Lifting as We Climb
A Black Woman's Reflections on Teaching and Learning at One Southern HBCU

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> But teaching was about service, giving back to one's community. For Black folks teaching—educating—was fundamentally political because it was rooted in antiracist struggle. (hooks, 1994)

I WAS EDUCATED IN ISOLATION. Raised by a progressive single mother in a large Northern city, I attended charter, Montessori, private and public schools, and was one, if not the only, of the Black children. My college years were an extension of my experience in isolation. By the time I started my career in academia, I was already worn down by years of navigating multiple environments. Then my big break! I was offered a tenure-track position at a historically Black university in the South. I thought I had found my opportunity to really impact students. Equally as important, I thought since I would be teaching at a historically Black university (HBCU), and one in the South no less, I would finally find the support and encouragement I needed to navigate academia – this was the kind of sisterly support and encouragement I had been yearning for all these years. I quickly realized I was wrong. I was mistaking Southern hospitality for true compassion and caring. As a result of my experiences, I have learned that, in the South, sometimes it is best to act "as if" rather than "to be."

What follows is the story of my struggle to stay alive within academia as I searched for tools and strategies that would allow me not only to survive, but also possibly to thrive within the ivory tower. According to what I thought I knew to be true, there should not have been any problems for Black women employed at HBCUs. Having only read about the struggles of Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), I naively assumed those problems did not translate to HBCUs. Imagine my surprise to find the struggle for Black women was the same, if not worse, than at PWIs.

My narrative illuminates struggles faced by Black women at HBCUs. Due to the preponderance of information about the struggles of Black women at PWIs (and the subsequent

lack of information about the struggles of Black women at HBCUs) my account is a counternarrative that makes visible the negative experiences of Black women at HBCUs that are too often hidden. In describing my struggles for survival at an HBCU, I also review existing literature about Black women employed at predominantly White institutions. When coupled with narrative accounts of my own employment experiences, this review of literature helps emphasize the relative invisibility of Black women's experiences at HBCUs and, as a result, the significance of my counternarrative.

I recall my first experience on campus for my interview. I was pleasantly at ease with the students and faculty I met that day. For a big city girl, the campus had a little taste of home. For me that meant an environment of shared goals, a collectivist worldview and support. In my mind's eye, I envisioned a professional journey where everyone would be engaged in the success of their colleagues and the students. Collectivism, based on support, encouragement, and shared knowledge, is a survival strategy passed down by Black women since slavery. As a Black woman, I embraced the ethic of collectivism.

Despite my high hopes for my work experiences at the HBCU that employed me, I was disappointed with the lack of mentoring and sisterly support I found on campus. I was still on my own without knowing who to trust and what my next step should be. A different type of politics surrounded me. I entered the tenure game, and in the South that also meant politely getting along. Discussions about church and food overrode discussions about campus activism. As a transplant to the South, I found myself with differing views on religion/spirituality, vegetarianism, and homophobia than the majority of my colleagues. But in the South, those discussions are well—just rude.

"Lifting as They Climbed"

Black women have relied on support, encouragement and shared knowledge as tools for survival. As an undergraduate student at a predominantly White institution (PWI), I gravitated towards Women's Studies and Black Studies courses as a way to make sense of my feelings of marginalization, isolation, anger, and confusion. It was in these classes that I was introduced to literature that helped me frame my experience as part of a larger narrative. I was so intent on knowing more about my how my experiences connected with other Black women at PWIs that I researched this literature as part of my master's thesis. What I discovered was both reassuring and startling. Black women at PWIs reported experiences that ranged from chilly classrooms to outright hostility (Arango, 1993; Anderson, 1988; Beoku-Betts & Njambi, 2009; Evans, 2007; Giddings, 1984; Gregory, 1995; hooks, 2004). This type of visually and culturally isolating and oppressive environment demanded that people rally together and press for equality in treatment. The literature paralleled my experiences as a Black female student at a PWI. However, the focus on the problems of inclusion at PWIs seems to have created a literary vacuum regarding issues at HBCUs. In the silence, I began to believe the assumption or illusion that if no one was complaining, there must not be a problem. Or as one of the phrases I've learned since moving to the South goes: "a hit dog will yelp." Since there was no one yelping, the assumption seemed to be that no Black women working at HBCUs had been hit. Against this assumption, I assert that those who were "hit" were too paralyzed by their fear to yelp. Their fear outweighed their pain, and rather than call attention to the pain, they struggled in silence.

The Role of Black Women in Education

As a small child, I knew that my family valued education. It was not until my experiences and my ensuing research that I began to more fully understand the historical role of education for Black women. Education was, and continues to be, a recurring act of resistance across historical time periods. Black women created opportunities for change through education both as students in higher education and as founders and teachers of schools. In the Black community, education was framed as a "way out" and a "way up." I was told often as a child to focus on my studies and stay in school. Black women were active in education as teachers, but they also understood the importance of higher education as a social mobility tools for Blacks. It was my dream as well to utilize education to ensure the financial stability of my family when I pursued my master's degree. My decision to pursue a doctorate was more personal—it was my opportunity to hopefully leave my footprint on the world. As I pursued my terminal degree, I discovered that between 1921 and 1954, there were "over 60 doctoral degrees awarded to black women." It became clear that:

> Education mattered and African Americans sought to make it work for them, regardless of the various methods employed to attain it. The doctorate, in the right hands, became a tool for racial justice and equal human rights. When black women gained access to graduate degrees, they infiltrated the academy in hopes of redefining scholarship and rechanneling resources of educational institutions to benefit the historically disenfranchised. (Evans, 2007, p. 138)

Even with a terminal degree, high hopes and "access", Black women still had a long road ahead of them in academia. Although the statistics regarding Black women in academia continue to create the illusion of progress, equality, and equity (Gregory, 1995; Harley, 2008), closer examination reveals a broader picture. Black women are increasing in the number of doctoral degrees awarded; however, there still exists a lack of racial parity. In 2010, 7.1% of Black women received terminal degrees; yet Blacks represent 13% of the population in the United States. The fields in which Black women receive terminal degrees and the institutions they work at upon completion continue to be disproportionate in comparison to their White counterparts (Carter-Black, 2008; Gregory, 1995; Hall, 2006; Harley, 2008). In addition, Black women work at less prestigious institutions; receive tenure at a rate much lower than their colleagues; and are often clustered in clinical, assistant, instructor and other "academic apartheid" positions (Contreras, 1998). As a result, Black women are named as "one of the most isolated, underused, and consequently demoralized segments of the academic community" (Carter et al., 1998 as cited in Harley, 2008, p. 21).

Challenges Facing Black Women in (White) Academia

As mentioned earlier, the research on Black women in the academy focuses primarily on the conditions for Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The overarching theme of the research regarding challenges faced by Black women in academia highlights themes of alienation and isolation. Alexander and Mohanty (1997) described predominantly White academic environments as producing a "sense of alienation, dislocation, and marginalization,

that often accompanies a racialized location with white institutions" (p. 68). Given the many years I had spent at PWIs, both as a student and an employee, the research confirmed my experiences. Upon further reflections, however, I framed the research to mean that environments at HBCUs are not racialized, and therefore would not create this same "sense of alienation, dislocation and marginalization."

Accepting the research at face value was easy for me given my experiences. A lot of what I read was commonplace knowledge among my peers. As I began my tenure in academia full of committees and appointments, occasionally someone would comment that the university needed me on a committee to fulfill diversity requirements. This statement itself, is not harmful, but the cumulative effect of the additional workload and the statements lead to my "cultural taxation" (Padilla, 1994). Cultural taxation describes the burden of additional responsibilities placed upon underrepresented faculty because of their racial, ethnic, and/or gender group memberships. These responsibilities include serving on numerous committees, mentoring larger numbers of students, and serving as the "departmental experts" for their particular gender or ethnic group. These additional expectations can impede career progress and may result in psychological problems. For me these expectations became exhausting, yet I was afraid to say no because of the culture that I worked within.

My hesitation to decline committee assignments and outside mentoring projects was tied in part to my need to prove that I could perform in academia. This has been described by Kelly (2007) as "racial tokenism" during his study of Black teachers as "tokens" in schools. His research expanded upon Kanter's (1977) theory of tokenism and delineated parameters for tokenized Black women in academia, in particular "performance pressure, boundary heightening, and role entrapment" (Kelly, 2007, p. 249). Tokenism of Black women in academia is problematized by the negative media images, further pushing Black women into the margins of the ivory tower, and compounding their alienation and isolation (Beoku-Betts & Njambi, 2009).

The effects of "cultural taxation" and "tokenism" are compounded by the amount of mentoring and service work Black women in academia conduct. Black women faculty are often sought out by students to act as mentors, reducing the amount of time allotted for scholarly work and creating very tough choices (Carter-Black, 2008; Gregory, 1995; Harley, 2008). Students consistently contact me after they have graduated for career and/or professional advice. I never turn them down, because I feel partly responsible for sharing with them whatever information I have acquired. This feeling may be tied to the historical ideology of collectivism held by most Black women in academe, and grounded in African and African American traditions (such as the National Association of Colored Women's motto of "Lifting as We Climb"). I understand my desire to be available to others as a moral choice; however, research has shown that this ideology can lead to a predicament for Black women whose service to others can lead to a lack of scholarly progress. Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) note:

> Another unwritten rule that Black women and other women of color faculty members often find difficult to address is that one protect one's time from service work and unlimited interactions with students at all costs, especially if one is not tenured. The conflict in this regard is particularly magnified for women of color when they feel that students of color need their assistance or that specific committees need their voice and representation. (p. 173)

Balancing expectations and navigating competing ideologies is psychologically and physically exhausting. I still struggle with the guilt associated with "protecting my time" because I recognize that someone lifted me as they climbed.

The challenges raised above can lead to serious physical and psychological health problems for Black women in academia. Passion for teaching, coupled with alienation/isolation, mentoring, role strain, etc., has resulted in a disproportionate amount of hypertension, heart disease, and depression among Black women faculty (Harley, 2008). Contrary to the dominant narrative, these conditions are not confined to the campuses of PWIs.

All that Glitters ain't Gold: Black Women Faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities

HBCUs were created during periods of segregation, as more formalized paths to higher education that would lead to upward mobility. The vast majority of historically Black colleges and universities were founded after the Civil War and given the daunting task of educating free Blacks (Gasman, 2007). Given the significant role Black women have played in education, it seems plausible that HBCUs would provide a much needed respite from the micro-aggressions of the larger social world. I believe that the above assumption (i.e, that HBCUs are nurturing places for Black women) is the reason that there is a dearth of information regarding the experiences of Black women who are employed at HBCUs. There has been a longstanding assumption that such research was not needed. According to Guy-Shetfall (1997) "a common misconception of historically black colleges and universities is that diversity is a non-issue, or even an oxymoron" (p. 56). This misconception has led to limited research on this topic, but further research is long overdue.

As I stated at the beginning of my counternarrative, my lived experience has been that Black women at HBCUs struggle with issues similar to those at PWIs, including isolation and disproportionate representation in leadership roles. Even one of the most well-known and respected HBCUs in the South, Spelman, struggled with turning over leadership to a woman. It was not until the 1970s that Spelman received its first Black female dean (Gasman, 2007). According to Gasman (2007), this illustrates that even "within the black college community, which was primarily governed by white and black male trustees, black women were rarely *trusted* to lead their own kind" (p. 772).

As I began my first year of employment at an HBCU, the excitement ran through my veins. I had a visceral and positive reaction to teaching. But, not just to teaching in general—I had been doing that for a while. I was having a reaction to teaching Black students. This was my chance to make a difference, give back, and share what I had learned about navigating systems of oppression! I was bright-eyed, super excited, and volunteering for every committee I could that I thought would make a change.

I was operating under the assumption that, given the historical role of Black women in education mentioned earlier, we (i.e., Black women) would not only understand the importance of education, but would also value the need to work together towards common goals. I realize now that I made the fatal mistake of assuming that everyone who looked like me thought like me. I negated the wide range of consciousness levels within any culture. I also turned a blind eye to the type of "horizontal hostility" (Lorde, 2007) and intragroup competitiveness that can exist within groups and cause destructiveness and division. I was not alone in initially ignoring the

plight of Black women at HBCUs. According to Bonner (2002), what continues to be missing from the dialogue is a "focus on the conditions and concerns of women at the nation's historically Black colleges and universities" (p.182). As mentioned earlier, many of the challenges Black women face in (White) academia such as alienation and isolation, cultural taxation, tokenism, disproportionate amounts of service work and mentoring, and internalized oppression are also faced at HBCUs.

"You're in the South now."

One day a colleague approached me with a research idea. He was intrigued by the deteriorating physical health of faculty at HBCUs. In a nutshell, he wondered, "are we [Black faculty] literally working ourselves to death?" He discussed his idea with a more seasoned faculty member who told him to "leave it alone." Such a project could get him, and me, labeled as "troublemakers." Not to be easily dissuaded, we contacted another tenured faculty member who echoed the advice we heard earlier. When I attempted to explain how I just could not understand this rationale, I was told "you're in the South now." The tenured faculty member was referring to my previous history and interest in social justice and activism while living in the North. According to him the direct approach often used in the North just would not work in the South. Reflecting on our warnings not to proceed with the project, my research partner and I marveled over the irony of working at an institution of higher education where we were charged with teaching our students independent and critical thinking while we were, at the same time, considering abandoning our research project because of fear that the seasoned faculty members who gave us advice were right.

An environment, riddled with fear and laced with patriarchy, does not promote healthy psychological or physiological development in faculty and I find this type of environment to be counterproductive for an HBCU. Historically Black colleges and universities which were developed to promote, uplift, and encourage Blacks and teach them, in part, to discover and *use* their voice. In the long term, Black women will not be able to survive by reacting to oppression with tools that do not allow us to use or understand our condition in a more psychologically healthy way. I believe the first step to making the environment of HBCUs more psychologically healthy for Black women is to share my experiences in order to break a silence that has been held too long.

While my counternarrative was written to shed light on the uncomfortable truth of Black women's work experiences at HBCUs, this portion of my paper discusses invigorating possibilities for positive social changes through the use of Black feminist literature to better understand, resist, and transcend the oppressive circumstances Black women experience within HBCUs.

Research has shown that the challenges Black women have faced in academia have been met with creative forms of resistance. Some of these resistance strategies carried over from slavery have been adapted to fit new conditions. These strategies include resiliency, building community, defiance, religion and mentoring (Gregory, 1995, 2001; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). But knowing what others had done was ultimately not enough to help me navigate the battlefield of academia. I had to find my own way—in my own time. And I did.

Creating my Own Paradise

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994)

I started this article by stating that I was educated in isolation. It is important that you (and I) don't forget that. I mentioned earlier being numerically outnumbered and feeling out of place. But what I think was really tragic is that I thought I was all alone. Throughout my high school and for a part of my undergraduate career, my thoughts and my very existence as a Black woman were subtly negated by everything I read, heard and saw. My way of thinking, feeling, existing, and knowing in the world was deemed invalid. I did not know that I was lacking serious and sustained connection with other Black women through dialogue that would validate my thoughts and feelings.

A change began to occur when I went back to school. At the time, I had no idea that I would be developing a survival strategy that would save my life, and ultimately help me to survive in academia. I was a stay-at-home mom with a masters' degree, three wonderful children and a supportive and loving partner—yet somehow I felt disenchanted. I remember vividly the day I decided I needed more. At a play date with my neighbors and our young children, I said *out loud* for the first time—I think I want to start a Ph.D. program. I wasn't aware then of the concept of voice, but I was just starting to find mine again. We were making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and I was handling my task of pouring apple juice into sippy cups when I could no longer ignore the yearning from within. It was like my soul had decided to override my brain and tell me what to do. I mean, if you think about it (or for that sake if *I* had thought about it) it made no sense. I had three children. My plate was full. How was I going to go back to school? How would I pay for it? But I couldn't ignore that yearning, even though I tried. And now I understand why, I was in a fight to save my life.

Connecting with My "Sistahs"

When I started my Ph.D. program, I wanted to explore the impact of education on children. But my soul would not let me go there. I had to change. I was being pushed in another direction, and I decided to follow it. In my quest, I began reading. Some books and articles I selected by choice, and some were required or assigned reading for classes. I wanted to tease out my anger, frustration and loneliness, but I was afraid that I would begin to dismantle what I would not be able to repair. I have since learned that fear is a common, and sometimes paralyzing theme, and I learned to work through it. My classes became both a retreat and a battle ground. It is hard to explain.

In my classes, I often found other Black women like me--women that I could feel were in my predicament. But again, we were not in the majority. With no Black female teacher during my doctoral years, we were left to figure it out. Stand up. Stand out. Be heard. Be silent. I often ran the risk of being labeled as the demonstrative Black woman, but I was starting to care less. Day by day, article by article, and book by book, I was finding my voice. I began reading about

women like me who had made it through the parasitic institution of education relatively unscathed.

Reflecting upon my journey, I would say I leaned most heavily upon the work of three Black Feminist Scholars: Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde. As I continued to read works by Black feminist scholars about topics that affected my life, I felt that I was engaging in dialogue. Realizing that I could no longer survive alone, I invited these scholars to sit with me virtually at my kitchen table and share their secrets of survival. By "talking" to these Black women scholars, I was discovering a new coping mechanism. I knew that ultimately I wasn't alone in my struggle. These women, my sistahs, taught me how to break my silence, confront my fear, love myself, and build my own community. I discuss each of these topics in the concluding section that offers a reflection on the challenges and benefits I recognize in sharing this counternarrative of the work experiences of Black women at HBCUs.

Breaking My Silence and Confronting My Fear

In 2010, I attended a summer institute for doctoral students. All of the participants were Black, and I was so excited about the opportunity to engage in "scholarly discourse." But I was expected to silently recognize the pecking order of privilege. During a discussion, I confronted a member of the group on his implied homophobia and was almost eaten alive by my "brothers." One of the group leaders said to us that we must never forget "we are Black first!" I was shocked by this statement, as I refused to privilege my oppressions, but no one said anything to support me. That fear of being alone and *isolated* crept back in.

Afterwards, nearly every young woman in attendance approached me and said "I was thinking the same thing"; but no one *said* anything. I doubted myself for a long time that night, fighting myself, using my energy against myself, because I felt I was correct in speaking up. Why did it bother me so? Why was I so afraid to become an anathema? For the rest of that institute several "brothers" wouldn't speak to me. I looked around the room with my "brothers" and "sisters" and realized I was alone. It was a pivotal point for me. As I found my voice that weekend and realized that it sometimes came with isolation and alienation.

All of my sistahs discuss the importance of recognizing, owning, and claiming our voice. According to Hill Collins (1998), when Black women break their silence individually through autobiographies or narratives, they are adding to, and shifting, the collective voice of Black women. The writing becomes, as it has for me, a counter-hegemonic tool, which nurtures a healing process both individually and collectively. Hill Collins (1998) has discussed the importance of writing about "concrete experiences," stating that "when Black women valorize their own concrete experiences, they claim the authority of experience" (p. 48). This authority disrupts other discourses which seek to subjugate marginalized groups by denying and/or overlooking the validity of lived experiences.

Voice involves the ability to acknowledge our feelings, addresses and conquers the fear that keeps us standing still. It also involves destroying the silences that slowly choke us. Like Lorde (2007), I have learned that to "suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance" (p. 58), which then places additional power in the hands of our oppressors. I recount my experiences at the summer institute because there, like the HBCU where I presently work, my silence would have contributed to the oppression of others. At the institute and at my current place of employment, fear is a reality that must be managed if we have any chance of making changes.

I find great comfort and insight from the poem, *A Litany for Survival*, in which Lorde (1978) addressed the issue of speaking out despite one's fear:

> and when we speak we are afraid
> our words will not be heard
> nor welcomed
> but when we are silent
> we are still afraid
> So it is better to speak
> Remembering
> we were never meant to survive. (p. 32)

I am learning, every day, to move through my fear. I recognize fear as a tool for immobilization, complacency and obedience. I also realize that the South was, and still can be, a fearful place to live if you are Black. Yet Blacks have had to learn how to survive, physically and psychologically, within this oppressive environment.

Addressing my fear is a daily battle. I have to remind myself, through reading counter-hegemonic literature or talking with friends, that I am within my rights to stand up for myself—at all times and with all people. Shedding light on the experiences faced by other Black women and myself at HBCUs is a way of standing up for myself. It is also a means of loving myself.

Loving Myself

But the greatest of these is love—(I Corinthians 13)

You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire Universe, deserve your love and affection—
Buddha

I have decided to start this section on loving myself with two quotes that I live by daily. The first quote I have heard many times as a child in church. The second quote I discovered while in Portland, Oregon, and it struck right to my core. I dug around in my purse for paper and scribbled it down. I shared it as my quote on Facebook, not for the others, but for ME, to remind ME to love ME.

I have learned from my sistahs that I must make time for myself and treat myself the way I have treated others. In this article I have outlined the literature on the personal sacrifices that Black women often make while in service of others. From personal experiences, I know that this condition exists within HBCUs as well as PWIs. I've learned that an empty vessel can't pour; Black women at HBCUs and elsewhere must take time to recharge, reflect, and reconnect with self and others to avoid extinction. During my Ph.D. program, and now as a junior faculty member, I made a conscious effort to reach out to those who shared a similar journey. Some reciprocated, and some relationships floundered, but it was all for the greater good. Ultimately, not selfishly, I was taking care of me. With my new ability to love myself came the ability to reach out and build connections with my sisters so that we can support each other through our journey in academia. My efforts serve as a way to build my own community--a community that helps me to counter my fears and love myself enough to speak out about oppressive circumstances within HBCUs and elsewhere.

Building My Own Community

Part of my journey demanded that I create supportive communities to assist me with moving forward in my goals, and dealing with difficult circumstances along the way. By reading the works of Black feminist scholars, talking with other Black women, and *writing*, I am building my own community. I am adding to my arsenal of survival tools and, at the same time, creating a counter hegemonic discourse that resists oppression. In my research I have come to understand that the use and building of communities has been a powerful tool for Black women since slavery. Yet, it is important to remain mindful of this particular tool for survival, especially in the academy.

My counternarrative has proven to be an exercise in self-healing and liberation. My reflections on finding voice, overcoming fear, self-love, and building community may be useful to others also traversing treacherous terrains and I share them willingly. Black women continue to pursue education as a "way up and out", but as faculty, I have discovered numerous roadblocks on our path to liberation. As there is no monolithic experience, there is also no one key that will unlock every door. However the more keys in our possession, the greater our chances of opening the doors to our liberation. My hope is that this counternarrative will provide one such key for liberation.

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