

FROM MARGIN TO CENTER

CURRERE AND THE EXPERIENCES OF A BLACK WOMAN PROFESSOR

By Shawnieka E. Pope

Miami University

THE REGRESSIVE MOMENT: THE WEIGHT OF PROGRESS AND BLACK WOMANHOOD IN THE ACADEMY

My journey to becoming a professor at a predominantly white institution (PWI) has been shaped by powerful moments of resistance, resilience, and self-discovery. Reflecting over my own remarkable school experiences offers moments of understanding the ways in which my steps towards the Academy had always been ordered. Growing up as a Black girl in a world where my existence was often rendered invisible or problematized, I learned early to navigate spaces that were not created with me in mind. Numerous racialized incidents informed the ways in which I show up in the world as a Black woman—and as a Black woman in the Academy. I attended K-8 in a predominantly urban public school system. My teachers looked like me. I felt affirmed. I felt smart. I felt capable. The educational environment that had once nurtured and affirmed my capacity and potential then changed in ways I couldn't fully anticipate—it would no longer look, feel, or even carry the same familiar essence. My mother decided to send me to a predominantly white Catholic high school, hoping it would provide new opportunities for my growth. However, the transition from my familiar primary school to this unfamiliar setting was anything but smooth. It brought with it numerous challenges and moments of difficult adjustment.

The sense of representation and belonging I had once taken for granted felt worlds away in my new school environment. There were no Black teachers, and in my graduating class, I was one of only ten Black students. I'll never forget my junior year in English class when Mrs. Taply, the guidance counselor, walked in and called on my classmates—who were all white—to join her, one by one, in her office. Day after day, I sat quietly, watching as they left the room with her until, eventually, I was the only student left. I waited for Mrs. Taply to come for me, but she never came. I eventually discovered what those meetings with Mrs. Taply were about—she had been providing my classmates with information about the ACT and SAT exams, details about college tours, and comprehensive college admissions checklists. When I learned the nature of her meetings with my white peers, I was conflicted. How could she overlook me? Didn't she know about my accomplishments? I was consistently a high honor roll student, a proud member of the National Honor Society, and deeply involved in countless extracurricular activities, including community service. Yet, somehow, I never made it onto her radar as a student worthy of her guidance or seen as capable of attending college. And if I *was* on her radar—as I was a well-known and popular student—what allowed her to justify not offering me the same support? I replayed those moments in my mind—the way she looked me in the eye each time she entered the classroom, knowing full well I had the potential to excel in college, just as I thrived in high school, despite the systemic barriers designed to diminish my spirit.

Interestingly, later that year, I finally received my summons to report to Mrs. Taply's office. It was not to discuss the college application process or how to register for the SATs. Instead, she invited me to participate in a parade. The parade highlighted two Historically Black Colleges

and Universities (HBCUs) whose football teams were featured in an annual football classic in my hometown. At that moment, my academic abilities were not considered, and I felt reduced to tokenism. I wasn't considered a viable candidate for college readiness. My Blackness was seen as valuable solely in the context of representing two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in a parade celebrating their athletic teams—trope that still captures the experiences of Blackness, similar to when Black athletes are told to just play ball and shut up.

These lessons were shaped by a society that, as Bettina Love (2019) poignantly articulates in *We Want to Do More than Survive*, consistently sought to constrain my joy, imagination, and potential. Love (2019) writes, “Our complicated identities cannot be discussed or examined in isolation from one another. These identity complexities, which create our multifaceted range of beings, must matter too” (p. 3). Yet, like so many Black girls before me, I found ways to dream beyond the confines of a world where educators like Mrs. Taply sought to limit me. As a first-generation college student, I navigated the process of registering for the SATs and ACTs on my own. With no one to guide me or explain the steps, I took it upon myself to learn and understand the complex world of college admissions. Against human made obstacles, I became one of only two students who were directly admitted into my undergraduate program. Then, just two weeks after turning twenty-one, I walked into my very first college class. The feeling of standing on the edge of all I could become, imagining myself in that classroom, was more joyful than I ever could have dreamed. It was a moment where pure pride and possibility were well within my grasp. I belonged! School was both a site of possibility and pain. The joy of learning often collided with the realities of being a Black girl in predominantly white spaces—spaces where my intellect was questioned, my body was scrutinized, and my voice was marginalized.

Patricia Hill Collins' (1990/2009) *Black Feminist Thought* gave me the words to make sense of the contradictions I often experienced. Collins notes,

In 1905 Fannie Barrier Williams lamented, “The colored girl ... is not known and hence not believed in; she belongs to a race that is best designated by the term ‘problem’ and she lives beneath the shadow of that problem which envelopes and obscures her.” Why are African American women and our ideas not known or believed in? The shadow obscuring this complex Black women's [sic] intellectual tradition is neither accidental or benign. (p. 5)

Collins' work helped me see those contradictions as part of a bigger picture—one shaped by systemic oppression and the unique ways Black girls and women understand and navigate the world. Collins' work not only validated my experiences but also affirmed the knowledge I already carried within me—knowledge born from my own life and the lives of the women who came before me. I was fully aware of my accomplishments and potential even as an elementary school student. Yet, instead of fostering environments where I could thrive, the educators in my secondary school seemed intent on diminishing both who I was and who I could become. I found myself fighting to matter—a battle no teenage girl should ever have to bear. Unbeknownst to me, these moments would shape me into the educator I would one day become. These moments would ensure that, as an educator, every student I connected with, whether in class or walking across campus, would feel they mattered.

My decision to pursue Academia wasn't a planned choice—it felt like fate. It was the result of careful intention and unexpected opportunities. I was drawn to the possibility of creating spaces of representation where Black students could see themselves reflected in the curriculum and feel

affirmed in their intellectual pursuits. Milner (2021) asserts, “All students need and deserve to encounter and experience a curriculum that highlights and reflects the life experiences of people of color, women, and other marginalized groups” (p. 6). I entered into the Academy without full awareness of its challenges. I would learn that this predominantly white space and its occupants had the potential to harm me as a person and as a professional. As Milner (2021) argues, the work of equity and justice in education requires not only a commitment to transformative practices but also an understanding of the systemic barriers that hinder such transformation. The systemic barriers of power and privilege within the Ivory Tower would seep down, almost like epigenetics or muscle memory, serving as a mechanism to embolden the students in my classroom, who then, knowingly or unknowingly, continued to perpetuate the harm. It’s a bittersweet thought—despite facing harm, some students offer me a window seat with a full view of the positive impact I have on their learning and the shift in their worldview. From this vantage point, I dare to imagine my own liberation—the hope that one day, the presence of my Black womanhood will shift beyond superficial tolerance and be fully accepted and deeply respected within the Academy.

IMAGINING LIBERATION: THE PROGRESSIVE MOMENT FOR BLACK WOMANHOOD IN ACADEMIA

As a Black woman professor at a PWI, I am constantly imagining what could be. What if students saw beyond my Blackness and were inspired by my story, my qualifications, and the decades of experience I bring to the table? What if they could feel the joy I experience when I teach? What if they understood that I view it an honor to stand before them, preparing them to be effective and compassionate practitioners? What if students held me in the same esteem as they do my white colleagues? What if students understood that, despite their anti-Black attitudes towards me, I have been called to teach them? This is my calling, my purpose. It’s spiritual. Cynthia Dillard’s (2022) *The Spirit of Our Work* resonates deeply as I consider the spiritual and ancestral dimensions of my work. Dillard reminds me that teaching is not merely a profession but a calling—a sacred act rooted in love, care, and the pursuit of justice. Dillard (2022) asserts that there is “beauty and wisdom embodied in the spirit of some of the most important people in the lives of any community: Black women who teach” (p. xiii). Her words inspire me to envision a classroom where all students can bring their whole selves, where their identities are not only acknowledged but celebrated—a classroom where white students embrace and hunger for diverse curricula, engage in humility, and are committed to curating a space in collaboration of true belonging for everyone. I imagine this collaboration could lend way to unspeakable joy.

In this vision, Gholdy Muhammad’s (2023) *Unearthing Joy* provides a pedagogical framework. Muhammad’s emphasis on cultivating joy, identity, and criticality in the classroom aligns with my aspirations to create learning environments that affirm the humanity of all students while centering the experiences of the most marginalized. Muhammad (2023) encourages “the pursuit of joy—helping students uplift beauty, aesthetics, truth, ease, wonder, wellness, solutions to problems of the world, and personal fulfillment” (p. 17). Furthermore, they assert, “Joy is the ultimate goal of teaching and learning” (p. 17). I imagine a curriculum that not only addresses and disrupts systemic inequities but also uplifts the stories, contributions, and resilience of Black communities. This is a space where we can dream, create, and resist—a space where we can thrive. I imagine this space could also address and disrupt the inequities I navigate as a Black woman

professor. I imagine a classroom that uplifts and honors my story, my contributions, and my humanity.

My vision reaches beyond the classroom, addressing the deep, intertwined roots of racism, sexism, and oppression that affect not only Black girls but also Black women. As Bettina Love's (2023) *Punished for Dreaming* illustrates, the systemic barriers that impact Black students are deeply entrenched in policies and practices that devalue their lives and aspirations. To address these barriers, I imagine an institution that moves beyond performative diversity initiatives to actively dismantle structures of oppression. This requires reimagining institutional policies, reallocating resources, and centering the voices of those most impacted by inequity. True transformation demands that institutions not only acknowledge historical and systemic injustices but also commit to actionable steps toward equity, such as developing anti-racist curricula, hiring and retaining diverse faculty, and fostering spaces where marginalized voices are valued and heard. Love explains:

The field of education saw a resurgence in calls for anti-racism and equity in the spring of 2020 when the world watched George Floyd die School districts and colleges around the country rushed to tap diversity, equity, and inclusion—or DEI—leaders to form task forces, committees, and working groups to tackle the issue of racism. But they did not address the real problem: despite good intentions, the work of racial justice is at best elusive without substantive commitments from institutions. DEI approaches that leave intact harmful structures are window dressing for Whiteness. (p. 215)

The hope for systemic change feels harder to hold onto in the socio-political climate of 2025, where resistance to equity-focused practices and the politicization of education seem more relentless than ever. In fact, many Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts and policies have already been dismantled in various spaces, including within educational institutions. Despite these challenges, I hold onto the belief that sustained advocacy, collective action, and the resilience of those committed to justice can ignite progress, even in the most adverse conditions. Institutions must confront the reality that equity is not a fleeting trend but an urgent and enduring necessity for the betterment of all.

THE ANALYTICAL MOMENT: NAVIGATING PRESENT REALITIES

The realities of being a Black woman professor at a PWI are complex and multifaceted. On one hand, I carry the privilege of being in a position to influence and shape the educational experiences of my students. On the other hand, I am acutely aware of the challenges that come with navigating an institution steeped in whiteness. As Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2009) reminds us, the intersection of race, gender, and class creates unique challenges for Black women in professional spaces. These challenges manifest in various ways, from the constant need to prove competence to the microaggressions that undermine authority. I have experienced students calling me by my first name and challenging my syllabus and instructions. I had students confront me in class during instruction. When I addressed these behaviors, different sections of the room would erupt in laughter. These moments prick my soul in the most unimaginable ways.

Yet, in defiance, I draw strength from the collective wisdom of Black women scholars who have paved the way, reminding me that my presence in this space is an act of resistance. Cynthia

Dillard's (2023) focus on the spiritual dimensions of teaching offers a powerful counterbalance to the dehumanizing aspects of academia. Her work is a reminder for me to ground my interactions with students and colleagues in love and care. This feels especially important in a PWI, where the relentless focus on metrics and outcomes often overshadows the relational and deeply human side of education.

THE SYNTHETICAL MOMENT: MERGING PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE BLACK WOMANHOOD IN ACADEMIA

Reflecting on my journey, I see how the past, present, and future intersect to shape my identity and purpose as a Black woman professor at a PWI. My experiences as a Black girl navigating predominantly white spaces—including being overlooked by a guidance counselor who ignored my gifts and accomplishments—continue to fuel my commitment to creating inclusive and affirming educational environments. Navigating college as a first-generation student further deepened my understanding of the systemic barriers Black students face and the resilience required to thrive in spaces not designed for us. As a Black woman professor, these experiences ground my dedication to embody the principles of joy and justice in my pedagogy, and advocate for systemic change within my institution. Cynthia Dillard's (2023) emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of teaching resonates deeply with me, reminding me to center love and care in every interaction with my students and colleagues. Her words remind me that this work, though challenging, is a sacred calling—a labor of love that honors the spirit of our ancestors and paves the way for future Black women professors. It is not easy, but it is necessary.

COMING FULL CIRCLE: REFLECTIONS AND ASPIRATIONS FOR BLACK WOMEN IN THE ACADEMY

Navigating the academy as a Black woman professor at a PWI is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge because of the systemic barriers and inequities that persist within these institutions—barriers that manifest in isolation, tokenism, and the often-unspoken expectation to prove one's worth. Yet, it is also an opportunity to imagine and create transformative possibilities. This journey is one of resistance, resilience, and radical hope—a journey that affirms my work. It is about more than navigating; it is about thriving. It is about building bridges where none exist, fostering authentic connections, and amplifying the voices of those often silenced. It is about creating classrooms where all students—not just a select few—can see themselves reflected, valued, and empowered—where the guidance counselor comes to see every student!

To be a Black woman in the Academy is to embody a dual role: one of scholar and one of advocate. It is to disrupt the status quo while holding space for the dreams of those who come after us. It is to stand as a testament to the brilliance and tenacity of Black women, despite the odds. Most importantly, it is to believe that, through our presence, our work, and our collective efforts, we can reimagine higher education as a place where joy, justice, belonging, and liberation are not just ideals but lived realities.

REFERENCES

- Collins, P. H. (2009). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd illustrated reprint ed.). Routledge. (Original work published 1990)
- Dillard, C. B. (2022). *The spirit of our work: Black women teachers (re) member*. Beacon Press.
- Love, B. L. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon press.
- Love, B. L. (2023). *Punished for dreaming: How school reform harms Black children and how we heal*. St. Martin's Press.
- Milner, H. R., VI. (2021). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms* (2nd ed.). Harvard Education Press
- Muhammad, G. (2023). *Unearthing joy: A guide to culturally and historically responsive curriculum and instruction*. Scholastic Teaching Solutions.