
An Education Scholar and a Tightrope Walker: Reflexivity and Self-Discovery through the Research on How African American Women Navigate the Contested Spaces of Predominately White Colleges and Universities

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ABSTRACT: Chronicling my research on academically successful Black women attending predominately white institutions (PWIs), I reflect upon the anxiety, anger, and disillusionment that I personally experienced in graduate school. I discovered while completing the dissertation that other Black women at PWIs navigate similar challenges. Using narrative inquiry, I explore how this research program developed and how the high-achieving women interviewed shaped my ideas about gender, race, and belongingness and the complexity of coping with racism. I wish for other women of color to realize they are not alone in their frustrations; I hope my research helps these women understand that their presence is both needed and valued in the academy.

KEYWORDS: African American women; Black feminist geography; academic achievement; higher education; predominately White institutions

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My experiences, like those of many marginalized scholars, became the basis of my academic investigations of institutional cultures and their impact on Black women. People often like to be associated with women who are successful role models and, in my mind, I had lost that status. For me, there was nothing worse than being labeled as a good-for-nothing Black woman. Such a woman was too weak to stand up or stand for anything. No one could stand on her shoulders.

Introduction

As a Black female scholar, my research is grounded in my life story. And, like many Black women in academia, my story is one of hard-earned successes and bitter disappointments—or, as the old saying goes: “two steps forward; one step back.” I tell some of that story here, hoping that my honesty and vulnerability will resonate with others—particularly other Black women in the academy. Also, storytelling is a way to reflect upon my experiences and grow from them.

In this piece, I discuss my doctoral research on Black women in predominately white institutions (henceforth PWIs). As I note below, the subject matter is critical because most of what we think we know about African American women in higher education tends to focus on those students who fail or who experience poor academic performance. When Black women’s college success is amplified, it is often to underscore better performance relative to Black men. Such narratives presume deficits among African American women, characterizing them as a population with a low capacity for success (as well as a population that is in competition with their Black male colleagues). Moreover, many people at PWIs harbor perceptions that are deeply rooted in negative stereotypes about African American women whom they presume lack a strong work ethic, possess lower intelligence, etc. Because white administrators, faculty, and classmates often have difficulty imagining Black women as high achievers in these spaces, these women are unfairly tasked with cultivating their academic talents within unwelcoming (if not downright hostile) campus environments (Patton & Croom, 2017; West, Donovan & Daniel, 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Navigating all of this is like walking a tightrope: missteps can have devastating consequences, and fear of losing one’s balance can be paralyzing.

I contextualize this important research within my own story, and, to situate my research discoveries and personal reflections, I draw strength and inspiration from other Black women scholars who celebrate the interior lives of Black college women at PWIs, oftentimes while negotiating their own personal and professional contexts as faculty members and administrators in white-dominated institutions. In the pages that follow, I trace the development of my research agenda out of personal experiences as well as the impact this line of research has had on my self-development.

I begin this paper by discussing my positionalities and subjectivities as a Black woman scholar exploring the tightrope walking of other Black women. Then I share some findings. Finally, I conclude this piece with an invitation to all tightrope walkers to lift up their voices and be heard.

The Hardships that Became My Research Calling

Funambulism (fyü- 'nam-byə-li-zəm) See funambulist (fyü- 'nam-byə-list)

Noun

- 1: tightrope walking
- 2: a show especially of mental agility

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage

I had a ritual when I was an undergraduate student. When I woke up in the morning, I would lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and think about the classes I had for the day. I would get excited and think about all the questions that I had written down and the notes that I had taken in my books. I wanted my questions answered because I wanted to learn. I could not wait to get to class and ask these questions and discuss the material and make comments. I had something to say. My undergraduate college experience was a great time because I felt as though I had come into my own and gained confidence in myself. I felt like I was on the verge of becoming the woman I wanted to be—I just needed to take one more step and I would be my best self. I was the perfect sister, the perfect daughter, the perfect student, and the perfect employee. I never needed any direction; I knew what needed to be done, and I did it. I was “the magic woman.” If someone said that it couldn’t be done, then I was going to do it—“Take that!” When I played soccer, if we needed to score a goal some way, I scored one. If you needed help with a paper, I knocked on your door. If a friend needed a shoulder to cry on, I provided it and asked for nothing in return.

But the “magic woman” is no more.

Graduate school was difficult. The classroom no longer felt like a space in which I excelled or where I wanted to be. As an African American¹ woman at a large PWI, I felt out of place. No one thought the way that I did; no one played by the same rules that I played by, and no one cared about the things that I cared about. I found myself around people who told me who I was because their definitions of me were what they felt comfortable with. I allowed others to define me, and I did little to challenge the way that people characterized me. I tried to brush it aside, insisting to myself, “Who cares about what people think? People who are my friends know who I am, and that is all that matters.” I know now that this is not true—I cared a great deal about what other people thought of me. It grated on me daily that people did not have a good opinion of me. I seemed to be a riddle to student colleagues and faculty members in graduate school. No one could “figure me out.”

In the process, I lost confidence in my abilities and felt undermined and disheartened by some people I thought were mentors. I slowly began to think that I was who people said I was—too quiet, aloof, and a little too weird. I knew that I was smart, but people kept treating me as though I was not intelligent, as if I did not know what I was talking about. I felt as though I was always sticking my foot in my mouth. I seemed to never miss the opportunity to say or do the wrong thing. It was nerve racking and disheartening. I would take one step forward and two steps back. I could not seem to have a breakthrough and move forward.

During the final stages of my graduate school career, I was tired and worn down, and I did not feel as though I had anyone I could confide in. I lost confidence in my abilities to excel or even try to do so. It was too hard and too demanding. I did not want to smile when I did not feel like it. I did not allow myself to believe that things were going to work out because the thought of being disappointed again would further crush me. I found that I did not have much to say to anyone, and that I was becoming increasingly wary of people. This is not to say that I did not have people who reached out to me and offered me assistance. However, in many instances, I was suspicious of their motives and what they would think of me cracking under pressure. I had regressed to the point of not recognizing myself. I used to love making schedules and planning and being excited about reaching my goals. By the end of my graduate school career, I had no goals and it was difficult to make plans. It was a chore to think about my future. As a friend told me, "You are in survival mode." I was trying to make it through the day without feeling humiliation or disappointment. I had no morning ritual, no way to start the day. I had nothing to say. I was done talking. I was done attempting to develop relationships that ended in disillusionment.²

Eventually my experiences, like those of many marginalized scholars, became the basis of my academic investigations of institutional cultures and their impact on Black women. While I was discussing potential research topics with a professor, he suggested that maybe I should think about studying academically successful African American women. I just looked at him. I had developed a poker face and I was not sure if the person that I was speaking to was being passive aggressive, offering fake support, or if this man was serious. I thought to myself, "Don't you see I'm crazy?" I said I would think about it, but I was not thinking about it at all. I was trying to end the conversation and get out of the room as quickly as possible. A few days later, I was speaking to my mom, who is one of the most supportive people ever. My mother thought that it was a good idea. She said what all good mothers would say: "You are so smart. I think it is a good idea." I had completed enough course work for two master's degrees, and was on the way to earning a PhD. Strangely enough, however, I didn't feel particularly successful, and I now cringed at the thought of someone calling me smart. I had lost my ritual. I had lost myself. The thought of facing young women who were succeeding was frightening—they would see right through me. Why would anyone listen to me? I had fallen and could not figure out how to get back up.

People often like to be associated with women who are successful role models and, in my mind, I had lost that status. For me, there was nothing worse than being labeled as a good-for-nothing Black woman. Such a woman was too weak to stand up or stand for anything. No one could stand on her shoulders. The negative perceptions that whites have of ne'er-do-well Black women make it harder for other women of color to advance professionally (Chen, 2017; Johnson, 2016). For me to feel that I was underachieving was the most gut-wrenching experience of my life. I did not want to be around myself and I believed no one wanted to be around me. I was certain that I was a disappointment. I still was not ready to talk about how I felt, so I told the professor I would "think about it." Clearly, I was thinking about it. The prospect of being successful or learning the secret to

remaining passionate about one's work was ultimately too much of a temptation to pass up. I therefore turned my scholarly attention to figuring out the conundrum I was living.

My dissertation, aptly titled, "Tightrope Walkers: Narratives of Academically Successful African-American Women Attending Predominately White Institutions," was the first of several projects that sought to add much-needed nuance to dialogue about academically successful Black college women. A theoretical approach that weaved together social geography, Black feminist thought, and narrative inquiry helped me trace how high-achieving Black women understand their collegiate experiences as socio-spatial ones—where various locations and activities on campus are fraught with racial and sexual discrimination. Specifically, I consider how PWIs are sites where these women derive meaning from various points of reference (including family and community, college residence halls, classrooms, and student activities) to navigate the contested spaces of the university while also asserting their agency. In so doing, I map these women's experiences while centering their voices. Whereas a good deal of the scholarship on Black students in higher education focuses on numbers (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014; Smith, 2016; Supiano, 2015) in terms of enrollment and graduation rates (Bingham & Solverson, 2016), including, increasingly, their college debt (Addo et al., 2016; Jackson & Reynolds, 2013; Redford-Mulrany-Hoyer, 2017), and what is often assumed to be an aversion to achievement (Howard 2019; Hudley, 2016), narrative inquiry and consideration of the spatial dimensions of university life provided me insight into the complex layers of how Black women understood themselves and academic success in relationship to their collegiate experience.

Setting out on this intellectual journey gave me a much-needed catharsis. It also helped me to understand not only that "[r]esearch is an extension of researchers' lives" (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2) but also that what I was experiencing was a sociological pattern that deserved more scholarly attention. More importantly, this body of research is an effort to help other African American women think about their own circumstances and to show them that they can (and do) deserve an opportunity to be successful. I speak from experience when I say that it is difficult to be successful at PWIs while staying sane and focused. I echo Robin Boylorn's (2006) lament that we celebrate Black women in PWIs for their accomplishments, but do we really understand what they endure on a day-to-day basis? Do we fully appreciate what they give up? Do we realize the pain, resentment, and anxiety these women manage so that they do not fall? From these and related ideas, my research agenda arose.

Using qualitative interviews and employing a narrative inquiry framework that was inspired by the writings of Washington and Mosley (2003, 2008), Hunter (2012), and Lander (2017), I examine vignettes and personal testimony for their sociological significance. My research process is guided by the following research questions: How do Black women stay on the tightrope? More specifically, how do academically successful African American woman stay balanced in a society that creates obstacles for them and discourages their prospects for success? And what about the costs? Tightrope walking takes both skill and bravery; as Harris-Perry

(2011) notes, there are costs to keeping one's footing in the "Crooked Room." Years after earning my PhD, these are questions I continue to explore.

An overarching theme that emerged from my research was that Black women in PWIs can feel simultaneously invisible (in the sense that white peers and faculty tend not to acknowledge and appreciate them) and hypervisible (i.e., they are over-scrutinized, and their actions and ideas are disproportionately policed). Race-gender stereotypes contribute to this sense of invisibility and hypervisibility, and the cumulative impact of those feelings is Black students' eroded trust in their white teachers and classmates, dormmates, teammates, co-workers, supervisors, and academic advisors. Another important emergent theme is empowerment: the pain that accompanies the marginalization these students experience often coexists with the joy stemming from a profound sense of pride in oneself and one's accomplishments.

A Tightrope Walker Studying Tightrope Walkers

It was the spring semester of 2009. I was sitting in a coffee shop near the main campus of a Midwestern PWI. Let's call it "Marion University."³ This was the agreed-upon site for most of the interviews: students met me there; I treated them to lunch;⁴ and they shared their stories with me. Mainly, they told me about what it was like for them to be high achievers in a place like this. Since my focus was on students with a proven record of academic success, I recruited participants who were juniors and seniors and had at least a 3.0 cumulative GPA. And because my mission was to chronicle the triumphs and challenges of these amazing Black women, Marion's Office of Minority Affairs helped me identify and recruit participants who not only fit these descriptions but who were also available to sit for a semi-structured and (roughly) hour-long interview.⁵ I was pleasantly surprised with how helpful everyone was. The Minority Affairs office supplied me with a list of potential participants, and those students in turn told their classmates, sorority sisters, and girlfriends about the project. Through this snowball sampling approach, I met the 20 women whose narratives I ultimately gathered for my dissertation.

Overall, the participants in this sample came from diverse academic backgrounds. Most of the Black women that I interviewed were majoring in social science fields (particularly psychology), while fewer were specializing in the "hard" sciences and fewer still were getting degrees in the humanities. The majority of the participants were not first-generation college students; only 30% of the Black women I interviewed were the first in their family to go beyond a high school education. There was not much difference in the average GPA levels that juniors and seniors earned, but the juniors did have slightly higher grade-point averages. Please see participant details in the Appendix.

When the time came to conduct the first of these 20 interviews, I sat in the coffee shop, notebook in hand, smartly dressed while trying to give off the

impression that I wasn't trying too hard. As I waited for the student to show up, I was nervous. Here I was, a Black woman who attended Marion as a grad student, now studying other Black women who were undergraduates. A lot had changed about me since I had last been on campus. I had gotten married, moved away to work remotely on my dissertation, and was (at the time) a newly-minted faculty member at another school. It felt odd being back doing fieldwork: Marion was a familiar place, but now I experienced the university from a different perspective.

Nervousness notwithstanding, my awareness of the significance of this work was never in doubt. On the contrary, studying Black women in higher education has always been vitally important (Croom, et al. 2017), and I situate my work within this ever-growing literature that seeks to understand Black women students' status in higher education. Amadu Jacky Kaba (2008) wonders if African American women are the new "model minority," a term typically deployed when referring to Asian populations that are academically and socioeconomically successful—oftentimes in the face of marginalization (Wing, 2007). Although they have endured the nation's history of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of racial oppression, Kaba argues that Black women are making significant gains. These gains include, but are not limited to, increased enrollment in and completion of college and professional degree programs (Helm, 2016). While African American women are certainly improving their living conditions and life chances through education, they are hardly immune to oppression and gendered racism (Reeves & Guyot, 2017; Winkler-Wagner, 2009). Rather than celebrating success, model-minority narratives reify stereotypes of the "Black superwoman" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; West et al., 2016). Like critiques of Asian groups as model minorities, this narrative perpetuates the idea that Black women's experiences are monolithic, and it trivializes how the intersectional identities of race and gender shape treatment as well as educational achievement. As Patton and Croom (2017) note, "the [model minority] myth absolves institutions, policymakers, and leaders from directing attention to Black women's experiences in college" (p. 6).

Also concerning are conversations about Black women and girls that characterize them as being "problem students" or averse to achievement. Here, Black women get attention as part of a deficit perspective—focusing on those students who academically struggle rather than those who are doing well (Washington & Newman, 1991). When Black women's college success is amplified it is often to underscore their outpacing the academic performance of Black men. Beyond downplaying the hardships these women endure, this consideration of Black women's academic success pits Black women and Black men against one another in a gender competition for academic status and scarce resources (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Washington & Newman, 1991). At worse, the focus on within-race gender gaps detracts from the bigger problem of the rising trend of racial and economic inequalities (Crenshaw & Allen, 2014).

Regardless if depicted as a problem or as the more academically successful gender among African Americans, Black women in higher education rarely get to speak for themselves about how they navigate colleges and universities as socio-spatial institutions. Thus, we know little about how they experience campus life,

not just in the classroom but also as dorm residents, members of student organizations, and in positions of leadership. As a result, we learn little about the interior lives of high-achieving African American women college students as they are either erased or assumed to be handling college life with aplomb as Black superwomen.

Because of these gaps in the literature, we know little about how Black women college students manage stress, frustration, and hurt; or, equally importantly, how they assert agency and feel joy, pride, and a sense of connection to community or their families' legacies of valuing education. My dissertation sought to add much-needed nuance to dialogue about Black female funambulists. Clearly, my desire to fill these lacunae in the literature is professional and deeply personal. I currently work as a faculty member at a university that is very much like Marion and I earned my undergraduate and doctoral degrees from PWIs. In the process, as I introduced this research, I went from an undergrad who enjoyed and excelled at school to a graduate student who no longer felt welcomed as a student, thinker, and peer at the campus. While the experiences that shaped this trajectory are not, ultimately, the focus of this paper, some of what the interviewees shared resonates. As such, some of my experiences are present in the data I report and at times I make that explicit. Put simply, this topic hits home. As an African American woman who advocates for educational equality, *who I am* and *what I study* are intimately linked.

On Being Simultaneously Hyper- and In-visible

When I talk about PWIs rendering Black women invisible, I am referring to the fact that our presence and perspectives often go unacknowledged and unappreciated in white spaces. Scholarship buttresses this point. As Alexander-Floyd (2012) puts it, institutions and practices often work to make Black women "disappear." A growing body of research focuses on the many ways that Black women fight against being silenced in academic settings. Boylorn (2006) chronicles these struggles among Black female graduate students; Griffin (2016) focuses on the lived experiences of Black women faculty on the tenure track; and two edited collections, *Sisters of the Academy* (Mabokela & Green, 2001) and *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012), remain two of the most groundbreaking and comprehensive treatments of the topic to date. Martin (2015) examines the invisibility that Black women faculty members endure while working at predominately white institutions. Haynes et al. (2016) define invisibility as the hidden curriculum that is "ignited" (p.381) when the master narrative in classrooms works to devalue Black femininity.

My dissertation contributes to this body of work by exploring the many ways that academically successful African American women respond to being "disappeared," and I realized that feelings of invisibility often coincide with a sheer lack of numbers. A recurring comment among the women I interviewed was that there are few African Americans at Marion, and those who attend the university

are spread out across a large campus. In a nod to James Baldwin's poignant essay on the challenges of school desegregation, Davis et al. (2004) compare being a Black student on a white campus to being a "fly in buttermilk." That was also my experience as a grad student. I could go an entire day without seeing another African American woman, much less a Black female graduate student. This was dramatically different from my undergraduate experience—while also a PWI, it was a research university in the deep south that had much more racial diversity.

The increased attention that comes from being the "only Black surrounded by the white many" can have devastating consequences, such as those I detailed from my journey in the opening of this article. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) speaks at length about this hypervisibility in *Fighting Words*, as do other Black female scholars like Black (2017), Chavous (2000, 2002), Dominique (2015), Kelly et al. (2021), Johnson (2018), Moore (2016), and Tucker (2016), to name only a few. One student I interviewed (an engineering major named "Alice") likened the simultaneous feelings of invisibility and hypervisibility to a form of performance anxiety, and this pressure to perform was characterized by a nagging desire to avoid making mistakes and somehow misrepresenting Black women. A comment that really stuck with me came from Leslie, a psychology and pre-law student, who mentioned that she would avoid cutting across the grass and instead take the zigzagging sidewalk paths in Marion's main yard for fear of being labelled "that Black girl" (Haynes, 2011, p. 48), a label she said characterized the constellation of anti-Black-woman ideas her white instructors and peers harbored about people like her.

Race-gender Stereotypes

Clearly, the concern over being "that Black girl" extends beyond mere matters of numeric representation. Underlying it is the insidious impact of what Collins (1990) refers to as "controlling images." At Marion, these controlling images often take the form of white students viewing their African American classmates through the lenses of race and gender stereotypes. As Sonya, a business student, notes, race/gender stereotypes create the conditions within which hypervisibility and invisibility fester.

You see, people have certain thoughts, certain prejudices about you... They might not sit there and call you, like, "nigger" or something. But you know the way that they view you and the way they view someone from the same race is different... You walk into class, and you are the only Black person and you get a good grade and all the white kids see your papers and they are surprised because they see that your grades are higher than theirs... Just stupid stuff like that lets you know that it is there, and it is uncomfortable. (Haynes, 2019b, p.1007)

Beyond their assumed intellectual limits, Denise, a psychology major, noted that Black women are also characterized as being standoffish and lacking social

graces: “There is the stereotype that we are all ghetto, loud, and angry a lot... There are times when I can be all three but not at the same time, but I think anybody can be, I guess” (Haynes, 2011, p.45). And Whitney, an international studies major who also worked in one of Marion’s dorms as a member of the residential staff, recounts a tense moment after she expressed her disappointment with the performance of a fellow residence hall supervisor.

People were, like, “You need to lower your voice because you are scaring everyone.” Apparently, I am terrifying, and I didn’t know and I did not even realize that I was going off on my boss. I just need to calm down right now. I left the room because I cannot be here right now. And that may have been really unprofessional, but we all have our slip ups. (Haynes, 2019a, p. 533)

Hearing these comments from the women in my study was like looking in a mirror. Although I was a graduate student talking with these undergraduates for my dissertation, navigating Marion as a Black woman meant that I too was preoccupied with what I believed others thought of me. I would wonder, for example, if my white colleagues and professors appreciated how much work and sacrifice it took for me to earn an assistantship. Or, if they would believe how supportive and wonderful my mother, father, and two sisters are given the racial stereotype of Black families being “anti-achievement” that circulates in scholarship and popular discourse. Or that, before coming to Marion, my undergraduate English professor thought the world of me and recommended that I continue my education. I worried that what white folks at Marion saw when they did notice me was “that Black girl,” that they would not see me as a peer but as an outsider—someone who got into Marion because of the university’s superficial commitment to diversity. To borrow a phrase from Purwar (2004), I was in a white space and I worried that, to the white people occupying that space, I was a “space invader.” For me, that is the nature of being a person of color in a world controlled by whites. I must be constantly vigilant. I must try to be perfect and avoid the “slip ups” that Whitney mentioned to avoid being judged as just another example proving negative stereotypes.

Eroded Trust

Tia’s story affected me greatly because she too struggled with trusting her colleagues and professors. A business major, Tia had many negative experiences with white people:

I’m pretty much the only Black girl in a lot of times in my classes, so if we have group work, then I have to work with somebody from a different race. And, I mean I get along with people fine... I think it’s just that, I think I have a defense, like I have a wall, like, I won’t let you get too close just in case they turn out to be racist, or, I don’t know, that kind of thing. But I don’t think... there are people I’m close to who are outside of my race, so...

The odds of being paired with another person of color is slim in Tia's field. Although she does not doubt her abilities, Tia resigned herself to the fact that she will encounter discrimination. Although she "gets along fine" with others, she does not trust white students. Tia is untrusting of people from other races and works to police her personal boundaries as a protective measure in case students are racist. For Tia, making it as a student requires that she keep a wary eye on, and a safe distance from others. She has been so racialized that she does not have any desire to associate herself with people outside of her race. Thus, Tia's self-isolation is just as much about coping with adversity and avoiding further hardships as it is about asserting racial solidarity with fellow African Americans.

Race/gender discrimination makes it difficult for Black women at Marion to trust most white people—or rather, it is very difficult to give white people the opportunity to earn trust because of the risks involved. During my time at Marion, I did not feel as though I could confide in or be vulnerable around anyone. If I trust the wrong people, I risk having my future destroyed or possibly even my immediate present. It is easier, instead, to be silent, to pretend and believe that racism is dead—or at least, no longer relevant—and to give that belief everything you have. To be successful, you must achieve the impossible: You must be perfect and when it turns out that you are human after all, with flaws like everyone else, you must hide your vulnerability. And so, you continue funambulating, eyes focused on the goal ahead, never looking down or even sideways and, most of all, pretending the tightrope you're balancing on isn't even there.

The Joy and the Pain

While reviewing the interview transcripts, I began to draw connections between what the participants in my study were saying about their insider/outsider status at Marion University and what Katherine McKittrick (2006) discusses in her book *Demonic Grounds*. Specifically, McKittrick uses Harriot Jacobs's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Brent, 1862), and particularly the notion of the "loophole of retreat," when theorizing about the lived experiences of Black women. Under the pen name "Linda Brent," Jacobs coined the phrase loophole of retreat in *Incidents* to describe the harsh crawlspace in her mother's attic that served as both her sanctuary from her sexually abusive slave master and the lookout post from where she could watch the children she left behind due to her self-imposed exile. The metaphor symbolizes the triumphs and challenges that accompany Black women's quest to cope with impossible situations. For example, despite being suffocated and enclosed in heat and darkness, Brent describes her time in this repressive space as the "first steps to her freedom," emphasizing that life there, no matter how harsh, was better than violence visited upon her by the slave master. McKittrick uses this metaphor to characterize the process by which Black women cope with the race- and gender-based discrimination they face.

When applied to the study of higher education, it helps us to appreciate more fully how Black women overcome hardships while also "(re)imagin[ing]

circumstances of marginalization—and, by extension spaces of resistance” at PWIs (Haynes, 2019b, p 1002). Because they are both marginalized and good students, academically successful Black women “find themselves situated in such a way that their academic dreams run in juxtaposition to their raced and gendered realities” (Evans, 2007, p. 142). Like Brent, these women must also find creative ways not only to “survive” but also “thrive” under adverse circumstances. More generally, Nellie McKay (1998, p. 100) reminds us that these and related stories of meeting and overcoming challenges fit squarely within the Black female narrative tradition, which “evolves from the processes of reinventing the self out of the specificities of each [of these] women’s experiences.” As McKay rightly acknowledges, a common thread underlying these processes is that... “[t]hrough generations of [B]lack women writing-the-self in the United States, the center of their life stories remains Black survival” (McKay, 1998, p. 104).

Consistent with the logic of the loophole or retreat, the Black women in my study felt simultaneously oppressed and empowered in terms of their collegiate experience. On the one hand, participants’ narratives revealed feelings of marginalization and anxiety that are consistent with the experience of constantly being “out of place” (Williams, 2007). Many of the participants discussed their run-ins with discrimination on campus. That said, there was a consensus among participants that negative treatment was not only “expected” but also that discrimination happened so frequently at Marion that students of color were no longer shocked by such behavior—but they were still angered, disappointed, and frustrated.

On the other hand, these women thrived under the pressure of hostile social and academic environments, and it was clear that, as high achievers, being good students was important to their self-image. For instance, several participants sought ways to outperform their peers and, as Janet stated, she became obsessed with making sure that she earned “As” in the courses in which faculty members stated it was impossible to get a grade that high. An international studies major, Janet reported spending an “obnoxious” (her wording) amount of time proving that she could exceed the professor’s expectations for students in the course. Additionally, the women in my study knew that they were hypervisible on college campuses because they were both Black and women. Valerie, a business major, recounted that during an interview for an internship, she was told that she “was going to stand out like a sore thumb” because she was a young Black woman in a mostly male career field. As Valerie shared with me, when her job interviewer pointed out that she would be hypervisible at the internship, her plan became:

I guess it is up to me to stand out for the better. I will give them something to watch. I should impress them and I should give them something to see. I think that it is going to motivate me more and make me more accountable to myself to do what I have to do. If people are going to be staring, then I want them to be staring [at me] for a good reason. (Haynes, 2011, p. 52)

Like Valerie, the other women in my study sought ways to give people “something to watch” if they were going to be placed under constant observation in predominantly white spaces. In the process, these women were constantly

negotiating the contested and contentious socio-spatial practices of higher education. The participants acknowledged that they were being discriminated against; however, they used this discrimination as fuel to succeed in the face of enduring stereotypes and some expressed pleasure at besting their white peers and exceeding professors' racist expectations. Many of the women I spoke with ultimately embraced being hypervisible because they are usually one of a few (and sometimes the only) Black people in the class. As a result, these women developed ways to reconstruct and challenge spatial practices around African American femininity from demeaning to motivating. They do not always seek attention and/or extra scrutiny, but they also do not shy away from letting people know that they are confident and good at what they do. The idea of these Black women "sticking out" because they are different works to spatially dislocate and dispossess them in academic spaces: Their abilities and leadership are being questioned because they are different. Valerie recognizes that, to be a viable candidate for an internship, she must be hypervisible and such heightened visibility becomes normalized in the spaces of PWIs.

In short, I came to understand that the Black women in my study were funambulating in ways that empowered them to create their own loopholes of retreat. My application of this idea to the study of Black college women in PWIs is grounded in narrative inquiry, employed to ascertain what the women I interview experienced, how they interpreted those experiences, and how they navigated or asserted agency. Narrative inquiry was coupled with geography theory, which considers the spatial dimensions of the college experience and how Black women responded to or asserted agency within Marion, and how different campus spaces serve as sites of particular discrimination and resistance.

Concluding Remarks

My fieldwork at a large, midwestern PWI reveals that African American women walk a tightrope due to their desires and anxieties about being successful while simultaneously struggling with being constantly racialized. On the one hand, the women I interviewed worry that their actions are interpreted vis-à-vis racist frameworks. On the other hand, these women know from experience that meritocracy is an illusion, and yet they must believe in it (or at least pretend that they do) to compete and succeed. They keep their experiences to themselves out of concern that their honesty will be mis- (or dis-) interpreted—white colleagues may accuse them of "playing the race card" to gain sympathy, or they may label Black college women as being unjustifiably angry. Consequently, the women I interviewed are reluctant to share their feelings with the people who dismiss or hurt them because such honesty might end up being used against them rather than in support. Thus, they often suffer in silence, receiving whatever support they can from members of their Black cohorts and the few white people they feel they can trust.

Running throughout all the participant's narratives is a spirit of resistance to race-gender stereotypes. These women view their individual accomplishments as evidence of their humanity and their right to be treated equally. They endure doubts about their intelligence in a society that racializes them and normalizes their failure. The fear of being racialized and stereotyped propels them to succeed, but it also causes stress and anxiety. By their very presence and success on campus, the women in this study challenge negative stereotypes of African American women. They seek to be defined as "ideal students" and they must work twice as hard as their counterparts to enjoy some of the privilege automatically ascribed to white students. These women accept that they have to be twice as good as their white counterparts.

My work is meaningful because it appreciates more fully the internal lives of academically successful African American women. Participant interviews provide insight into how African American women perceive white spaces and the various ways that they negotiate them. Narrative inquiry and Black feminist geographies reveal African American women students' complex perspectives and coping strategies. This article shares what I learned about myself from studying other tightrope walkers. My experiences, in concert with those of other amazing Black women, underscore the importance of creating spaces for ourselves in environments that are simultaneously policed, contentious, hostile, and liberating.

Early in my academic career, I firmly believed that I could succeed on my own merits. My experiences in graduate school made me question that faith. Like other academically successful Black women, I had to be on guard against my words and actions being read within racist and sexist frameworks. Although most of the people I encountered in academia seemed genuinely committed to fighting the impact of racism on their students of color, more than a few seemed blithely unaware of the unconscious ways their words and deeds reproduced racist outcomes. And here's the thing: I had no way of determining how sincere they might be because I was afraid to challenge them, afraid to raise questions about how they were treating me and other Black women, afraid to be honest about my feelings. For one thing, I did not want to hurt their feelings. For another, challenging them meant bringing the issue of race to the forefront of our relationships. Yet another concern was how they might perceive me. Would they view me as someone "playing the race card," trying to excuse my failures, and making others responsible for them? Would they see me as "that Black girl" who is always angry, always focused on racism? Then, of most concern, would they try to punish me in some way, using the powers granted by white privilege? In short, I was walking a tightrope, balancing myself precariously on a single thin line and scared to look at the abyss below, into which I was sure to plummet with the slightest misstep.

So, how do Black women manage that invisible tightrope? How do we stay balanced in a society that creates obstacles and discourages our prospects for success? How much of a cost do Black women pay for this type of funambulating? Setting out to answer those questions provided me with some much-needed catharsis. I have suffered and allowed people who care about me to watch me suffer. What was first suggested to me as something to study by my graduate

school professor ultimately became a scholarly and personal project of helping other African American women think about their experiences and showing them that they deserve an opportunity to be successful. By relating to their experiences, I could say to them, “You are not the only one who has felt the strain. I have seen others suffer enough, whether they were academically successful or not.” I wanted to say, “It is not just you—it is all of us. We all feel it.” And from that shared experience we draw strength. It was time to overcome the silence, both my own and the silence that too many Black women at PWIs know all too well. I study the tightrope walker because she is me—and we matter.

Notes

1. I use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably throughout this article.
2. Nothing of what I say here should be construed as an indictment of anyone. People do what they can when they can for as long as they can. I am grateful to everyone who made the attempt to reach out to me, whether our relationship blossomed or not.
3. To protect anonymity, I changed the names of the research site and the participants in my study.
4. This was a small gesture given my practically non-existent research budget, but it was something at least, for it was important to me that these wonderful women be compensated for work that often goes unappreciated.
5. See Haynes (2019b) for details about the research design.
6. The personal narrative that I use in this article comes from the introduction of my dissertation; see Haynes (2013) for more details.

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Appendix

Background Characteristics of the African American Women Interviewed

Pseudonym	GPA	Class Rank	Major	First/Second/ Generation Collegian
Clair	3.15	Senior	Communications	Second
Lisa	3.3	Junior	Political Science	Second
Sidney	3.56	Junior	Communications	Second
Sonya	3.58	Senior	Business	First
Stacey	3.4	Junior	Microbiology	Many
Tia	3.25	Senior	Business	Second
Valerie	3.2	Senior	Business	First
Whiney	3.73	Senior	International Studies	Second
Chelsea	3.46	Junior	Chemistry	Second
Clarissa	3.6	Junior	Music & Communications	Second
Denise	3.08	Senior	Psychology	First
Emily	3.68	Senior	Economics	Second
Felicia	3.4	Junior	Psychology	Second
Jada	3.73	Senior	Sociology	Second
Janet	3.49	Junior	International Studies	Second
Amber	3.8	Senior	Human Ecology	First
Alice	3.2	Senior	Engineering	Second
Brandy	3.73	Junior	Human Development	First
Brenda	3.52	Senior	Folklore	Second
Leslie	3.83	Junior	Psychology & Pre-Law	First

This chart is from Haynes (2019a).

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