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Extracting Life-giving Strength from my Roots: An Endarkened Feminist ~~(Auto)~~Nkwaethnography of Navigating Tenure as a Black Woman at a Predominantly White Institution

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Abstract: This ~~auto~~ nkwa (life-affirming) ethnography shares a Black woman's journey to tenure at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Grounded in endarkened feminist epistemologies, the author weaves together elements of intersectionality, critical autoethnography, narrative inquiry, and Black womanist traditions to share first-person accounts of how she navigated the socio-cultural and socio-political institutional context to ultimately become the first Black woman to earn tenure in the School of Education's history at her university. In connecting the personal to theory and theory to praxis, the author illuminates how PWIs must undertake anti-racist and justice-orientations in order to fully center and support Black women's ways of knowing and being in the tenure and promotion process, ultimately ensuring their long-term success.

Keywords: endarkened feminist epistemologies, intersectionality, autoethnography, nkwaethnography, Black women, predominantly white institutions, tenure

Prelude

As I sit down to write this autoethnography, I just read an article that literally changed my life forever. In my exploration of other Black women faculty autoethnographies, I came across a piece entitled: "Endarkened Feminism and Sacred Praxis: Troubling (Auto) Ethnography through Critical Engagements with African Indigenous Knowledges."[1] Where has this article been my whole entire academic life? I'm deeply disturbed that I have never come across it before. Nonetheless, I'm reading a gut wrenching autoethnographic account of the authors' experiences at the Cape Coast slave dungeon in Ghana and read the following line as if in slooooooowwww motion: "There can be no **auto**-ethnography from an endarkened feminist framework. What is needed is a different ethnography, beyond the prefix "auto" or singular version of ethnography to gesture toward the prefix "trans" or beyond the singular, multiple of nature."[2] Wow, #mindblown and now I must recalibrate and try this again.

Introduction: From Auto to Nkwa Ethnography

"Nkwa" (sacred or life affirming in Twi) ethnography transforms my previous understandings

[1] Dillard and Bell 2011.

[2] Ibid: 344.

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of the method of autoethnography. Nkwaethnography is an African-centered ethnographic research approach that affords African ascendant individuals a way by which to engage in a deeply introspective and sacred self-research process at the myriad intersections of their identities.[3] While returning back home to the Cape Coast slave dungeon in Ghana, the literal gateway of forced exodus of our ancestors, Dillard and Bell trouble autoethnography and its utility to support all of the facets of their embodied and spiritual experiences:

> What we needed was a kind of ethnography that truly honored the complexities of the Indigenous and the 'modern' that we'd experienced in our bodies, minds, and spirits. Something both dialogical and multiple. Both spiritual and sacred. Something both historical and cultural. Something that honored the fluidity of time and space, of the material and spiritual world. Mostly we needed an ethnography that acknowledged both the joy and pain of location, dislocation, and the transformation of both in our stories: African women are not stories of a singular self but are stories of we, collective stories deeply embedded in African women's wisdom and Indigenous knowledges.[4]

Hence, the emergence of nkwaethnography-hence a healing methodology.[5] As a Black woman, I find a deep interior connection as I grapple with pivoting from "auto" to "nkwa" in this self-study of navigating tenure at a predominantly white institution (PWI).

Autoethnography has traditionally provided a much-needed space for me to unpack my experiences and to attempt to connect the personal to the cultural, the storying of (my)self-engulfed in social context.[6] Grounded in experience and often written in evocative prose, Boylorn shares that autoethnography is poised to provoke other stories.[7] As an autoethnographer, I have often wavered back and forth in the paradigmatic tug of war between evocative and analytic autoethnography.[8] However, in order to bring forth my nkwa (life affirming) story, I must write for evocation and evocation only. Similar to the autoethnographic accounts of navigating the academy of Griffin, Boylorn, and Jones et al., I yearn for my story to join in harmony with other Black women who have, who are, and who will navigate academic life… across all levels- undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, tenure track, non-tenure track, mid-career, full, distinguished, as well as across transnational boundaries.[9] In this space, I strive to illuminate how my experiences and the interplay of my intersectional identities[10] make room for our collective endeavors, our collective strength, and for that it is worth it. It is worth it to go deep, to not hold back, to relinquish my story so that it can illuminate the contours of the academy that are so deeply *in* and *in need of* (dis)repair.

[3] Dillard and Bell 2011.

[4] Ibid: 343.

[5] Dillard 2008.

[6] Ellis 1997; Ellis and Bochner 2000.

[7] Boylorn 2008.

[8] Chang 2016.

[9] Dillard and Bell 2011.

[10] Crenshaw 1990.

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What better time to engage in this process than in this moment of the movement of Black Lives Mattering, when performative ally-ship from institutions is on full display. Institutions are wrestling with the reckoning of just how jacked up the academy is, and how deeply entrenched in white supremacy, racism, antiblackness, patriarchy, and hegemony are the departments and colleges that make up the university structure. As hard as it is for the university to look itself in the mirror wherein its reflection will be that of upholding whiteness as property,[11] I am acutely aware that my very Black womanist existence challenges and troubles the who, what, and why PWIs were created and continue to exist today.

Endarkened Feminist Epistemology

I glean from Dillard's endarkened feminism as if it is air, essential and sustenance for this ~~(auto)~~ nkwaethnographic journey, and my process of meaning making. It is through an endarkened feminist perspective that I can fully see ALL of me, for myself, and thus amplify and illuminate for others the ways in which my own story can connect to theirs. What Dillard has so masterfully done is made space for and centered Black women's ways of knowing and being, research identities, and methodologies to co-exist in the full constructs of our identities.[12] She contends that an endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) articulates how "reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities, and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women."[13] In this story, I am grounded in and inspired by all of the tenets of EFE:[14]

> (a) self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility within a given communal space
> (b) research is both a spiritual and intellectual pursuit that is filled with purpose.
> (c) the individual appears through dialogic and communal context.
> (d) one's experiences form the criterion of meaning-making.
> (e) the knowledge constructions from women of color are (and should be) acknowledged as ontologically and epistemologically viable within the academy and society at large.
> (f) there is a desire to understand the interwoven complexities and identities of women of color, which are often linked to power relations such as race, gender, and class.

This endarkened feminist standpoint offers me the opportunity to provoke my positionality as an outsider-within the walls of academia, to which Collins asserts "permanently claiming an outsider within identity rarely results in real power because the category, by definition requires marginality…using the insights gained via outsider-within status can be a stimulus to creativity

[11] Harris 1993.

[12] Evans-Winters and Love 2015.

[13] Dillard 2000: 2.

[14] Dillard 2008.

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that helps African American women."[15] This here nkwaethnography is the product of insights I have gained and my creativity- an evocative story as I write emotionally about my life[16] and lived experiences on the tenure track at a PWI. I start with me, which in traditional research terms might be conveyed as my positionality. Next, I journey through my previous experiences engaging in autoethnography, and how I came to the point that I am today yet again entangled in this self-study process. Following, I dig deeper into the context which serves as the backdrop to my story. Lastly, I share stories of various experiences that were recalled by memory as being pivotal components of my tenure journey, and that herein illuminate the socio-cultural and socio-political facets of the PWI landscape.

The Pieces of a Beautiful Flower

This writing journey is for me a healing balm, a moment of catharsis, and a therapeutic exercise as I carefully disentangle my lived experiences as a Black woman on the tenure track in the white academy. Just like the beautiful detangling process of my twelve-year natural hair journey, every strand, every section must be carefully unraveled to illuminate the entirety of the whole experience. I seek to disentangle the multifaceted pieces of me as I move in and out of institutional spaces, and I draw inspiration from one of my favorite songs sung by Ledisi of the same name, *Pieces of Me* written by Charles Harmon, Claude Kelly, and Ledisi Young (2011):

> So, when you look at my face
> You gotta know that I'm made
> Of everything love and pain
> These are the pieces of me
> — (Track 1)

Each piece of me is intricately interwoven within the backdrop of the white academy and its systems and structures. My experiences, relationships, conversations, research, teaching, and service stitched together like a beautifully messy tapestry of a life lived in pursuit of tenure. And so, at times throughout, you the reader may feel the complexities of emotion that encompass the human experience…just as I have throughout this writing process. I will share the love and pain endured on this journey and my emotions teeter tot between happiness and sadness, purpose and emptiness, joy and even sometimes pain. These are feelings felt by almost everyone at some point in time yet navigating the tenure track as a Black woman within the white academy is a unique experience that is truly known only to those who have walked throughout its vestibules. And oh, how walking along this tenure track can sometimes extract life from one's very soul.

Although this story is about the pieces of me navigating tenure, it is not a fractured nor disjointed story, as I attempt to cohere together the intersections of self, others, identity, systems, institutions, and the environmental context of the white academy. Storying the I and the telling

[15] Collins 1998: 88.

[16] Ellis 1997.

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of my story must begin with the seed of who I am.[17] My name Ayana means beautiful flower in Ethiopian, and my personality often mirrors that of a flower, and thus the metaphor of a flower carves out the edifice of my life.[18] An anonymous quote states that "the flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all." There is no more accurate metaphor of a flower in bloom in adversity than of my tenure track journey. This story is for the reader to extract whatever meaning, draw whatever conclusions, and for themselves interrogate whatever residue that is left in your mind, written on your heart, breathed into your lungs, and painted on your soul after reading my story. I'm just going to tell my story, my journey and for the first time in my time on the tenure track, reject and shed the very tenets of the scientific process. Because this is a story of me, matter of fact it is the artistry of me and my experiences, with the hope that they may in some form or fashion speak to you and yours.

It's quite nostalgic that I am sitting down to write this piece — a piece that will allow me to engage in the journey of storying an autoethnographic account of my lived experiences navigating tenure. I also just realized in this moment that I haven't engaged in the autoethnographic process since I wrote my first autoethnography about my experiences as a Black girl from birth to college as an epilogue section of my dissertation.[19] It would be five years later until I wrote and published my second autoethnography about my Black self in white context, particularly as a student in predominantly white schools from elementary to doctoral study.[20] In order to write this here story, I had to turn back the hands of time, to read my previous autoethnographies because it had been many years since I had done so. I wanted to (re)member who I was in writing those pieces and to have a sort of out of body experience, to see myself then through the eyes of me now, and to build upon the pieces of me that I have already revealed through the other projects.

Looking back 10 years ago, I see me at age 30 at the endpoint of my doctoral journey. Five years ago, I see me at the endpoint of my postdoctoral journey, and herein today I see me at the endpoint of my tenure journey. I guess it is interesting to reflect on the fact that I have not necessarily engaged in an autoethnographic experience while going *through* something. It seems to be that I have tried to understand my experiences and life more deeply as I have liv*ed* it versus in the here and now of the liv*ing*. Now, I am an avid writer and journaler since the age of 6 and have often captured my life in real time as it was happening, but there has been a significant breach in my journaling and capturing of my lived experiences during the interim of my post-doc and tenure process. In total, six years of uncaptured stories, memories, happenings, feelings, emotions. In my consciousness I try to understand my unconscious more fully, and why I have not journaled as much during the six years on the tenure track. In my self-uncovering I am wondering if subconsciously I did not want to remember this time retrospectively. Perhaps, it is the hustle and bustle of everyday life as a wife, mom, daughter, sister, and academic. Perhaps it is the sheer exhaustion of publishing to not perish, teaching to transform, and serving without boundaries the university, the field, and the community. However, whatever it is, it seems as if I have tried to hide from myself and others…to keep these experiences contained only in my memory. Griffin reminds us that we often keep the personal private because treading lightly when it comes to experiences

[17] Josselson 2011.

[18] Allen 2015.

[19] Allen 2010.

[20] Allen 2015.

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of racism and sexism might in fact be killing us softly, might in fact be the spirit murdering that so many Black women experience in the white academy.[21] Here I pray, in this space that here I will stay true to my story and unafraid to share it all, making the personal public. The last six years roll by in my mind like a movie trailer, and it is here that this beautiful flower begins to embark on this ~~(auto)~~nkwaethnographic experience for the third time.

Setting the Stage: The Context

Hancock and Allen state that "the context in which autoethnographic research is conducted colors and frames a narrative. It is the context that influences epistemological and ontological truths, as well as narrative energy and storied advocacy."[22] It is important that I share the context, because context is so critical to my story. The context of this narrative is set up against the backdrop of my childhood home in the city of Brotherly (Sisterly) love-Philadelphia. There is a constant dance between my past, present, and future as I often exist in a state of nostalgia as my office is just blocks away from the homes where my maternal and paternal grandparents raised their families after transplanting to West Philly during the Great Migration; and where my husband, son, and I live only two blocks north from campus. I am often humbled by the fact that my purpose and my family legacy is wrapped up in my daily life as a professor at my institution.

My institution is located in a section of the city called "University City" but to those of us who grew up here, it's really West Philly. Our student body demographics are approximately 50% White, 6% Black, 21% Asian, 7% Hispanic/Latinx, and 4% Multi-racial. Black faculty make up only 3% of the faculty. In the School of Education, there are a total of 8 Black faculty, 6 of whom are tenured/tenure track and 1 of the 6 on the tenure track is a Black woman…that 1 is me. It is mind-blowing to me that in the city of Philadelphia where Blacks comprise 45% of the population and 46% of the School District of Philadelphia, we only have a total of 8 Black faculty out of approximately 50. To add insult to injury, our college has the second highest number of Black faculty across the entire university and the most with tenure and on the tenure track. When I first came to my institution, I was part of a cluster of hires and the new era of a shift in our school from being a professoriate of mostly clinical/teaching faculty to a new era of growing the faculty on the tenure track. Under the direction of my now former Dean, who hired several tenure track faculty, 8 to be exact in the span of three years. Not only did the dynamics of tenure vs. non-tenured track shift, but now race was front, and center as Black faculty occupied 4 of the 8 newly created tenure lines and since that three-year time, another Black tenure track faculty member has joined our faculty.

Another important lens for the context of this article is that it takes place during the Covid-19 pandemic and a time of deep racial reckoning. In the wake of the senseless and brutal murder of George Floyd, I came across a powerful image of the horrendous 8 minute and 46 second act which depicts Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin's knee pressed relentlessly against Mr. Floyd's neck while his spirit simultaneously departs from its earthly shell (Figure 1). Watching another human life sucked away right before my eyes while he pleaded for breath and for

[21] Love 2016.

[22] Hancock and Allen 2015: 4.

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his Mama, shock me to my core…forever sketched into my mind. As the days, weeks, and months go by, I have been trying to reconcile all that I am feeling. The depths of grief and helplessness grow as the hashtags pile up, and more and more Black lives are lost by the hands of anti-blackness, racism, and state-sanctioned violence.[23]

As a Black woman professor and the only Black woman on the tenure track in my college, I have often felt as if my own spirit (that spirit of joy, of hope, of faith) was suffering a slow death[24] through the daily challenges of navigating the overwhelming white spaces of my PWI. Herein, I turn back to the picture of Mr. Floyd and envision my own spirit escaping from my body (metaphorically, no less), suffocating under the weight of the pursuit of tenure. Young and Hines remind me that I am not alone, for "Black women faculty at PWIs are more at risk of experiencing racism and racialized criminalization,"[25] and "the spirit murdering of Black female faculty deserts them into spiritual dying where they will ultimately not have the strength and ethos to unchain themselves."[26] Navigating the multiple marginality[27] of the academy as a Black woman is compounded by the "pressure to conform, social invisibility, isolation, exclusion from informal peer networks, limited sources of power, fewer opportunities for sponsorship, stereotyping, and personal stress."[28] All of these experiences render my spirit feeling murdered, almost daily through microaggressive, passive aggressive, and downright aggressive acts of institutional and individual racism.

Yet, in order to even diagnose my condition as spirit murdering, I must first acknowledge that I am a spiritual being, and that there exists an undeniable connection between my mind, body, and spirit. Furthermore, my mind, body, and spirit are sutured together across space and time upholding my past, present, and future. In this attempt to be whole, I re(member) that I am my ancestors' wildest dreams and the living, breathing remnant of their very existence; their legacy lives within me.[29] However, going through the tenure process at a PWI is incongruent with this recognition of the whole person, for I am often asked to leave the "spiritual parts" of myself at home. Taliaferro-Baszile calls this the "despiritualized space of the academy, the place where circulating information seems far more important than engaging inspiration."[30] In so far that I have attempted to disconnect my mind, body, and spirit within this space, I recognize that I cannot do so. This is why EFE is so critical to my story and this context. Drawing upon EFE,[31] I attempt to excavate the ways in which I draw life-giving strength from my roots (as a beautiful flower) while navigating tenure. Not only for myself, but I also strive to pass that strength on to others as I journey through the tenure process without losing my soul.[32] I seek to display the intersectional ways in which I live, breathe, and move in and out of spaces in the white academy while navigating tenure.

[23] Dumas 2015.

[24] Love 2016.

[25] Young and Hines 2018: 19.

[26] Young and Hines 2018: 20.

[27] Turner 2002.

[28] Russell et al. 2015: 50.

[29] Dillard 2012.

[30] Russell et al. 2015: 53.

[31] Dillard 2012.

[32] Rocquemore and Laszloffy 2008.

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I share how my non-traditional development of research, programs, and projects has disrupted the status quo, business as usual ways in which the white academy functions and thrives and use storying as an avenue to illuminate larger cultural and contextual realities.

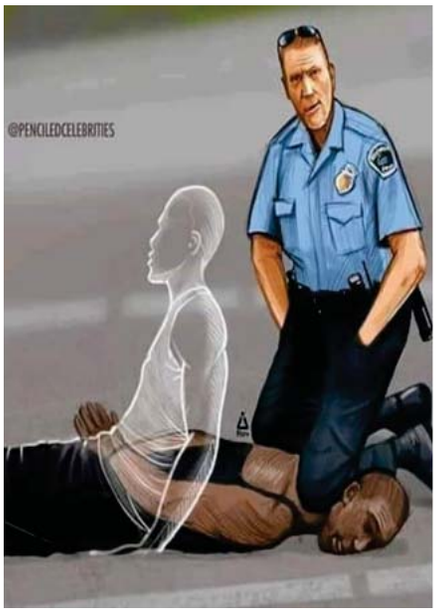

Figure 1 — Drawing of George Floyd's Brutal Murder by Artist Ray Styles
Retrieved from Facebook 5.27.20

Navigating Tenure as a Black Woman at a PWI

It's Convocation 2015, the onset of my journey as a new tenure track faculty member. Feelings of pure excitement and anticipation keep the butterflies in my stomach in full flutter with no relief, as I look intently at the stage of the Main Auditorium as our new Provost, (who happens to "to look like me") is officially introduced to the university community. Wow! I think to myself, how proud I am of this Black man that I have never met, how proud that he is my Provost. I find myself lost in thought but quickly brought back to reality by my Dean's voice announcing my name and title over the microphone. It was then that I realized I too was taking my debut. It was reminiscent of a wedding ceremony when the witnesses testify that they have seen for themselves the union and are tasked to hold the couple accountable. It was as if everyone in that auditorium was bearing witness and holding me accountable to all that this new role would entail. I stand up to wave at the crowd…hesitant, nervous and hopeful, but find myself having to fight the imposter that keeps trying to rise, rise, rise up in me… Sit yourself down I say to the imposter as I rise in response to my Dean's introduction, and my time on the tenure clock officially begins…tick tock, tick tock, tick tock…goes the tenure clock.

Invisible And Hypervisible All at The Same Time

Navigating any predominantly white space is taxing for a Black woman, but especially when I must navigate a world where whiteness permeates the systems and structures that could very well

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determine my livelihood, my ultimate tenure decision. It has been well documented that Black women are significantly underrepresented amongst the faculty ranks where Black women comprise only 3.6% of the professoriate. These numbers are even more alarming when broken down by rank — 1.3% of full professors, 2.6% of associate professors, and 3.6% of assistant professors.[33] As the only Black woman on the tenure track in my college, I have felt simultaneously invisible and hypervisible …existing in a space where my presence is not really noticed, where I'm not truly "seen" until I'm not perhaps present in a meeting or when I attempt to make my voice heard and myself be known, and I am ignored or silenced. I've often felt as if several of my white colleagues looked past me, around me, but my experiences and perspectives have never been centered. For instance, rarely did they show interest in me or my work. Often, they would walk by me in the hallways of our office and on the sidewalks of campus without a look of acknowledgement. Many wouldn't even speak the mere words of hello. In one incident that stands out in my mind, I was talking/catching up with a white woman junior faculty colleague when a more senior white woman came up to us and said to my colleague, completely ignoring me stating: "You have to come out with all the girls to get drinks and have dinner with us. We go out often and we would love to have you join us." She did not even look at me, acknowledge me, nor invite me to also join "all the girls"; a moment of pure invisibility (even though I had no desire to join them anyway). In my first year on the tenure track I literally kept to myself and kept my focus on my work. I often said to myself "let my work speak for me…it will speak for itself" and thus that is what I aspired to do.

While trying to navigate the feelings of invisibility, I was often struck by how simultaneously I felt hypervisible. I can so vividly recall many occasions of public attention being drawn to me and my hair whether in its natural afro, straight, braided or twisted, colleagues rarely refrained from commenting on how my hair could "change" so much. I did in fact often wear my hair straight that first year more or less subscribing to the norms of whiteness, and in order to combat the hypervisibility of my hair for I did not want to draw unnecessary attention. In one incident, a colleague "petted" my hair in front of the faculty like I was a cute little puppy and told me how beautiful my hair was pressed out straight, and that I should always wear my hair like that. On another occasion, towards the end of my first year, while meeting with a superior about my progress thus far on the tenure track, she shared with me her pure amazement at my strong research record even stating that she wasn't as advanced as I was on her tenure journey when she was at the stage I was at- "Wow you have done SO much, I don't even know what to tell you to do to improve or what to say you need to work on…you have done all of this…and YOU'RE BLACK…I mean… because your Black you probably have more demands to do service and things like that, that's what I mean (back pedal, back pedal, back pedal)"…and the HYPERvisiblity yet again sets in.

The Monkey Wrench

During the final months of my first year on the tenure track and during a trip to Denver for the Critical Race Studies in Education Association Conference with my graduate assistant, I could not shake my exhaustion and thought I was suffering from a bad case of altitude sickness as many experiences when visiting Denver. Having met a good friend from college for lunch, I recall

[33] Croom and Patton 2012; Jackson and Johnson 2011.

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telling her how I didn't know how she lived with the high altitude and that I was suffering from a strong case of altitude sickness, to which she shook her head in fierce agreement. After me and my student's presentation, we decided to celebrate with mojitos. I felt so sick right away from the first sip… I was like…um… I feel sick…. Oh no! After returning back home to Philly, I couldn't shake the symptoms of altitude sickness, and the realization that I was "late" prompted me to take a pregnancy test. Low and behold I was indeed pregnant. With only a few weeks left in the academic year in June, I knew I could pretty much keep my pregnancy a secret until at least the next academic year.

Around the same time, I was asked to develop a new urban education course for our teacher education program. A course existed in the catalogue, but the course itself had not yet been developed. Now mind you…how in the heck does a teacher education program in the heart of Philadelphia, not have an active urban education course is beyond me. So, I was to develop the course over the summer with the intent to teach the course the following winter quarter. Knowing that I would be on FMLA and wouldn't be able to teach the course, I let a colleague know about my ensuing pregnancy and begged her to keep it private because I had yet to disclose to my Dean or Department Head. During the first day back after the summer and an informal "get together" to celebrate a colleague's birthday and welcome folks back to the academic year, a senior white woman blurts out in front of everyone: "Well I guess you being pregnant sure puts a ***monkey wrench*** in your tenure huh?".

Now… not only had she just revealed to all of my colleagues without my consent and without having heard this deeply personal information directly from my own mouth, but a trusted colleague was the one who had told her. I was devastated, and there was a clear look of confusion and disappointment on my Dean's face as she inquired of me why I had not yet told her? Now imagine, it's the first day of my second year as a faculty member (and the only Black woman on the tenure track no less), and this woman just likened the fetus growing inside of me to a "monkey" … "a monkey wrench" …does she really not know the derogatory and repulsive comparisons of Black people to monkeys that have degraded and marginalized us for centuries? Oh, how the revelations of deeply held ideologies of antiblackness and racism come forth with the Freudian slips of ignorant folks. Nevertheless, I immediately called HR and told them what the woman had just said, that she is in a position of power in my school and that I need for her to catch a case.

As the HR rep opens up a claim and starts to take down my statement and I disclose who the individual is, what was said, how others and I reacted, and the rage brewing inside of me, she asked for my name and information. It was at that juncture that I immediately shut the whole thing down saying I did not want to disclose my name for fear of retaliation, for fear of stirring trouble, and for fear of jeopardizing my tenure case. I proceeded to tell the HR rep to forget that I even called and dismiss the case. It was here that I felt the pangs of silence, of disarming agency, of disempowerment. This colleague would never be held accountable for her actions, moreover illegal statements about my pregnancy and the threat my pregnancy could pose to my tenure decision… her white privilege in-tact and her racist behavior unaccounted for. This would be the first of many encounters with colleagues that brought me great pause and distress.

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Mid-tenure Review and Suffering in Silence

Having received an extra year on the tenure clock due to the birth of my son before going up for my mid-tenure review, I was able to take my foot off the gas a little. The great thing about the publication pipeline, is that luckily, I had publications in cue which had seemingly delayed my anxiety about having to get papers out with the quickness. Now, in my fourth year, I worked tirelessly to gain momentum from the time I took off for maternity leave and just plain settling into life with an active two-year old. Two days before my mid-tenure dossier was due, I found out that I was pregnant with our second child. The news of a second child was obviously such a blessing, and we were so excited to be expanding our family, but I had a pang in my heart, a feeling of worry and fear came over me as I knew that I had not been taking care of myself the last several months preparing my mid-tenure dossier. At my institution, the mid-tenure dossier is a full dossier with all of the components of a tenure review dossier being evaluated except for external reviewers' feedback on my case. I can't even count on my hands and toes how many all- nighters I pulled in the weeks and months leading up to the submission of my dossier. So that pang in my heart was like, I hope my baby is ok cause I have not been taking care of myself.

Within 3 weeks after submitting my mid-tenure dossier one day I just felt off…I wasn't too alarmed by it, but did mention it to my doctor who asked me to come in. She wanted to check my blood levels. Two days later, the doctor called me with my blood test results and said that my levels were low, and she wanted me to go to have an ultrasound right away. The ultrasound revealed a non-viable pregnancy, but the doctor encouraged me to wait a few more weeks to see if my levels improved and if there would be further development the next few weeks...but I knew… a woman knows when the life inside of her has been lost. I remember speaking to the little life that I could not bring forth to completion that Mommy was sorry for placing more attention and all of my energy into work…killing myself and my precious baby. inside of me. There is no denying that I blamed myself and wondered what I could have done differently…if I hadn't stayed up so many nights, if I hadn't written so much, stressed so much about getting tenure…if my job wasn't so demanding, if I didn't always have to fight against that imposter syndrome, etc. Even as I write this the tears flow…the sting of this loss is still a very present part of my daily life, but I couldn't leave it out of this story…sure I contemplated if I should, if I would…but if I left this piece of me out…the rest of my story would not be. You see, Black women we rarely show weakness, any outward displays of weakness are strictly forbidden, yet we often suffer… and suffer in silence. I was suffering in silence, but no more…just writing this, just illuminating this makes all the difference, and brings forth the balm of healing that I referenced in the beginning of the paper! Somehow, little by little, day by day I tried to pick up the pieces and dived head-first back into work. Within two weeks after the process to eliminate the miscarriage I was on my way to Toronto for the American Educational Research Association conference. I saw several friends/colleagues from other institutions who knew that I was pregnant, yet I never disclosed that I had lost my baby as I tried to hold a tight grip to what was.

Making Meaning and Finding Purpose in My Methods

I have found teaching and mentoring students to be one of the most rewarding and edifying

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components of my journey. Having been an educator my whole 20-year career, I consider myself to be a teacher by heart and professional training. Teaching is what inspires my work and fuels my sense of purpose. I believe that grounding my teaching in critical race theory[34] and culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies[35] within a Black womanist ethic of care has been well received by my students. Having taught students of all backgrounds in our undergraduate and graduate programs, I consider myself to be lucky to have not encountered some of the many horror stories frequently shared with me by Black woman professors teaching at PWIs. I consider myself blessed to have had only 2 incidents with students that deeply troubled me over the last six years.

As a scholar, my thoughts are often driven by questions. Herein the academy, we know that our burning questions are the impetus of our research endeavors. In the beginning, my questions often centered around teachers and teaching and how best to build the critical and cultural competence that teachers, mainly white teachers needed in order to meet the expectations of the brilliance of Black and Brown children. So, I spent the first few years trying to theorize culturally relevant pedagogy within predominantly white teacher education programs,[36] and wrote with colleagues about the experiences of Black teachers specifically and the need to diversify the teacher workforce.[37] Somewhere in between I became very discontent with this focus. For one, I would look around at my faculty colleagues and recognized that some of them did not exhibit the cultural competence nor reflexivity that would warrant them prepared to teach the future generation of teachers who would be teaching our Black and Brown babies and I knew our program had a way to go to do this, it just wasn't going to be me taking on that burden.

Nevertheless, my research interests began to pivot towards the end of my second year on the tenure track. I started to learn more about critical participatory action research (CPAR) and appreciate so much having had the opportunity to attend a CPAR workshop at the Public Science Project at CUNY. I then set my mind on developing co-constructed research projects with youth and community. Ginwright shares that the PAR process can foster critical inquiry and the development of liberatory practices, so much of what I longed for in my own methods. He contends:

> The participatory process involves the intersection of art, science, and imagination. Equal in importance to the analytical skills developed through participatory action research, youth develop a collective radical imagination that is vital for community and social change … PAR forces researchers to re-examine what constitutes research and shatters the brittle barriers that separate the scholar and artist in each of us."[38]

It was then that I knew that in order to claim that my work was community-engaged, I had to literally engage the community. In response to this burning call to make meaning and find purpose in my research endeavors, I established PAR projects with youth (YPAR) and community-

[34] Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995.

[35] Ladson-Billings 1995; Paris 2012.

[36] Allen et al. 2017.

[37] Farinde-Wu et al. 2016 and 2017.

[38] Ginwright 2010: 15.

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led PAR projects that centered the expertise of youth and community in every aspect of the research process.[39] These various projects have been a great source of love, purpose, community, family, and strength. I have now found purpose in my research because I'm not doing research on people but with people. Again, I draw inspiration from Dillard who articulates the gravity of the privilege it is to engage in research. Her words helped me to yet again reframe my commitments to the research process. She states, "research as responsibility, answerable and obligated to the very persons and communities being engaged in the inquiry, an invitation to the reader to become aware of multiple ways of knowing and doing research, available to those serious enough to interrogate the epistemological, political, and ethical level of their work."[40] These approaches help me to understand the conditions of the marginalized more fully and the collective pursuit of liberation.[41]

Haters Gonna Hate… But Joy

There's a scripture that always brings me solace: Weeping my endure for a night…but joy comes in the morning". There is just something about that "but joy" that gets me every time, and morning is when you wake up-or in other words when you become "woke"! At this point in my tenure journey, my last year on the tenure track, I was woke to the game of navigating tenure as a Black woman at a PWI. I had come to know over the years just how important it was for me to stay focused and to be sure to give the academy what it demanded, what it valued: publications, funding, decent teaching, and service. In the quest to legitimize myself and legitimize my research, I knew that my work had to speak for me…my work would be my biggest advocate or my biggest antagonist in those closed-door conversations amongst my tenure committee.

In the spring of 2019, my Dean put out a call for faculty to apply for research labs. I didn't really have any intention of applying, because like I've shared, I like to keep "my business" to myself. However, after a personal invitation, I applied and was invited to establish my research lab: The Justice-oriented Youth (JoY) Education Lab. The work of justice is never easy, but the rewards I have reaped far out way the fatigue of engaging in justice work. To this end, I wanted to create a space that was inundated with joy, a space where even in the laborious work of justice, we could nurture joy through our purpose:

> The JoY Education Lab strives to democratize traditional research methods (which are often reserved for and sanctioned by the academy) by centering the lived experiences, cultural ways of knowing and being, and expertise of our youth and community researchers. Ultimately, we seek to cultivate **joy** amongst our diverse, intergenerational community of scholars in our collective pursuit of **justice**.

JoY Ed Lab is currently home to seven active projects inclusive of three participatory action research projects and other projects centered on marginalized Black and Brown youth. In my last

[39] Allen-Handy and Thomas-El 2018; Allen-Handy et al. 2021.

[40] Dillard 2008: 5.

[41] Dillard and Bell 2011.

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year on the tenure track, in fact the year when my dossier was under review, I received several university and external awards for community-based teaching and research. Well wouldn't you know this did not bode well with several of my colleagues. There were of course many of those who celebrated my success, but there were also those who did not. I was particularly struck by the bombardment of microaggressive statements by white women colleagues specifically during faculty meetings.

White Woman Colleague #1: "Only certain people, well Ayana, get recognized for doing certain kinds of work like urban education when other people were doing this work way before she even came here. She is always getting recognized and promoted while others are not, but I'm only the messenger, other people have been telling me this".

My Reflection & Response #1: Mind you, I was in the meeting, yet being spoken about as if I wasn't. The whole visible/hypervisible scenario is quite vivid here and everything she just said is loaded with microaggression and passive aggression. I respond back to her: "Each and every one of us has a faculty profile on the website, so if you want to get "recognized" your work should promote and speak for you and if it isn't saying anything then that's on you".
In another faculty meeting a few weeks later, when we were discussing how to measure our impact as a department, another white woman proceeded to complain about the fact that her work isn't recognized by the university and that no one even knows who the School of Education is.

White Woman Colleague #2: "…Well, except I guess they know about Ayana, but what about the rest of us? Other people should be recognized for their impact as well. I wrote an article, and the university didn't even share it widely".

My Reflection & Response #2: Again, I am in the room being spoken about as if I am not actually there (invisible/hypervisible once again). I interject: "All this talk about getting recognized is quite frustrating. If you are doing your work to be recognized then you're being driven by the wrong motivation in the first place, and if the discussion on the table is about our impact, then perhaps we should go ask the communities and individuals that we say we seek to serve whether or not our research has had a real tangible impact in their lives or situations. What would they say that your/our impact is?" …Ensuing silence.

I could talk about a whole host of other "haters", colleagues who say, "I don't do social justice" or "I don't do urban education", but one particular incident remains stuck at the forefront of my mind. During my last year before submitting my dossier, I led a faculty search committee for a tenure track faculty position in urban teacher education. After an intense review process led to all Black finalists, the "hidden conversations" that perpetuated amongst some faculty members were "why were only Black candidates invited to campus, that's not diversity, white people do urban education too." Rather than embrace that we had in fact invited the top candidates of a very competitive pool, there was obvious discontent, and many faculty did not even show up to meet the candidates or attend their job talks, which deviated from past searches when the participation of the faculty was high. After the search was complete, I could never quite shake my frustration and the

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racism that this situation illuminated. It finally all came to head after the violent death of George Floyd. During an all school "come to Jesus" meeting to unpack the current happenings, protests, and the BLM movement, I used this as an opportunity to call attention to the aforementioned situation, and the pervasive racism and white supremacy that I personally have encountered as a faculty member in our college and that we as a school perpetuated.

Sister and Brother Scholars and Countering-spaces

I have found solace amongst other BIPOC faculty and staff within and outside of my institution. I would consider many of them to be family and am thankful…quite grateful that they care deeply about me and I for them. Without their unwavering support, collaboration, thought partnering, and love, I know I would not have made it through this journey. Spaces like Critical Conversations in Urban Education, the Urban Education Collaborative, Easton's Nook, the NOMMO Collective, and the JoY Ed. Lab have provided safe spaces that have countered many of the unfavorable situations and struggles that I have had to navigate through the tenure process. Not only am I fully enmeshed in community in these spaces, but I am able to bring forth the fullness of my intersectional identities.

By far one of the greatest gifts and blessings on this journey has been being a member of a research team for the last five years with three other Black women and building a strong program and sisterhood through Black Girls STEAMing through Dance (BGSD).[42] BGSD is one of my most sacred spaces. Herein I am surrounded by Black girl magic…an unapologetic space designed by and made for Black girls. In so many ways this space is a counterspace where I can shed the strain of navigating a PWI. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso explain, "counter-spaces serve as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive racial climate can be established and maintained."[43] These counter-spaces where Black women and girls are centered has nourished my soul in ways I could have never imagined.

Endarkened Feminist Epiphanies

My story maintains coherence through an endarkened feminist nkwaethnography as it illuminates the sacredness of my experiences. Dillard and Bell contend, "nkwaethnography fundamentally, systematically and symbolically shifts one's understanding and experience of personhood: It is sacred because its re-centers, allowing the recovery of one's humanity and one's spirit."[44] At the core of EFE is the recognition of the expertise that Black women acquire through our lived experiences and specific to our lived conditions. While unpacking what I believe to be critical reflections in my journey towards tenure, I am acutely reminded that these experiences did not happen within a vacuum, but my past, present, and future are constantly in concert with one another. As an African ascendant woman, this snapshot into my experience navigating tenure is encapsulated with stories of my family history and my ongoing journey of self-discovery. I hope my story can amplify and

[42] Allen-Handy 2020 and 2021.

[43] Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000: 70.

[44] Dillard and Bell 2011: 345.

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connect with the experiences of Black women throughout academia and beyond. For example, I deeply resonate with Nikole Hannah-Jones' story, whose tenure embattlement after she was offered a Knight Chair-ship but was denied a tenure review by her and my alma mater UNC-Chapel Hill. Her story of achieving national acclaim for her life's-work, only to be engulfed in controversy further illuminated my own fears and anxieties going through the tenure process. Connecting to her story further demonstrates for me how important EFE are to the survival of Black women academics. Following, I share my affirmations and commitment to continue on this path to healing, and circle back to the tenants of EFE and my EFE epiphanies throughout writing this story.

a) self-definition forms one's participation and responsibility within a given communal space.
My Affirmation: I am a beautiful flower in bloom and have withstood the adversity of earning tenure at a PWI. I am a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend who embraces all of my experiences throughout this journey as a story of not just me, but of we. Through my own journey navigating tenure may my story encourage Black women on similar journeys, may they provoke their own stories to come forth.

b) research is both a spiritual and intellectual pursuit that is filled with purpose
Affirmation: I find meaning in my methods and ask questions that agitate the status quo. I will do this through my commitment to critical race theory, intersectionality, and the participatory and youth & community led research methods that I employ. I will continue to cultivate joy while engaging in justice-oriented research, practice, and teaching. This purpose pays homage to my heritage and my ancestors, within a co-constructed space of mutual respect and familial connection.

c) the individual appears through dialogic and communal context
Affirmation: I share stories of my life experiences and the collective communal context weaved with other Black women academics and beyond. I will seek out and generate counter-spaces, safe spaces that nurture the intersectional identities of the most marginalized.

d) one's experiences form the criterion of meaning-making;
Affirmation: I am making meaning through my own experiences, my reflections, my life journey. My perspectives and experiences are valid and worthy to be shared.

e) the knowledge constructions from women of color are (and should be) acknowledged as ontologically and epistemologically viable within the academy and society at large.
Affirmation: I am committed to amplifying the knowledge constructs of Black women and drawing upon them in my research, teaching, and service endeavors. I am committed to supporting other women of color by sharing our unique contributions to the academy and society.

f) there is a desire to understand the interwoven complexities and identities of

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women of color, which are often linked to power relations such as race, gender, and class.
Affirmation: I am complex and will continue to center my intersectional identities within my work and in ways that tear down power, privilege, white supremacy, and patriarchy.

Closing Thoughts: Extracting Life-Giving Strength from my Roots

A flower draws strength and substance from its roots. In order to grow, the very ground that a flower blooms in must be watered and fertilized. This is the metaphor of my story…a beautiful flower, blooming, persevering through to tenure. On May 8, 2021, I received my official letter from the Provost that I had received tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. I was immediately onslaught with a bevy of emotions. It reminded me of Kamala Harris' Vice Presidential-Elect acceptance speech on November 8, 2020 when she shared a critical piece of advice that her Mother gave her: "Kamala, you may be the first to do many things, but make sure you are not the last." This statement resonated with me as I received similar advice from my aunt, grandmother, and great grandmothers who have gone on to glory all throughout my life. I realize that it is them, my ancestors who have watered and fertilized me and from whence I extract life-giving strength from my roots. I may be the first Black woman to earn tenure in the School of Education at my university, but I will not be the last.

Epilogue

I dedicate this paper to Dr. Penny Hammrich, and hope to always honor her extraordinary life and legacy. On August 11, 2022, my Dean and big sis Penny passed away at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. I had the tremendous blessing of being with her for several hours that day. In fact, I was the last person with her alive and the first one to spend time with her after she had passed on. I am grateful that I was chosen to be the one with her in her very last moments, and I believe that in that moment Penny passed the torch to me-to remind all of us who she had touched so deeply to never let her flame of influence burn out. Penny was my mentor, champion, and advocate! She unequivocally supported me throughout my tenure journey, and she is one of the very reasons why I obtained tenure. She was there for me through the good, the bad, and the ugly that I shared in this story. Penny was the quintessential white woman ally and co-conspirator who saw my full humanity. She saw me as a Black woman and she not only gave me opportunities to learn, grow, and shine, but she also broke down barriers for me. She literally shattered the glass ceiling, and if and when she noticed that the ceiling wasn't even made of glass but concrete, she got a bulldozer and eliminated the concrete ceiling, walls, doors, she was relentless about dismantling obstacles. I will never forget her smiling, yelling, and jumping for joy the day I received my tenure letter. I believe she was even happier than I was about getting tenure! LOL! I will always hold tight to her words "I am SO proud of you, Ayana-you are a super-star"! And she will forever be that bright ray of sunshine watching over this beautiful flower so I can continue to extract life-giving strength from my roots.

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