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# “Black Lesbians—Who Will Fight for Our Lives but Us?”: Navigating Power, Belonging, Labor, Resistance, and Graduate Student Survival in the Ivory Tower

S. TAY GLOVER

At two different instances during my graduate career, I saw Sara Ahmed give her talk about institutional diversity, racism, and the immense labor of being queer, a feminist killjoy, and a willful subject.<sup>1</sup> The first instance was during my time completing my MA degree in a women’s studies program where she delivered the keynote, “Willful Queers and Other Wayward Subjects” for our graduate queer studies symposium. The second instance occurred two years later when I matriculated to an elite private university to earn my doctorate in African American studies with a concentration in Black feminisms and Black queer studies. Although I experienced both lectures in different Midwestern institutional, departmental, and interdisciplinary contexts, there was a glaring continuity. I suffered immense upper body and facial pain from muscular tension that became chronic since entering higher education, and I blinked back tears of sadness and anger while in the majority-white rooms. I identified all too well with Ahmed’s poetic overview of the violence and bureaucracy that Black people, queers of color, and women are set up to experience, to

weather, or be weathered by within primarily white cisheteronormative higher education spaces. In both instances, I was in the midst of intense departmental drama where *I* was positioned as the problem for “talking back” to instructors and peers’ gendered racist infractions, *and/or* choosing silence in an attempt to avoid conflict and backlash (hooks). I was viscerally struck by Ahmed’s weave of allegories, philosophy, and ode to Audre Lorde’s Black lesbian feminist politics of resistance, integrity, and survival because I was also a subject at the interstices of these “wayward” sociocultural locations. I was persecuted for epitomizing the troublemaker figures Ahmed described—the Black lesbian feminist killjoy and willful subject.

In the midst of both traumatic confrontations with instructors and peers, Ahmed’s messages contributed to Black and women of color feminists’ ever-growing genealogy of literature concerning academic institutional violences, and she articulated the root and manifestation of my antagonisms. Ahmed referenced Lorde to ruminate on Black lesbian/queer

positionality, affect and performance, and the neoliberal corporate university's specific tactics of maintaining epistemologies of ignorance and structures of white supremacy and racial capitalism that make university spaces uncondusive to Black lesbian and queer feminist politics and survival. In this essay, I contribute to this objective while recognizing my vulnerability as a Black lesbian woman graduate student.

To interrupt epistemologies of ignorance, I engage Barbara Christian and Grace Hong's critiques of ways universities *and* disciplines comply with the state's historical containment, management, and extinguishment of Black women, Black feminisms, and Black (queer) feminists in particular, as well as literature exploring Black queer women's specific graduate and postgraduate experiences in the academy (Musser; Bailey and Miller). For example, Moya Bailey and Shannon Miller elucidate the presence of gendered racism and racist homophobia as significant structural and sociocultural tenets of the neoliberal university, Black faculty codes of conduct, and of primarily white women's studies spaces' codes of conduct, curricula, and pedagogies. Building on this scholarship, I seek to unveil the life-in-death consequences of neoliberal anti-Black, sexist, homophobic institutional spaces for Black lesbian/queer women in graduate school, and specifically within women's studies and Black studies at predominately white institutions (PWIs)—spaces thought to be justice-centered, progressive homes for graduate students like me. Part of this analysis includes examining the mechanisms within those contexts that facilitated gendered racism, homophobia, and health deterioration even as they propa-

gated commitments to "feminism," "diversity," and "queers."

Common factors challenged my belonging, safety, and wellness in both graduate school spaces: regional racial and sexual politics; misogynoir and homophobia in respect to my Black queer body and lesbian feminist politics; myths of safety and community; asymmetrical solidarity; professionalization cultures; and what Chandra Mohanty terms "pedagogy of accommodation." Distinct from "pedagogy of dissent and transformation" (Mohanty 178), pedagogy of accommodation promotes multicultural civility and respectability versus a social justice perspective, by which one *manages* or quells race, gender, sexual, and class conflict as a stand-in for an active, ethical commitment to challenging and diminishing them. Pedagogy of accommodation appeases white normativity and white comfort in the curriculum and classroom environment, often to the detriment of students of color. My experiences reveal how these mechanisms sanction policing and criminalization of Black queer women's affects and intersectional decolonial antiracist critiques, and ultimately contribute to an uneven, unfair, and unhealthy distribution of labors on our token bodies. In service of white supremacy, neoliberalism, paternalism, misogynoir, and homophobia, these mechanisms maintain the age-old dilemmas of unbelonging and weathering for Black lesbian feminist scholars. To sustain life, much less a commitment to scholar-activism, it became essential to heed the words of Black and women of color feminists who came before me, regarding the importance of cultivating self-care, self-love, and "differential consciousness" (Sandoval).

## The Neoliberal Corporate University: Reproducing Respectability and Black Lesbian Impossibility

Feminist critiques of white supremacy, capitalism, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and their detrimental effects on Black women and Black feminism are not new. Canonical Black feminist work delineates how Black women have always had a haunting inside/outside presence in the world and academia (Hull et al.; Higginbotham; DuCille; Guy-Sheftall; Griffin; White; James et al.; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Spillers). Black feminists across the African diaspora and time recollect how Black women's epistemological, intellectual, cultural, and social justice contributions were theory in the flesh—born of their physical-sexual, emotional, and affective denigration (Shange; Higginbotham; Guy-Sheftall; Collins). These entangled factors of oppression catalyzed the social justice struggles that helped institutionalize disciplines such as Black studies and women's studies.

This institutionalization left Black feminisms and Black women without a disciplinary home and symmetrical solidarity from their feminist and Black nationalist counterparts. Barbara Christian explains this dilemma in her essay “But Who Do You Really Belong To—Black Studies or Women's Studies?,” asking: “who can we trust if we are to help ourselves? . . . Our problem is that we do not have a ‘home really fitted to our needs,’ for the study of women of color is itself a critique of Afro-American Studies and Women's Studies, yet these groups are hardly powerful institutions in the university and their validity is still in question” (90). Historically, this

homelessness has been compounded for Black lesbian feminists at the intersection of literary studies, Black studies, feminist studies, Black feminism, queer studies, and their respective movements because of epistemological respectability and praxis laden with hetero- and homonormativity (Clarke; Lorde; Smith, *Home*; Smith, *Truth*).<sup>2</sup> New to this dynamic are the configurations of power and culture that produce the neoliberal corporate university.

Scholars describe the contours of the contemporary liberal capitalist-driven university in many ways: historically, socially, economically, and politically. Martha Nussbaum underscores how education is a tool for capitalist growth. She delineates how U.S. society invests in teaching students skills perceived to bolster national profit and competition in the global market. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) departments are predominantly rewarded with educational support because of their profit-making potentials. On a basic level, this model robs students of skills needed to make critical contributions to society and in society's best interests. It threatens the general existence of humanities and arts programs—spaces where students interface with difference and learn those skills. As Nussbaum warns, “If this trend continues, nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person's sufferings” (2). Furthermore, these conditions exacerbate labor exploitation of women faculty of color while undermining justice-oriented disciplines like Black studies and women's studies.

Neoliberalism in the corporate university means claiming racial and gendered violences are things of the past by selectively incorporating and deracinating previously radical politics and actors into its structures and objectives of hegemonic biopolitical and necropolitical power through an appeal to reproduce respectability and have protected life from premature death (Hong). Like Ahmed, Grace Hong articulates how historically, neoliberal disavowal emerged as a response to *contain and manage* the liberation movements of the post–World War II period—local and global movements for decolonization, desegregation, and self-determination. Epistemological norms governing what can be validated as scholarly knowledge, in concert with the political and economic structures of racial hierarchy and economic deprivation, became the mechanisms by which the university excludes and extinguishes Black feminists (Christian; Hong).<sup>3</sup> These conditions contribute to the precarity of Black feminisms, Black lesbian impossibility, and death of Black feminist women.

Just as in the 1960s through the 1980s, contemporary literature about Black women’s feminist labor outside and within the academy and contemporary accounts from Black queer women about their experiences in the academy, including my own, illuminate how we remain ambivalently located within the academy. Within Black studies and women’s studies, we also witness the ways “difference” and “diversity” are exploited and managed. Neither discipline adequately validates nor contends with Black queer women’s “multiple jeopardy,” or intersectional, particularized oppression in theory, curriculum, and praxis (Crenshaw; Christian; King; Guy-Sheftall; Hong).

All of these contours generated health deterioration and deeply violent graduate school occurrences for me in my women’s studies and Black studies programs in respect to my standpoint and being. On a systemic level, because the corporate university puts feminist and Black studies programs in positions of capitalist scarcity, the marginalized surplus—poor Black women and Black queers who are graduate students—experience abuses of power, exploitation, and dispossession. Having held work positions at various institutional/power locations of student life and student advocacy—from being an undergraduate resident assistant, graduate teaching assistant, university women’s center employee, and graduate student leader liaison with multiple university offices dedicated to “equity” in student experience—I now know intimately the workings of diversity labor and ways universities are protected enclosures of unchecked violence and abuse of power. Black studies and women’s studies’ relationships to the university and their praxis are implicated in maintaining or destabilizing the inherently racist, sexist, and cis-heteronormative power relations in universities and society as they affect *the most marginalized populations like Black queer students*; therefore, Black queer feminist women’s comparative experiences of being both pseudo-employed instructors and students simultaneously are important indicators of whether and how they collude with the neoliberal university and actualize anti-Black racist sexism and heteronormativity in praxis as previously indicated by experiences of similarly situated professors.

More often than marginalized graduate students are safely able to admit due to our political socio-economic-vulnerability,

these programs and professors collude with racist, sexist, queerphobic norms via their social policies, department codes of conduct, pedagogies, curricula, bureaucratic measures of assessment, and disciplining. At the same time, they celebrate institutionalized feminism and diversity to maintain (one's place within) the neoliberal capitalist university. However, this often evokes continued *doubly* invisibilized violence, exploitation, and silencing of Black feminist women and queer graduate students in particular ways. It means the violence lives at the intersection of systemic, institutional, interpersonal, workplace powerlessness and can masquerade under the mouth-service and liberal banner of "feminism" and be coercively suppressed in service of androcentric racial solidarity by Black studies agents. For a Black lesbian woman graduate student at a primarily white university who occupies the strange position of poor pseudo-employee and student with inevitable life crises *on behalf of* interstitial and layered oppression, navigating power dynamics, belonging, labor, and survival while maintaining the integrity of her Black queer feminist politics is, and was, indeed, impossible.

### Black Lesbian Feminist Killjoy Chronicles: Navigating Place, Pedagogy, Power, and Labor in Women's Studies

Scholars such as Lorde, Hong, Sharon Holland, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs provide precedent regarding the importance of examining Black lesbian/queer feminist belonging and viability as potent sites through which to trace the racialized-gendered coercive nature of neoliberal disavowal, disciplining, exploitation, and

death in the world and higher education institutions across time. Their works note that epistemological norms of validating scholarly knowledge, affect, and racial, gendered, political, economic deprivation are the mechanisms by which the university excludes and weathers Black feminists. These scholars also provide additional details about contemporary neoliberal mechanisms of disavowal and Black lesbian impossibility that my experiences map onto. For instance, Amber Musser invokes the term "specimen" to articulate both the workings of, and her affective experience of, how the fetishization and commodification of Black queer feminist bodies and minority difference affects her social experiences of tokenization and demands for diversity labor. I contribute to this body of literature with a comparative analysis of my experiences at a large public research institution and elite private institution from a Southern point of view.

You could say that by pursuing my degrees at one of the biggest public Big Ten PWIs and a top private PWI, I was bound to experience microaggressions. However, growing up in a small segregated rural town in the South with an almost all-Black, conservative-religious social experience made *difference*, or "diversity," "multiculturalism," and experiencing urban geography enticing, and thus important deciding factors when choosing colleges in high school. Therefore, because of the constructed silences in my education and family regarding possibilities of Black queer life in the South, I went further north to the Midwest and attended a public, Big Ten university to experience something new. However, the difference I was seeking, the reasons why I sought it, were to my awakening, not a part of the difference

my institution advocated and promised within their diverse, multicultural, LGBT-affirming, urban geography.

Upon entering higher education I was a Black lesbian queer youth from the rural South who was a star student my whole life but was disowned after coming out to my family. I sought refuge and freedom to learn, be myself, and make a difference in the lives of people like me by pursuing higher education. I inherited poverty on multiple accounts—on account of my familial history of being only three generations removed from slavery in which my great-grandparents were sharecroppers, being from a working-class family, being cut off financially and emotionally from my family after coming out as a queer person, and on account of the racialized gendered and sexualized wage gaps with lack of the cultural, financial capital of the hetero family unit or certain financial literacies.

Along with the ruse of “Southern” food items on Midwestern restaurant menus, I quickly discovered the ruse of white supremacist multiculturalism and diversity when I moved for college. But it was not until I began my graduate education in the university’s women’s studies program that I became wholly conscious of the ruse in terms of its violent manifestations within higher education institutions. Difference is cool and all, but if it is not exploitable for the university or department’s image or fails to pander to the palettes, comforts, and interests of white folks, you end up othered, antagonized by microaggressions, pissed off, and then made out to be the problem yourself for being pissed off and addressing the anti-Black woman shit directed your way.

In both of my graduate school experiences, the in-betweenness of being an employee and student (graduate teaching

assistant), as well as token diversity figure because of my checklist of oppressions, would mean an uneven load of labor and trauma that I still had not expected. I experienced policing of my affects and critiques by professors and peers, immense stress due to conflicts from structural and interpersonal gendered racism and homophobia that did not plague my peers, in addition to difficulties successfully completing tough coursework, teaching, and professional development responsibilities. While some of us may know we were never meant to enter into, survive, and thrive in graduate school, the rude awakening of these climates in a feminist or ethnic studies program can be devastating for those with assumptive hope that these programs will be inherently ethical and pro-praxis for transformative justice.

Because of faculty hiring/student admission disparities and curricula in my feminist studies program, I was admitted with initial minimal academic and social support for my research. With my admittance into my women’s studies program, I ended up being the first and only Black woman to be admitted in three years. There was one Black woman faculty member who was assigned as my advisor. When I began, however, I had to find out on my own, versus anyone in my department telling me, that she was on leave for the duration of my entire first year. This left me feeling frazzled and neglected in comparison to my cohort, whose advisors were easily accessible when they had qualms about handling the pressures of acclimating to graduate school. It felt awful to hear useful information about resources, courses, and strategies second-hand from my peers based on their advising meetings. This felt strange and disheartening being the only Black person, still ignorant

to what graduate school required and actually meant.

I was admitted into a cohort that at the time consisted of two self-identifying white men (one has since claimed and affirmed their trans\* identity), four white women, and another woman of color who was an international student newly interpellated as a U.S. racialized subject and “woman of color.” While I found friendship and camaraderie in my fellow woman of color and two antiracist white folks out of the six—one a smart and funny queer woman formerly in the military and the other a gentle and beautiful soul from Georgia—the two antiracist white folk left the program within the first year, with the woman being essentially forced out because of her militant audacity to confront the liberal whites’ racism. Besides being a racialized-gendered-sexual anomaly, I could not be my whole true self in the Midwestern liberal feminist climate. Northern white folks’ conviction that racism and unrelenting homophobia only existed in the South was bewildering and infuriating while actually interfacing with white supremacist gendered racist and homophobic aggressions for the first time in my life in the white environment. And though I moved away for college to be out and proud in my lesbian sexual identity in a way that was foreclosed in my rural environment, in the white liberal queer feminist climate, my excitement was quickly extinguished by the racism and cultural appropriation of my white homonormative queers—many of whom believed their Jewish and queer identities mediated their white privilege and racism in thought and action, as well as the lack of social spaces for queer people of color in what is actually considered one of the nation’s top “LGBT affirming” cities. While Bailey and

Miller mark the regional racial and sexual politics of the Southern city Atlanta as aiding in their ability to find support outside of the academy while in graduate school, it was my distance from the majority-Black South and my rich culture, and my Southern lesbian feminist epistemology and politics of truth-telling that engendered a bewildering, disappointing, isolating, lonely, and exploited experience at my midwestern PWIs among peers, in the classroom, and from faculty.

In terms of curriculum, my women’s studies program privileged Eurocentric knowledge formation and points of view, which propagated ahistoricism and intellectual posturing. Its core feminist ideological objectives consisted of teaching us about knowledge, subjectivity, and oppressive power formation in ways that elided how colonialism, anti-Blackness, and slavery were their conditions of possibility. In tandem it theorized gender versus race or racialized gender as a primary signifier in knowledge, subjectivity, and oppressive power formation. The class syllabus for our core feminist theory course was crafted with the common token women of color feminism week where the white students complained about how hard it was to understand the readings, while the rest of the syllabus consisted of Judith Butler and white European “high theorists” that required arduous labor of translation for someone like me whose native language is Southern, country, African American vernacular. The thing is, my classmates also struggled to read these texts, and I understood them more than they did, so it became clear that they simply preferred it because it was in their native epistemological frame and evaded talk of race. Therefore, due to the nature of the curriculum and pedagogy, I was positioned to be

“that Black person that makes everything about race” or “the angry Black woman” based on my intellectual critique and my dark skin color regardless of volume and/or tone in class. Besides the fact that I am physically unable to subdue my bitch face when I am over something—to which I blame all of the church-going Black women in my family—in this setup I was bound to be a problem. I was a Black queer feminist killjoy and always already projected as a willful subject in intellectual debates and in professional or informal social settings.

Ahmed and Lorde corroborated my experiences of how affects such as willfulness, combativeness, negativity, unhappiness, and criminality are always already mapped onto Black (queer) women’s bodies, especially when we refuse to comply with the status quo by advocating in our best interests. For example, being troped as an angry Black woman when in classroom intellectual debates or interpersonal conflict with instructors and peers is a common response used by racist and/or sexist folks to silence or disregard Black women’s intellectual contributions and critiques of any given issue, regardless of the nature of delivery. Whether they are university administrators, professors, or peers, this ploy works to deflect the critique and how they are implicated in the problem. The trope is also commonly evoked by professors to problematize Black women’s modes of resistance and survival in anti-Black woman classroom spaces—whether it be speaking up, performing dissemblance, or being silent—and to evoke paternalist punitive measures and questionable assessment of Black women’s class participation, while evading responsibility for cultivating and sustaining exclusionary, harmful, paternalistic spaces.

In the classroom environments there was a simultaneous criminalization (by peers and white faculty) and appropriation of my marginalized transgressive knowledges while racist student commentary and superfluous posturing actually went unchecked by faculty, even when it was clear intervention was required. It was an environment in which, because students were afraid of being called racists after I had implied such on a few occasions, my classmates became voyeurs and parrots of my “outsider within knowledge,” sprinkling words like “colonialism” and “intersectionality” in their commentary without having experiences or backgrounds that produced that embodied knowledge, and without having done any reading or intellectual labor to understand that work or know that history. I became distrustful and fearful of speaking in class because I also noticed certain classmates started to type down everything I said. I recalled the ways that Black feminist intellectual property is stolen and understood personally how upsetting it was because it disavowed and took for granted the corresponding trauma and affective/physical labors that are a part of its production. In addition, it was an experience in which I felt incredibly unprotected because a white woman’s tears had magical powers to turn victims of her racism into the attacker—even another. white. woman—when they called her out, revealing the professor’s racial bias when they took her side. Again. And again.

Eventually I became so traumatized, distrustful, and angry that I stopped participating in extracurricular events and speaking to the white folks in my program. I also tried to get out of professional development events. But what is amazing about professionalization requirements

is not just their ability to waste your “colored people time,” but also their ability to mandate you show up to experience violence. It sometimes pleads for you to show up to the violent spaces for representational purposes and to fulfill an illustrative multicultural image for website pictures. It requires you to socialize with folks you hate while providing free labor under *the professional development requisite of service*. And, when you stop showing up, it positions you as unprofessional and having failed to meet expectations without considering their failure to create a space that supports your well-being and success in the first place.

## Pedagogy and Graduate Teaching Experiences

Neoliberal institutions often facilitate disciplining and exclusion for students (and faculty) of color through “unclear and ever-rising expectations, lack of support, subjective evaluations, and limited external support” (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2). Relatedly, in the face of conflict it opts for subjective bureaucratic and diplomatic forms of conflict management, which are not often mutually exclusive with ethics, although it presents itself as such. As I experienced, these norms are maintained via professionalization cultures, myths of safety and community, and pedagogy of accommodation. An important aspect of praxis for freedom is pedagogy, which Mohanty warns can naturalize capitalism, postracialism, and *racialized* gendered governance in higher education in particular (hooks and McKinnon 814–29).

A pedagogy of accommodation, in combination with professionalization demands, often serves as a mechanism to actualize and normalize universities’

structural, sexist racism. And in the liberal humanities this means being compelled to celebrate diversity, mainstream white feminism, and homonormativity when really as a Black queer lesbian woman you know these things contribute to your own and your communities’ oppression. It means performing reverence in being a token since its entangled with your job security, while pretending that trust, safety, and community are established. It also means feigning belief in the most elaborate lie that one could tell—that a safe world exists for Black people in general, let alone a Black queer woman. Relatedly, protocols of professionalization demand that those committed to justice, suppress dissent, code-switch, and try not to be more *noticeable* (or disruptive) than you are in/to a sea of whiteness.

For a graduate student, the aforementioned prohibitive structures manifest in the context of navigating campus climate, the politics of your discipline/department, power dynamics in interpersonal/professional relationships, curricula, and classroom intellectual debates, while juggling labors of coursework and teaching. Navigating the institutional and departmental hierarchies and assimilationist, repressive demands in these different contexts is especially hard for folks “who occupy a disadvantaged position within one or more of the *social hierarchies* structured around race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality” (Mohanty 178). And if we reject these demands of the system we are impediments to the status quo and face backlash. Or *push-out*. For those more interested in preserving normative ideals we must be silenced and reminded of our rightful place at the bottom of social hierarchies. Only recently is this dilemma for graduate teachers with marginalized

identities who must navigate their interstitial position as employee and student/subordinate, along with the antagonistic institutional and professional power dynamics being explored. What do you do when you are a grown-ass Black lesbian feminist woman, impassioned pedagogue, and colleague to your professors, yet remain subject to surveillance and anti-Black woman antagonism as a graduate student, and cannot dissent and critique the terrible racist-sexist pedagogy your professor enacts in a course you are in because of sticky politics and infantilizing power dynamics?

In my women's studies program, a common justification for non-transgressive pedagogy and politics was that the department did not want to scare undergraduate students away from feminism or jeopardize the department's existence. Enrollees for introductory feminist courses were predominantly white students from the business and science schools seeking to meet their elective requirements, thus this nontransgressive approach maintained the corporate university. This pedagogical approach maintained the "school to oppressor pipeline" for white undergraduate and graduate students and demarcated feminist politics as not mutually exclusive with antiracist and decolonialist politics. It had negative implications for me as a Black, queer, student-teacher and my women of color colleagues. It also had negative implications for undergraduate students of color.

My graduate teaching pedagogy course was a contradictory ebb and flow of experiencing violence of white privilege while being explicitly trained to teach about violence and social justice. I witnessed my professor fail to address classmates' racism while discussing best feminist teaching strategies for us to employ in our own

courses. They relayed utopic tips to make our feminist classrooms a "safe space," and I intervened to assert students have different levels of risk and trust in the classroom according to intersections of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and nation. The historical sociopolitical contentions of "safety" and "safe space" concepts are simply not realities for people of color in America, which is hyper-visible. It was also ironic considering the unsafe atmosphere already created for the students of color in the room. This only deepened the alienation I felt from my colleagues, while also taking our core feminist theory course that never addressed the historical material violence that upended theories of power, subjectivity, and oppression. When we discussed wielding authority and power as an instructor, the corresponding feminist solutions were to have nonhierarchical relationships between students and teachers. We did not problematize what this meant for women instructors of color whose corporeality signifies hypersexuality, criminality, and militancy that can warrant resistance and violent contestation from students. As the only Black woman in my cohort and the department in years, and the darkest person in my classes, this training certainly did not address questions of gendered anti-Blackness and embodiment. When discussing the corporate university, I pondered how my teacher-student power imbalance would be mediated by my entangled color, race, gender, sexuality, and femme embodiment, as well as by the power white students at primarily white institutions wield as consumers in the corporate university—especially when it comes to complaints about instructors of color. This white rhetoric of safety under the guise of feminist pedagogy marginalized graduate and undergraduate students

of color, and it made me and the other woman of color in my cohort feel even more nervous about teaching. In resolve, I had to walk with hooks and Paulo Freire and simply lead with my heart, humanity, and grandma's prayers.

I first witnessed the effects of this pedagogy while a teaching assistant in a large introductory feminism course. For example, during a lecture on the gendered wage gap, when an Asian woman student asked how race impacted the gap statistics (which was not included in the lecture), the professor skirted around the demand for intersectional analysis and even told the student there was not enough research to know. She said that for Asian and Native American populations, the populations were simply too small to get an accurate account. In my recitation session I constantly redressed elisions from the lectures regarding racialized gender and sexuality differences and how issues impacted queer and trans people of color differently, often at the behest of students' questions and students of color's complaints. And in our group teaching assistant meetings, the professor said plainly that she skirted around discussions of race so as not to alienate students. So, plainly, this meant that white students' comfort and epistemologies of ignorance was priority and not the interests of students of color.

Undergraduate students of color had issues with the trickle-down effects of this pedagogical tradition. They coordinated an interventionist panel/town hall meeting calling out our department for its racist, colonialist politics and pedagogy. On this panel we heard from Native American, Asian, Black trans\*, and Black lesbian students dissatisfied with the content and pedagogical tools used by instructors. Students recounted instances of unchecked

racism, trans\* erasure, and indigenous erasure. They testified to boredom from recycled white feminist content across their classes that did not push their feminist analyses. This melded with their frustrations concerning the disconnect between theory and real-world issues—historical and present—that were relevant to them and increasingly prevalent in the news. Ultimately, they attested their interests were not priority. The effects of this pedagogical praxis confirmed that the rhetoric of comfort, safety, and pedagogy of accommodation was a colonialist notion that maintained the “school to oppressor pipeline” for white students, facilitated violence and exclusion for undergraduate and graduate teachers of color in these primarily white spaces, and demarcated feminist politics as not mutually exclusive with antiracist and anticolonialist politics. By not integrating a woman of color, decolonial feminist philosophy into teaching, the department adamantly maintained the corporate university and racialized gendered suppression of dissent/governance among students and student-teachers of marginalized identities. However, interestingly, the white liberal climate allowed me and the undergraduates to push back and have our departmental grievances somewhat addressed to influence structural changes that benefitted others thereafter, which was unexpectedly foreclosed in the Black studies department at the private PWI I attended next.

### When Skin-Folk Queer Folk Ain't Kinfolk: Reproducing Respectability

A private, elite institution was a change of pace and social norms for doctoral study. I looked forward to finding belonging

and a safe, supportive work environment in the Black studies department since it competitively recruited me and others based on its interest in further substantiating its reputation as a premier department to conduct research in the field of Black Queer Studies. This area of research primarily attracted Black queer students with investments in destabilizing white dominant and historically oppressive policies, social practices, cultural illiteracies, and higher education disciplinary norms that contributed to unbelonging and criminalization of intersectionally marginalized populations such as us. My research project also made me a particular match for the program.

During my visit I asked questions that were important to me given my previous graduate experience and career trajectory, such as inquiries around the department's commitment to pedagogy and supporting students in the unstable job market. Although I desired more concrete answers to these questions, my visit was nevertheless a success, with the department offering me acceptance and a competitive package to sway my decision from another extremely prestigious university to which I had been accepted. However, I could not negotiate help with moving expenses. I took out loans and incurred more debt to move states since I lacked familial or intimate partner support.

I arrived nervous, brave, and excited to have many Black queer peers to journey with, get advice from, and build a social life with—a markedly different experience from my previous school and department. I learned quickly, however, that department culture was deeply affected by dysfunctional relationships, power struggles, and ideological wars among faculty that contributed to low morale. This environ-

ment negatively affected students' ability to work between faculty—especially if their interdisciplinary research required so—for fear of experiencing backlash or becoming a chess piece and/or collateral damage in faculty disagreements. Combined, these factors contributed to a department culture that enforced a paternalistic hierarchy, conservative code of conduct, competitiveness, and punitive pedagogy, that was the backdrop of their reputation for “weeding and pushing students out.” This manifested in: 1) policing students' engagements around intellectual ideas; 2) lack of transparency with students when it came to relaying important information about required milestones and measures of assessment, which routinely meant moving goalposts and differing subjective assessments for students that affected student performance and mental health negatively in the highly competitive and prestigious environment; 3) lack of student democracy in terms of an inactive departmental student government, connected to a history of hostile and/or negligent reception of raised student concerns; and 4) sometimes punitive backlash when adult student persons raised concerns, which was often the subtext of students' all-too-common experience of being put on probation. These probations then were amassed as grounds for exclusion.

From the perspective of students, faculty were far removed from and apathetic to understanding ways contemporary conditions in society and departmental culture affected students' lives and well-being. This proved devastating to the vulnerable marginalized population of Black queer graduate students. For example, compared to the graduate school's larger policies for its *primarily upper-class white student body*, such as assessing satisfac-

tory progress toward degree completion and its accommodating timeline to completion, the departmental graduate study handbook held its 99 percent Black and queer students to higher standards with less accommodating and more punitive standards.

The prestige of the university and department foreclosed radical refusal or protest by demanding respectability. Students were urged not to call attention to the stricter professionalism standards and to sustain reputable appearances to the rest of the university and access to resources. I also found that whether I pointed out department or peer gendered racism like I did during my master's degree experience or tried to intentionally avoid conflicts and confrontation because of burnout and previous trauma, my action and inaction were read as insubordination due to conscious and unconscious demands of my affective, emotional, and intellectual labor that privileged subjection. These cumulative experiences illustrate precisely how "access (or lack thereof) to gendered and sexual respectability becomes the dividing line between those who are rendered deviant, immoral, and thus precarious and those whose value to capital has been secured through a variety of norms. The invitation to respectability becomes a way of regulating and punishing those populations it purports to help; thus, in the neoliberal moment, 'care' becomes the conduit for violence, both epistemological and physical" (Hong *Kindle Locations 412–15*).

What was psychologically, mentally, and emotionally abusive about my graduate programs was learning about the roots of these specific issues under a guise of feminist reverence, while experiencing these phenomena from instructors and

fellow classmates simultaneously. For example, from my graduate courses and their elisions especially, I came to understand more fully the connections between racism and white supremacy, anti-Blackness, capitalism, colonial history, and its protracted effects manifested through ideological state apparatuses such as education institutions (Althusser 86). Institutionalized multiculturalism, diversity, and respectability were the threads that bolstered this structural formation. Diversity campaigns were strategic distractions from the fact that the university and its programs maintained demographic disparities of students and faculty of color through admissions and hiring/retention practices, uneven allocation of resources to support STEM fields over the arts and humanities, the student as consumer paradigm, and the myth of safety, comfort, and community for all students across difference. I also learned that these Black elitist appeals to prestigious ego and excellence in the academy were a guise for a sick exploitation of slavery, Southern horrors, and Southern politics of resistance, as I sat in course after course in which they eulogized them (us) as central to the Black studies canon, our very lives, and our future (even as they also only gestured to the South as stuck in the past).

And here I was. The materiality of hauntings. The interstice. In the flesh. Dying. Just to live.

### A Note on "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action": Decolonial Refusal, Care, and Black Queer Lesbian Survival

The first thing my first Black queer woman mentor told me when applying to graduate school was that Black women have

the highest rate of suicide among graduate students. I never verified this then, but took it as her forewarning to be extra attentive to and honest about my mental health and general wellness in the stressful, racist spaces of graduate school. Just as her Black queer housemother care kept me alive and encouraged leading up to my grad experience, it never left me when I matriculated. However, I could not have imagined the tremendous toll that the stress and trauma of graduate school would wreak on my body in addition to my psyche.

While in my master's program, at the tender age of twenty-two, I began to suffer from debilitating chronic neck, shoulder, and back pain, which I learned from doctors was because of subluxations, or misaligned vertebrae, and a deteriorating spinal disk that correlated to constant poor posture from extended laptop use and reading, as well as carrying heavy books. My chiropractors told me, intently, that "subluxations are misalignments in one or more of the vertebrae in your spine. They can cause nerve interference, hindering communication between the brain and the rest of the body—every cell, tissue and organ. This makes it so the body is unable to function at 100 percent" (Chiro One Wellness Centers). Most importantly, subluxations can occur at any age, and the main causes are considered the "Three Ts": *trauma, toxins, and thoughts*—with thoughts/stress being the number one cause, followed by both micro and major trauma. My x-ray was so alarming, yet filled with hope that my chiropractor urged treatments two to three days a week and arranged a generous payment plan with me.

Essentially, this world and this environment was killing me slowly—constantly

experiencing racialized and homophobic familial crises, financial crises, microaggressions and lack of safety, being tense and criminalized all of the time in the white and respectable environments, being disconnected from cultural expression central to my life force and catharsis, having no time to maintain wellness rituals, relationships, or get enough rest due to the large workload and its demands. The stress, trauma, and distrust I felt for white people during my first PWI experience became compounded by the incessant Black deaths from police brutality reported in the media. Plus, given my research and subjectivity, the sociopolitical moment underlined how anti-Black violence against Black cis and transwomen fails to galvanize the same mourning and fervor for redress. I suffered from muscle spasms and inability to sleep comfortably because of muscle tension; and I developed anxiety and panic attacks for the first time in my life. My panic attacks happened during finals—once when I was afraid I wouldn't finish on time and another from revisiting Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) and being so triggered by the graphic details of Black women's subjection to violence and death in plantation landscapes like home, in combination with Black death in the news.

These instances made me consider leaving academia on multiple occasions given the common knowledge that it engenders short life spans related to this work. I began to see that as my fate. But then I realized I couldn't be like them. I couldn't kill me too. I couldn't feed into the lie and gaslighting that their treatment of me was a reflection of my badness, inadequacy, or worth, but instead the truth, which is that my presence served to remind them of

their own waywardness and evils. I leave implications for senior faculty committed to diversity, inclusion, and equity in the academy by suggesting the ways these mechanisms in graduate school map onto the Black feminist concept and empirical social reality that Monique Morris terms “push-out” in respect to Black girls in grade school—the deployment of policies, social practices, cultural illiteracies, and pedagogies of apathy by teacher, administrators, and the justice system that push Black women students out of institutions charged with helping them flourish, into unhealthy, unstable, and often unsafe futures. This research, like my narrative, also shows how, despite obstacles, stigmas, stereotypes, and despair, Black girls—and I add Black women—still find ways to persevere.

Like Black and women of color feminists before me, I realized the importance of cultivating, and being just as militant about, self-care and self-love as I was about scholar activism if I hoped to sustain it. I have to love myself more fiercely than anyone else ever could. This means shielding myself from triggering content on social media, disengaging toxic people and situations, utilizing free counseling sessions on campus to heal all the parts of myself damaged by my family and the university environment, consistent chiropractic care, spiritual wellness therapies, exercise, and being in tune with the erotic—unapologetically indulging in the things that give me pleasure and feed my heart-mind-body-spirit.

Another part of this is honing my differential consciousness. Chela Sandoval’s notion of differential consciousness is about enacting a U.S. Third World feminist oppositional consciousness based on functioning within and beyond dominant

ideology and hegemonic feminist praxis. It is about being able to shift between and among modes of political decolonial oppositional stances based on the situation for the sake of your goal—something queer, Black, women of color, and indigenous feminists have been doing forever. For me it is about the bravery to utilize and transform silence to practice decolonial refusal in affect and theory, or ways of knowing/feeling (Lethabo-King) and care. My positionality, ancestry, Southern womanist upbringing, and proximity to the South’s devastating conditions of protracted colonialism means I have different stakes in life, a different indebtedness to redefining life and liberation, and a notion of safety and survival that unfortunately is always already entangled with risks of violence, being silenced, and death. So in the words of Assata Shakur, I have nothing to lose but my chains.

Barbara Smith edited the canonical Black feminist anthology *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, where she used a line from Beverly Smith’s 1983 essay to entitle section three of the book “Black Lesbians—Who Will Fight for Our Lives but Us?” Although the text was published in 1983, this question is still urgent. Black cis and trans\*, queer and lesbian women are still faced with the dilemma of perhaps being the only persons in theory and praxis invested in a liberationist politics that could free them too. Even with the development of Black queer studies and trans studies. Even though Barbara Smith and the entire field states that some of the most radical change-making feminists of color in past social justice movements have been lesbians (*Home*), and even though Black queer and lesbian women propelled and continue to lead and labor in new liberationist movements

such as Black Lives Matter. What happens to Black feminism when normative (academic) reproduction is subverted or even foreclosed not only by the exclusion of the “children,” as Christian’s essay details, but also by the premature deaths of the “mothers”? What alternative, queer modes of reproduction and memory must be mobilized to forge these connections (Hong *Kindle Locations 2433–36*)? Who will fight for our lives but us? Audre Lorde encapsulates the stakes of this positionality in a haunting proposition for all of us to heed: “I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. . . . What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours?” (Lorde 41). This is the question for liberal humanities programs born out of anticolonial struggle. To regain some integrity based on their histories and their commitments to diversity, equity, and feminist liberation, they must take these things into account. Commitments to diversity and inclusion within higher education institutions often do not engender meaningful change because their efficacy is contingent upon capitalism, myths of safety for people of color and queers, and a genuine misunderstanding of/lack of care for how anti-Black racism and sexism, specifically, manifests on the micro- and macro-levels within these spaces. Just as recent

research, police brutality incidents, and Black Lives Matter #SayHerName protests highlight how primary and secondary educational spaces disproportionately criminalize Black girls, this phenomenon also weeds out Black women pursuing higher education degrees (Crenshaw et al.; Morris). Every Black woman in academia I know has a story about a Black woman pushed out of academia due to anti-Black woman antagonism. Even while battling attempts to push me out, I witnessed the successful push-out of others and was left to mourn my fate. And when swapping stories, this anti-Black woman antagonism is always specific, harkening to capitalist logics and racist-sexist archetypes that have sustained Black women’s disparagement across time and space. Willfulness attaches to us—beings who refuse to carry out the will of hegemonic power and who are already corporeally unworthy of respect or autonomy. So, for the Black female queer feminist, she is always already a willful subject, invisible and hypervisible through her difference, and a rebel that must be disciplined based on her existence within these structures when she is simply trying to survive. The words of Audre Lorde still rang true:

Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call America, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson—that we were never meant

to survive. Not as human beings . . . And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. . . . But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive. . . . it is never without fear—of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. (42–43)

So we keep fighting, knowing that we have no choice, that we will be a perpetual problem, that we may be alone taking these risks. But I hope, for all of us, that this inspires reflexive praxis from liberal humanities programs born out of anticolonial struggle and senior faculty committed to diversity, inclusion, equity, humanities programs, and feminist pedagogy in the academy to hear Black women, and change. Who will fight for our lives but us?

#### NOTES

1. Ahmed's lectures about institutional diversity, racism, and the fatiguing labor of being a queer, a feminist killjoy, and a willful subject reflect her cumulative thoughts in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012), and *Willful Subjects* (2014). Indebted to Black-Black and women of color feminists, Ahmed interrogates how the neoliberal corporate university is secured through institutional diversity.

2. Black lesbian feminists writing and organizing in the context of 1960s–1980s feminist, Black, and LGBT freedom struggles were particularly critical of homophobia within the Black community and Black nationalisms, and insisted its eradication was a critical component for liberation through a Black sexual politics that restores the embodied, epistemologi-

cal, spiritual, and sexual dispossession Black people have faced from white supremacist terror.

3. Black feminist women who look back at significant historical periods of Black women's activism and protest continue to uncover how Black women have been/are overlooked, silenced, forgotten, and continuously exploited within nation-state systems, social movements, and intellectual and literary/scholarly cartographies (Carby; Christian; Davis; Higginbotham; Roberts; Collins; Springer; Gore; Higashida). This vast archive of Black feminist contributions threads a common fact: Black lesbian consciousness has been particularly formative to major theoretical advancements in Black diaspora, feminist, and queer studies. Black lesbian feminists and the anticolonial theory-in-praxis they urge, however, are often met with asymmetrical solidarity, death, and liberal cooption and repackaging from women's studies, Black studies, lesbian and gay studies, and queer studies.

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