating Under the Tripartite Pressure of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Anti-Black Racism, and the Academic Job Market

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I completed and defended my doctoral dissertation after my state instituted a shelter-in-place order during the COVID-19 pandemic. Two of my children were in middle school and learning remotely, while my daughter, located in another state, dealt with the pandemic on her campus. I wrote a dissertation about historical student, community, and campus activists while witnessing a renewal of student, community, and campus activism due to the continued state sanctioned murder of Black people, such as Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the United States. Still further, I completed this work as the already capricious academic job market sank even further into uncertainty. For many doctoral students, the time spent writing a dissertation is fraught with competing time demands, crushing anxiety and

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insecurities, poor health, and the stress of finding work after completion (Brown & Watson, 2010; Evans, 2007; Silinda & Brubacher, 2016; Sverdlik & Hall, 2020).

STUDY SYNOPSIS

I conducted a historical study of the ways Black women experienced the civil rights/Black Power eras as students at Fayetteville State University (Fayetteville State), a historically Black institution of higher education located in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I graduated from Fayetteville State and I grew up in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I felt a particular kinship to the women in my study as we were all Black women who attended the institution and, for at least a time, considered Fayetteville home. I used archival sources such as student, local, and national newspapers and magazines and institutional records to lay the sociohistorical foundation for my 18 oral history interviews. Through these sources, I explored how Black women participated in the sit-in and Black campus movements, how they came to gain political education via family, community, and/or educational experiences that may have shaped their involvement in organizing and activism, and how their participation in these protests may have affected their career trajectories.

I found that Black women were present, active, and, in some cases, leaders within student protest efforts during the sit-in and Black campus movement(s) while students at Fayetteville State in at least four ways mediated by gendered social norms. First, Black women participated through groups—such as Black Greek letter organizations—for which membership inherently denoted leadership. Second, Black women were on the front lines during both the off-campus sit-in movement and the on-campus Black campus movement. Third, Black women participated as bridge leaders and communicators. Sociologist Belinda Robnett (1997) defines bridge leaders as persons who serve as go-betweens connecting those in power—in this case the Student Government Association president and the university administration—with the foot soldiers or student body. Lastly, Black women made up the campus electorate and were, therefore, responsible for the election of the SGA presidents. The simple act of being Black in the United States radicalized the students in my study. Some of the narrators spoke to recognizing and experiencing injustice at very young ages and the ways such memories seemed to strengthen their resolve to fight injustice as adults. Many of the narrators I interviewed were deeply connected to their home churches but attended Fayetteville churches that collaborated with organizations, such as CORE and the NAACP, to provide nonviolent direct-action training for students. Some of the narrators discussed the ways their professors and politically educated community leaders introduced them

to grassroots organizing and activism. Finally, their experiences, whether overtly gendered or not, impacted their career and community experiences post-graduation. Most of the Black women and men I interviewed spent at least part of their careers as educators and they all remained connected to social movement work at the community, local, or state level.

CONTEXT AND PRESSURE

When I began my doctoral studies, my daughter was in high school. By the time I defended my dissertation, she was a junior in college. I intended to complete my dissertation in 2018, but I had a knee injury that sent me into a deep depression due to poor medical care and being gaslit by multiple physicians. In not letting this injury confine me, I attempted to do all the things I'd done before, but with a pronounced limp and sometimes debilitating pain. Prior to this injury, I wrestled with beginning my dissertation interviews because I was terrified that no one would agree to talk to me. I injured my leg a few days after I worked up the nerve to call and interview the first person. This increased my pre-existing writer's block. I turned into as much of a hermit as graduate school allowed for at least a year. In a discussion with a member of my cohort, I admitted that I was stuck. Just saying those words out loud broke the wall for me. I made an appointment with my advisor. I managed to refrain from crying while I explained that I was scared that I would not be able to write my dissertation. He shared some stories of his experiences writing his dissertation and shared that when he couldn't write, he made sure he performed other tasks that were important to his work. Through this conversation, I realized that I did the same. There hadn't been a single week where I didn't collect and catalog archival research, read pertinent articles, or have conversations about my topic—activities that are a part of writing a dissertation. I contacted the next person on my list of potential narrators. She agreed. I contacted the next person and she agreed. I ended up conducting most of my interviews over the next 3 weeks. My orthopedic doctors refused to operate on my leg and put me through months of ineffective physical therapy until I more aggressively demanded proper care. I had surgery in June of 2019 and intended to finish my dissertation by the Summer of 2020 and defend during the fall semester.

COVID-19 AND THE ACADEMIC JOB SEARCH

Because I found it difficult to concentrate on the dissertation, my work as a graduate teaching and research assistant, my family, and the job search, I did not intend to apply for academic jobs until after I completed my

dissertation. I applied for several postdoc positions that would allow me to do the exact work I wanted to do. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my children never physically returned to school after spring break as they moved to remote learning. At the time, I was recovering from the flu. I interviewed for my current position after seeing several institutions institute hiring freezes and rescind job offers. Upon being offered the position, I met with my advisor in mid-May, talked to my committee, and developed my completion plan. I discussed the situation with my family, and we agreed that Mommy needed to write.

WRITING CHALLENGES

I am extremely productive when writing in coffee shops or restaurants. The soft busy murmur provides just enough background noise for me. While writing at home during the pandemic, however, every sound was a distraction from the work because I was responsible for my family. I countered this in two ways. I began getting up by 5:00 a.m., having a cup of tea, cleaning one thing in my house, and being in my seat to read one article and write by 7:00 a.m. I then put on headphones and participated in several online writing groups created by and for Black women. I also went without sleep sometimes due to wanting to capture and complete a line of thought before I lost or forgot it. I met my deadlines early but doing so took a toll on my health, due to lack of sleep and overreliance on caffeine. As each one of my committee members was also an administrator and dealing with how my campus responded to the pandemic, I got very little feedback on my chapters. This, of course, deepened my sense of dread. First that no one would agree to be interviewed, next that I would not be able to write it at all, now that what I did write wouldn't be good. I cried a lot. I felt increasing pressure to finish the dissertation, but I also wanted to write a document that my narrators would be proud to read.

SHELTER-IN-PLACE AS OPPORTUNITY

My state's shelter in place order meant that each member of my immediate family was home at the same time, so I felt torn by trying to meet their needs while trying to finish the dissertation. Being home, however, aided in my dissertation completion in two ways. First, it was less distracting than the rat race of school drop offs and pick-ups, sports, and going to and from campus to work. I no longer had to end a day worrying and planning for the next day's excursions. I lost a lot of time to those endeavors and ended up with several notebooks of ideas I had to table until I could get back to

my computer. While I was responsible for making sure my children participated in their classes and did their homework, I experienced far fewer interruptions to my work. Second, my children saw the work I had to do in real time—work I would normally complete while they were in school. The dissertation became something in which my children also took ownership. For example, my sons would remind each other to let me write so that “we” could finish this “long paper.” Answering their questions about my progress often helped me think through analytical points. I distinctly remember my youngest son’s face when he saw me remove the last sticky note from my to-do board. His excitement allowed me to, for once, take a moment and enjoy the milestone of submitting my full draft to my committee.

I successfully defended my dissertation, virtually, in front of a Zoom audience of over 40 guests on July 1, 2020. My digital defense alleviated some of my stage fright because I did not have to deal with how awkward I feel standing in front of a crowd at an in-person defense. What does one do with their hands after all? Defending my dissertation virtually also allowed several generations of my loved ones to witness me become the first person on either side of my family to earn a PhD. It would have been expensive to physically bring that many members of my family to my campus. Because they are open to the public, in person defenses can be tense and cold. Most of the people who attended my virtual defense knew me long before I entered graduate school and they were deeply invested in my success. I don’t think I ever smiled as hard looking at each of their faces and trying to thank each one individually.

STRATEGIES AND TIPS

It is not nor should it ever be considered normal to complete a dissertation the way that I did. This essay is not a pitch for normalizing writing a dissertation in 3 weeks. Were it not for the way I organized my historiographical and archival research in the years prior to my time dedicated to completing the writing portion of my dissertation and the way that I wrote snippets of certain stories over the years and had them ready for insertion into the document, I would not have been able to complete my dissertation under this kind of extreme pressure. While the positive aspects of how I managed to go from three chapters to eight chapters in 3 weeks (scrapping and re-writing two of them), might not work for everyone, I do want to share several of them. The most important step is to backdate your completion plan. By this I mean that you should set short deadlines going backwards from your defense date. When should you get a full draft to your advisor? How much time do you need to devote to each chapter? Schedule yourself time to put the document down before editing it. Do you want a reader

outside your committee to see the document first? How much time do they need to provide feedback?

I joined and effectively used my time in a variety of Black women created and curated online writing spaces. These spaces and the Black women in them were integral to my completion; I was in community with other Black women who were at various stages in their doctoral process and with whom I did not have to explain my angst. We could just do the work. Some of these groups required us to simply report our progress while others required us to meet via videoconferencing while writing. In line with this strategy, I also verbalized my completion goals to my family and posted those goals on social media. This added another layer of accountability.

The next strategy I used was to set and stick to a writing ritual of sorts. I got up before the rest of my family and used that time to myself to grab some tea, clean one thing, read one thing, and begin the day's writing. I found this helpful because I contributed something to each area in which I held responsibility—myself, my home, and my scholarship and that alleviated some of my daily stress.

Additionally, I cannot overemphasize the degree to which you must protect your writing time. You may write for longer periods of time, but I suggest you devote several hours of uninterrupted time each day to writing the dissertation. It can be trying to repeat yourself to your family, friends, and employers, but do it. Volunteer for nothing. If your goal is to complete the dissertation, you would not bring your whole self to any additional projects you take on anyway. Lastly, protect your health and sleep when your body tells you to. Refusing sleep is not a sustainable practice and you'll just end up rewriting unusable paragraphs.

AFFIRMATIONS AND THE WRITING PROCESS

I made use of various forms of affirmations during my writing and defense whirlwind—visual, verbal, and written. I created a gallery wall in my living room with photographs of historical and contemporary Black women and family members who inspired me and were integral to my work. The faces of Maria Stewart, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ida B. Wells, Anna Julia Cooper, Nina Simone, Anne Chesnutt, and Jenifer Lewis, for example, coupled with what I knew of their stories, provided me with motivation to complete my work. I kept a picture of Fannie Lou Hamer as my desktop background and a picture of Toni Morrison as the background on my laptop.

Further affirmations came from the women I found in the pages of my work. Each person I interviewed for my dissertation—some with doctoral degrees, most without one—imparted words of wisdom to me for the

dissertation process. When discouraged, I thought back on their kind words. I also printed a copy of a quote, attributed to Maya Angelou, and kept it on my desk. Angelou said, “Forgive yourself for not knowing what you did not know before you learned it.” This helped me get through the times I felt embittered over how little guidance I had throughout the long story of my process.

Lastly, I will always draw inspiration and resolve from a line in historian Stephanie Y. Evans’ (2007) *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850–1954*. In situating the subject of her research within the larger community of Black American women, Evans reminded her readers, “For every triumph cited here, the Academy crushed thousands of Black women. Many left without their diploma, some not to return, some never to recover” (p. 102). I sat with this line for quite some time and, ultimately, I decided that the Academy would not crush me.

CONCLUSION

In short, the pressures and challenges in writing and defending a dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic, explosive displays of anti-Black racism, and the precarity of the academic job market ended up also serving as opportunities and motivation to do the work. I created a writing world where I wrote about Black women’s historical organizing and activism while I simultaneously witnessed contemporary instances of anti-Black racism that mirrored those that occurred in the distant times and places I visited in my work. My desire to chronicle prior activist experiences as a set of blueprint and cautionary tales of sorts for contemporary and future organizers and activists delivered a sense of urgency that the job offer alone could never have provided. Most importantly, I formed an intentional community with *sista* scholars—Black women who were also writing towards their own dissertation or manuscript completion. In a world outside this carefully curated one, I may not have been as successful.

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