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Un/masking Identity

Healing Our Wounded Souls

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Using personal narrative, this article examines how masks function to subordinate African American and Latina women in the academy. The article uses Critical Race Theory and more specifically critical race gendered epistemologies, including Black feminist thought and Chicana feminist epistemology, to understand how females of color resist in the academy. Interweaving two narratives, the narrative of an African American woman and her experiences in the White academy with the author's personal narrative about resisting cultural and linguistic domination, this article seeks to understand the process of redefinition leading toward self empowerment. Critical in exposing hidden truths, the article unmasks racism in the White academy, challenging the dominant discourse.

Keywords: racism; Critical Race Theory; empowerment; storytelling; Chicana feminist epistemology; autoethnography; Black feminist thought; resistance

As I sit at the end of her bed, she brings out a big box full of black and white family photos. She flips through the photos: high school prom pictures, newspaper clippings of football games, a picture of her mother. Dressed in a flowered 1950s dress, her mother stands in front of a house. She hands the photo to me. "That was my mother. She don't look Black do she? She was actually mixed. See this house in the background? This was my grandmomma's old house. We would go there for the summers. I wanted to keep it in my family, fix it up, but . . ." She hands me photos of her grandma's house, "And this is the house now." A dilapidated mint green house stands in the background surrounded by a rusty fence. She hands me another picture. This one, of a kitchen with pink walls and curled up lime green and yellow wallpaper, old broken dishes strewn on the stove and countertops. She hands me a recent picture. It's a bedroom. In it sits a dresser with clothes spilling out onto the floor, the bed, and trash on the floor. She points to the photo, "See that?" I come closer to look but don't

see anything. "Look closer." I squint and don't see much but a yellow Tupperware bowl. She points to a small object on the dresser, "That's a spoon, where my cousin and all her friends did drugs. Her grandmother's house served as a place where her heroine-addicted cousin and junkies from the neighborhood congregated to get high. "Destroyed my grandmomma's house! Nothin' but a bunch of mutha fuckin' niggas! Can you believe that shit? Can't even keep a damn job!!! Low life niggas!"

Lashawna, a single mother and graduate student at the university, fought a long battle to obtain full custody of her heroine-addicted cousin's daughter. The words *low life nigga* hang in my head. And although I am aware that there are various connotations behind the word *nigga* (Akom, 2000), at this particular instance, I am pretty certain about the meaning behind the word. Self-esteem, the confidence in our ability to think; confidence in our ability to cope with the basic challenges of life; and confidence in our right to be successful and happy; the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants, achieving our values, and enjoying the fruits of our efforts (hooks, 2003, p. xii), is the foundation of self-hatred that people of color constantly struggle with. When masking one's low self-esteem, it becomes easier to project problems onto poor Black folks (hooks, 2003). bell hooks argues that African Americans are living in a state of chronic anxiety, fear, and shame. One survival strategy that African Americans have historically used is masking one's feelings.

Dating back to slavery times, masking one's feelings was a useful tactic. Masking ourselves can serve the need to conceal part of our identities, essentially serving our need to survive in a racist and patriarchal world. An integral strategy for survival, the inherited legacy of submission and simply not showing one's feelings, in particular to Whites, continues to this day. Similarly, for Chicana/Latina women, wearing masks has also been central to our survival. Masking our inner selves serves as defenses against racist educational institutions in which we try to maneuver through. We construct a certain persona in public, through the clothes we wear, the way in which we speak, and so on. Yamada (1990) writes, "My mask is control/concealment/endurance/my mask is escape/from my/self" (p. 114). Wearing a "head-to-toe mask" (p. 41), Montoya's autobiography reveals that to function in an Anglo and/or male environment, wearing her mask was a matter of survival. In *Mascaras, Trenzas, y Grenas*, Montoya (1994) welcomes her trenzas (braids) along with her Catholic school uniform, simply to disguise the poverty her family endured.

These masks are steeped with self-hatred and other internalized oppressions. Anzaldúa argues that between our masks exist interfaces, or spaces, that can provide us with the ability to undo or break through these masks.

To decolonize our minds, we need to become critically conscious that we live in a racist and White supremacist society as well as use that particular knowledge to circumvent exploitation and oppression.

Compelled to wear our mascaras (masks; Anzaldúa, 1998) in a White supremacist world, how can we as people of color unmask ourselves? Understanding the process of how we liberate ourselves lies in the question, "How do we create an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization?" (hooks, 2003, p. 15). Opposition is not enough; one must still "make oneself anew." How do we understand the process that entails one coming to a deep understanding about how social structures work to dominate one's life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined?

As people of color, in order to ever decolonize our minds and "heal our wounded hearts" (hooks, 2003), we must unmask our identity. But, I often wonder, can we ever truly unmask ourselves? Oftentimes, masking ourselves allows us to survive, and when we do begin the process of unmasking, do we ever know when we're done . . . *done*? What does this process of masking and unmasking look like, specifically for women of color in the academy? And how do we go about remaking ourselves?

The Use of Narrative as a Means of Healing

In *Interpretive Ethnography*, Denzin (1997) calls for the transformation of ethnographic writing. He argues that scholars should create new sorts of experiential texts such as narratives of the self. Narratives of the self may include poems, fictional novels, autoethnographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. This article seeks to tell not only stories of my own personal experience in struggling with racism but also stories that unveil the truths of racism for women of color. Narratives can serve as a powerful means of creating a site of resistance. For the marginalized, storytelling (or counter-storytelling; Delgado, 1988/1989) can serve as a powerful means of survival and liberation. Writing counter-stories can also serve as a tool for unmasking and challenging majoritarian stories (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) that uphold racial privilege. Stories can also serve as a means to destroy complacency and challenge the status quo.

Stories about oppression can guide us through understanding that oppression, in a sense, heals us. Autobiographical writing essentially legitimizes

the personal experiences and perspectives of those who have been excluded from the dominant discourse. Storytelling seeks to expose and subvert the dominant discourse. According to Delgado (1989), these counter-stories serve several theoretical and methodological purposes. First, they can build a sense of community among those at the margins of society by providing a space to share their sense of reality and experiences. Stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings. Second, stories can challenge the dominant's perspective. In Delgado's words, "narratives are [a] powerful means for destroying mindset" (p. 2413). Counter-storytelling challenges the accepted ideology, the dominant ideology. And last, storytelling can teach people about how one can construct both story and reality. Narrative that focuses on the marginalized can therefore empower the storyteller as well as those who listen.

As Delgado argues, members of out-groups can use stories as a means of psychic self-preservation as well as lessening their own subordination. By coming to an understanding of our own oppression, members of out-groups can heal. By writing these stories, this can lead members of out-groups to stop perpetrating mental violence on themselves.

Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Feminism: Unmasking the Dominant Discourse

Historically, social scientists have represented people of color through traditional social science paradigms, often misrepresenting or ignoring them altogether. Theories created in the educational literature have often relied on racial characterizations and stereotypes about people of color. Moreover, literature on instructional approaches for African Americans and Latina/o students often involves some type of remediation, often leading to blaming at-risk students as deficient. Much of this literature is based on cultural deprivation theories connecting race and academic performance, often blaming students of color (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Miron, 1995; Noguera, 1997; Pizarro, 1998). Despite its problems, elements of the cultural deprivation paradigm continue to appear in the educational research literature involving ethnic minorities. Cast in a language of failure, these approaches continue to ignore marginalized groups and their concerns about racism (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Educational researchers are in need of a language that will provide tools to examine race and racism in education. Race-based theories such as critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminist theories can provide a language and a space for people of color to voice their

educational experiences. These theories can help us generate knowledge of those who have been marginalized and have become invisible to the academic discourse.

Race-based theories such as CRT, Black feminist thought, and Chicana feminist epistemology can serve several purposes for conducting research. First, race-based methods can provide a venue to voice marginalized groups (Bell, 1987, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado, 1995; Espinoza, 1989/1990; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker, Deyhle, Villenas, & Nebeker, 1998; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998; Solorzano, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, 2002; Tate, 1997; Wing, 1997). Second, race-based methods can allow for a space to critique legal institutions as well as educational and other social structures for the perpetuation of inequality. Last, these methods can provide us with useful insights into analyzing the role of schools for students of color.

In the telling of these stories, women of color have particular insight into our racist and patriarchal society. Critical race feminist Mari Matsuda argues that the work of feminists, critical legal scholars, and critical race theorists is necessary to unmask the justification of science as defined by those in power. It is imperative to re-theorize Eurocentric and patriarchal frameworks (Collins, 1998; Lorde, 1984) that often underlie our legitimate way(s) of knowing. This is necessary in coming to a deeper understanding about the lived experience of people of color and the eventual liberation of all people of color. By using CRT as well as critical raced-gendered epistemologies, we can recognize students of color as creators of knowledge (Delgado-Bernal, 2002).

As Butler (2000) argues, African Americans and Chicanas/Chicanos have developed a double consciousness, a unique perspective on the world, acquired at the cost of the pain of racism and oppression. This article seeks to understand the intricate ways that race and gender intersect, ultimately naming the experiences of women of color that often remain nameless in scholarly texts. Understanding these intricacies is critical in bringing liberation to all women of color (Anzaldúa, 1998; Collins, 1998; Guy-Sheftall, 1995; hooks, 1990; Lorde, 1984). Unmasking the experiences of women of color is critical in exposing truths that so often are guided by the dominant discourse. For women of color, writing about our collective histories and experiences, or writing about "theory in the flesh," is a necessity for our liberation (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002). By telling our stories, we name our reality, our experience.

Black feminist thought has recently served as a means of unmasking and gaining a deep understanding of the experiences of Black women. Black

feminism, a self-conscious struggle on behalf of Black women (Collins, 1998), critiques institutional practices that U.S. Black women face collectively. Black feminist thought begins with the assumption that African American women create oppositional knowledge that aims to resist oppression and search for justice. Black feminist thought also involves discovering, reinterpreting and analyzing the ideas of subgroups within the larger collectivity of black women who have continuously been silenced (Lorde, 1984; Smith 2000). As a collective group, one of the main goals is to name one's own reality (Collins, 1998). African American women's voices are specialized bodies of knowledge that have been excluded from the social science literature (Bell-Scott, 1998). The second goal is self-determination, or aiming to have the power to define one's own destiny. Because African American women's theory has often been excluded from mainstream educational research, and social science research overall, the purpose of this research is to do more than legitimize culturally indigenous voices, and use this epistemology "as analytical, conceptual, and representational tools that explicate deep meanings of the very bases of educational leadership, its ontologies, epistemologies, pedagogies and its ethical concerns" (Dillard, 2000, p. 661).

Similarly, Chicana feminist theorists (Anzaldúa, 1998; Cordova, 1998; de la Torre & Pesquera, 1993; Delgado-Bernal, 1998; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002; Trujillo, 1998) have relocated Chicanas to the center in various research areas, developing a Chicana feminist epistemology by researching the lives and experiences of Chicanas. Because the voices of Chicana/Latinas have largely gone unnoticed and undocumented, the need to document and analyze these experiences remains a challenge (Rendon, 1992; Segura, 1993; Turner & Thompson, 1993). By analyzing Chicanas' relationships and experiences, researchers can gain insight into the relation between Chicanas and structures that shape their lives. Chicana feminist epistemology documents Chicana students' experience in school from multiple dimensions, including skin color, gender, class, bilingualism, immigration, migration, and English proficiency. It is through these endarkened feminist epistemologies (Dillard, 2000) that we can begin to create a space for new ways of understanding. Because language has historically served as a means of colonizing marginalized people, we must reimagine new ways of knowing.

Using race-based theories such as CRT, Black feminist thought, and Chicana feminist epistemology, I aim not only to unmask the reality of racism but also to reveal the process of achieving critical consciousness for women of color. I write these stories in an effort to give voice to the

experiences of women of color who continue to struggle with the historical legacy of colonization and current mechanisms that continue to haunt us daily.

Ballet Shoes and Racism

Lashawna walks into the kitchen with a bright orange sheet of paper in hand and places it on the table. It's a letter from Dionne's (her daughter) school principal. The letter instructs parents to work with their children on their homework and demands that parents "be responsible" because several of the students are not doing well in class. Lashawna yells, "I am livid! Can you believe this?!? Look at that shit they're sendin' to the parents. Did they ever think that *they* the ones ain't doin' their job?" Earlier that week, Lashawna was going over Dionne's homework with her. "Dalia, what is this? What the hell is a homonym? Let's see. . . ." She scans the homework sheet to see if there's any explanation of what it is. "What is this? Have you ever heard of that?" Preoccupied with reading an article about our deadly waters, and fearful that I may have some kind of poisoning in my body from the last fish entrée I consumed at Red Lobster, I don't hear Lashawna. She brings over the homework sheet, "Read this." I scan the instructions and can't seem to figure out how to begin answering the question. All I can think of is how useless my PhD is in figuring out how to complete a third grader's homework. "What is this? What grade is Dionne in? Isn't she only 7 years old? My niece is 7 and she ain't learning this stuff. She's learning how to read! I mean, like the basics on how to read. Nobody's asking her about no homonym!"

Lashawna has been told that her daughter is having difficulty reading. She attends endless meetings with teachers and school officials, with little if no response. They simply tell her that Dionne will catch on, and everything will be okay. After several meetings with her daughter's school principal and speaking to other parents, she finally realizes that it isn't that her daughter can't read, it is that school officials found out about Dionne's family history. The assumption that Dionne's biological mother was a heroine addict was enough for school officials to assume that Dionne was "slow" and would need help in her studies.

When Lashawna sought tutoring assistance for her daughter, at the recommendation of school personnel, she also ran into problems with her daughter's teacher. After pressing her daughter's teacher about tutoring possibilities, the teacher told her, "Well, ya know, people *do* have work

schedules, people *do* work. So, I can't meet with you right away." This is a testament to how Black women continue to be associated in the White mind with the image of the welfare mother (Collins, 2000). Black women are blamed for failing to pass on their work ethic to their children. In addition, the images of the Black welfare mother stigmatize Lashawna, creating the myth of Black women as being lazy and at fault for their poverty.

She has repeatedly disenrolled her daughter from several local schools. "I feel awful, awful for not being able to help her. I have taken her from one school to another, and nothing seems to be working out. I had to . . . had to take her out of that other school. I mean, one of her teachers tried saying my daughter was fast! I had to take her out of that school—when Dionne went to the restroom, some boy followed her and was trying to touch her inappropriately and the teacher could do nothing but blame it on Dionne." Just 9 years old, Dionne's small Black body has already been racialized and sexualized. Although all racial and ethnic groups can be targets of sexual myths and women can be treated as sex objects, Black women endure a special kind of racism and sexism (St. Jean & Feagan, 1998). The myth of the Black woman as being sexually aggressive is common. Representations in the mass media suggest sexually promiscuous images of African American women.

After circling the same parking lot area over and over again, Lashawna finally spots the dance shop behind another business. We walk in the dance shop where every wall is covered with tutus, dance outfits full of sequins and ruffles. There's one wall full of dance shoes: tap shoes, ballet shoes, pink, black, and white, some with long ribbons at the end, others without. The young helper takes a shoe and asks Dionne to sit on the little plastic cream-colored step that was to serve as her bench. After trying several different types of shoes on, like any 7-year-old, Dionne is having a hard time staying still. She stands instead of sits, moves her foot around and complains that the shoe is too tight. While the young salesgirl goes to the back room in search of another size, Dionne quickly shoots up to grab a pink ballet shoe. Looking annoyed, the young girl says, "Sit down," in a stern voice. Dionne sits and waits to have her new shoes laced, then stands up to walk. No longer interested in trying on any more shoes, she walks to the other end of the store. "Mom, look! Look at that!" as she points to a pink duffle bag with tiny bears in tutus. Rolling her eyes, the young girl snaps, "Ok, you **HAVE** to sit down." The young girl goes to the back room and closes the curtain, and I can hear bits and pieces of the conversation. "No, I'm not going back out there. . . . She's acting up!" An elderly woman, with skin so tan that she looks like she's spent her retiring years basking in sunny

Florida, appears from behind the curtain. Distracted by her American flag t-shirt with the words "We Love America," I immediately worry that perhaps we shouldn't have come here.

Why is it that Dionne is not seen simply as a child that is excited about her shoes? As Ferguson (2001) poignantly argues, "The existence of African American children has been constituted differently through economic practices, the law, social policy, and visual imagery. This difference has been projected in an ensemble of images of black youth as not child-like" (p. 81). The African American child then is seen not as an image connected to childhood but as an adult. Children then no longer are involved in innocent wrongdoings but instead are seen as children who have to be controlled. Much of this imagery that continues today stems from the early decades of this century when Black children were depicted as dirty, grinning, and animal-like savages (pickaninnies). Today, Black children's behaviors are seen as sinister, intentional, and so on. This serves as a way to frame school trouble.

Racism in Special Education

Having been a special education teacher and evaluator, Lashawna has endless stories about her frustration with the school system. Last night, she was telling me about how there were many ways in which children of color were constantly being labeled as having special needs. As an evaluator on a special needs evaluation team, Lashawna commonly witnessed African Americans, in particular African American boys (Ferguson, 2001), being labeled as troublemakers and deviant. Shaking her head and looking over at the 12-year-old African American boy roaming the hallway, one of the special needs evaluators leans over to Lashawna, "Oh, him over there, he ain't gonna make it. There's no hope for him." Already labeled as a failure, children of color are frequently dismissed as not having the ability to succeed. Reflecting on her experience as a special education evaluator, Lashawna realizes the inequality prevalent in schools:

I see why special ed[ucation] doesn't meet the needs of our kids. Even when I was on the Child Evaluation team, I would be honest. . . . Doing evaluations for pre-schoolers, I would say, "I suggest you get this kind of evaluation, that kind of evaluation and they'd get mad." Once I put it in my report and if the team accepts it, the district has to pay for it. [They'd say] "Well, we don't have that [type of treatment] here. You gotta take this outta this report." Instead of

providing the necessary services to children who may need assistance, special education evaluators would choose to ignore the issue. I'm talking about babies that are born with medical problems, and if they would get the intervention they need[ed] . . . in first grade or in kindergarten, they wouldn't need special ed[ucation]. But they don't wanna address those issues.

Ya know, I'm talking about equity, I'm talking about parents not (being) treated the same. . . . But I finally realized, they just didn't *want* to see it.

Tired of seeing the persistent inequality in schools, Lashawna decides to speak up to her coworkers by refusing to sign a form that would allow evaluators to label a child as having special needs without the consent of the parents. To her surprise, one of the evaluators simply responded, "Well, two of us have already signed it, so, we don't need your signature." Oftentimes, when confronting evaluators about the problems with labeling students without appropriate consultation and review, the usual response was, "Well, we have these laws, so. . . ." Although the U.S. law does require students be examined every 3 years, evaluators often make very little effort to obtain parental consent. Because families of color are often transient, it is common for families to relocate to a different address. Evaluators would often only be concerned with proving that they *attempted* to contact the parents, usually through mail. When parents failed to respond, evaluators simply made the decision to do what they saw fit with the child.

Concerning Spanish-speaking immigrant children, when one child was tested, one evaluator casually told Lashawna, "Oh, this will be an easy one. He doesn't even speak English." Hearing this, I begin to think about my own experiences as a native Spanish speaker. As a kid, once a week, I would meet my English tutor to learn how to speak English. Together, we would sit at the empty table, my chair facing his. In Santa Rosa, a border town with the majority of its population being Mexican, Spanish was spoken everywhere: at home, at the local grocery store. One didn't think twice about what language to speak. But going to school . . . going to school was different.

We knew that speaking our language was a no-no and that we could get in deep trouble. Whispering became prominent in our way of communicating. Sitting in class, I'd try to hurl a Spanish word here or there at my best friend Jaime, and he would respond by taking his elbow and poking me in my rib cage to remind me, "Ya callate! Ya sabes que no podemos hablar espanol!" [Be quiet! You know that we can't speak Spanish!]. Despite knowing we would get punished, we would speak it anyway, on the playground and in the classroom when the teacher wasn't listening, creating our own Spanish-speaking world. In our teacher's presence, we learned to hold our Spanish-speaking tongues (Anzaldúa, 1987). Common in most schools

in the Southwest, the Spanish language was and still continues to be not only prohibited but stripped away from those of us who try to hold onto our language. With the dismantling of bilingual education programs across the country, accommodation for those who do not speak the dominant language is not an option. Clad in his black slacks and white starched, crisp, and clean shirt, the tutor represented a school official, with the authority that I eventually realized I had to follow. However, when I first stepped into his office, I wondered why I was there, because I read, wrote, and understood English well. However, my performance wasn't exactly convincing, as my thick heavy accent demonstrated otherwise.

Slowly, the tutor would place a picture in front of me. It was of a train, the old fashion kind that you see on Christmas cards, rushing through a small village. Looking at the picture, I wondered why this man dragged me out of class to show me a picture of something I obviously knew the answer to. Of course it was a train, so I answered, "Tren" (train). Frustrated and shaking his head, he would say, "Train, T-RRRR-AAAAA-INNNN. Can you say that?" After repeatedly going to these sessions, I got the point and simply stopped speaking Spanish in school.

The irony of the schooling process—the purpose of schooling is to teach children to learn, but the reality is that we are simply socialized into believing that we're learning what we're supposed to be learning. It wasn't until my later years when my family and I moved to Flint, Michigan, that I realized I was starting to "forget" my Spanish—I would blank when trying to think of a word here or there. Although I still spoke it at home with my family, most of my day was spent speaking English at school. Adapting to more of an "acceptable" mask became the foundation for hiding my inner self when dealing with White society. No longer using Spanish as much in school, I masked myself linguistically, for the sake of survival. But masking myself linguistically was only the beginning. After my family and I migrated from Texas to Michigan, I continued to mask myself. Going to school with tortillas and frioles didn't exactly resonate with most kids who brought their pb&js. Kids constantly asked, "What's that?" I hurriedly stuffed my tortillas back into the aluminum foil. Losing our Spanish and losing our accents is just the tip of the iceberg. As Rosaldo (1989) argues,

For Chicanos, so much of what we experience in our daily lives stems from cultural domination and personal humiliation. Consider how Anglo-Americans who learn a second language in college become "cultured" and "broaden their horizons," but Chicanos who enter elementary schools already speaking another language suffer from a "deficit" and are labeled "at risk." (p. 149)

Assimilating into the dominant culture becomes a mask for Latinos to hide behind and to deal with oppression. Shedding one's traditions to achieve educational and occupational mobility has become an acceptable way of thought. It is unfortunate that the cost of some Latinos who have succeeded academically is that assimilation becomes a mask for Latina/os to hide behind. Masking applies to all out-groups who have been colonized and who have been able to maintain some of our past as well as create a public persona. Not feeling like we quite fit in dominant society, we strive to mask ourselves in various ways.

Pimped Like a \$2 Whore: Racism in Graduate School

Despite the increase of the proportion of Black women pursuing a doctoral degree at prestigious colleges and universities, Black women's presence still remains scarce in academia. Studies that have documented the racism that Black women face on a daily basis indicate that Black women face a number of obstacles in higher education settings. A study conducted by St. Jean and Feagin (1998) argues that Black women experience a "gendered discrimination." This involves negative White reactions, individual and institutionalized, to Black female characteristics (p. 16).

Black women have been participants in higher education for more than a century, but rarely are their experiences examined. Women of color face significant obstacles in higher education. According to Lomotey (1997), "U.S. education is indifferent, hostile, and psychologically and physically dangerous to women" (p. 4). Women and minorities are not adequately represented on faculties in higher education. For example, African Americans represent a mere 2% of college faculty. In higher education, out of 197 top officials in the top 33 major research institutions, only 2 are women. African American women, who represent less than 1% of top-level higher education administrators, are consistently ignored for promotions and substantial pay increases (Snearl, 1997). As scholars have documented (Cooper & Stevens, 2002; de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Padilla & Chavez, 1995; Trueba, 1999; Turner & Myers, 2000), both African American and Latina/o professors continue to encounter racism in higher education. As some (Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999) have found, women academics get paid less and have difficulty obtaining promotions and tenure. Research indicates that "brown-on-brown" research is also not valued, whereas white-on-white research is accorded legitimacy (de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Margolis & Romero, 1998).

We're in my driveway and, as usual, we can't seem to stop talking. Lashawna's upset because she has been dealing not only with school officials at her daughter's school but also with one of her committee members with regard to her qualifying exams. As we sit in my driveway, I can see the frustration on Lashawna's face. "Now what happened with your damn committee members?!?!" I yell, as I've heard numerous stories about the difficulty Lashawna has had in her graduate program. Her committee members repeatedly give her a hard time about everything she writes. "Ya wanna know what my damn advisor said to me? I turned in this assignment and I get my paper back and in the margins she wrote, 'What do you mean by white supremacy? Isn't that a little harsh? You have to have citations. . .'" Waving around her paper, marked up in red ink, she points to several of the comments, "How is slavery related to where African Americans are today? . . . Don't you think saying white supremacy is a bit of an exaggeration?" Repeatedly being told that her work was "not quite there," Lashawna has been dealing with racism in graduate school at every stage of her dissertation. While in the special education department, she was consistently questioned about her work. "I guess I'm nothin' but a dumb nigga!" Hearing her say that hurts and I just want to yell at her to not say that and that the more we verbalize these negative images Whites have about us, the more we contribute to our own oppression. If she truly believes that then, well, THEY would have won.

Hearing her talk, I begin to wonder how many times we have questioned our own abilities. As Tijerina (1989) argues, "We take from the oppressor the instruments of hatred and sharpen them on our bodies and our souls." Once, while at a departmental colloquium, a professor asked me, in front of other faculty and graduate students, "Oh, hey Dalia, what are you doing here?" Confused as to what he was getting at, I naively asked, "What do you mean?" He smiled and said, "Well, I'm just surprised you came back, I mean, I just didn't expect to see you again this semester." Or the time my old roommate introduced me to one of her friends as "a writer," and how I thought that being referred to as a writer . . . how that word connected to my name almost sounded strange to me. After all, "Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing?" (Anzaldúa, 2003, p. 184). What right does a Chicana/Latina from a working-class background who comes from Flint, Michigan, have to say about her own personal experiences? There is the fact that I write, obsessively, but yet, the difficulty of thinking about being a writer and, worse yet, believing that I can still remain etched in my brain. Internalized oppression is not like a light switch, something you can just turn on or off at a moment's notice. But I still write. I write to face my

fear of what I may find. I write to face that which I may have unknowingly repressed for days, maybe years. I write to erase invisibility (Bell-Scott, 1998), and I write to free myself from my inner hidden masks. Writing to “confront one’s demons” (Anzaldúa, 2003) is a difficult task, but a necessary one to achieve critical consciousness. Fearful as to what I may reveal about myself, I work to expose these hidden fears, some that I pretend not to know and other fears that I work hard to repress.

Instead of preaching to Lashawna about institutionalized racism, I choose to listen. As Yamato (1990) claims, internalized oppression is our worst enemy. It limits us in our vision of what we can accomplish; it leads us to accept mistreatment and question what we can and cannot do. “Look how long I’ve been here, I mean, I’m embarrassed to say I’ve been here for a damn decade . . . a damn decade!!! Half of it is how they treat you around here. Ya know, they make you feel like you’re a nobody, tell ya ya don’t know what you’re doing. They slowly chip away at you, until you have no self-esteem. I mean I don’t know, I just don’t know if I belong in the academy. I don’t know if I have the emotional energy it takes to even try to get a tenure-track job. I just don’t know if I have it.” Self-doubt that brings us down to the point of where we feel the lowest of the low, that makes us feel unworthy of deserving anything and then masking ourselves through silence. I suddenly get a flashback to the day I went into my advisor’s office to inform him of my departure from the sociology department, where he sat in his chair asking me, “Education? You’re going over to education to finish up your PhD? Well, you *do* know that you’re going to *have* to publish in journals like these?” and he picks up the *Harvard Ed. Review*, shakes his head, and says, “and I just don’t know about *that*.” Right there and then I wanted to kill that man, but of course, I knew what the social consequences would be—going to prison just didn’t sound too appealing, so instead I slowly sunk into the brown leather chair and was grateful I was leaving the department.

Not voicing my opinion, essentially not finding my voice in this particular instance, I wonder how many times we have contributed to our own oppression by simply remaining silent. How often do we mask ourselves with a big smile, only to realize that we’re not exactly happy in the situation we’re in? As colonized people, have we been conditioned to become passive, to passively accept social injustice, creating a distance between the inequality that we see as well as experience everyday? By engaging in this “conditioned passivity” (Williams, 1991), it allows us to cope with the pain that racism causes us. Breaking this silence is a struggle—and finding our voice does not come easy.

When I first came to the university, I was naïve enough (and perhaps a bit hopeful) to think that people with so much education couldn't possibly be racist. But I soon discovered that racism takes different forms, sometimes masked by the formalities of being professional, other times as overt as can be. Lashawna once recounted a story about her interaction with White professors in her department. She was on her way to an appointment at the university when she ran into one of her professors, who greeted her, "Hi! Lashawna! So, how's your daughter doing? How is she doing in school? Is she [hesitation] o.k.?" Knowing that she is going to have to spend the next few years dealing with professors in the department, Lashawna decides to mask her feelings. She continues, "I hate that shit! I hate it when they say that, all them professors in that department that make all these damn assumptions about my baby. I said as little as possible, cuz they always act 'nice.' These people can nice you to death, but what they *really* believe eventually comes out. I was ready to cuss her out, I was ready to go the hell off! Luckily, I had enough sense to keep my mouth shut. I remember just putting forth every effort not to scream . . . everything that was up on my head. I knew I couldn't say it verbally. I was just thinking twice about what I said, and just trying to stay calm."

As a single Black woman, she is profiled as a woman having a child with "problems." The difficulty of having to deal with professors making assumptions not only about her as a graduate student but also about her daughter is a constant struggle that she has to deal with. Having to deal with being stereotyped, Lashawna finds it difficult to establish meaningful relationships with faculty members in her department.

Lashawna also realized how her Black presence was being exploited in many ways. She realized that whereas her White counterparts were being asked to collaborate on articles for publication, she instead was being given tasks such as photocopying and filing. As a graduate student, she sat on a diversity project, dealing with African American mothers' experiences with the educational system. However, her presence there was just simply that—there were no expectations to even listen to her input. Everyone on the research team was responsible for coding the interviews. When coding, Lashawna consistently found themes of racism throughout the data. When the research team held a meeting to discuss the codes, the lead investigator went around the table and asked everyone about the codes they came up with. When Lashawna, the only African American on the project, expressed that racism had been a prevalent theme coming up for African American mothers dealing with the school system, the head professor in charge of the project said, "No, I don't think we'll use those codes. We'll stick with these

other ones.” Lashawna shares her realization: “After the project was over, we were left with pages and pages of uncoded data, ain’t that a shame? I just felt like I was manipulated and used, like . . . they pimped me like a \$2 whore!”

As scholars have found (de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Margolis & Romero 1998; Woods, 2001), women of color have difficulties fitting into programs that are not designed to include students from different racial, class, gender, and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Aubert (1997) found that it is difficult for African American students at predominately White universities to establish open and trusting relationships with their professors/advisors. White professors often show a sense of sincerity toward White students through gestures and attitudes and use a more distant approach toward Black students. Feagin and Sikes (1994) discuss how, within the educational system, White professors often stereotype Black students and therefore do not give them sufficient mentoring, feedback on papers, and so on. Black students do not receive full recognition and respect from White students, teachers, advisors, and other campus personnel, which can lead to the small amount of Black students in universities.

Coming to Voice

With the ascribed marginal status, students of color have developed critical resistant navigational skills to succeed in higher education (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998). Many of these skills are not adaptive nor conformist but instead emerge from resistance to domination and oppression in a system that devalues our experiences. Moreover, some students may choose to situate themselves on the margins (hooks, 1990). As hooks argues, more is known about the margin as a site of oppression and that we need to understand the margins as both sites of oppression and sites of resistance, empowerment, and transformation. Many students use their “strategic voice” (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), calculating at every step of the way as to when to speak and when not to speak.

Being in my new department, I was excited to be in a new place, until I realized where I had ended up. I used to sit in the building, day and night. Working three jobs on top of having 90 students that I was responsible for, there just wasn’t any time for sleep. My friends and I used to sit in the teaching assistants’ (TA) office grading endless stacks of papers, which we always dreaded. However, grading was actually the least of what I dreaded about graduate school. I dreaded walking the halls, as I rarely felt welcomed. Constantly being told to conduct some other kind of research or,

“Good topic, but why don’t you use a data set instead?” I began getting discouraged to pursue my interests.

Bound and determined to prove them wrong (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998), I decided that it just didn’t matter that my work wasn’t valued, that I was expected to fail. That didn’t matter because no one could take away the knowledge that I had worked so hard at acquiring. As a student of color, you would either sink or swim, and I was damned if I was going to sink. Failure was not an option. I hadn’t worked my ass off in that department to leave without the piece of paper in my hand and with a friendly smile that said, “Ha!!! Told you I could do it!” Somewhere along the way, I found my voice. Coming to voice (hooks, 1989), or moving from silence into speech, is an act of resistance. However, finding my voice did not come easy. As is the case for most of us, when dealing with racism, things are not always so clear cut. You always give people the benefit of the doubt and hope that what you see is all in your imagination.

But eventually, we got tired of not being listened to, our work not being taken seriously. There were three of us that year who were accepted, Jimmy, an African American male, Diem-My, a working-class Vietnamese female, and myself. Jimmy walks into the TA lounge and takes out a folder with the petition, with several signatures. The list was made up mostly of graduate students in the department, and as we stared at the list, we wondered, which one of us, if any, would make it through the program? We all worried that we would get kicked out of the program, that somehow, somehow, they would find a way to get rid of us. After meeting with a few administrators, we were surprised to receive news that an investigation of the department would be conducted. Sitting in the TA office, Diem-My and I stare at our screens. Surprised that the university actually decided to take action, we feel hopeful that something would finally be done. We both fill out our surveys and cross our fingers that the head of the department wouldn’t find out we were behind it. It is often in these situations that we slowly learn that we *have* to be strategic to survive. Constantly being questioned left and right by faculty, as well as by some graduate students who wanted to know who was “causing problems,” we began to think about our options. We would sit in the TA office, where my friends and I would joke that the office was probably bugged, and ironically at around 10 p.m., the phone rings. It was the head of the department, asking us, “What’s going on?” and “Did you guys circulate that petition? . . . Am I getting sued?”

I think back to the time I was on the job market when I made sure to do anything but de-politicize my cover letters. I had heard the advice before:

“Don’t be too radical . . . tone that stuff down.” I purposely used the term *students of color* and emphasized issues of oppression, never mentioning the trendy and *nice* term of diversity, because I refuse not to expose my identity. I figured that if a place wasn’t going to consider me because I am “just too radical,” then I didn’t want to be there anyway.

Discouraged from pursuing brown-on-brown research (de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1988; Padilla & Chavez, 1995) in special education, Lashawna seeks support by enrolling in courses outside of her department. Developing her critical navigational skills (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1995), Lashawna successfully maneuvers through a hostile environment. Considering the mistreatment by White faculty, as well as the absence of faculty of color in Lashawna’s PhD program, graduate students have a difficult time finding support. Many, like Lashawna, turn to faculty of color outside of their departments to find that support:

Whenever I meet with Dr. _____ [African American professor] and I’m around other scholars of color . . . a community of scholars of color, I don’t know . . . I mean, I just feel empowered, and I begin to think, maybe I *do* belong, maybe I *can* make it . . . Just being in Dr. _____ [another professor of color’s presence] was validating to me, to see this African American man with his stuff together, so articulate . . . was inspiring!

Drawing on the support of other faculty of color begins to serve as a means for Lashawna to liberate herself from her oppressive situation. Instead of accepting her situation, she takes action and begins to realize her potential in obtaining her PhD.

A Home Away From Home: Safe Spaces and Self-Empowerment

Something about visiting Lashawna feels more than familiar, and I feel right at home whenever I visit. I guess it’s because it reminds me of going to my sister’s place, where we often gather in the kitchen to gossip about who’s up to what, while my nieces and nephews chase each other throughout the house. As we sit on her futon in her living room, Lashawna does her usual Sunday routine. She begins her ritual by doing Dionne’s hair, braiding one braid at a time, adding one multicolored bead after another. “Mom! I don’t waaaaant beads!” Holding onto Dionne while she squirms, Lashawna reminds her daughter, “We are almost done!”

As I sit flipping through *Black Essence*, I look up and see, taped to the top of the living room television, a notecard that reads “television.” Throughout the house, a host of other spelling words are taped up. Dionne’s artwork is proudly displayed on every wall. Even the door leading to the kitchen that perpetually stays open has a picture of a cut-out brown face of a little girl, with black yarn as hair. On the kitchen cabinet, there is a picture of a rainbow sprouting from a blue cloud, a water-colored picture with what looks like earth—blue for water and green for land—with pictures of brown bodies, brightly colored flowers, and stars randomly painted throughout.

Hanging on her closet door is what looks like a pink shoe holder, with see-through plastic holders. Instead of shoes, Barbies fill every slot. Inside are a few Black Barbies, Ken, and doll clothes. Above the headboard hangs a picture of three giggling Black angels. A bookshelf is filled with storybooks of famous Black heroes like Malcolm X and books on African American poetry. Dolls are clinging off of shelves for their dear lives. Begging to be rescued, Dionne grabs her doll Annibel and runs into the kitchen.

Today, I am their “special guest,” as Dionne invited me over for dinner and ice cream. There is much work to be done and Dionne is as ready as ever to start on making the ice cream. Never having used an ice-cream maker before, I am especially excited about the whole endeavor. Dionne immediately begins the process. “Ok, here’s what you do. You puuuut this in here and then, wait a minute . . . we need the salt.” I ask her, “We need the salt? What do we need salt for?” She runs to the cabinet to get the salt and comes back to continue the lesson. She continues, “See . . . you *need* the salt, because it melts the ice and then we can make ice cream.” Following her brightly colored cookbook, I begin listing off the ingredients. Lashawna comes in the kitchen and says, “Dionne, I want *you* to read this. What does this say? What’s the first thing that it says you need?” Lashawna points to the book, and Dionne reads, “Ssss-aaaaalt. Salt.” Encouraging her to continue, “Good, now what’s the next word?”

A common scene at home, Lashawna makes every instance a learning experience for her daughter. After dinner, Dionne brings out a book. She sits on my lap and asks, “Ms. Dalia, can I read to you?” She reads word-for-word from her SpongeBob book, periodically pointing to pictures, making certain that we follow the storyline. Every night, at around 8:30 p.m., it’s the same ritual.

As I sit at her kitchen table, flipping through a magazine, Lashawna has finished putting Dionne to bed, and it is often here that we have our endless conversations about our worries and frustrations. “Girrrrr! I can’t believe

this . . . think I've lost a damn decade of my life being here! When in the hell am I gonna get outta here?!?!” I look around at the home she has built for her daughter despite several obstacles she has had to face, and I see a woman who has struggled and has survived. Living in a White supremacist society, folks of color spend a lot of time feeling bad about ourselves. To Lashawna, I respond, “Instead of spending our time constantly beating ourselves up for what we *don't* do, we should really be spending our time recognizing and celebrating what we *do* do.” She picks up another picture from her desk, “Yeah . . . a different generation . . . I'm creating new memories for my baby. This is a new generation.” She brings out new photos, this time of her last trip to New Jersey, where much of her family lives. She hands me a photo of Dionne. She has a great big smile and is wearing a bright pink bathing suit at the beach as she squints into the camera. “That's my baby. Ain't she beautiful? Yeah, girl, I gotta get outta here . . . for my baby.” Drawing strength from her daughter, Lashawna redefines the margins (hooks, 1990). Becoming an othermother, her daughter serves as a source of empowerment in redefining herself (hooks, 2003). Resisting institutional marginalization, Lashawna turns to her daughter for her source of support and strength to continue on her educational path. Remaking herself anew, Lashawna gains the confidence to continue in her graduate program. By refusing to accept the dominant culture's image of a Black woman, she defines her own reality. It is these everyday realities of life that reveal the deepest meanings behind a White supremacist society.

For me, my home away from home includes these safe spaces, like the safe space of Lashawna's home that provides a space to talk and to be supportive of one another. Everyday I remind myself of my responsibility and commitment to redefine myself. Through my writing, I seek to expose my passions, fears, and pain. I remind myself that writing is a powerful thing to do. Writing is my means of survival, because as Anzaldúa (2003) argues, “a woman who writes has power.” As a woman of color, writing about my own experience is a radical act. For someone who looks like me, acts like me, that was never supposed to even be here, it is a political act to write these words and to NOT stop talking about race and gender.

Making it through the day means reminding ourselves about who we are and what we've accomplished, drawing strength from those who support us, whether it'd be faculty, friends, or family. It also means we have to remind ourselves that we are worthy of respect and not expect anything less. Despite the hegemonic control of dominant White society (Carty, 1991), rejecting the dominant's definition of reality, especially for non-White women, is central to enabling women of color to develop a positive

self-concept (hooks, 1990). It is our responsibility as women of color to interrogate our silences and our critical consciousness and reconceptualize ways of knowing. We can no longer ignore the pain that tells us that we are just not good enough. As a part of the self-critical conscious process, we have to remember the struggle and the pain (hooks, 1990) to achieve self-transformation: "Our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" (p. 148). We have to refuse and resist colonization by strengthening ourselves, and as Cordova (1998) argues, "The more we can do to strengthen ourselves, the more we can resist the colonizers' definitions of us" (p. 39).

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