

Resistance to the Academy: A Call to be a Disrupter

Lakindra Mitchell Dove

Abstract: This personal narrative provides an account of my path to academia as a Black woman. I recall the initial hesitation and resistance that I battled as a result of my observations, experiences, and uncertainty about my place in the academy. I discuss my non-traditional approach to securing a tenure-track position and how I have come to view my role and my presence within academia as a form of resistance to and disruption of racism. In this personal narrative, I present strategies that I have used to thrive despite racism and oppression, in addition to the challenges posed due to the pandemic. I also highlight the importance of amplifying the voices of Black women and women of color within the literature.

Keywords: social work, academia, faculty, racism, Black women, women of color

Over the past year and a half, I have been thinking about how I ended up here in academia, occupying this space. I used the disruption caused by the pandemic to pause and consider the journey and all of the checkpoints that contributed to my critical decision to join the academy. I realized that this had been a journey in the making before I even knew it, that these moments would surely come to pass. My great-grandfather was the first person to recognize my gifts as a young child. He noted my curiosity, love of reading and writing, and natural leadership abilities. As a child, I would always carry a pencil and paper and was always journaling about daily life events and documenting my observations. My grandmother and father would periodically remind me of his vision and words. He prophesied that one day I would become a teacher. This revelation was taken seriously by family members. My great-grandfather called me his little professor. As a child, I did not realize that this work was bigger than me, a calling to be in this space was an aspect of my soul's mission. This became apparent over time. During the course of my academic journey, I received signs pointing me toward a path that I resisted. Now that I am on this path, I want to understand why I initially resisted. This narrative is an account of my journey, reviewing the checkpoints and critical milestones that occurred along the way. It also embraces a non-linear approach to storytelling, similar to the twists and turns that occurred on my journey.

I battled with myself for a few years. It was an internal tug of war. I knew that I was being called to occupy space in the academy, yet I did not see how my full authentic self could be supported in a place that espoused all of the things that I was yearning to detox from: productivity, “fake it till you make it,” be a good worker, ignore the soul work, then I found myself at a crossroad. I heard the echo of bell hooks who so eloquently offered a different perspective to occupying space in academia. Hook's teaching trilogy, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (hooks, 1994), *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (hooks, 2003), and *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (hooks, 2010), served as much needed manuals, the “how to authentically navigate academia” handbooks, as I referred to them. I had been stretching myself between two worlds, not wanting to make a concrete decision, thinking that by remaining in direct practice I was doing right by my community who so needed my presence and voice. I would consider this a splitting that many practitioners of color reckon with, knowing that there are not enough of us serving our own communities, and

not wanting to stifle our own professional growth and development. There is a cultural aspect of loyalty to your community and feelings of betrayal that surface when it is time to move on. I had convinced myself to believe this narrative because I had long ago reached burnout and I was in a state of denial, disconnected from the thoughts, emotions, and experiences in my body. My outlet became teaching, a lifeline, preventing myself from completely drowning. I was an adjunct instructor which fueled my passion and desire to engage in critical consciousness. I attempted to feed myself and fill my cup through teaching, an aspect of academia that I embraced.

At one point I thought that I would simply walk away from the academy once I earned my PhD. I considered myself an atypical doctoral student. In full transparency, it was my love of learning that brought me back into the world of academia. I never envisioned myself as a professor or researcher and in retrospect, this absence of vision relieved a lot of pressure to pursue opportunities tailored to the traditional pathway of a professor or researcher. I was a rebellious student. I displayed resistance through my body of work that centered the experiences of Black youth. I resisted the lore of quantitative research that was held as the standard and embraced qualitative methodologies that afforded a deeper engagement with people whom I was passionate about supporting and providing an opportunity to share their stories through research. I resisted the curriculum by using practice-based experiences to counter evidence-based practice. I did not enroll in the teaching practicum, although it was highly recommended. I did not attend conferences that felt too much like schmoozing, and I did not see spaces where my work felt welcomed or valued. I did not check many of the boxes on the checklist for doctoral students. I essentially created a lane for myself that focused specifically on defending my dissertation and obtaining my degree. So it was very surprising to me when I started to receive signs to consider academia as my next career move.

There were several excuses that I created to justify why this would not be the best fit for me. I leaned heavily on my fear of public speaking and disdain for being seen. I preferred to be behind the scenes, getting the work done, and flying underneath the radar. I reminded myself of my observations of professors whom I admired and respected and how they were mistreated by academia. My mentors often revealed aspects of academia that I otherwise would have been oblivious to, specifically the reality of academia being another harsh hierarchical system with the potential to cause great harm. I was definitely limited in my perspective as a student. They shared their struggles as professors of color, navigating spaces that were never created with them in mind. I did not want to partake in mental gymnastics by attempting to interpret and deflect messages, while preparing a rebuttal, or the emotional battle of combating microaggressions that would inevitably surface in classrooms. These are realities shared by my professors that I also witnessed as a student. My own experiences included incidents such as the time when a White student made a statement of coming a long way as a society, since the days of Martin Luther King Jr. As the only Black student in the class, I felt obligated to speak on the continued perpetuation of racism among Black people. There was also that time when I was minding my business walking down the hall and a White staff member asked, “are you lost, little girl?” As a result of these oppressive experiences, I often pondered if the joy of teaching was worth the risk.

Thinking about the first course I taught shortly after completing my PhD, I was willing to take that risk. I had to pace myself, building my confidence and comfort level in the process. I started teaching one course, then two, then multiple courses per term, and before I knew it there was an opportunity for a one-year contract as an instructor. In retrospect, these were significant milestones in the making. I took this as a sign from the universe to make a move. I was straddling the fence, still engaged in direct practice full-time while teaching on the side. At that point, I was completely consumed by burnout and my soul was yearning for new and invigorating experiences. I concluded that I was no longer willing to tolerate the oppressive experiences I had encountered in the workplace, and I was eager for a new start, a different experience. I learned a very painful lesson about valuing my worth. I had allowed others within my place of employment to take advantage of my expertise. I fell for the illusion of upward mobility by accepting a supervisory role, and when I did not adhere to the ideas of how the role should be enacted, I felt scrutinized and disconnected from the role and a member of the administrative team. I eventually stepped down as a supervisor as I was not willing to compromise my integrity. My love of learning would carry me, or at least that was the new narrative that I convinced myself to believe. I left direct practice and joined the ivory tower.

My journey to academia was unique, yet serves as an example that we all have our individual paths and points of entry. I was taught that there is a foolproof model, and I doubted my chances of securing a tenure-track position because I did not check all of the boxes as a doctoral student. My approach was unconventional, and I wanted to prove a point, one being that I could do it my way and on my terms. To some extent, I did because I was offered a position as a tenure-track faculty member during the 2019–2020 academic year. This felt surreal. I had completed my PhD in 2015 with no desire to remain in academia, and four years later I was preparing to become an assistant professor.

I was not naive about what I was stepping into. I learned a lot about the fight through observations and experiences. I had to remind myself that I had a relatively good experience as a doctoral student in comparison to other students of color, and I am certain that my PhD cohort (majority students of color) had a significantly positive impact on my experiences. I did not experience egregious acts or blatant racism, yet I knew they existed. There were instances of experiencing microaggressive acts, second-guessing myself, suppressing my voice and viewpoints as a Black woman. These are common occurrences among Black women within academia, often with the goal of silencing their voices and positionality (Rodgers, 2021). For example, I questioned whether the several months that I spent waiting to see if my study would be approved by the research committee of a collaborating partner due to their research procedures, was truly related to my methodological approach or the focus of my study. It was also quite plausible that the fact that I wanted to explore the experiences of Black youth in a system known to cause harm to this population, and the potential illumination of the experiences of youth within the system, raised concerns. It is the not knowing or not being able to name, but feeling the impact of potentially racist and discriminatory acts that often creates a cumulative experience of racism. This time around I wanted to be strategic and methodical in my approach to academia. As a new faculty member, I did not want to begin this journey afraid of the horror stories that activated vicarious trauma. I did not want to assume that I would be in a constant fight with an invisible beast that was so often described and experienced by students, staff, and

faculty of color. A beast that delivered body blows, a beast whose energetic presence seeped into your pores, your psyche, then slowly began to feast off your energy and attempt to erode your soul. I would often ask myself, who would intentionally agree to such an experience? I was stepping into the ring with my toolkit, my armor. I was equipped with expertise, wisdom, coping skills, a strategic plan, resources, and most importantly my eyes wide open. I was alert, not afraid. My strategy was paying off.

As I assessed the first six months in my new role, things were going relatively well. Then this other beast, one foreign and unfamiliar, appeared and swiftly rendered a devastating blow that knocked me off my course and significantly altered my path. As the effects of the pandemic quickly settled in, I was now faced with attempting to wrap up my first year as an assistant professor in the midst of a global pandemic. There were many unknowns regarding what the future would hold, let alone the remaining months of the spring term of 2020. I found myself, like so many others, operating from a space of survival, assessing the bare minimum required to get through the day, the week, the month, the term, and so much more under these unbearable conditions. The pressing questions that remained were: How am I going to navigate my tenure trajectory with the added barrier of COVID? Will the effects of the pandemic be an indelible stain that significantly impacts my ability to receive tenure, or will it be an opportunity to create a new path and venture into uncharted territory?

The collective pause of the pandemic created multiple pathways: one being ongoing chaos and confusion, and another observing the space in between. While navigating the space in between, I was able to step back and further analyze my journey, reflecting on multiple points of disruptions along my path and how the current disruptions were shaping my view of self and of my role within academia. An unbelievable amount of change occurred very rapidly. Everyone seemed eager to respond to the pandemic, social injustice, and racism simultaneously. I often questioned what contributed to the spark of interest in this work. Is it that many were forced to witness what communities of color have been experiencing for decades, as a result of not being able to unsee or distract themselves, or are they now suddenly enlightened? What was the threshold and how did we get here? I also thought about the social work profession and the dance of how to respond, an obligation to respond, and whether the profession collectively is responding in a way that is sincere and genuine or performative. Scholars who engage in this work are, in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer (1964 as cited in DeMuth, 1964), “sick and tired of being sick and tired” (p. 549). There are many such as Trisha Bent-Goodley, Iris Carlton-Laney, Joy DeGruy, Jerome Schiele, to name a few, who have for decades been engaged in this work. These brilliant scholars amplify the experiences of African Americans, specifically within the field of social work, and serve as role models for how to do the work. There is a burgeoning interest to create space for this work and engage in critical conversations, and the invitation is being received with raised eyebrows, pursed lips, and heavy speculation. The works of these scholars and those engaged in anti-racism and social justice work were not as apparent pre-COVID, as the social work profession struggled to embody these perspectives. Yet, when the world seemed to come to a halt, there was an urgent need to address racism and social justice.

Over the past year and a half, I have come to realize that there are several ways that I disrupt racism in the academy. The primary way is my mere presence in an institution that was never

designed for me. So, the fact that I am here, occupying this space is a disruption. One of my roles as a disrupter is to support others by using my voice to affirm, not negate, their experiences in the academy. There is an inner fire that is ignited when I hear fellow colleagues question their visibility, place, and competency. I often feel compelled to dispel these thoughts with stern statements, such as “you are not an imposter, you were not hired as a token, you are here for a reason, and you must remember your why.” This is not in a manner that is dismissive of their lived experiences, but rather supporting them in not believing these sentiments as the only narrative. In these moments I often feel an energetic shift as I search for the words to help others release baggage, purify thoughts and emotions, and cleanse the collective overwhelm that seeps into our pores. We begin to carry things that do not belong to us, and then carry them as our own. Racism is one of those things. It has become very apparent that these types of interactions are critical for sustainability. There is an element of I see you, I hear you, and I feel you. Validation of the experiences of other faculty and staff of color within the institution, in and of itself, is a disruption of racism.

As a disrupter, I give myself permission to go against the status quo. I know that it may be considered risky as an early career faculty member to say no and enforce healthy boundaries, but one of the realities of COVID is that I have felt more empowered in some instances to say hell no! I am able to do so by not overcommitting to service, but rather tuning into opportunities that resonate with a full yes, where my voice is valued and appreciated. I am also cognizant of not falling into the trap that working from home enhances productivity. I am adamant about maintaining boundaries and not extending work hours. As inequities, injustices, blatant racist acts, and lack of acknowledgement of emotional and invisible labor are further illuminated, my response to combating an institutional system that uses a bullhorn to chant “be productive, do more, business as usual,” is to create and practice healthy boundaries, protect my energy, and protect my space. This approach has provided so much fortitude.

Another role as a disrupter is my style as an educator and presence in the classroom. I am a reflection of possibility for students of color, and I am the counter-narrative to non-students of color who otherwise may not have ever had an experience with a Black educator. I authentically and unashamedly embrace my Blackness and it is very much an aspect of who I am and how I show up as an educator. This is a gift and I treat it as such. I am intentional about incorporating diverse content in my courses and encouraging students to challenge what they have been taught about the construction of knowledge and how to engage in learning. This approach welcomes rich discussion about how social work education is situated in a system that has not done its due diligence at acknowledging and excavating its racist roots, entrenched within a system that maintains a hierarchy and emphasizes power, control, and domination.

I am learning that there is value in resistance, which is catalyzing and often an indicator of the need for change. I do not regret my decision to join academia, and I certainly did not anticipate navigating my first year during a pandemic. Yet, there is an aspect of it all that feels like par for the course, as my path has never been traditional. I feel equipped for upcoming challenges because I am accustomed to traveling a non-traditional path and anticipating the need to create my own lane. In the midst of so much chaos, I have found my way by remembering that I have done this before and was successful in the past, which gives me hope that I will be successful in

the future. Although many may perceive a disrupter as someone who creates challenges, goes against the grain, and resists assimilation, I see my role as a disrupter in the academy as a beautiful opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of social work education. As a disrupter, I am willing to use my experiences to challenge the “business as usual” narrative and continue to illuminate an alternative path, one that is not rooted in oppression or contradictory to its very mission as a profession. There once was a time when I allowed just the thought of having to encounter racism to deter me from this path. I realize that in those moments I willingly gave racism undeserved power. I allowed it to be a critical factor in my decision-making. I have since learned to do the total opposite. I am able to choose how I respond to racism, and I most definitely respond from a space of personal empowerment. This is a critical lesson that I have learned on my academic journey, leading to my career choice as an academician.

For many women faculty of color there is an understanding that we exist at the margins within academia, some may even say we are outsiders. However, this perspective is shifting as we push back on these beliefs that are rooted in oppression and reclaim our roles and positions by using our collective voice and power to create change. I fully embrace my role as a disrupter, and I look to the guidance of the women who have come before me, forging a path to continue to amplify my voice and position. As Rodgers (2021) and Azhar & DeLoach McCutcheon (2021) have noted, the experiences and stories of Black women and women of color have gained little traction in the empirical literature. There is a critical need to enhance the body of knowledge regarding Black women and women of color within academia. More opportunities, such as this Special Call from *Reflections* for narratives for social work educators to confront and dismantle systemic racism within social work programs, are creating space to share stories and collective experiences and triumphs that recognize the rich scholarship and research regarding the navigation of racism within academia.

References

Azhar, S., & DeLoach McCutcheon, K. P. (2021). How racism against BIPOC women faculty operates in social work academia. *Advances in Social Work, 21*(2/3), 396–420.

DeMuth, J. (1964, June 1). “Tired of Being Sick and Tired,” *The Nation*, 549.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/fannie-lou-hamer-tired-being-sick-and-tired/>

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. Routledge.

Rodgers, S. T. (2021). Next wave of post traumatic slave syndrome survivors: Black women resisters in academia. *Advances in Social Work, 21*(2/3), 438–459.

About the Author: Lakindra Mitchell Dove, PhD is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Portland State University, Portland, OR (lakindra@pdx.edu).