

## **How We Survive and Aim to Thrive: Realities of Three African American Women Faculty in Higher Education at PWIs**

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**[Abstract]** Using the methodology of critical autoethnography and theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought and Critical Dis/Ability Race Theory (DisCrit), three African American women faculty collaborated on documenting and sharing their experiences and impact in predominantly White institutions. The authors shared their personal narratives; core identities; intersectionality of cultural and sub-cultural identities and experiences (race, gender, abilities, generation/age, discipline, skills, expertise, faculty classification, critical consciousness, etc.); hegemonic institutional culture that focuses on compliance vs. inclusion and outcomes; and their support systems and strategies employed to do more than survive and aim to thrive.

**[Keywords]** African American Women Faculty, Black Feminist Thought, Dis/Ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), critical autoethnography, cultural identities, gender, predominately white institutions (PWIs)

### **Overview**

African American women faculty (AAWF) continue to be an endangered racial/ethnic group at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). The academy is an unending battlefield strewn with daily experiences of racial battle fatigue, being enveloped in imposter syndrome, professional isolation/invisibility, insufficient resources, salary discrimination, and challenges with intellectual collaboration, all while they navigate the institutional circumvention of an inclusive academic community (Collins, 2000; Dade et al., 2015; Edwards, Beverly & Alexander-Snow, 2011; Griffin, 2014; Stanley, 2006; Sulé, 2014). AAWF face disparate scrutiny by peers and students when teaching and adopting a research agenda on race and racism when compared to their White counterparts (Closson, Bowman & Merriweather, 2014). This results in a state of silencing, where it is the exception, not the rule, to seek and listen to the frank experiences of AAWF as a method for developing effective recruitment and retention strategies (Stanley, 2006).

Sulé (2014) surmises the struggle within a culture of dissemblance by recognizing the disenfranchisement within the academy in stark contrast to the personal or familial culture of being valued for the level of education and accomplishments. AAWF live dual lives of acceptance and disenfranchisement that give way to professional isolation and invisibility. In an increasingly polarized world, the authors come together, despite differences in their respective andragogical or pedagogical praxis (i.e., Dance Education; Applied Behavior Analysis; Special Education; Organizational Management, and Adult and Community Education), to reflect upon and analyze their shared experiences and collective desire toward continuous improvement in teaching and learning. The three authors' collective higher education teaching experiences at predominantly white institutions (PWI) span more than three decades. In this article, they use critical autoethnography as a method to interrogate majority culture power and privilege and embrace their

solidarity and history, as they share their passion for teaching and learning and offer it as liberation for themselves and their sisterhood of AAWF in higher education everywhere.

They began conversing about the intersections of race, gender, and disability in the fall of 2018. As faculty at predominantly white institutions (PWI), they shared their narratives of their lived experiences as adjunct (Ms. Lancaster), tenure track (Dr. Simmons-Reed), and contract (Dr. Cain) faculty members at two-year and four-year institutions.

After hearing Dr. Cain's use of storytelling as a method to share the legacy of her cultural heritage with an international group of students earlier in the 2018 semester, Dr. Simmons-Reed reached out to her for help with a keynote presentation she was invited to deliver at a teacher education conference. In their subsequent meeting, Dr. Simmons-Reed shared some of the experiences she wanted to discuss for the presentation. She wanted to conduct interviews with other Black, blind women in the academy and use storytelling as a method to share their challenges, as well as their achievements despite the odds they face. Understanding and naming the experiences described by Dr. Simmons-Reed, Dr. Cain also shared her experiences and struggles as an accomplished older A-A woman. Dr. Cain recommended Dr. Simmons-Reed interview her daughter, Ms. Lancaster, an adjunct faculty member at a community college. She called Ms. Lancaster immediately because she thought they had similar experiences as blind and visually impaired AAWF at PWIs. Over the past five years, the three have become close friends, presenting at several international, national, state, and local conferences annually.

In this article, using Black Feminist Thought (BFT) and Dis/Ability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) as theoretical frameworks, they elaborate on the primary themes across three components: their core identities, the role of intersectionality as AAWF, and the hegemonic institutional culture of higher education. The purpose of this collaborative piece was to voice their shared experiences as AAWFs and make visible their lived experiences by challenging systems of oppression that perpetuate inequities within educational structures.

The significance of their findings is helpful to other PWIs, specifically to marginalized faculty (i.e., AAWF) interested in cultivating an inclusive and affirming academic culture. For example, just 2.7% of all placements in 2019 were for Black women (Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021). According to 2019 NCES statistics, 573 (37%) of higher educational institutions had no tenured Black women. The monumental emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has yet to result in higher AAWF retention rates, which are currently merely creating the illusion of inclusion. Finally, they conclude by sharing their views on strategies that allow these three AAWFs not just to survive but thrive in PWIs.

### **Methodology**

The methodology employed for this study is critical autoethnography. The narrative data is derived from the authors' collective experiences. Their goal is to lift the voices of faculty scholars, who have also been silenced and burdened with multiple forms of internal and external oppressions (e.g., imposter syndrome, discrimination, racism, bias, ableism, sexism, and ageism) in their everyday encounters in the academy. Boylorn and Orbe (2014) describe critical autoethnography as incorporating three aspects of critical theory: to understand the lived experiences of real people in context to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination (p. 20).

The methodology of critical autoethnography allowed them to document, articulate, and embrace their similarities and differences, in order to resist marginalization, heal, and engage in a continuous dialogue and collaborative work that informs their teaching, scholarship, and service. The data collection and analysis of experiences resulted in three key themes: core identities, the role of intersectionality, and the realities of hegemonic institutional cultures. From the data collection analysis, they reported their findings and discussed needed support systems and strategies that fuel their desire to thrive, despite the odds.

### Theoretical Framework

The authors analyzed their stories through an integrated theoretical framework that seeks to deconstruct normalized dispositions and practices within the academy. The theoretical framework allowed them to talk about, interrogate, and make new meanings of shared experiences as AAWF, marginalized in the academy. They employed and explored the interplay between two theories, BFT and DisCrit. These theories represent the lens through which they look into and experience the world. Integrating these theoretical frameworks enabled them to understand their unique positions and positionalities and help shape the individual constructions of their realities as AAWF. This includes embracing and valuing their cultural lenses while learning from and with each other. The iterative process of writing and rewriting results in a deeper understanding of their collective past and present (Dimitriadis, 2012).

BFT (Collins, 2000) is derived from the concept of intersectionality coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her paper *Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex* (Crenshaw, 1989). Both BFT and intersectionality emerged from the legal arguments put forth by scholars of Critical Race Theory (CRT) almost 40 years ago. BFT is aimed at disrupting and interrogating notions that race, class, and gender are mutually exclusive (Betts, 2023). According to BFT, the uniquely marginalized status of Black women was due to their subordinate positions in the dominant interlocking and interwoven systems of race, class, and gender (Betts, 2023; Collins, 2000). It recognizes how these systems of oppression impact Black women individually by shaping and informing their experiences (Betts, 2023; Collins, 2000).

Three of the distinguishing features of BFT were used to analyze the data:

- 1) From their perspective, the Black Woman Standpoint helps illuminate the similarities among their core identities and shared experiences; affirms them being their authentic selves; and permits them to define themselves for themselves, all while resisting oppressive systems (Betts, 2023, Collins, 2000).
- 2) The *Creating Diverse Space for Black Women* feature emphasizes the intra-diversity among the responses to challenges and experiences of Black women that span across various cultures, generations, sexual orientations, social classes, and geographies (Betts, 2023). This intra-diversity among Black women recognizes that they can have and engage in myriad experiences, it should be accepted and respected by others, and protected in spaces that are meant for them (Betts, 2023; Collins, 2000).
- 3) Intellectualizing (Collins, 2000) acknowledges Black women's contributions, encourages them to resist by narrating their own reality, and to counter the dominant narratives written and spoken about them. Intellectualizing is particularly important in educational spaces like higher education, where Black women are expected to conform to Eurocentric pedagogical ideas and navigate hetero-normative intellectual spaces (Betts, 2023 and Collins, 2000).

BFT provides the authors with a framework for understanding their counter-stories as AA women in the academy. However, BFT does not address the experiences of Black women at the intersection of race and dis/ability. Therefore, a theoretical framework examining the impact of race and gender at the intersection of dis/ability is important to explore.

Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) has emerged as a useful framework for understanding how the social constructions of Race and disability create, perpetuate, and sustains structural and institutional inequities including ableism (Connor et al., 2021). Social construction refers to taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, knowledge, and ourselves that are assumed to be universal rather than historically and culturally specific ideas created through social processes and interactions (Ben-Mosh, 2013). The term *Ableism* refers to a pervasive system that oppresses people with differing abilities while privileging people who are labeled as able-bodied (Annama et al. 1., 2013; Dolmage, 2017; Weiland, 2021).

Using DisCrit, two of the authors discuss ways that the forces of racism and ableism operate interdependently, in neutral and invisible ways, that perpetuate notions of normality, as well as its mental and psychological impact. Finally, DisCrit focuses on the legal and historical aspects of both Race and Dis/Ability and how they are used to deny the rights of some citizens.

These frameworks contribute to understanding the connections between knowledge, consciousness, and empowerment. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, gender, and dis/ability, as interlocking systems of oppression, the theories reconceptualize the social relations of resistance and domination, that are empowering to marginalized groups and may have a far greater impact.

### Core Identities

AAWF are a vulnerable population in the academy. They respond to, experience, and demonstrate intersectionality as identity and experience (Tucker, 2016). The authors identify as A-A women descended from a long line of strong A/A women whose love of family, expression of culture and education, and dedication to community reflect their teaching, scholarship, and service. Viewed through the lens of BFT, their counter-stories honor the cultural wealth of African Americans and other marginalized communities. Yosso (2005) conceptualizes community cultural wealth from a CRT perspective. She rejects traditional interpretations of cultural and social capital that conflate economic wealth with knowledge and depicts communities of color as disadvantaged and culturally impoverished (Yosso, 2005). The intra-diversity among the authors as first, second, and third-generation college graduates are reflected in their narratives. However, their counter-stories link the cultural capital they bring to the academy. As A-A women educators, the intersections of their work, personal attributes, and lived experiences promote transformational learning.

First and foremost, Ms. Lancaster identifies as an A-A woman descended from a long line of strong A-A women whose love of family, expression of culture, and dedication to the community are evident in all they do. She is a Performing Artist in dance, utilizing her choreographic voice as a means of self-expression. She is a third-generation college graduate and dance and movement arts educator in higher education, where she strives to draw connections between dance and movement art forms and their cultural and social relevance with her students, both in and out of the dance studio. She is visually impaired and embraces the importance of self-advocacy as she moves through life with her differing abilities.

As a special educator and behavior analyst practitioner and advocate, Dr. Simmons-Reed uses her voice to facilitate students with and without dis/abilities to become empowered, goal-

oriented, self-determined adults to resist marginalization, and make informed choices to achieve their academic, personal, and social goals. She is because of her family, faith, and lived experiences. As the youngest of ten girls and one boy, she found affirmation from her sisterhood of strong A-A women in her home, neighborhood, church, and community. The importance of serving others was instilled in her at an early age. Service is part of her DNA and influences her personal and professional life today. She became adventitiously blind, at the age of ten years. It made little difference because of her family. She and her twin sister, who was also visually impaired, were always included in backyard games with the neighborhood children or having chores. She drew strength from and within her *village* of cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and church members. In their home, the disability label or notion of abnormality, that was thrust upon her parents by *experts* in school and the medical fields, was rejected. She was mainstreamed in general education classes in public school. She has always been a leader. She was in the honors society and was elected president until tenth grade.

Dr. Simmons-Reed had to move 150 miles from home to get the free appropriate public education (FAPE) guaranteed by the 1975 Education for All Handicap Children's Act. At sixteen, she found herself in a space where most people who looked like her or spoke like her were responsible for cleaning the facilities or serving food. The funny way she spoke, dressed, and communicated was suddenly unacceptable if she wanted to succeed. She unconsciously started code-switching in high school to navigate white spaces. As a first-generation college student and minority scholar at a PWI, she resorted to code-switching to survive at home and school life. She had to learn to advocate for herself and others. She helped found a student organization for students with disabilities and was a leader for disability rights on campus. She recalls that when she wanted to organize a protest march against the beating of Rodney King, her Black male faculty advisor warned her against it. He told her that she would be jeopardizing herself and that it would be better not to bring attention to herself. In other words, she did not make people notice she was Black.

Prior to becoming a tenure-track faculty member, she was a program manager for a 2.5-million-dollar grant at a University Center of Excellence for Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) and as a special education teacher had taught at the elementary and secondary levels, as well as instructed students with a wide range of differing abilities. In her career as a special educator, she got a whiff of a profession that tolerated her rather than accepted her, dismissed her rather than respect her, and try to neutralize her rather than empower her. Throughout her career, she has navigated the invisible snares of racism and ableism designed to silence her.

As her family's historian and champion fighting for social justice throughout her life, Dr. Ruby Cain, as an adult educator, utilizes her voice to help students make relevant cultural and social connections as adult learners. Her personal identity priorities are God, family, education, and social justice. Although individuals of the majority culture were welcome and part of the congregations, the churches she affiliated with were predominantly AA Baptist denominations. Many of the organizations that she joined were also predominantly African American. She grew up in working-class neighborhoods and still identifies with this culture. She grew up interacting with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins regularly. They were not her extended family, as defined by human resource rules in majority culture institutions. They were immediate family.

Dr. Cain is an A-A female and second-generation college graduate. She knows of four generations of ancestry, consisting of teachers and preachers. Teachers in segregated A-A schools often did not always have college degrees in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While growing up, there was never a discussion about if, but when she would go to college. She



is her family's historian and has researched her ancestry for more than twenty-five years. She has learned more about the challenges and achievements of her ancestors, instilling in her and others cultural pride.

She began her career in Information Technology. After 20+ years in this field, she moved from the West to the Midwest, as a trailing spouse, due to her husband's job relocating. There were no viable job openings in Informational Technology in the small city where they lived, so she began a consulting business (organization and training management) and worked as an adjunct faculty. Dr. Cain worked in nonprofit organizations, directing major programs. She worked as an administrator and faculty in universities before beginning her full-time contract faculty position, including program director and academic advisor.

Her social justice activism began in second grade and continued into her adulthood. She would tutor students in lower grades in her home. As she grew older, tutoring would be done at the school and community spaces. She co-founded three nonprofit organizations in three states, focusing on community building among A-As.

### **The Role of Intersectionality**

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *intersectionality* as the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (e.g., racism, sexism, dis/ability, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups. Their philosophies of adult education amalgamate their intersecting identities and lived experiences. Their philosophies of adult education are a combination of liberal, progressive behaviorism and radical humanism. Whether in the classroom or virtually, educators of adults are to be facilitators of the learning process, not keepers of knowledge or the *expert* in the classroom. They assert that education is the practice of freedom. They utilize the language of critique and the language of possibilities to inspire radical hope in their students that lead to greater access, accountability, and inclusivity (Gannon, 2021).

The intersectionality of Ms. Lancaster's identities (A-A, female, visually impaired, community builder, dance artist, and educator) informs her artistic voice and expression, teaching practices, and desire to support self-advocacy amongst students and community members' lives. She is a combination of a rich, diverse, interwoven collection of identities which all inform how she walks through life and, as such, the acknowledgment of this rich tapestry of identities in others is at the forefront when creating learning environments for her students and community members to engage in dance and movement arts.

As an instructor in a postsecondary, pre-professional dance program at an institution of higher education, Ms. Lancaster believes it is important to focus on the connectivity between dance techniques and the cultural, social, and historical origins from which they came and continue to influence, the dancer as both a technician and an artist. Her approach includes preparing students for meaningful careers within the dance world, be it in performance and choreography, research and philosophy, education, or business and commercial. While it is important to acknowledge that many factors influence how students learn that educators must address, there are certain structures. There are standards that educators can hold fast to when doing so. As a dance educator her philosophy of adult education is informed by Liberal, Behaviorist and Humanist perspectives.

Her belief in the concept of intellectual development manifests itself in the importance she places on presenting information to express the intricacies of the connectivity between the technique and its origins in social, cultural, and historical movements such as the Great Depression,

the Civil Rights movement, the influx of Cuban refugees to the U.S. as one of the results of the Cuban Revolution, and the emergence of various urban dance styles as artistic expressions from socio-economically disenfranchised communities. Through her teaching experiences, she has found the importance of presenting this information in a way that students connect and then to move the learning further to a place where the connection of the student to the larger community as a whole through the learned information can be realized.

She finds that the need for structure and learning through repetition lends itself to dance education when exploring the connection between the cultural history of the technique and its physical characteristics. Ms. Lancaster constantly challenges herself to find new and varied ways to present the same material, thereby repetitively reinforcing the retention of the learned information without forcing students to rely solely on one experience with said information. Offering various learning opportunities is key when encouraging students to achieve technical proficiency and find artistry in their performance. Performance quality does not come once a dancer steps onto the stage; it is born from the dancer's connection to the movement. Emphasizing the dancer's connection to the movement when nurturing the dancer's journey toward finding their choreographic voice. Although objectives must be clearly defined, flexibility is important in how the dancer meets those objectives. The overall aim is that the students understand the material, both its physical technique and historical context, and can articulate that understanding physically and verbally. Ms. Lancaster strives to create a learning environment that allows students to excel in those skills with which they are comfortable and seek to improve those skills with which they are not. As a dance educator, she encourages students to move beyond perceived limitations. Her goal is to meet each student where they are and work with each student to set goals and a path to succeed, both within the institution and post-graduation.

As a faculty member in Special Education, the intersectionality of Dr. Simmons-Reed's identities intertwined and has informed her scholarly work, philosophy of adult education, advocacy, service, and passion to mentor students and make visible what is often unseen by her privileged colleagues. From an epistemological perspective, she is a beautiful mosaic of cultural and subcultural identities informed by knowledge (e.g., a priori, posterior, explicit derived from her lived experiences as an A-A, blind woman educator in the academy. Her multidimensional identities as an educator, researcher, and community activist center around creating learning opportunities and experiences, in and outside the classroom that facilitate students' increasing self-determination. By discovering and defining their own mosaic of intertwined identities, they will be empowered to determine their own destinies.

Dr. Cain's reality at a PWI is not that of every female faculty. She is the total of myriad cultural identities that are marginalized in the hallowed halls of academia. In addition to those identities mentioned above (A-A, entry to an academic career later in life, working class, highly recognized and skilled in organizational/training management and development, and social justice activism), she is perceived by many as a novice faculty, devoid of skills for which she has received local, regional, and national recognition in other professional and business settings. As full-time contract faculty for twelve years, she is considered *as less than* by many administrators and tenured track or tenured faculty.

Her philosophies of adult education include Progressive Behaviorism and Radical Humanism. The purpose of adult education is personal/professional skill development, in which the learner is an active participant, not a passive recipient. In most cases, the adult learner knows

what (s)he does not know and, more importantly, knows what (s)he wants to know. Instructional strategies must include methods of transforming what has been learned in theory via textbooks and research literature into practice via opportunities and activities to apply the newly acquired knowledge. She equates education with social justice, poetry, and liberation.

### **Hegemonic Institutional Culture**

Dance curriculum in Higher Education has a history of legitimization through the codification of Eurocentric, western dance forms. The evolution of Eurocentric Western dance forms is often the focus of not only technique classes but overall dance history in many programs in Higher Education. Dance forms created in other parts of the world, often by Black and Brown individuals, in addition to dances of the African diaspora, are relegated to elective courses listed as cultural dance reinforcing the binary falsehood of Eurocentric Western dance and the *other*. A step further, a dance created by and representing individuals and communities with differing abilities may only be found in most dance curricula if looking at a special topics course that teaches individuals with specific abilities (Risner & Stinson, 2010). Compliance with narrow concepts of what is legitimate dance content for a program in higher education often does not take into consideration the rich tapestry of cultural identities of the students served.

Students must see themselves in the dance curriculum they study. Seeing themselves creates spaces where they can move from diversity to inclusion and develop a sense of belonging. It is just as important to support educators charged with making these spaces. Compliance takes the form of a need for more support for educators interested in inclusion and representation within the curriculum. Rejection of this compliance can result in constant demands for justifications for adding Black dance studies to create a more inclusive curriculum. The reality is that Black dance as an art form expresses a diverse culture and various identities. To exclude Black dance from the curriculum, based on a Eurocentric ideal of legitimate dance offered in a postsecondary institution, denies students the opportunity to fully understand what dance is and how it is representative of the community.

The social constructs of race and disability have a legacy based on White supremacy in education in the United States (Annamma et al., 2013). Despite numerous laws aimed at extending equal educational and employment rights to Blacks and individuals with disabilities, Black children's overrepresentation and poor outcomes in Special Education are evidence of the biased educational system masked to appear equal. Similarly, racial disparities in higher education reveal that among college completers, Black and Latina women are far less likely to attain a bachelor's degree in education than white women. Although students with disabilities attend college at increasingly higher rates, over the past 30 years, few have earned advanced graduate degrees, and even fewer have obtained professional careers in higher education. The National Center for College Students with Disabilities estimated that only 4% of faculty members identify as having a disability (Grigely, 2017).

Black Faculty with disabilities experiences the hegemonic systems of oppression, such as racism and ableism, that interact and function together at the institutional, cultural, and individual levels. The legal protections and institutional compliance mask the interlocking systems of oppression. Her reality is that these overlapping systems of oppression have manifested themselves as Friendly Façades, Accommodation Traps, Cultures of Confusion, Environmental Impediments, and Social Sabotage, especially when this perceived A-A, blind woman dares to lead, has any ambition, or speaks the truth to power.



The Friendly Façade is comprised of policies and practices at the institutional, college, departmental, and individual levels that appear equal but often have an underlying disparate negative impact on members of minoritized groups. Most institutions require faculty with disabilities to disclose and negotiate accommodations with the department chair involved in decision-making regarding their promotion, tenure, and appointment to prestigious university, state, and national committees. Most institutions are more concerned about consistency and standardization versus equity and inclusion. Asking for help can be risky for faculty, especially for those with differing abilities.

The Accommodation Trap are practices that meet the compliance codes for providing people with disabilities access to the curriculum or building; however, they often require one to go above and beyond what others must do to carry out their job duties daily fully. Access is considered for the *disabled*, although research supports its social benefits. The idea of meeting the individual accommodation needs of the *disabled* limits the perception of the individual to that of a passive agent as a receptacle of experience (Quigley, 2017). The constant advocacy for accommodation subjects individuals to accusations of harassment, aggression, ungratefulness, inflexibility, and personal attack by those in the hegemonic culture. The hegemonic cultural norms also promote and reward Cultures of Confusion or behaviors that create crises for people with disabilities and often perpetuate negative thoughts and stereotypes of incompetence. The fact that academia values independence over interdependence and places faculty with disabilities in subordinate positions with privileged colleagues because they are not able to *fake it until they make it* but allow their sometimes less skilled and knowledgeable colleagues to appear superior.

The Environmental Impediments or aspects of the physical environment or infrastructure, schedules or practices put individuals with disabilities at a disadvantage. Faculty with disabilities get a seat at the table but have their voice silenced because the material distributed is not accessible, or if sent electronically, it was sent with little time to review. Academia rewards quantity over quality work, and the climate is a never-ending game of survival of the privileged. She calls this fifth and final form, Social Sabotage or attitudes, prejudices, biases (e.g., innuendos, insinuations), mistruths, or actions that *intentionally or unintentionally* project the perception that people with disabilities are different, difficult, demanding, or downright derelict in some way.

In 2021, Inaugural Poet Amanda Gorman recited the poem, "The Hill We Climb."

*We braved the belly of the beast.*

*We have learned that quiet is not always peace, and the norms.*

*Moreover, notions of what is "just" are not always justice.*

Drawing from the poem, the beast is the academy. The belly is a lonely place where Dr. Cain can be invisible, ignored, discredited, ostracized, and penalized for wrongs she did not commit (and can prove). She is to be silent when her character is defamed. Speaking up about unjust policies and practices annoys those who can make the change but choose not to. *They have always done it that way* is justification for not altering the status quo.

Denial of personal connection to racism involves the motivation to view racism in a philosophical and unemotional manner. Discussion is avoided via silence or focusing on personal intent to be impartial or colorblind. One such example is microaggression. Microaggressions are comments and gestures from majority culture individuals that may result from implicit or explicit bias. Racial and ethnic minorities in PWIs self-report regular and frequent occurrences of

microaggressions (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne Huntt, 2016; Pittman, 2012). These actions are insults, character assassinations, and hurtful, thinly disguised negative jabs delivered in comedic tones. Another common example is acting as the spokesperson for a person of color, telling the individual or others what they meant or said, offering to act as an advocate without permission. Because one individual does not view these actions as offensive, it does not negate the harm inflicted on the one it does.

Lost in the perception of her as *less than* is the fact that Dr. Cain has been at the university longer than most A-A tenure track/tenured faculty. Although the number of A-A faculty hired annually is equivalent to the number leaving, few stay long enough to reach the status of Associate or Full Professor.

### **Support Systems and Strategies Employed to Survive and Aim to Thrive**

It is essential to find community within the institution with like-minded individuals whose experiences, both in and outside the institution, are similar to ours and who have similar goals for inclusion and representation within their departments and their institution as a whole. For example, the *Women of Color Employee Resource Group* is one of many strategies Ms. Lancaster employs. She also found that creating a space where students' voices as stakeholders in addition to that of hers as faculty and like-minded administrators are heard is another strategy that has provided support. Extending these spaces to include individuals, organizations, and partners within the community they serve also lent support to her as a faculty member and to her students to have an extended community once they leave the institution's walls and continue on their artistic journeys of expression and engagement. These strategies are important when realizing her endeavors to connect, dance, and facilitate community engagement. Through this connection, dance symbolizes a vehicle for change and social justice, celebrating the histories and contributions of the Black artists that make up the art of dance.

As an AA, blind, Christian woman in the academy, Dr. Simmons-Reed views her role as an educator as a service to the Lord. Every day, in and outside the classroom, she looks for opportunities to educate, empower, and elevate her students. She supports students in disconnecting themselves from the deficit-driven dogma that pathologizes them and ignores their intellect, strengths, preferences, and interests. She seeks to collaborate with colleagues passionate about social justice and shared values for cultivating radical hope in learning. She seeks to create support communities for herself and her students through mentoring, participation in affinity groups, shared authentic interactions, and responsive discourse in the pursuit of social change. She advocated for representing students and faculty with differing abilities on university diversity, equity, and inclusion committees. She advocated that ability was included in the university, college, and department strategic plans.

Dr. Cain actively seeks out the community with colleagues who authentically understand and get what it means to be marginalized, treated inequitably, and are social justice activists, even when the injustices do not personally impact them. She focuses on providing knowledge, guidance, and encouragement to students, community members, and colleagues on discerning the difference between what just is and justice. She serves on the Leadership Team of the Indiana Association of Blacks in Higher Education and as the former Vice-President-Faculty of the university's Black Faculty and Staff Association. These communities within the academy provide affirmation, support, and strategies to showcase members' excellence and best practices of inclusion. She turns

to her ancestors and remembers the obstacles they overcame so that she might be born and have a better life. The purpose in life is not to settle but to strive for what should be and can be.

### Conclusion

Their reality is multicultural. Their cultural selves are different from their work selves. The lack of understanding of historical inequalities and the impact of interlocking systems of institutional oppression on faculty with multiple marginalized identities limits in-depth exploration for substantive dialectic engagement and motivation to effect change. To counter this reality, they create inclusive communities to achieve educational excellence that affirms their value in the academy and equips students and themselves for living in a global world. To sum it up in two words, *they belong*.

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