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There is No Vacation from Trauma: Black Women Academicians' Narratives on the Need for Community During Times of Racialized Injustices

Valerie J. Thompson
Wichita State University

Leslie Ekpe
Texas A&M University-Commerce

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the collective traumas of the COVID-19 pandemic and the metaphorical racial reckoning of the summer of 2020, two Black women within the academy share their reflections through an intersectional collaborative autoethnography. One overarching theme, intersectional racialized trauma, and two subthemes, (a) feelings of helplessness due to collective trauma and (b) Black women get tired too, emerged as findings from this study. The piece closes with recommendations for Black women academicians navigating the academy.

Keywords: Black Women, Collaborative Autoethnography, COVID-19, Higher Education, Racial Trauma

As the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic continued to ravage society's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, it had a collective impact on the Black community. Just as Black people were experiencing higher hospitalization rates due to side effects from COVID-19, a reawakening to the reality of racism towards Black people began to emerge (Ekpe et al., 2023; Njoku & Evans, 2022; Roberts, 2021). From the hashtags that filled our social media pages to the ambiguous black squares of presumed solidarity, Black people could not escape the collective weight of the racialized traumas. This would also have implications for the well-being of Black women, faculty, staff, and students.

As Black women in need of an emotional reprieve, we found solace and safety in sharing our stories, which later translated into a collaborative autoethnography centering our shared recollections of the summer of 2020. The following research question guided our inquiry: How did COVID-19 and the summer of racialized trauma impact how Black women within the academy develop communities of support towards radical resistance?

BACKGROUND

Isolation and loneliness would be commonplace occurrences in the world as we dealt with the consequences of COVID-19. In terms of schooling, this isolation and loneliness would take the form of schools closing their campuses and transitioning to remote learning. Faculty, staff, and students had to shift their engagement from in-person to online. This level of isolation also deepened when George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis in May 2020. As Black women, instead of disconnecting or rather disengaging from the trauma, it was as if we were trapped in a repetitive loop replaying the moments of police-sanctioned violence (Diaz et al., 2022). We did not get to metaphorically call in sick or escape the many requests from our colleagues to 'process their trauma'; instead, we had to continue functioning while distressed, regardless of the emotional, physical, and mental strain on our well-being. These instances create spaces where the experience of racial battle fatigue (RBF) surfaces as a natural occurrence for Black women (Rollock, 2021). RBF is the collective impact of racialized microaggressions and microinsults toward minoritized individuals (Franklin, 2016; Harris et al., 2015; Husband, 2016; Smith, 2004). This fatigue occurs like any other form of fatigue: progressive weakness or wearing down due to constant tension on the mind and body. Still, it is distinct from the usual fatigue of partnerships between infants, jobs, and spouses (Smith, 2004).

While we continued to grapple with the many obstacles thrown our way, we also wrestled with the fact that we were not afforded the same 'rest' as our colleagues. During the summer of 2020, Black Americans not only witnessed their families suffer from COVID-19, but they also witnessed their communities lynched while jogging, murdered in their homes, killed while sleeping, and assassinated while protesting (Cox et al., 2023). However, still, we woke up every day, swallowing our pain as we replied to our supervisors, offered support to our students, and handled the invisible duties that we, as Black women, so often get assigned. In retrospect, we learned to navigate our hurt because there was no other option, as there was no vacation from our trauma. While some may argue that no one is afforded a vacation from trauma, according to Powers et al. (2019), Black women with higher education endorsed the highest number of traumas.

Furthermore, Black women experience a higher rate of trauma by 35% when compared to other people, including that of racial trauma (Powers et al., 2019). There is evidence that racial trauma is experienced more broadly as a collective trauma for minoritized communities since everyone in the community can experience distress from prejudice, discrimination, or violence (Williams et al., 2018). Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black women's increased emotional trauma fueled a dire need for support through community.

METHODOLOGY: A VIEW FROM WITHIN

In addition to rigor and good research practice concepts, before beginning our collaborative autoethnography (CAE) process, it was first imperative to discuss the data collection strategies and the extent of involvement within the project's developmental stages (Chang et al., 2016). Both researchers heavily identified with the subject matter and were highly committed to developing the piece; therefore, the researchers decided on full researcher collaboration. According to Chang et al. (2016), the researcher's entire collaboration process is one that "will contribute your autobiographical data to the common pot of data, convene to ask probing questions of each other for clarification and expansion of data, and collaboration in data analysis, interpretation and report writing" (p. 68).

As the decision was to participate fully in the collaboration, we, researchers, also had the choice to enact this effort concurrently or sequentially. Chang et al. (2016) define concurrent collaboration as the process by which each person writes their reflections one at a time, and the other researcher waits on those reflections. This process allows the researchers to build, connect, and explore new avenues related to their reflections. The alternate option would be to conduct a concurrent collaboration model that requires each researcher to write separately on the selected topic and share their stories concurrently. This process enables each researcher's reflections to stand alone and not influence the stories as they unfold. Additionally, after sharing one's stories, each researcher asks probing questions and offers insights as they arise.

We chose the concurrent process as it enabled us not to be beholden to each other's responses but to spend time doing deep internal reflection before coming together to discuss our new insights. In this process, we met twice within two months, each time taking notes and building our reflections and insights from the probing questions. Lastly, when conducting our analysis, we found similarities in our reflections that established our two themes. Within this piece, we utilize 'us' and 'Black women' interchangeably to further accentuate our experiences with trauma.

Sharing Our Stories

Methodological Fit & Endarkened Feminist Epistemological Standpoint

Black people, and more specifically, Black women, have always used their experiences as lessons for their communities. Whether their experiences are referred to as testimonies, songs, or poems, their stories depict the often harsh reality of being Black women in an anti-Black world (Brown-Glaude, 2010; Collins, 2016). However, sharing one's testimony is spoken and shared in a community of others with the acknowledgment that they are connected through historical and cultural knowledge. This culturally situated knowing is similar to what Dillard (2000) coined as an endarkened feminist epidemiology, which rejects epistemologies that fail to acknowledge the historical and cultural standpoint of Black women. Thus, with the shared agreement of finding a methodology that could enable us to express

ourselves as Black women fully, CAE surfaced as the ideal choice as it helped us to be transparent as both researchers and Black women within the academy.

The spread of COVID-19 and institutional inequality placed Black women before two pandemics. While we sit with the critique of Patton (2020), as she suggests situating the racial reckoning and COVID-19 as twins or surfacing at the same time is an incorrect critique, as racism is rooted within the roots of our nation and did not originate with the pandemic, the fact remains that the impact of both created shockwaves within our psyche as Black women in higher education. More explicitly, as unrest swarmed the world with people opposing police brutality, inequality, and injustice within the Black community, we also experienced instability, including unemployment and the struggle to preserve optimum health and well-being during the pandemic. As Black women, we found comfort in consoling one another as we expressed our experiences of trauma. To illuminate our experiences, we explicitly used collaborative autoethnography. CAE, as an analysis method, stresses the importance of narrative study explicitly and qualitative research more generally as a way to extend discussions and deepen comprehension of the psychological effect of systems, policies, and social ties (Ellis, 2020). The distinguishing feature of autoethnography includes self-centering in the investigative process (Merriweather, 2015). Based on our academic interests and personal experiences as Black women academics, we sought to appreciate our experiences in tumultuous times through storytelling.

Researcher Positionality

Throughout our reflections, we use the descriptive word ‘Black’ in reference to all African diasporas. We include people of African origin throughout the diaspora, including Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America, Canada, Europe, and Asia. As illustrated in the United States (U.S.), cultural inequality extends to and affects everyone in the African diaspora, as shown by earlier global protests (Collins, 2016). As researchers, we identify as one Black woman professor working in a student affairs program and one Black woman graduate student within a higher education program. Our collective experiences have influenced the context of this study. We are Black women owing to our socio-economic standing and educational attainment. We accept our privilege of being cis-gendered, able-bodied, and deserving of living. We also acknowledge that our intersectional backgrounds are Black and women who are the minority in a profession where few share our identities. We have over twenty collective years of practice in the academy that speak to the numerous experiences recollected. So, while we navigated the summer of 2020 that interrupted our way of life in numerous ways, which we once called ‘normal’, we recognized the need for community as our safety net.

RESEARCHER NARRATIVES

With the central research question grounded within the narrative process, this section first begins with The Professor’s narrative, followed by The Graduate Student’s narrative. As the methodology section detailed – we, as researchers,

participated in a concurrent process when conducting a CAE inquiry. This enabled us to create deep introspective autoethnographic accounts of our experiences regarding the summer of 2020, which we found to be extremely traumatic as Black women in academia. Then, after meeting two times, taking notes, and discussing our narratives, we went back and created a reflection of each other's narratives. This is what we provide within this section.

The Professor's Narrative

Naming the Numbing

Heavy, all of this feels extremely heavy… I had decided long ago for my own personal well-being not to allow myself to watch any videos that placed Black death on display; however, this time was different. As a Black woman, I was not naïve to believe that we as a nation had evolved towards a post-racial society; however, that did not lessen the impact of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor's murder on my emotional psyche. This, coupled with my new role as a professor within the academy and the realization that COVID-19 was directly impacting my collective community, left me feeling raw and numb from the intersections.

Today I Decided to Watch the Video of George Floyd…

Where Does It Hurt: The Intersections of Injury? I CAN'T BREATHE…it feels like I am unable to breathe. Although my mind understands that there is no physical injury, my body rejects that knowledge and demands my response. I feel tears welling up in my eyes as I listen to George Floyd calling out for his mother. I wonder if his mother was able to feel as if something was wrong with her child; if at that moment, although there was no physical wound, if she knew that something was wrong? Could she have known that the pain that she felt in that moment would have been made into a rallying cry for change? No. To a mother, this moment was about the loss of a child, regardless of his age. A life was gone, and all that was left was the pain from the moment... Facebook, Twitter, and even Instagram provided no reprieve… Beyond feelings of sadness and frustration, there was an undercurrent of exhaustion and mental anguish. Some websites called many to check on their "Strong Friends" or to check on their "Black friends" because they were not ok…

Then Came the News About Breonna Taylor… Although the murder of Breonna Taylor happened on March 13, 2020, I did not see national news coverage of her murder until after George Floyd was murdered. Three months passed before we knew the story of her life and the story of her untimely death. What must her family have thought after experiencing such a loss and not to see the same public outrage that they knew she deserved?

In the closed Facebook groups where Blackness and womanness were made central, all shared a collective frustration but interwoven with a collective sense of exhaustion. Some shared how the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery moved them to protest, but others, like myself, were just

numb….and it felt as though that feeling would never go away. However, there is no vacation day for such trauma….it was time to go to work.

Blackness and Womanness: Showing UP While Black. I do not have the energy to be #Blackgirlmagic today; I need to survive this meeting right now. I am becoming less interested in small talk and have no capacity to be able to engage with how your summer is going. At this point, I just want to be left alone...

Through collective knowledge as a Black woman in the academy, I was aware of the spirit murdering that Young and Hines (2018) referenced that we encountered as Black women; however, this feels different right now. Breonna Taylor makes this feel different for me.

Teaching Through My Womanness and Blackness. I am a Black woman first…Then a professor second… It is taking everything within me to show up and teach today; however, I knew that was my responsibility. I knew that because of COVID-19, my students were feeling varying levels of isolation and loneliness; I was not sure that I had it in me as a Black woman to ignore my well-being. Nor should I have to. At that moment, I decided that it was more important for me to model my humanity as a Black woman to my students. They needed to become aware that all was not ok for many in the world, and on a smaller scale, among their campus communities where Black and Brown folx resided…

Today I show up as a Black woman first and your professor second. You should know that it is taking every facet of my well-being to show up today. However, I felt it was important that you heard that as future practitioners in higher education. I knew that my moment of transparency and openness could have implications on my evaluations. However, I would be disingenuous to myself and my humanity to function as a lesser version of myself. Everything was not ok, and it certainly was not well…

Recalling that moment when I decided to speak, regardless of the reaction of my students, reminds me of an Audre Lorde quote, "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" (Lorde, 1995). After sharing my truth at that moment, I think back to the lone Black woman student in my class and how she nodded and smiled due to my transparency. At that moment, I knew that I was not alone. That there was strength and power in a collective knowledge and seeing that once acknowledged could transcend the moment of sadness towards something powerful…

The Graduate Student's Narrative

Where Am I?

At the beginning of the year 2020, I was returning to the states from a fun-filled trip from Nigeria. My brother had just gotten married, and we were celebrating his new union with his beautiful wife. As I returned to the States, I was getting ready for a new semester. I knew that the Spring 2020 semester would require a lot out of me, but I never could have fathomed just how much that meant. As I continued this

chapter of my life, the semester began pretty normally. Homework, research, teaching, work, workout, church, socializing, and repeat. However, my life would quickly take a turn for the worse pretty unexpectedly. As a graduate assistant in my office, we were bombarded with multiple diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. We were being thrown in every direction with issues Black faculty, staff, and students were facing on campus, challenges that were too much to bear. It felt like my office was tasked with being the 'Savior' of the university. In the meantime, outside events such as the passing of NBA star Kobe Bryant was enough for anyone to know that there was something "different" about the year 2020. Nevertheless, I still made an executive decision to be optimistic about the coming days. I still had work to do, and it was not going to get done by itself.

Oh, Wait, There's More…

In February, things began to take a turn for the worse, and in the midst of the chaos, I and many of my friends and family were completely unaware of the COVID-19 pandemic that had been around since November. To make matters worse, in February, I attended a friend's wedding without knowing that it would be my last time seeing one of my close friends. My friend would go on in the following months to later lose his life to kidney disease. As I coped with the many forms of adversity throughout the rest of the semester, I was reminded to truly appreciate each day as if it were my last. As the world began to shut down in early March, classes began to transition online. My birthday came and went; teaching and research were a bit groggy; I was trying to make it to see the next day, honestly…

I Am Tired, No, Like Seriously Tired…

As an African American female, it was challenging to grapple with the changes that were occurring. I turned to my faith during this time because I knew that it was the one thing that I could reside in. As I fought to finish the treacherous semester, I was forced to have unexpected surgery in May. At this point, financial burdens had taken over my life. Not only did I have to reach out to family and friends to help me pay off debt, but I also felt an overwhelming sense of anxiety. I did not know what was next, and I feared that a new day would bring me new burdens. Moreover, after the death of George Floyd, I felt entirely helpless. Although Mr. Floyd was not the first brutal fatality of a Black person in the U.S., at a time like May 2020, all of the world was watching and could not turn a blind eye to what was apparent: the need for a new system, one that would have protected Breonna Taylor and Sandra Bland.

Collective Impact: COVID-19 and Racial Injustices

My community was facing multiple pandemics, from the COVID-19 pandemic to racial injustices, to discrimination within healthcare, to the ongoing mistreatment of Black people within the academy, and the list goes on. The burdens were taking a toll on my mental health.

Thankfully, my community, such as my family and friends, kept me sane. Throughout the summer, I used this time to write and become one with myself because self-reflection throughout the pandemic reduced my anxiety. As the summer began to conclude, I began preparing for the Fall 2020 semester; however, COVID-19 was still taking a toll on the lives of many of my loved ones. At the same time, life was still happening.

Performance Over Trauma, Right?

I was having to perform at my best, while outside was at its worst. I had to log in every day through the Zoom platform for class, work, and family gatherings. I was Zoom fatigued. On top of that, my go-getter attitude would not allow me to take a rest. I felt guilty when I would want to rest because I knew that I could be contributing to work at the time. After speaking with my mentors, I realized that rest was a necessity for my well-being, that keeping busy would only create more stress and anxiety for me. Rest was a form of resistance. In this, as the Fall semester continued, I kept this note as a reminder.

Why Is Guilt Associated with Rest?

Rest is okay. I do not need to feel guilty. It is okay for me to take time off without feeling like I am being taken from. It is okay to take time off and not have to answer why I need the time off. Right? Anyone? Or is that rest not afforded to me? At the end of the Fall 2020 semester, I completed my courses with all As. This is an accomplishment. Right? However, I never celebrated. I never told myself good job. Because I expected this from me, even during times when the world was crumbling, I still did not take time off until I was forced to. As a Black woman, I was not afforded rest because I felt as though I still had to perform to the best of my ability in the midst of chaos. I cried and cried and cried some more. As a woman of my faith, I wanted nothing but to be where my God needed me to be. I sought out therapy, relied on my community, and purposely made efforts to seek peace.

Still, I Rise

And whatever the next days and months may hold, community matters. None of us can do this ourselves. It is critical that we find and rest in our communities.

A CALL AND RESPONSE

The Professor's Reflections

The Collective Call: Caring While Wounded

After reading The Graduate Student's reflection, I found myself resonating with how we as a collective community are instructed to care for our own, particularly as it relates to issues that directly impact our communal functioning. This sentiment is

especially true for Black women. That mission or directive does not change because someone is in the academy.

Whether that directive of care be through an actual familial connection or the "metaphorical village", Black girls and later Black women receive the message that our work is not completed until we also care for our own. This is even evident through how we are encouraged to continue to function while hurting, often receiving the message that being emotionally injured does not afford us the ability to take a break (Thompson & Coles, 2023). This leads me to the question, who takes care of the Black woman at this moment? If she is not insulated from the collective racialized and gendered trauma of being Black and the impact of COVID-19 killing her community, where does she find solace?

Sister Circles of Collective Healing and Restoration

In both The Graduate Student's narrative and within my own, collective healing and restoration surfaces as sites of radical resistance against the hostile environment that resists our humanity as Black women. In moments of The Graduate Student's story where she finds peace sharing and receiving solace from her family to me seeking solidarity in closed Facebook affinity groups, the value of a collective knowing among a community is paramount. In these spaces, we do not have to be the caregiver, nor is that a narrow definition of our humanity. Instead, we can be emotional, open, and fully ourselves while receiving the love and support that we so desperately need.

The Graduate Student's Reflections

Words of Wisdom for Keepsake

After reading The Professor's reflection, I found myself thinking about 'rest.' How do Black women within higher education wear numerous hats, yet are never afforded the opportunity to rest? Even when we rest, we are not resting. Rest is not afforded to us, and it is time to address the notion of the 'Strong Black Woman.' During times of tribulation and hardships, not only is rest needed, but it is also essential to healthy relationships, work-life balance, and success as living beings. Within a few days, a wave of marches, demonstrations, arson, and other riots occurred throughout the country due to the institutional injustices that daily plague many Black citizens' lives in the U.S. To be mentally paralyzed during a time when our communities seemed to have no way out was depressing. I am more than the amount of work or productivity I put out. The 'Strong Black Woman' stereotype and the development of the rise and grind culture meant that, as a Black woman, I would always feel like I wasted time if I did not deliver, which could be a massive burden on my well-being.

So, No More…

I meditate on my identity and my worth. I use my power to empower myself to illuminate my voice. I use my power to engage my community and create spaces of

solidarity. Here is where I breathe because I deserve to breathe. If anything, I deserve to just be.

ANALYSIS

To remain connected to our data and keep consistent research memos on our reflections, we chose to upload the reflections on Dedoose, a research tool used to code and analyze the data collaboratively. This process was helpful, and as discussed in the previous section, it aligns with the method's full collaborative process. Next, as qualitative inquiries are emergent designs, it was imperative to read all the data, which consisted of research memos, our pre-reflections, and post-reflections, to see what themes emerged. In this way, in conducting a narrative study, we were responsive to how we made sense of our experiences as researchers/participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Here, our narratives were critical pieces of data that depicted the reality of being Black women in the academy during the summer of 2020. These sources of data were first-person accounts that did not rely on secondary data to explain the experience but instead told the story of how we struggled to find peace, solace, and safety within our roles as a professor and a graduate student. Next, consistent with narrative studies, we conducted a narrative analysis that was undergirded through the process of hermeneutics.

According to Patton (2002), as cited within Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the hermeneutical perspective, with its emphasis on interpretation and on context, informs narrative studies, as do interpretivist social science, literary nonfiction, and literary criticism (p. 115). Thus, through this process, we reviewed the data and created themes by assigning concept codes. Saldaña (2015) defines concept codes as ones that "assign meso or macro levels of meaning to data or to data analytic work to progress (e.g., a series of codes or categories)" (p. 119). Through this initial process, eight codes were then collapsed or condensed by both researchers to ensure consistency and agreement in the findings. Then, one overarching theme and two subthemes emerged as key findings from the study: intersectional racialized trauma, feelings of helplessness due to collective trauma, and Black women get tired too.

Intersectional Racialized Trauma

Both narratives discussed the intersection of trauma during times of grief. It was clear that, although being Black women in two different sectors within higher education, there were still similarities between the both of us as it relates to the distress of summer 2020. When the Strong Black Woman's analysis stops at detailing race and gender specifics without examining the links or intersections between them, an incomplete view of how Black women experience racialized and gendered trauma within the academy emerges. Two themes were evident within our reflections: feelings of helplessness due to collective trauma and Black women get tired too. In these themes, we describe how the lack of empathy for Black women academicians has severe implications for the Black women themselves.

Feelings of Helplessness Due to Collective Trauma

As both authors shared raced and gendered experiences that undergirded an intersectional knowing, another theme surfaced as consistent within their stories. Akin to a collective consciousness that responds through a shared understanding, there was also a shared communal sense of exhaustion due to racialized trauma's collective impact. This was highlighted within a portion of The Professor's narrative as she discusses the emotional and physical exhaustion that she felt from the experience and how she was unable to disengage. In truth, it was impossible to disconnect the impact of the outside world as it related to the racialized trauma from her identity as a Black woman. This sentiment was also highlighted within The Graduate Student's narrative as she shared the following collective trauma, "My community was facing multiple pandemics from COVID-19 to racial injustices, to discrimination within healthcare, to the ongoing mistreatment of Black people within the academy, and the list goes on. The burdens were taking a toll on my mental health." Thus, these traumas operated as collective weights that transformed news reports or images shared on social media feeds to real tangible traumas that impacted The Graduate Student's well-being. Resulting in direct opposition to the moniker that touts the #StrongBlackWoman without a real examination of the burdens or rather racialized traumas that Black women experience that can often impact these statements of strength.

Black Women Get Tired Too

In both narratives, the authors express the need for community during times of fatigue. In The Graduate Student's narrative, she explains:

> To be mentally paralyzed during a time when the community seemed to have no way out was depressing. I am more than the amount of work or productivity I put out. The 'Strong Black Woman' stereotype and the development of the rise and grind culture meant that as a Black woman, I will always feel like I waste time if I do not deliver, which can be a massive burden on my well-being.

Black women are deserving of rest. We deserve to close our eyes and let our visions carry us to a place where we are uplifted – a world where our prayers are answered, and our sons and daughters will go far and make it home at all times; an environment where we are not objects to be handled, or devices to be used, or projects to be done, or bodies to be destroyed; an environment where we are not fields for disposal (Thomas, 2021). We are exhausted with being the Black woman called the champion of diversity and inclusion – a quota when nobody else is prepared to advocate anything as simple as distinction. Because of the expectation that Black women need to look confident and not address their struggles, the Strong Black Woman stereotype worsens the current tension. Black women are highly prone to persistent psychological stress due to their tendency to suppress pain and indignation and make it easier to combat derogatory stereotypes (Simien, 2020). Black women's vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic's inadequacy in reducing socio-economic inequality and institutional bias is at the core of racial health discrepancies in the U.S. Too many Black women are all too well aware that

the challenge facing them is not whether social challenges exist but whether they can bear yet another struggle.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BLACK WOMEN

Black women within the academy must forge spaces where they can radically reclaim moments of peace and solitude for the sake of their well-being. As the academy often reflects the outside world, protests that demand racial justice for Black people often are reflected within the campus environment. For example, as hostile classroom evaluations of Black women are often laced with racism and misogynoir (Wallace et al., 2019), Black women within the academy are not able to escape these moments of racialized and gendered trauma. Thus, spaces of resistance are critical to Black women academicians' well-being.

Sister Circles as Communal Spaces of Resistance

As shared previously, Black women within this article found solace and peace when they were in a Black identified community. Sister circles emerged as spaces where Black women found such solace. According to Neal-Barnett et al. (2011), sister circles are "support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among African American females" (p. 2). Although the narratives shared did not specifically name their groups as sister circles, it was clear that these were the places where both authors found a sense of peace. However, it is less about the group's naming than about what members of their communities receive. In truth, within these groups, members did not have to explain their exhaustion and fatigue to each other as they were in the presence of ones who knew their struggle. That knowing, or seeing, emerged as freeing for Black women academics and was something we desired to create for the next generation of emerging scholars.

Black women within the academy must identify these spaces early and utilize them continuously for their well-being. By acknowledging racism, segregation, and gender bias embedded within the foundation of many colleges and universities of white origin (Wilder, 2013), it is antithetical to expect them to create safe spaces for Black women to resist. Therefore, Black women within the academy must not only create these spaces but fiercely protect them for the sake of their well-being. For the sake of our mental sanity, these spaces offer us peace amongst chaos.

Disengaging from the Madness, an Act of Political Warfare

Wrapped within the loving embrace that Audre Lorde's words conjure, it is clear that guarding oneself for the sake of one's own well-being (Lorde, 2017) is an act survival for Black women. Within her prose, she instructs Black women to care for themselves, not out of an agenda that pits our workplace as our prime focus, but for the sake of Black women's self-preservation. This perspective also emerged from our narratives. Beyond identifying spaces as metaphorical sister circles, it also became cathartic for us to disengage from the media's madness and its constant

coverage. Whether that came from spending time with family, avoiding social media, or emerged as a decision to not wear the mask of #BlackGirlMagic (Gillespie & Brown, 2019) within staff meetings, these decisions were made with self-care and self-preservation in mind for us as Black women. The act of defiance, which pits the self-care and well-being of Black women in opposition to the workplace agenda and its functioning, is troubling. As the well-being and wholeness of Black women academics may never be placed at the forefront of the institutional agenda, Black women must reclaim their time and peace for themselves. Thus, it is essential that Black women have an opportunity to radically realign their lives in a way that supports their mental health.

CONNECTION TO PRACTICE

Working within the academe for Black women exposes harsh realities associated with being Black in America. As the death of Black people continues to be televised and as society's viewpoint of Black people continues to carry over into the hostile treatment of Black women within the classroom, the academy must not act as if their walls are impenetrable from the reality of violence, hatred, and misogynoir. The academy must do more than the typical platitudes of caring about diversity and inclusion; instead, the academy should make immediate policy changes in the environments in which Black women reside. For example, beyond institutions creating aimless statements of unanimity (Knopf et al., 2021), colleges and universities alike should ensure that their institutions are active spaces of solidarity in which Black women can feel empowered. This means evaluating policies and practices that further entrench instances of racialized trauma that create hostile work environments for Black women (Briscoe, 2022; Meikle et al., 2022). Even more so, because Black women experience racism and sexism in higher education (Hanson, 2004; Thompson & Coles, 2023), an institution's failure to address these persisting racialized stigmatizing experiences results in the underrepresentation of Black women in the academy (Leath & Chavous, 2018). Njoku and Evans (2022) explain the need to implement changes through an anti-racist practice when stating it is "imperative to understand, recognize, and implement the cathartic survival skills and strategies of collaboration, communication, self-care, racial and gender equity, and anti-racism through a trauma-sensitive and informed lens for students, faculty, administrators, and staff" (p. 10).

Through countless autoethnographic accounts and research studies of Black women faculty, staff, and students, the environment of many historically white institutions (HWIs) is often characterized as toxic and oppressive to the well-being of Black women (Acuff, 2018; Corbin et al., 2018; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Husband, 2016; Patton & Catching, 2009; Porter et al., 2020; Young & Brooks, 2008). Undoubtedly, higher education continues to function as if these studies do not exist. This could be the reason that the academy is experiencing a mass exodus of many Black faculty, staff, and students within HWIs (Martin, 2019). Thus, in order to create more inclusive and equitable environments on campus, institutions must consider both racialized issues and Black women's unique experiences. Based on the authors' perspectives in this study, the effects of the two

pandemics, COVID-19 and racialized injustices (Bright, 2020), present a dire need to eradicate anti-Black practices and policies in and outside of the academy.

CONCLUSION

Conversations about racial injustices that Black women face can be encouraged through an intentional commitment to DEI at an institutional level (Walton et al., 2021). Furthermore, the institutional commitment to provide and sustain racial awareness should also be emphasized to co-conspirators to learn how anti-Black racism operates in the academy (Ekpe & Toutant, 2022). The onus, or rather the responsibility, in fixing these spaces of prejudice should not be placed on Black women, as this responsibility so often crushes their well-being. Instead, that responsibility is on the system that is doing the crushing. Academe must metaphorically fix what was broken through its original creation of being exclusive and intolerant towards Black people (Wilder, 2013). However, this will only happen through an acknowledgment of the problem, as things will only worsen if higher education institutions do not shift their practices to make the environments safer for Black women. While it is critical that we celebrate the successes Black women have made in higher education, we should continue to address the issues that Black women face in their educational journeys through interpersonal and institutional barriers.

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VALERIE J. THOMPSON, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership/Educational Psychology. Her major research interests are Black women in higher education, student affairs practitioners, and intersectional stress and burnout. Email: valerie.thompson@witchita.edu

LESLIE EKPE, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the Higher Education and Learning Technologies department at Texas A&M University-Commerce. Her primary research interests lie in anti-racism, diversity, equity, inclusion, and racial equity. Email: leslie.ekpe@tamuc.edu