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1. THE SPOOK WHO SAT BY THE DOOR

The Challenge of Unhooking from Whiteness in the African American Faculty Experience

> There seems to be a growing conspiracy of silence surrounding the experiences of faculty of color teaching in predominantly White colleges and universities. For many faculty of color, who reside throughout the academic landscape, their silenced state is a burdensome cycle that is rarely broken.
>
> <div align="right">Stanley, 2006, p. 701</div>

This chapter presents and analyzes important aspects of my experiences as an African American faculty member in a prestigious midsized university in the northeast United States. My experiences at this university are analyzed within the context of contemporary discussions about the experiences of faculty of color in Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Stanley, 2006). Stanley (2006) describes these experiences as hidden from plain sight by a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 701) that makes the recruitment and retention of faculty of color an amazingly difficult endeavor. In exploring this topic, Stanley (2006) asked prominent sociologist and White anti-racist activist Joe Feagin why so many White colleagues silently ignored this injustice. Feagin's response was simple: "because it costs white folks" (p. 702). Stanley (2006) later extends this analysis and postulates that there is an enormous cost associated with African American faculty members speaking up about their experiences at PWIs and that this cost often acts to silence them in the face of deep and pervasive injustices.

In an effort to challenge the injustice that is reflective of this silence, it's important that faculty of color tell their stories and express their truth regarding their experiences in the professoriate. I will undertake this task through an examination of my own experiences as an Assistant Professor in my first tenure track position. These experiences will be written as personal narratives that are intended to convey the "facts" surrounding specific incidents as well as the existence of emotion surrounding these events. The conveyance of emotion in these narratives is especially important because of its centrality in the experiences of faculty, teachers, and students at all levels of education (cf., Boler, 1999; Dirkx, 2008).

THEORETICAL LENS AND METHODOLOGY

To help analyze these experiences and connect them to the larger world, I utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT) as my primary theoretical lens. The use of CRT as a theoretical lens is appropriate for this type of research because it (a) centers the concept of race in the study of narratives that focus on educational experiences, (b) emphasizes an understanding of socio-cultural contexts in education, and (c) allows for a research stance that challenges dominant discourses and advocates for social justice.

CRT has become an important component of the critical analysis of race in education because of its development and use of critical research methodologies that challenge mainstream ideas about the binary of "subjective vs. objective" knowledge that frequently informs discussions regarding methodology in educational research (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Specifically, CRT historically has emphasized the use of narrative and storytelling to challenge prevailing ideas and assumptions about race by "telling the stories of those people whose experiences are often not told" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These untold stories represent an important "counternarrative" that challenges the racist ideology that is used to create, maintain, and justify the use of "master narratives" that advance hegemonic discourses about race in America (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Given that the concept of race was a central focus of my experiences as an African American faculty member, it's important that an appropriate theoretical lens and a complementary methodology are utilized in the exploration of a personal narrative that examines the complexities of race as manifested in the lived experiences of an individual African American faculty member.

THE ROLE OF THE SPOOK

They accepted at face value what he appeared to be, because he became what they wanted him to be. (Greenlee, 2002, p. 48)

In 1969, a former army officer and Foreign Service officer named Sam Greenlee published a novel entitled *The Spook Who Sat By the Door* (1969/2002). It tells the fictional story of an African American ex-CIA agent and his complex plan to incite urban warfare in American cities during the late 1960s. The book's title is a play on words: "spook" has multiple meanings that hold particular saliency for African Americans. First, it has been used for several decades as a disparaging descriptor of African Americans. Second, the term "spook" is often used to describe spies and undercover agents. This comes from the fact that the word "spook" is frequently used interchangeably with "ghost," and spies (like ghosts) are often described as being invisible to detection (Sheppard, 2013).

The book advances multiple themes related to race, racism, politics, and power as reflected in the African American urban experience of the mid-1960s. The book's protagonist, Dan Freeman, carefully navigates the difficulties of being the

first African-American to work as a CIA agent. He does this largely by utilizing a non-threatening and amiable persona that he hopes will provide him with a sort of "invisibility" from his superiors while training and working in what can be classified as "white space" (Moore, 2008, p. 24). He eventually leaves the CIA and returns to Chicago where he works as a social worker with some of the city's most notorious street gangs. He uses this position to gain the trust of gang members in a way that taps into their disdain of institutional racism and their general distrust of white society. This allows Freeman to effectively politicize and re-organize the gang for the purpose of conducting urban-based guerilla warfare in a manner that rallies the support of the black community while representing a major threat to the existence of the *status quo*.

In a similar way, I felt that as a faculty member I would be able to quietly accrue knowledge, experiences and professional capital in ways that I could then use to train and influence students about the nature of race across American society. More specifically, I wanted to teach my students about the role of race and its connection to constructs of power and the formulation of policy in the field of education. It was my hope that my students (all of whom were future educators and educational leaders) would develop a knowledge base that allowed them to work with students and communities in ways that respected student and community cultural wealth while simultaneously fighting against the hegemony that permeates U.S. society (Yosso, 2005).

Like Dan Freeman, my plan was to lay low while gaining knowledge offered in graduate school. I believed that this knowledge would empower me so that I could later make "bold" and "decisive" moves as part of the professoriate. I hoped that the result would be evident in the knowledge base of my students, who would now understand the importance of challenging hegemony in their classrooms, across their campuses, and throughout their communities. Although this now seems naïve, this is what I hoped for and planned for as I moved into becoming a member of the professoriate.

ON SITTING BY CLOSED DOORS

He who listens at doors hears more than he desires. (French Proverb)

That was why it was an advantage to be black. There were millions of peoples and races in Europe whose centuries of subservience made them culturally perfect as raw material for spying. The nigger was the only natural agent in the United States, the only person whose life might depend, from childhood, on becoming what whites demanded, yet somehow remaining what he was as an individual human being. (Greenlee, 2002, pp. 109–110)

My experiences in the professoriate have ranged across several different types of universities situated in several different geographic locations. Each institution has offered unique experiences, and each has played a role in my professional

development as a faculty member. However, like other African American faculty members, I have experienced discriminatory treatment and racial microaggressions at each institution that I have worked (Pittman, 2012). My first job was as a Lecturer at a well-heeled New England college, while my second position involved evaluation work for a large grant at a major research institution in the mid-Atlantic region. Both jobs had their ups and downs, but what I most desired was a tenure-track position.

When I finally acquired a tenure track position, it was at an "R1" university located in a major east coast city. I was ecstatic to say the least. After two university jobs that weren't on the tenure track, I was happy to have found a position where I could focus on the duties inherent in being a faculty member. The department I was in was fairly small and very homogenous. I was the only African American on the faculty and the only person of color as well. Perhaps even more disturbing, I was one of only a handful of African American faculty members on the entire campus. Our numbers were so small that on those rare occasions when we would meet on campus we didn't have enough members to fill a table with eight available seats.

Although my time at this particular institution started out smoothly, it quickly became obvious that I did not truly "fit in" as a faculty member in my department. My recognition of this seemed most obvious in my interactions with my students. One of my duties as a new Assistant Professor was to teach a graduate diversity in education class and an undergraduate introduction to education class. For me, this meant revamping my classes so that they went beyond the idea of multiculturalism and diversity as forms of cultural celebration and instead offered a sustained critique of education through a critical social justice lens (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

The majority of my undergraduate students were white upper middle-class and cisgender. Many had fairly minimal contact with people of color, and most seemed to know little about the working of race, class, and gender in the U.S. My graduate students were more racially and economically diverse, but largely exhibited many of the same characteristics. I frequently asked my students (both graduate and undergraduate) to step outside of their comfort zones by understanding their own positionality in society (Maher & Tetreault, 1993) and juxtaposing their positionality with that of others in society from different backgrounds. This forced many of my students to confront their own privilege while acknowledging the role of institutional racism and sexism in how opportunities are structured in U.S. schools and communities.

I found that many of the same issues related to power, privilege, and positionality also affected my interaction with faculty members in my own department. Most of the department members were over the age of 60 with only a handful under the age of 50. All of them were white, and most had been at the university for many years. During our faculty meetings, I pushed my colleagues to recognize broader issues of race and class not only in relation to our student body but also in relation to the surrounding community (which was traditionally African American and working class).

4

One particular example that stands out was in regard to the lack of diversity in our faculty. The department had received criticism for a lack of student and faculty diversity as part of a review by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). During a discussion about the implications of the review I was shocked when one of our senior faculty members encouraged the department to respond to the reviewers by telling them that the department "really" was diverse because we had a faculty member who was fluent in several European languages. He explained that the presence of a multi-lingual white female faculty member represented linguistic diversity, something that he felt was just as important (or more important) than racial diversity. I objected vehemently to this idea, but my faculty colleagues met my reaction only with blank stares and silence. For the first time in my professional life, I fully understood how silence could be utilized as a weapon to enforce the hegemony of white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 1996).

Several weeks later, one of my graduate students arrived at my office and told me that he needed to speak with me immediately. I was busy, but I could tell that he was very upset and angry about something, so I asked him to sit down and tell me what was going on. After taking a seat, he explained that he was furious because one of the department's senior faculty members had asked him to carry his bags from the ground floor of our building up to his third floor office. Without asking, I already knew that he was referring to the same faculty member who had previously insisted that racial diversity was not a real issue for our department. Unfortunately, I was correct. Despite this, I was stunned to think that this individual would ask any student, but particularly an African American student, to carry his bags as if he were a hotel porter. I thought about confronting the faculty member who had made the request, but I realized that—being an Assistant Professor—I would be taking a huge risk by confronting one of the department's Full Professors over his treatment of a graduate student.

Although these faculty interactions were difficult, dealing with my students could also be equally challenging. They complained that I spent too much time talking about race and that I "hated" whites. I was also accused of being "lazy," "unprepared," "unorganized," and "too hard." Comments related to my preparedness, organization, and teaching methods came as a surprise because I put a great deal of time into teaching, and I thought of myself as a good teacher who challenged his students while caring about them as well. When my first teaching evaluations came in, I was surprised to see that some of my students were angered that I had canceled class because of a winter snowstorm. The class was an evening class that I had canceled in the late afternoon. Only two hours after I canceled the class, the university announced that all classes for the evening were canceled due to inclement weather conditions. I couldn't figure out why the students were upset about a class cancelation—something that most students usually applaud—especially when the cancelation was later reinforced by a campus wide closure.

During the spring semester, I received similar complaints from a graduate class because I ended one of our class sessions only a short while after it started. I'm not

sure why this was an issue since I had explained to them that the reason I had to cancel the class and leave quickly was because my wife was in labor and needed to get to the hospital in anticipation of the birth of our second child. I had even forewarned them at the beginning of the semester that this would likely happen since my wife was six months pregnant when the spring semester began. For whatever reason, this didn't seem to matter, and I was (again) labeled as problematic for having a "lackadaisical" attitude towards the class.

The following year my teaching evaluations seemed to be just as bad as those from my first year. One of the major complaints was related to a mandatory school observation that was part of the department's Introduction to Education course. The problem revolved around the fact that I insisted that the students in the class do their observations at a nearby public school. The school had Title I status and served a population made of mostly black and brown students, almost all of whom relied on free and reduced lunch. This was the type of school that I believed our students should spend time at in an effort to understand the realities of urban education and to better reflect on the issues that we discussed in class. The students were highly upset by this requirement because previous iterations of the class had utilized a distinctly different school for the required observations.

Faculty members who had previously taught the course always allowed the students to attend an elite private school that was located near the campus. This allowed the school observations to be done in an environment where the vast majority of students were white and upper middle-class. This gave my future educators a great sense of comfort, but it provided them with a false sense of the realities inherent in urban education. Many of the students were upset by this and reported to the chair and other faculty that I was endangering their safety by sending them to a school in a "dangerous" area far from campus. I pointed out that both schools were nearly equidistant to the campus and that the students needed to spend time in diverse schools with diverse student populations. Despite my admonitions, the students frequently complained about the location of the observations, and each semester I made it mandatory that they visit a similar type of school.

My students' attempts at distancing themselves from black and brown children and their communities were painful. It pained me on a personal level because by rejecting these children and their communities it felt as if they were implicitly rejecting me as well. After all, I was the product of a working-class African American community like the one they tried so hard to avoid. In that sense, I came to represent the "other" in their construction of black and brown children as being both different and unworthy. On a professional level, their attempts concerned me because I felt that if they had this type of attitude as teacher education students, then what type of attitudes would they have as teachers?

All of these issues overshadowed my first years as a tenure track faculty member. Despite this, I thought very little of the faculty review that I would go through during the fall of my second year. Although very few institutions had second year reviews, I was told that it was an old tradition at the university where I taught and

that such reviews were largely perfunctory. I was told, half jokingly, that the second year review at my institution was utilized mainly to make sure that anyone with an undone dissertation had completed it. As the time for the review approached, my chair told me that she didn't expect any issues to come up and that I shouldn't worry. She told me that the review would be conducted at a regular faculty meeting with the entire faculty in attendance (except for myself). This seemed strange to me because this meant that other Assistant Professors would be discussing and voting on my review. She assured me that this was the normal procedure for such a review. She instructed me that on the day of the review the faculty meeting would start a half hour earlier than usual so that the faculty would have adequate time to discuss my review. I was further instructed that if I arrived to the faculty meeting before the discussion was done that the door would be closed and that I was simply to have a seat outside of the meeting room area. When the discussion was over, I would be ushered in so that the regular faculty meeting could resume as scheduled.

The day of the faculty meeting came, and when I arrived at the meeting room I was surprised to see that the door was closed. The door was always open in advance of faculty meetings so that faculty could come and get settled before things got started. Given this fact, I was momentarily confused. Just as I put my hand on the doorknob to open the door, I suddenly remembered that the meeting that day was going to start a half earlier than usual and that I was supposed to sit and wait until I was told that my review was over. A wave of relief washed over me as I realized that I had avoided the major embarrassment that would have occurred had I opened the door and walked into a meeting where a review of my work was being conducted. Having been told that this review was perfunctory, I settled into a comfortable chair outside of the meeting room and sought to pass some time looking over some reading for my class.

I quickly realized that I could clearly hear voices from inside of the room. I stood up to leave because I was sure that being able to hear the discussion around my own review was not something that was supposed to happen. However, as I stood up, the voices from inside became louder, and I could hear my name being mentioned. I felt that I should leave, but a morbid curiosity overtook me. I slowly sat down and decided to listen. After all, the department chair was the one who told me to sit and wait outside until the meeting was over, so I guess that I could stay. In short, I justified my decision to stay by convincing myself that I was only following her instructions.

What I heard can only be described as life changing. I was described as being an angry black man who was overly militant and incapable of accepting the help offered by colleagues. My teaching was characterized as poor because I structured my classes to emphasize student interaction and because I pushed my students to confront and critique the role of race, class, and gender in schooling. Most interesting of all was the charge that I constantly disrespected the university through my critique of its policies around race and its lack of interaction with the local African American community. Nothing was mentioned about my scholarship or service to the

profession or to the university. Instead, the only thing discussed was the belief that I was an angry, race-obsessed individual who terrorized his students, disrespected the sanctity of the university, and refused the help of well meaning colleagues who wanted me to be seen and not heard. It was clear that these colleagues wanted me to teach, conduct research, and carry out service in ways that were deferential to them, non-threatening to the institution, and supportive of the *status quo*.

I was so overwhelmed by what I heard in those moments sitting by the door that my brain could barely function. My mind swirled in the midst of what can only be described as a fight or flight response. I was filled with anger, sadness, and disbelief all at the same time. Should I wait quietly for the meeting to end and then enter and unleash my rage as soon as the door opened? Should I leave campus immediately and head for the comfort and security of home? I did none of those things. Instead, I went to my office and sat in stunned silence. How could I explain this to my wife? What would this mean for my two young children? Would I ever be able to work again as a professor? The fall semester was about half over, so I mulled over having to enter the job market when I wasn't prepared to do so.

As I sat in my office that day reflecting on all of the details of my time at the institution, I began to wonder if it was really my fault. Maybe I didn't work hard enough. Maybe I was too radical, too critical…too black. Having been trained in the Social Foundations of Education (Tozer & Miretzky, 2005), I had a critical perspective on education in the U.S. I recognized the depths of the hegemony that I faced every day and how this hegemony structured and maintained institutional racism in U.S. education. Being an African American faculty member, I frequently connected with colleagues across the country who had similar experiences, so I knew that what I experienced was not at all uncommon for faculty of color teaching at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (Bonner et al., 2015; Jackson & Johnson, 2011). Despite these understandings, I was still overwhelmed by what I had heard, and I found myself in a great deal of emotional and psychological distress.

I'm not sure that I ever fully got over the pain. However, I was able to move forward with what had happened because I had no other choice. I didn't protest or appeal the decision even though I thought that it was blatantly unfair. I realized that even if I had successfully appealed the decision, I wouldn't feel right continuing my journey at the institution I was working at under any circumstances. That fall, I went on the market and was blessed to secure a tenure track position at a university for the next year. The university I went to was a very different place from the one that I was leaving. I found that my work and my views were respected and that having supportive colleagues as well as a supportive Chair and Dean can make a huge difference. I flourished at that place and was able to reach my full potential. I even received early tenure and was actually nominated for a teaching award as well. My department and my college advocated for social justice as an explicit part of their mission, so many of the battles that I previously fought were no longer necessary. It's not a perfect place; the specter of whiteness and threat of hegemony still lurk in every corner like a "spook" in the darkness. However, the support of

8

other faculty of color and a host of white allies have helped me to utilize my previous experiences (both negative and positive) as a means to navigate the difficult terrain that defines faculty life for people of color at predominantly white institutions in the U.S. (Garrison-Wade, Diggs, Estrada, & Galindo, 2012).

UNHOOKING FROM WHITENESS THROUGH GUERRILLA INTELLECTUALISM

They can forgive a nigger almost anything other than competence. (Greenlee, 2002, p. 90)

In analyzing my experiences as an African-American faculty member, it became clear to me that race played a major role in how I experienced being a member of the professoriate. Employing the lens of CRT, I view the professoriate and the supporting structures of university life as reflecting the dominance of White supremacy in the operation of U.S. institutions of higher learning (Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002). When I discussed race and white supremacy in my teacher education classes, I was met with a forceful reaction from my students that emphasized anger, denial, and blame. Unfortunately, such a reaction is often typical of white students pursuing teacher education (Fasching-Varner, 2012; Hayes & Hartlep, 2013). The faculty in my department seemed equally resistant to discussions about race and how it affected our department, our university, and the wider local community. In my presence they often exercised their silence as a weapon; however, when discussing me in private they spoke up and utilized their access to institutional power as a means to silence my critique of whiteness both in the classroom and in the department.

It was easy for my colleagues and students to ignore and minimize my critique because of the inherent difficulty in spotting and naming whiteness and its role in education. Berry (2015) addresses this phenomenon by stating that "the difficulty of spotting Whiteness in educational arenas is that it's the invisible epistemological and ontological construct against which all others are compared and marginalized" (p. 15). Given this difficulty, the reaction of my students and faculty colleagues to critiques of whiteness is reflective of an all-consuming and ever present system of privilege and power that works against faculty of color while simultaneously working for the benefit of whites (Taylor, 2009).

My experiences in the professoriate have provided me with access to a career that reflects an ability to play a major role in both the construction and dissemination of knowledge at the highest levels. Furthermore, working at universities that emphasize research and publication at the highest levels has put me in a very privileged position. Despite the privilege generally afforded to faculty at these types of colleges and universities, they remain sites where faculty of color come face to face with White supremacy in unique and intimate ways. Working at these institutions often yields outstanding professional credentials for faculty of color while simultaneously isolating them and attacking their self-esteem and sense of identity (Stanley, 2006). Given this dichotomy, it's difficult to believe that institutions of higher education

will ever truly be able to play a major role in the creation of a just and equitable society. Although this may be considered highly pessimistic, it is a belief rooted in the concept of "racial realism" that is a hallmark of CRT (Bell, 1992). This concept recognizes the fact that these institutions are strongly ingrained in incrementalism and face little serious pressure to make sweeping changes that would benefit people of color. In fact, it can be argued that social justice was never the intent of these institutions and that their primary purpose is to maintain paradigms of oppression such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation by supporting and extending these same existing institutional arrangements (cf., Marx, 2008; Spring, 2010).

With this in mind, this auto-ethnography of my first years as an Assistant Professor represents a counternarrative to the story that colleges and universities tell about the freedom, openness, and equity of the academy. Additionally, this auto-ethnography challenges the master narrative that casts African American males as angry and incompetent individuals who have minimal aptitude for the important faculty activities associated with teaching, research, and service. Specifically, my counternarrative challenges this portrayal by highlighting personal struggles against racism and framing them in a critical race narrative that reflects larger constructs of White supremacy and the various elements of faculty agency. Inclusive of this complexity is the cultivation of subversive teaching in conjunction with radical scholarship that challenges the hegemony of the professoriate by encouraging faculty to unhook from whiteness.

This emphasis on unhooking from whiteness has potential to strongly inform the basis of what Guyanese activist/scholar Walter Rodney (1990) referred to as "guerrilla intellectualism" (p. 111). Rodney (1990) coined this phrase to emphasize the necessity of intellectuals of color challenging the "imbalance of power" (p. 111) that exists within the academy. In the context of my journey, the notion of guerilla intellectualism guided me to recognize existing power relationships in the academy and to then consider what resources and strengths that I could bring to my work in the academy. Recognizing the numerous issues that I faced and understanding the personal and professional resources that I possessed helped me to tackle these issues and move ahead in my journey as a faculty member.

In practicing guerilla intellectualism, I've found it necessary to challenge the *status quo* represented by whiteness in the academy. As a guerilla intellectual, this challenge magnified my position as someone occupying a liminal space that embodied being simultaneously rendered as both invisible and hyper-visible (Moore, 2008) within the confines of the emerging neoliberal research university (Gaffkin & Perry, 2009). I understand the difficult of such a position and do not take it lightly because it means that both my existence and my actions will most certainly be seen as a challenge to the institutional *status quo*.

My past experiences have shown me that challenging the *status quo* is a necessary part of the scholarly activism that I am committed to. However, it must be approached with an understanding that such challenges will likely engender a host of negative reactions from the institution and its adherents. While there is no definitive right

or wrong way to handle these complex reactions, it's important to me as a faculty member of color to seek the support of other faculty members of color as well the support of white allies. Likewise, it's important to draw on resources from outside of the academy (e.g. community, family, faith traditions, etc.) to obtain the necessary support to continue the struggle within a context that recognizes the importance of nurturing one's mental, physical, and emotional well being (Smith, 2004; Vakalahi & Starks, 2011).

Obtaining this broad spectrum of support is an important step in unhooking from whiteness and countering the hegemony of the academy. Doing this helps to establish a counternarrative of active resistance that challenges the "silent state" (p. 701) identified by Stanley (2006) and helps to break the "burdensome cycle" (p. 701) of anger, guilt, and shame that so often challenges faculty of color in the academy (Stanley, 2006). In turn, as these counternarratives continue to be established and communicated, they will help end the silence about the experiences of faculty of color and instead will help illuminate a path that will allow for increased recruitment and retention of faculty of color in American colleges and universities.

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