

Commentary

# 'I Am a Broken Policy': A Critical Reflection on Whiteness and Gender Anti-Black Racism in Institutions of Higher Education and Social Services

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**Abstract:** This personal narrative is a critical reflection and affirmation letter to Black women. Throughout this commentary, at the end of each section, I have included what I call "gems". I hope they serve as a manifesto for our collective healing from working in institutions that center on the ideologies and practices of dominance. This piece particularly focuses on the dominant ideology and practice of "whiteness" within institutions as a surveillance tool through policy that directly impacts Black women's wellbeing through gender anti-black racism. Through storytelling and drawing on Black feminist scholarship, this narrative exposes the challenges I faced with institutional policies and practices as I pursued my career in both academia and social service work. Throughout this narrative, I highlight how the undercurrent of whiteness is embedded in the foundation of institutional policy and practices. This narrative serves as a demand for institutional accountability and reckoning with the coloniality of epistemology and ontology. There is a great emotional toll for Black women who are confronting and resisting gendered anti-black racism with deep internal struggles and triumphs. The violent institutional practices seek to eclipse Black women's ability to dream, imagine and create. Whiteness is centered in institutional infrastructure, serves as a distraction, and impedes our ability to conceptualize the world we desire. We deserve to have imagination in our work. This narrative is a reflection of the harm of whiteness, a guide for Black women academics, a manifesto for change, and a testament to our humanity.

**Keywords:** whiteness; gender anti-black racism; institutional harm



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## 1. Introduction

*"Real radicalism implores us to tell the whole ugly truth, even when it is inconvenient. To own the hurt and the pain. To own our shit, too. To think about it systemically and collectively, but never to diminish the importance of the trauma."*

—Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*

I decided to write this narrative in the wake of the recent forced resignation of Harvard University president Dr. Claudine Gay and the tragic death of Lincoln University's administrator, Dr. Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey. There are numerous Black women who have faced forced resignations or untimely deaths while holding faculty and administrator positions at universities across the United States. My hope is that this open narrative and manifesto serve as a call for accountability and a testament to the unwavering strength and resilience of Black women.

As I observe Black women being targeted and harmed by institutional practices and left to fend for themselves, it forces me to wonder what my fate is as an emerging scholar. As a Black woman myself, who recently completed my doctoral degree in social welfare, my apprehensions about my future as an emerging scholar extend beyond academic realms. As I near the finish line of this part of my academic journey, I grapple with concerns about my wellbeing in academia as I remain steadfast as a research scientist-activist while maintaining

my humanity through the challenges in academia while fulfilling the obligations associated with a Doctor of Philosophy.

This narrative does not aim to represent the diverse experiences of Black women, as Black womanhood is not a monolith. Rather, this piece stands as my personal contribution to the scholarly documentation of the collective journey I share with many Black women who have come before me and who will succeed me. Within the academic and social service field, where the written word is crucial and deemed as supreme evidence, I present this narrative as material proof of our experiences and a call for citation. This piece serves as my contribution as an emerging Black feminist scholar to address the dearth of scholarship that acknowledges both implicit and explicit policies that result in the exploitation and dehumanization of Black women.

In the vast fields of academia and social service work, which include nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, and research think tanks, Black women experience extraction, exploitation, and various forms of control. The exhaustion is apparent, and a collective weariness prevails. This narrative is an expression of that exhaustion and serves as a call for change and action.

*Gem #1: Believe your experience. It is really happening. Just because dominance is denying it does not mean it does not exist. This work cannot be carried out if we gaslight ourselves.*

## 2. Early Life

*“Black girls pursue freedom unapologetically and with imagination to cope with stressors of punishment.”—Tyese Brown (2023)*

My journey began the moment I was born into this world as a Black girl. I believe the very existence of Black girls and Black women is an act of resistance. Growing up in the South Bronx and raised in Harlem by a grandmother from the south helped me find my voice early. My work in advocacy and policy dates back to my pre-teen years, when I was immersed in a community rife with challenges and thrust into activism to survive the multiple forms of oppression I faced as a Black girl.

The public schools I attended were a haven for me. The administrators, teachers, and support staff were all predominantly Black and Latino. They served as a shield to the outside world of oppression. In school, I was able to cultivate my communication and leadership skills through theater, debate, and dance programs. School was also the first place I was allowed to use my voice to speak about the injustices faced by my peers and me in our community. In junior high school, I attended protests, rallies, and state hearings on child welfare issues. These experiences were vital because they showed me that my voice mattered. It also allowed me to understand policy early on. As I transitioned into high school, I was introduced to whiteness and dominance through a youth-focused mock government program outside of my school—a stark contrast to the predominantly Black and Latino environment I grew up in. It was through these white-centered programs that I began to see the many hardships I would face as a Black girl and woman. Pon (2009) defines whiteness as “A structural position of racial privilege from which white people view themselves, others, and cultural practices. Whiteness operates to maintain and reproduce the systemic and structural dominance of white people in all spheres of society including the social, cultural, political, spiritual, and economic, among others”. Whiteness is created and functions as the norm. The moment anything goes against whiteness, it is deemed problematic, resulting in a state of confusion for all. Andrews (2016) posits, “If we see whiteness as a psychosis, then we understand that it is hallmarked by irrationality and a distinct inability to see reality in any other way than the distorted view it creates”. Whiteness never made sense to me, and it was the primary reason I was almost always in trouble as a teen participant in nonprofit programs serving Black and Latino youth but centering whiteness as its practice. White-centered spaces labeled my voice “too much” or “negative” as a teen who demanded we have race-centered conversations. Teen programs were created through what I would now refer to as a programmatic design

rooted in epistemic violence. Gayatri Spivak (1988) defines epistemic violence as the notion that dominant discourses can inflict harm on subjects through discourse. It was the first time I felt othered, controlled, and silenced. It was in white spaces that I suffered extreme punishments as a teen, such as loss of scholarship funds for publicly disagreeing with the director of our program and dismissal from a banquet when I refused to read a speech written for me but not written by me. The rules and policies I broke were designed by whiteness, maintained by whiteness, and enforced by whiteness. This pattern continued to play out into my adulthood as a professional. Whiteness begets whiteness. The perpetuation of whiteness leads to the reinforcement of its norms, and anything diverging from these norms is seen as a violation. Very early on, I understood that simply existing as a young Black girl meant I was considered outside the bounds of acceptability by the standards of whiteness, as it could not control or define me.

*Gem #2: Whiteness is not my barometer; Black womanhood is. Therefore, I leaned into Black womanhood, affirming my work and success, not institutions.*

### 3. Whiteness as an Institution

*“Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience”—Bell Hooks (2000)*

Before entering academia, I spent the first decade of my adulthood working in various social service organizations for a series of nonprofits and advocacy think tanks. Although the organizations were different in various ways, what was consistent across institutions was the organizational structure, expectations, and implicit punishment and silencing of those who failed to work within the confinements of the ideologies of dominance such as whiteness, coloniality, and patriarchy. Melendez et al. (2023) posit, “Ideologies of dominance at the root of racial-settler colonialism are embedded in all United States institutions”. Each institution I worked at had a commitment to social justice and liberation for all, yet they all perpetuated inequality to maintain power through the enforcement of policies designed to protect dominance through the centering of whiteness. Hess (2007) refers to the functioning of whiteness as “white mythologies” and argues that it functions as the dissonance between reality and what is socially fictitiously constructed. Race is not real; it is constructed. Whiteness is not real; it is also constructed. Somehow, there is a lack of interrogation of whiteness as a construct that ultimately positions whiteness as what is natural and normal, which results in its ability to dominate. Whiteness was created to establish the binary we see today through the formulation of the hierarchy of power, where the top of the hierarchy represents power and privilege, and the bottom of the hierarchy encompasses anti-blackness, serving as the foundation of exploitation. At the end of the hierarchy framework, the binary constructs of structural and systematic inequality functions. On one end of the spectrum, there is whiteness, which has power, and the other end is anti-blackness, which is the anchor of oppression. It is through these two constructs that inequality was designed and currently serves as the root of the United States economy. The economy we have today is a result of racial-settler colonialism and the money that allows these organizations to operate cannot be separated from it. Therefore, the root of the money institutions invest to start their work is at least two times stolen: capital from the stolen land from Native Indigenous people and stolen labor of Black enslaved people.

My understanding of the history of institutional investment is what I bring to every position I have worked in. I operate as if all executives and managers who carry out inequality work are clear about the intentional design of our economy and inequality. I worked in the fields of social welfare and social services. Understanding the construction of the US economy is pertinent to the social welfare field. My experience as a young professional during my first decade of work in nonprofits and think tanks was a form of psychological abuse. In my experience, whiteness showed up in ways that made me question my reality. For example, from 2017 to 2020, I served as a board member at a small nonprofit and raised concerns that leadership did not reflect the community being served. I decided to resign after three years of waiting for promises of equity to be fulfilled. I was

promised the first year of my tenure as a board member that the current director of the organization, who happened to be a white woman who was not from the community but had a Ph.D. in social work, would not become the Executive Director of the organization. I was promised by the founder, who was also a white woman, that the board would hire someone from the community to lead the organization. Three years later, the director became the Executive Director, and the justification was “she deserves the job after all of her hard work”. Whiteness builds the game and then dictates the rules of engagement so the outcome can be in its favor. Upon my resignation, one of the founders, who at the time I thought was a friend, responded to my resignation and stated, “I honestly had the vibe that you didn’t want this to work, and this was the outcome hoped for which you can use as a story in your career”. This statement was meant to question my intentions of resignation; it almost got me to question my reality and decision until I could point to the material, tangible fact: the Executive Director did not represent the community as promised. Intention over impact is the result of whiteness. Today, in 2024, the Executive Director has not changed, and she now oversees over eight Black and Latino staff members; all of the children they serve are Black and Latino, and not a single community member has a job within the organization. Whiteness is literally profiting from a community’s harm and marginalization when whiteness is the original designer and benefactor of their hardship. This is modern-day colonialism. Almost seven years later, the leadership has remained the same. I made the right decision. Whiteness is entitled.

The cycle and control of whiteness continued as I climbed the career ladder. My tenure working at a national gender equity think tank as the Director of Policy and Advocacy was my entry into the treacherous world of knowledge production. Language is vital in my work as a social policy scholar, researcher, and practitioner. Acknowledging all parts of history so that future scholars and practitioners have what they need to build future scholarship is imperative. As an emerging scholar, I believe it is my duty to be honest in my scholarship on inequality. While that desire might seem evident, it is not practiced by all scholars and practitioners. There is a dominant and intentional narrative framing in both public and private scholarship that centers on whiteness. Whiteness gets to tell the story from its viewpoint. The control of language is one of the primary functions of whiteness. I experienced language control firsthand, disguised as a “best practice” skill while working at a national think tank. While drafting a report on the racial and gender wealth gap, I was told I could not use the term “anti-black” in my writing. When I asked the reason, I was told, “the language is too strong” and “it goes against our communication best practice”. My director at the time was a white woman with work experience in “women’s” wealth work (not gender wealth work) and a master’s degree in political economy. At the time, I was in my fourth year of doctoral studies, with two master’s degrees and over fifteen years of work experience. I am also a Black woman who has studied critical race scholarship for a decade. I was hired to work at the national level to center race and gender in the wealth work at the institution. As an emerging Black feminist scholar, I understood that words matter. I advocated for the term and asked for a description of our policies and definitions of “strong language”. I argued that there is a clear distinction between racism and anti-black racism. My director at the time told me I was “new” to this landscape, and she advised me to listen more before I tried to perform “new things”. As a Black woman completing my terminal doctoral degree with over fifteen years of formal higher education, I was not deemed expert enough by my director to use terminology I considered appropriate or lead our narrative work without her approval and comfort of language being used. This is just one example among many of how whiteness sustains itself by spreading falsehoods to shield its own existence.

*Gem #3. Do not listen to their words. Let actions and outcomes serve as information when whiteness tries to play in your face.*

#### 4. The Triple Threat

As Black women, we suffer double exploitation due to what [Crenshaw \(1991\)](#) calls intersectionality, which is the way anti-black policies and gender inequities result in gender anti-black racism. The third silent threat we rarely discuss is the threat of being highly formally educated in addition to being a Black woman. The intersection of gendered anti-black racism has a particular impact on darker-skinned women. As a dark-skinned Black woman initially, I was unaware of how racism intersected with colorism as a young adult. Today, as a professional, I can clearly see the way my darker skin plays a huge role in the oppression I face. I have been in numerous spaces where women of color have been at the “table”, and when I got there, I was the only darker-skinned woman of color. I have also witnessed how other women of color conducted a classroom difficult conversation the same way I have and received praise, whereas I have been told in anonymous surveys from students that my “tone is making everyone uncomfortable” when I am direct in my dialogue. Furthermore, I have witnessed advisors and faculty who were a part of my doctoral process pit me against the one other lighter-skinned Black woman who was in my cohort. Somehow, when advising me on how to go about my career and work, they would refer to the other student’s approach to her work as an example of “excellent” research and her career trajectory. While I agreed that my fellow doctoral sister-friend’s work is, in fact, stellar, the conversations made me extremely uneasy. My body told me it was more to the comparison; however, I did not have the language at the start of my career. We were both brilliant Black women, and if whiteness had won, we would not have been on the same team. Thankfully, she and I both understand abundance, and there is room for both of us; however, our intellect and collaboration are a direct threat to whiteness. Institutional whiteness seeks to divide. Centering Blackness leads to collaboration.

While our Blackness and womanhood are constantly used as a DEI checkmark, our educational success and intel are viewed as a threat. [Thomas et al. \(2013\)](#) conceptualized the theory “pet to threat”, through a psychological study of Black women’s journey to their mid-career which highlights how bosses go from liking Black women to disliking them and deeming them a threat to the work environment and institution. Black women are the belly of the world. [Hartman \(2016\)](#) states, “The plantation is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world.” Black women function as an intellectual plantation within institutions; we are the primary producers, conceptualizers, and creators within social service organizations and academia. Our creation is inductive. We seek to create new epistemological and ontological frameworks. Despite our circumstances and structural oppression, we still manage to use our imagination and vision. When I was first hired in many of my professional roles, directors and managers were excited about my passion and creative imagination. I have encountered numerous occasions where directors expressed being impressed with my academic and professional achievements despite my upbringing in a resource-deficient environment. In one instance in particular, a white male CEO interviewing me for a consulting position bluntly asked, ‘How did you make it this far given your upbringing?’. While to some, these comments might serve as a compliment, if listening closely, there is almost an undertone of “you are not supposed to survive what was designed to harm you”. The survival of Black womanhood, despite what [Collins \(2000\)](#) calls the “matrix of domination”, is often appalling to folks who have power. It also serves as a threat because the more we survive and thrive as Black women, the more we threaten the reality of the ideologies of dominance. Whiteness is exposed for the lies it has created and perpetuated. Resistance is crucial.

Due to my on-the-ground training in advocacy and education, I have resisted within institutions and have not been forced to resign or terminated (yet). I have, however, been silenced, uninvited to meetings, and labeled a “troublemaker”. My training in policy has supported me in navigating institutional violence, but I also acknowledge that I will never be able to holistically exist in an institution that was not designed for people who look like me. Although I have not been removed from any of my employment positions, I have been surveilled and “set up”. On two occasions, I have had directors inadvertently

send me emails and text messages about me with an outlined plan to watch my every move to document a mistake for human resource purposes. I have had a white male CEO include me in an email not for me and say, “we are going to get her ass”. On both occasions, I responded back to the messages, and both parties ignored my response to protect themselves. Whiteness is sloppy; when confronted, whiteness shrinks.

There is a shelf life for Black women working in institutions that center power. I experienced and observed that Black women seem to have approximately eighteen months to two years within institutions before they become a threat. There is a constant dehumanization and ungendering that happens to Black women in institutions which is designed and regulated by institutional policies. Black women have historically been “ungendered” since US chattel slavery. The constant ungendering served as a justification and institutional functioning of US chattel slavery (Spillers 2013). This ungendering happens within institutions the moment darker-skinned Black women’s passion is labeled aggressive or “unprofessional”. Our intellect, leadership, and drive for change are viewed as “having an agenda”, when in fact I have admitted to an agenda during the interview process. The agenda is racial and gender equity. What was previously celebrated and sought after is now controlled, deemed unprofessional, and an ultimate threat to the institution. Whiteness perpetuates harm to protect itself.

*Gem #4. Gather a team of four to seven people who can remind you of who you are, challenge you, and hold you accountable. If whiteness seeks to change the way you speak, dress, or “carry yourself” guised as professionalism, it is dehumanizing. Make sure the critique is based on tangible work outcomes, things you can change without stripping who you are.*

## 5. The Academic Plantation Field

I entered academia in 2017, right after the Trump election, to disrupt the violence that was about to come. I was a first time mother of a six month year old Black girl. I thought academia would be the safest place to be, given the focus on academic freedom and speech. What I learned about academia shocked me, but it put into perspective what I was witnessing in the field of social service work. Academia is the belly of the beast. The foundation and construction of whiteness, patriarchy, and coloniality are conceptualized and maintained through academic research, pedagogy, and practices. Black feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1991), Collins (2000), Hooks (1994), and Cooper (2014, 2018) all speak about the interlocking nature of these systems of oppression within academia in their scholarship. My time in academia has been eye-opening and liberating. I have spent the last seven years navigating the beast of academia, trying to figure out if there is space for me as a Black woman scholar. While in academia, I realized my mere existence was a broken policy shaped by the systems and structures of US academic institutions that curate, teach, and practice dominant epistemologies. My humanity does not protect whiteness and is deemed a threat to the institution.

Throughout my seven years in academic training, I have personally been the subject of multiple complaints from students about my pedagogy, attire, and overall demeanor. I have spent almost every semester in some form of mediation mandated by the University to resolve student conflicts with me. As an adjunct faculty member, I have been taped without permission, and audio has been used by university lawyers and administrators without my knowledge. I am not perfect; I acknowledge I have areas I am challenged in, but academia has not aided in my growth as a professor. Academia has served as a place where I feel like I am being put on a psychological and emotional wiping post without any meaningful, tangible outcome. For example, when I interrogate the complaints against me and summons to what I like to call “dean court”, they have almost always been about perceived unsafety regarding feelings or the directness and candor in my deconstruction of power. One academic year, I had to hire an attorney to support me in navigating the academic institutional jungle, and I was summoned to multiple hearings without an actual material resolution. White Supremacist values continue to oppress,

subjugate, surveil, exploit, police, and justify violence against Black women (Collins 2000; Rodgers 2021; Spencer and Perlow 2018). Rodgers (2021) affirms how the harm of Black women in academia shows up as overt and subtle experiences of discrimination, including the silencing of Black women's voices and positionality. Institutional power has tried to silence me multiple times. In most of the mediations I attended, when I asked the goal of the meeting, the answer was almost always to obtain a resolution. When I asked for examples of possible resolutions, I was told that the goal was to provide space for the student who was almost always white presenting to address upset, unsafety, and hurt feelings with my pedagogy. I am a professor, not a clinician. My job is not to fix feelings it is to educate. Somehow, in the school of social work where I carry out most of my teaching, we have created a space where future social work practitioners and clinicians will hold their feelings as facts and weaponize them to hold Black women hostage. We are not your mammy; get somebody else to do it!

Today, in 2024, I am deeply concerned with the field of social work and academia overall. We have reached what I hope to be the peak of extreme violence and pure savagery. I am witnessing firsthand what my aunts and mentors told me all along would happen. In 2024, I am witnessing the killing of thousands of children across the world, and even acknowledging it in this paper may be breaking an institutional policy at one of the many institutions I am affiliated with. There is this silent yet very loud gag order within academia to say nothing about what we are witnessing right before our eyes in 2024. Academic freedom has been eliminated. Institutional policies have been weaponized to dismiss violence, which protects imperialism. Yet, if we acknowledge the extreme violence and trauma, we may risk our careers and livelihoods. We have entered what I am now calling "the savagery of whiteness". This phrase relates to the way whiteness engages in extreme violence and demands that we all stand by and "mind our business". Whiteness is currently operating like a dysfunctional family that protects the abusive actions of an adult against children rather than protecting the children. Whiteness is upset that Black women will not agree to watch death without protest. Opinions and feelings have been turned into facts and used to target, dox, and harm young people on college campuses. I have witnessed faculty call for the arrest of students ON campus due to protests because they have different opinions. Whiteness does not know how to engage in difference. Whiteness is a tyrant. I have witnessed and been a victim of online exchanges, which resulted in a person contacting my employer to "tell on me". If this is not the end of times, I hope it is the beginning. If this is the beginning of something new (which I hope), what does accountability look like when academic institutions are responsible for producing and helping legitimate feelings and opinions as fact? Whiteness does not have an answer because whiteness is too busy denying that it exists.

*Gem # 5. Align yourself with multiple institutions so that when one decides to engage in extreme harm, leaving is an option. Use your degree as a shield. It is ok to have many (small) jobs. We often have five to six jobs at one institution. One institution should not have 100% control over your life. They can provide you with benefits. But the operation of the institution should not be contingent on your dehumanization.*

## 6. The Future Is Black Women

*If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.—Audre Lorde (1982)*

As I enter this new chapter of my life as an emerging scholar, I have entered the stage of "radical acceptance". Burton et al. (2020) state that radical acceptance teaches that although an individual will not choose to have a particular issue or circumstance, resisting or fighting situations that cannot be changed intensifies emotional suffering. Radical acceptance does not approve of the situation but makes clear what the individual has power over and what the individual does not have power over, allowing for a clear, healthy strategy to cope and live to emerge. While I do not agree with the lack of response institutionally to the violence against Black women, I acknowledge it is happening, and I have no control over it.

I can only control myself. I have radically accepted that despite what institutions claim, administrators' role within academia is to protect the institution, not the students or faculty, and Black girls and women will be the least protected. Radically accepting these truths but not approving of them has been freeing. It has also allowed me to see my accomplices who hold these administrative roles and shield me from the harm of institutional violence. There is hope. There are administrators doing the most they can with the power they have. I have access to wise mentors who serve in academic and administrative roles and have held me with grace, protected me, and held me accountable.

It is imperative to know that in the historical and current institutional landscape, our mere existence as Black women is perceived as a flawed policy. We were not meant to survive the conditions of racial-settler colonialism despite our ancestors' significant contributions to building the foundation of the economy, and many of these institutions' whiteness will not protect us. Even with our significant contributions, we find ourselves excluded from epistemological and ontological frameworks and forced to participate in institutional practices that exploit, extract, and co-opt our talents for the benefit of whiteness as power often does.

Our strength lies in our Blackness and our womanhood, recognizing that we construct and create against power rather than operate alongside it. Given the interlocking systems and structures that exist, there is an urgent need for creation, imagination, and dreaming. Simply deconstructing power is not enough; we must intentionally construct the futures we envision toward liberation. As [Rodgers \(2017\)](#) posits, Black women's historical roles as foremothers and valuable knowledge producers within the women's liberation movement have been erased. The current institutional oppression serves as both a barrier and distraction, rooted in fabricated narratives that produce tangible inequities.

### **7. Imagination as a Tool**

Whiteness operates as a diversion, serving as a dehumanizing strategy. Gendered anti-black racism is a form of psychological terrorism. One way to disrupt both whiteness and gendered anti-black racism without being manipulated is by exercising our imagination. We can be creators of new epistemologies that center our own experiences and aspirations. Our collective consciousness and imagination are necessary tools to build a free world. Our purpose as Black women scholars should not be confined to solely deconstructing and discrediting white epistemologies. We must situate our purpose and career by envisioning our own ontological futures. Below are three examples of how I plan to use imagination in my work within academia moving forward.

### **8. Imagination through Research**

As I enter my role as an early career researcher, I enter ready to center Black women's lived experiences in all my work. I believe Black women's narrative is essential information for pushing toward liberation and overall economic justice. Black women are unique; they make up 70% of primary/sole heads of households in the United States ([Price et al. 2020](#)). Yet, most of our work on economic disparities and health disparities is studied through a race lens. These race-centered methods center on a cis-hetero patriarchal approach and perspective in research and interventions. This approach lacks substance and true centering on the lived experiences and needs of Black households and communities. A true racial justice approach includes gender at the center. I plan to use my time as a scholar working with Black women across the country to build a data bank of our lived experiences and desires. I plan to use my imagination to create new research methodologies that center joy, imagination, and creativity. Too often, Black women are overly researched in what we call "trauma porn" for the sake of data which results in more money for the institution. Furthermore, they are rarely compensated for their worth and value in participating and are left with a USD 25 gift card and a broken heart. My desire is for my research to be a space of refuge for Black women to come and just BE.

## 9. Imagination through Play

Somehow, in the United States, an individual's career becomes their identity. I know this because I have traveled and worked in other parts of the world, such as South Africa, Brazil, Ghana, Kenya, and the Dominican Republic, and work rarely comes up outside of the work environment. Gray et al. (2023) note, "Black women are more than mules of white supremacy". It is essential to have hobbies and passions that spiritually sustain you and can be poured into you outside of work. I have recently been intentional about defining myself and exploring who I am outside of academia and my career as a research scientist and professor, as Black women have been conditioned to labor and serve through capitalism. Laboring and serving are not natural, despite what we may think. This is the conditioning we inherited from our ancestors, who were conditioned by white colonizers to labor excessively without rest or payment, which is another tenet in the savagery of whiteness. We must disrupt this conditioning and engage in nonpayment/production hobbies. Our imagination can be activated by drawing, playing mystery games with friends, singing karaoke, and playing solo solitaire. This summer, I plan to teach my daughter and niece how to jump double Dutch and hopscotch to reclaim my inner child. It was through play and engaging in joy that my imagination allowed me to BE.

## 10. Collaboration as Imagination

I always carry an "ideas" notebook with me to write down ideas, and on the first page, there is a quote by Tricia Hershey that reads, "*I do nothing alone, my whole life is a collaboration*". This quote grounds me and calls me to collaborate instead of isolate, which is my natural tendency. Collaboration is key in the work that we conduct; finding "our people" is necessary to keep us grounded and sane. Gems 2 and 4, outlined above in the critical reflection, expose the need for having people whom you can call when your vision is cloudy and your ability to imagine has been eclipsed by whiteness. Gem #2 Black women are my barometer, which has forced me to redefine my ideas of what success looks like. Just given the fact that Black women's ideas are often viewed as DEI, it is already setting us back. I realized that if I remained true to myself, my community, and Black women-centered research, then I would risk not being successful in academia by getting awards, grants, or even tenure. I had a mentor, who is a Black woman, tell me, "Tenure can't be the goal. It can't define you". She was telling me that I was more than a label of tenured professor and that is a white-centered standard that does not center my desires and the people I serve. So, I made Black women and other women of color my barometer. Anytime I am challenged institutionally, I collaborate with my circle on how to address the issues. Before any major hearing, or if someone "tells" on me and I am summoned by university administration and lawyers, I strategize with at least two other Black women, from adjunct faculty to Vice Provost, on how to deal with an issue. When I address my challenge, I repeat something my wise healing coach told me, "There is nothing for me to protect and defend". I always feel armed and ready when I enter these complicated, treacherous institutional issues because at least two brilliant Black women have helped prepare me for the matter, and good luck trying to outsmart all of us.

## 11. Conclusions

Black women, although to these institutions we are deemed a broken policy, we are not illegal or broken. Academic and social service institutions are a manifestation of power through the creation of ideologies of dominance such as whiteness, cis-heteropatriarchy, and coloniality. Our mere existence and being is a manifestation of liberation our ancestors got free; therefore, in every instance, there is hope. This manifesto is a call to create and not to advocate for the abandonment of resistance. We can challenge systems and structures of power and confront whiteness while simultaneously using imagination to shape our identities and desires. This manifesto is a call to center our humanity in our endeavors, recognizing that embracing our own ontology and epistemology is affirming our humanity.

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