



Sheroes, Divas, and Other Endangered Species: Black Women in Higher Education

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Abstract

Because of their intersectional identities, African American women in the academy must navigate the many visible and invisible obstacles of racism and sexism. To do so, they might employ several coping mechanisms and strategies to combat deficit-based stereotypes, possibly resulting in the harm of intergenerational trauma and Racial Battle Fatigue. This paper utilizes critical autoethnography and storytelling to interweave my personal narrative that outlines the everyday occurrences of high-performing Black women and the predictable backlash of American white supremacy with supporting literature to illuminate the coping strategies and underpinnings of John Henryism, Armoring, the Superwoman Schema, and Sister Circles.

Keywords: black women, racial battle fatigue, coping strategies, critical autoethnography

The Makings of Identity

Like all humans, I possess several identities, many of which intersect, creating unique circumstances and situations when juxtaposed with history, tradition, and culture. As a first-generation American and daughter of Jamaican immigrants, I carry my ancestors' admonitions, hopes, and dreams that still urge me to be the best. As a Black female, I am fully aware of the deficit-based stereotypes assigned to me by the dominant culture, resulting in my hypervisibility as one of the few Black women in my institution (Dickens et al., 2019; Settles et al., 2019) and my hypervigilance to prove them wrong (Whitfield-Harris et al., 2017).

As a full professor and department chair at a predominantly White American university, I realize my opportunity and duty to help create spaces and conditions for students, especially students of color, to succeed in their graduate studies and subsequent careers. These identities constantly inform and shape my work in higher education. I must navigate structures and policies created by and for White males. This can be an inhospitable environment, and many Black women do not survive. Those who do usually must employ

some coping mechanism to maintain their sense of self and agency.

This personal narrative utilizes the methodology of critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021; Chang, 2016). Marx et al. (2017) characterize critical autoethnography as:

... addressing how power and privilege play out in socio-personal lives and how these entities are reproduced as well as resisted. Deeply personal accounts of race, gender, culture, language, and other aspects of identity can powerfully illustrate how people live with and through privilege and marginalization each day. (p. 2)

Gallagher (2011) describes the method of storytelling, "After having pulled it apart through 'objective' research methods, storytelling as method puts research back together as a partial and intersubjective critical experience" (p. 53).

In this chapter, I position myself as the researcher and the participant. I share stories about what shaped me as an African American woman. I engage in reflexivity and introspection, looking through the lens of critical autoethnography and utilizing storytelling to help me illustrate the social and cultural complexities of race and gender (Tilley-Lubbs, 2016). I weave various

frameworks, theories, and literature throughout my stories to make meaning of the practical applications of how I have survived and continue to thrive in the academy.

For this purpose, I offer insight into the question: *What are Black women's survival strategies and coping mechanisms in higher education?* My stories attempt to shed light on the socialization, inner ruminations, and outward manifestations of the intersectionality of race and gender in the Academy while viewing them through the lens of several dispositional characteristics—coping strategies and mechanisms—adopted to overcome the challenges of chronic psychosocial stress. It intends to lend experience and voice to the challenges, triumphs, and ongoing resilience required of African American women in higher education.

While I have enjoyed success and recognition for my work, it has not been without its toll. As a Black woman leader in higher education, I have been labeled a shero, a diva, and, because there are so few of us in the academy (ACE, 2017; Chun & Evans, 2016), an endangered species. I have had to employ several tactics to achieve my professional goals while maintaining my mental and physiological health. Some strategies and coping mechanisms, such as *John Henryism* (James et al., 1983) and *Armoring* (Bell & Nkomo, 1998), I learned as a child. As an adult, I realized my need for self-care and balance, which I found in part through *Sister Circles* (Boyd, 1993) because I exhibited the classic behaviors outlined in frameworks such as the *Superwoman Schema* (Woods-Giscombé, 2010) and began to suffer some symptoms of *Racial Battle Fatigue* (Smith, 2006). In the following pages, I share the underpinnings and personal connections to these strategies, coping mechanisms, and frameworks.

I am a tenured full professor at a university in the upper Midwest of the United States. As the chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and the coordinator of our doctoral program, I frequently interact with potential students who want more information about our graduate programs. The initial expression of interest is usually via email, but it often quickly develops into a request for a virtual

meeting. Descendants of Scandinavian and other European immigrants heavily populate the area of the nation in which I live and work. My married last name—Rasmussen—evokes images of and preconceived ideas about a White woman. My face, however, does not. Some White potential graduate students can barely conceal their surprise when we finally meet on screen. First, there is usually a pregnant pause, then an awkward smile, and finally, a rush of nervous questions. Conversely, when potential graduate students of color meet me on screen for the first time, there is a pregnant pause, a brilliant smile, and finally, their shoulders lower from their ears. I interpret the body language and actions of these two groups of potential graduate students to mean the same thing: they did not expect to encounter a Black woman.

I experience similar reactions during initial encounters with students, faculty, administration, or attendees at national conference presentations. These reactions boil down to my most significant professional pressure: ensuring that everything I do exudes and produces excellence. This pressure is both inwardly and outwardly facing. I understand the intersectionality of my identities. I am fully aware that I am representing women in higher education. More critically, I know I am representing Black people in higher education. Recognizing the nexus of two of my identities—a Black woman—is usually in the eye of the beholder. Depending on the identity and experiences of the beholder, I might be viewed as a shero or a diva.

"Shero" is a noun that means a woman who is considered a hero or role model. It combines the words "she" and "hero". The word was first documented in 1836 but was not added to the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary until 2008. Other definitions of the word include a woman admired or idealized for her courage, outstanding achievements, noble qualities, or a [heroine](#). To one observer, I might represent what is possible regarding the academic aspirations of ambitious and enterprising Black women.

The word "diva" comes from the Latin word for "goddess" and was originally a compliment used to describe the most famous

female opera singers. The term emerged in the early 19th century when female sopranos became so popular that they were considered to be almost goddess-like. However, the word's meaning has changed and is often used as a pejorative term. The word "diva" is often used as a derogatory description of a woman who is difficult to please, demanding, or temperamental. Another observer with a different identity or experience might view me as the current definition of a diva. To them, my self-imposed urgency and high standards for myself and those around me might be seen as laborious and taxing. While I would not choose either noun—shero or diva to describe myself, I know that if either label is not tempered with humanity, it—and she—becomes an endangered species.

Early Academic Influences

My parents were Jamaican immigrants who came to the United States separately for post-secondary education. They met in New York, married, and moved to Detroit, Michigan, for work. They eventually had six children, of whom I am the eldest. In Detroit, we attended elementary school in a predominantly Black neighborhood, which included several Caribbean, African, and a few Jewish families. I remember talking freely about race and ethnicity at home, in school, and in the neighborhood, but without malice. It was used as a descriptor: "That red-haired Jewish boy," or "The Dominican family down the block," or Black people described as "light-skinned" or "dark-skinned," but I perceived no value attached to the description. It was as if I was asked to notice the blue car or the green truck.

My parents were bibliophiles. Books were in every room of the house, and they read constantly and wanted their children to love reading. Consequently, they taught me to read when I was three years old. Several of my first elementary teachers of color celebrated that I loved reading and writing. I was not alone. Several of my classmates loved to read and write as well.

My father received a fellowship to earn his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota. When I was eight years old, our family moved from Detroit, Michigan, to a first-ring suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. In a few weeks, I had

transitioned from a neighborhood and school where most of the people looked like me to an environment where my family was the only one of color. My parents tried to prepare me. I distinctly remember them telling me I would probably be the only Black girl in my class. On my first day of fourth grade, the teacher brought me to the front of the classroom to introduce me to the rest of the class as the "new girl." I looked around and saw 25 White faces looking back at me. My parents had been right, but I figured it was no big deal. I would meet other kids, make friends, and adjust. I was unprepared for the racist treatment I received from my classmates those first few days. The insults, name-calling, and physical assaults were mind-boggling! I remember thinking, "Who taught these eight and nine-year-olds to hate? My younger siblings in the lower grades at that school experienced similar treatment.

Racialized Trauma

After seeing the four oldest of the six children come home from school traumatized, my parents had a family meeting with us to reinstall our identities and worth. We were explicitly told that we were brilliant and deserving. These messages were implied when we lived in Detroit, but they would need to be reaffirmed and tattooed on our hearts because of the daily harm we faced. At that family meeting, my school-aged siblings and I, in fourth, third, first, and kindergarten, respectively, were told that even though we were good, intelligent, and capable, we would need to work "twice as hard" as the White kids. We would need to prove to everyone that they were wrong about us. This was the first time I heard my parents talk about race other than in a descriptive manner. This was the first time I had considered measuring myself against a White standard. It was during my formative years that I learned survival strategies and coping mechanisms to be able to succeed in a system that was not built for me. It would be decades later, while researching academic literature, before I would have the language and cite the sources to express my internal feelings about these external forces.

Strategies to Achieve and Protect

Due to the harmful racist events of my youth and my parents' admonitions, I became a

textbook case of John Henryism (James et al., 1983). John Henry is an American [folk hero](#). An African American [freed](#) after slavery, he is said to have worked as a "steel-driving man"—a man tasked with hammering a steel drill into rock to make holes for explosives to blast open spaces in mountainsides to construct railroad tunnels. According to legend, John Henry's prowess as a steel driver was measured in a race against a [steam-powered rock drill](#), which he won, only to die in victory with a hammer in hand as his heart gave out from stress. John Henryism is a personality predisposition that describes a person's belief that they can meet racist demands through hard work and determination. The term was coined in the 1970s by African American epidemiologist Sherman James. It is based on the positive idea that Black Americans can overcome the effects of discrimination by working harder and longer.

My parents, directly and indirectly, socialized me to embrace the John Henryism strategy and the coping mechanism of *armoring*. Psychotherapy literature has used the term armoring to describe a mechanism for coping with racial oppression (Greene, 1994). Faulkner (1983) uses this concept to refer to “specific behavioral and cognitive skills used by Black and other people of color to promote self-caring during direct encounters with racist experiences and/or racist ideologies” (p. 196). Faulkner writes that families of color teach their girls at a very young age to armor themselves to protect their inner sense of self-worth and dignity. Bell and Nkomo (1998) used the term armoring to describe a form of socialization of a girl by her family “to develop a protective shield as a buffer against the unsavory element of the outside world—a world where they quickly discover Black women are invisible, devalued, and dishonored in particular ways because of their race and gender” (p. 286). These ways of being have mostly served me well, at least outwardly. I relied upon them to carry me through my educational and professional career. Even now, I continue to internalize them with inward-facing behaviors and self-talk.

The Elementary Years

My new White elementary school placed me in one of three possible fourth-grade reading

and math tiers. I distinctly remember thinking that the work was too easy and that I had seen and done that curriculum in the second grade at my previous school. At that time, I knew nothing about tracking, but my parents were upset about the low-level assignments I was doing as homework. They complained to the school and asked for my reading and math skills to be adequately assessed. Subsequently, I was moved to the highest reading and math groups. My teachers assumed that I was a low performer, even though my transcript from my previous school indicated the opposite. Had it not been for my parents advocating for me, I would have stayed in the lowest-tiered group. Two years later, in sixth grade, we were assigned to write a five-paragraph theme about what made something significant to us and to support it with three fact-based reasons. I turned in my paper and was given a failing grade because the teacher said I must have copied it from someone or somewhere. He assumed that I could not have written it. Again, my parents had to come to the school to advocate for me. They invited the school principal into the meeting with my teacher, and eventually, the teacher gave my paper full credit but no apology. It was not until much later that I realized that I had been subjected to the bigotry of low expectations based on my race. I also learned that the purpose of my parents' advice to “work twice as hard” was to fend off these types of racially based educational assaults. As a result, I fully embraced John Henryism by working harder and longer, usually in private.

I have always had a love for science. I found it fascinating! I was one of only a handful of people of color in my high school. I took advanced science courses and was always the only Black person in class. While I enjoyed learning, there were strange comments from peers and teachers when I performed well. Even after being in class for an entire semester, students and teachers expressed surprise when I produced good work or answered complex questions. I became hypervigilant about educators who did not expect academic excellence from me. I often took offense and needed to soothe my hurt feelings by employing a lot of positive self-talk—a technique I learned from my mother.

College and Graduate School Years

This treatment continued in my predominantly White college experience, particularly in upper-level math and science courses. I was excited to explore quantum mechanics, the science dealing with the behavior of matter and light on the atomic and subatomic scales. On the first day of this class, with my course schedule in hand, I wandered into the lecture hall several minutes before the start of class. The professor greeted me with, “Oh! Are you sure you are in the right place?” The other White and primarily male students who were already seated looked up and waited for me to justify my existence in that space. I showed the professor my course registration schedule and then took my seat. I noticed that none of the White students who came in after me were asked that question. As I was familiar with this brand of treatment, I girded myself for what I knew would be a long semester of proving my work and worth while still trying to preserve my sense of dignity.

The Call to Do It All

I completed my bachelor’s degree and became a high school science teacher. This coping mechanism served me throughout my master’s degree in education, where I was one of four Black women in a cohort of 45 people. I resorted to John Henryism and armoring again when I earned a Ph.D. in Science Education, where I was the only Black person in the program. During that time, I was a full-time doctoral student, worked full-time as a teacher, prepared for five daily classes, coached two varsity sports, and was very involved in our church. Additionally, I had two children in middle school who were busy with their activities. My husband was a wonderful support, but our days were packed from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m. almost every day for years.

Pursuing Academia

I came to higher education because public K-12 education leadership broke my heart. I was completely happy as a high school chemistry teacher. I had taught at the same school for many years and thought I would spend the rest of my career there. However, because of some ongoing inequitable decisions made by district leadership

that threatened the closing of several predominantly Black schools, I felt I could no longer work in that district. I moved from an inner-city public school to an elite private school and soon became an administrator there. I learned about how wealthy, privileged people perceive education and what that looks like for teachers and students—a wonderful mixture of academic freedom, high standards, assuming the best intentions, and exposure to new experiences and opportunities. After several years, I returned to my former public school district as an administrator because I was recruited to open a STEM-focused academy in a Black high school. The work was challenging and rewarding, but the original district leadership issues that had caused me to leave in the first place had never been addressed, and they began to weigh on me. An acquaintance at the University urged me to consider taking a faculty position. I declined the offer three times because I was committed to working with Black STEM students. It was not until I concluded that the issue was not with students, teachers, curriculum, or testing but, instead, with the district leadership that I decided to leave K-12 education and transition to higher education. To be clear, I have never “run after” a job. I had been pursued and recruited. After being hired, however, the usual feelings of needing to prove myself worthy emerged. I was determined to show that I belonged at the university because of my skills and experience rather than being considered a “diversity hire.” My old, socialized tendency to work “twice as hard” kicked in.

The First Few Years: A Steep Learning Curve

My university requires a demonstration of production and growth in five areas: teaching; scholarly research; professional development, continuing preparation and study; contribution to student growth and development; and service to the university and community. My first few years were a joyful amount of work. I fully embraced being a new hire and jumped into everything with both feet. I carefully crafted rigorous, relevant, and engaging lessons for graduate students. I collaborated with colleagues to research and publish findings. I signed up for every faculty book read and recommended podcast list. I advised many graduate students in our

department's master's, principal preparation, and doctoral programs. I volunteered for many committees and took on several projects in addition to my prescribed duties. In short, I did my job and a lot extra.

Microaggressions and Daily Challenges

During my first few years in the department, there was a growing undercurrent of tension among some senior faculty. At the time, I was not privy to the events that led up to this unrest, but everything came to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd. Our seemingly tight-knit department imploded due to some personal accusations by some members against others. This resulted in a human resources-led investigation, which eventually found the allegations false and unfounded. Nevertheless, the damage had been done. The department was harmed, trust and respect were lost for many members, and a few faculty members chose to leave. The department chair at the time had just completed their first term and was preparing to serve a second term. Because of the departmental drama under that chair's leadership, several department members encouraged me to run for the chair position. I reluctantly accepted their nomination, won most of the votes in the department, and was installed as the new department chair starting the following academic year. Some people who voted to keep the former chair engaged in passive-aggressive messages and actions toward me. These microaggressions were thinly veiled assaults on my intelligence and leadership ability, which were meant to "put me in my place." They thought I was friendly but were "unsure of my readiness." They were sure I probably meant well, but "wondered if I understood what I was taking on."

Navigating Research Focus, Scholarship, and Scrutiny

Some of my most painful dealings came from the petulant nature of specific individuals who are intimidated by strong Black women in the Academy. In higher education, it is assumed that one's intellect and ability to teach and advise, produce thoughtful and valuable research, and contribute to the university and community are the reasons for tenure and promotion. However, even

after achieving those goals, there are always the lingering effects of society's notion of Black intellectual inferiority, regardless of evidence to the contrary. Because some of my colleagues were uncomfortable with my passion and expertise around racial equity work in educational leadership, words and phrases were routinely thrown into conversations. There were backhanded compliments that inferred that because my courses had emphasized "good racial equity work," they somehow must have sacrificed robust content and rigor. It was implied that my scholarship and research were basic and unsophisticated. It was insinuated that my growing reputation as a sought-after educational consultant was due to my outgoing personality and ability to "entertain a room." These experiences were nothing short of *gaslighting*—a form of emotional abuse or manipulation involving distorting the truth to confuse or instill doubt in another person to the point they question their sanity or reality. Sweet (2019) asserts that instead of a psychological phenomenon, "gaslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships" (p. 851). I did not feel safe enough to "openly acknowledge that I was hurt or offended by their actions and insinuations—which would be admitting weakness, especially in front of White people" (Rasmussen, 2023, p. 84). As a result, I pushed my feelings down. I adorned myself with the second tenet of the Superwoman Schema: an obligation to suppress emotion, and I armored up with positive self-talk.

One way to protect and nurture my dignity was to fill my mind with examples of sheros. I used the third criterion by which my university evaluated me—professional development and continuing preparation—to immerse myself in the scholarship of Black women. I read books and articles, watched documentaries, and listened to podcasts. I listed all of them as part of my yearly professional development report. I reflected on the challenges of getting work published in academic journals that may not prioritize or value research on race and education. I learned of their difficulty securing grants and institutional research support that critiques systemic inequities, often requiring a continuous fight for validation and legitimacy. I

aimed to not only gain knowledge and perspective but also to learn and compare coping strategies.

The Tenure Journey

Because I had produced much good work in all five evaluation criteria in a relatively short time, my dean supported my desire to go up early for tenure. I put in the paperwork declaring my intent for tenure and promotion from assistant to associate professor. I spent several months gathering evidence and artifacts to assemble a “perfect” dossier consisting of a website and a 38-page narrative with many embedded links to my website to illustrate my work. I am sure the process is stressful for anyone undergoing this type of professional scrutiny. Still, there was the nagging feeling that those in the department who had not supported my racial equity work now had a say and a vote in how my tenure and promotion portfolio would be evaluated.

I earned tenure and a promotion to associate professor two years earlier than the “normal” time frame. I felt a mix of relief, pride, and vindication. This accomplishment confirmed what I knew in my heart: I was successful and proved that I deserved to be there. I wanted to take advantage of any opportunity to effect change and improvement in the department as soon as possible. My new status and rank would coincide with my first day as the department's new chair and as the new coordinator of our department's doctoral program.

Leadership Roles

As the new chair and doctoral coordinator, I wanted a clear picture of how our department and graduate programs were faring. I looked at our measurable data—enrollment numbers, graduation rates, staffing, and finances—through the lens of race. Although our graduate student enrollment had some racial diversity, there was a gap when measuring “on-time” graduation rates. Students of color took longer to finish their master's, principal preparation, or doctoral programs for various reasons. This was troublesome to me. I needed to discover why graduate students of color had different experiences from their White counterparts. I started asking uncomfortable questions about

teaching, advising, support, and bias. Most faculty in the department embraced this inquiry as they saw it as a moral imperative to ensure we did not have any racially predictable gaps. However, some became defensive about their teaching and advising methods. They asserted their right to academic freedom and blamed their graduate students for not being serious about their work. I am sure I must have been seen as a diva for requiring that we focus on changing our practices.

I do my best to recognize and dismantle educational barriers for marginalized groups. I question long-held professional procedures and educational norms that have not considered students of color. I am not afraid to ask, “Why are we doing things this way?” and “Is this working for *everybody*?” These questions and our department's subsequent actions have improved outcomes for students of color in our graduate programs, with increased graduation rates.

Additionally, our program enrollment has grown by attracting more potential students passionate about equity work. Further, we have increased the cultural competency of our White students, making them much more desirable candidates for school leadership positions in our region, as evidenced by the increasing number of our graduates securing leadership positions in our rapidly changing and racially diverse school districts. I have published extensively on many of these topics. I am often sought out to provide professional development to K-12 school districts, institutions of higher education, and national and international conferences.

The Emotional Labor of Advocacy

I sought out and spoke informally with graduate students of color who took longer to complete their programs. I heard many stories and various reasons for their struggles. Most students in our graduate programs are working adults, and many of them have families. I listened to the recurring theme of guilt. Even though they knew that their professional and educational aspirations would cost them money and time away from their families, they now felt blameworthy, which caused several of them to feel stuck and, consequently, become unproductive. I became the person they came to when they felt racially isolated or perhaps

even targeted. While I was honored that these students felt they could share their concerns with me, there was the emotional and physical toll of being a “go-to” person for diversity work, otherwise known in the vernacular as “the Black tax” (Hicks, 2021). This tax—the extra work doled out to people of color, often without any thought of compensation, recognition, or support. This exemplifies one of the aspects of the Superwoman Schema: the obligation to help others. I saw it as my moral duty to represent these students of color who were experiencing racial issues at the University—to act as a mediator between the perpetrator and the harmed. Others in the department, regardless of race or gender, needed to understand the nuanced experiences of many of our students of color and partner with me to craft solutions. We spent many department meetings developing processes and procedures for increasing rigor while increasing support. Some faculty members were enthusiastic about changing their practice and processes to see if it made a difference. Others who were reluctant to change but did not wish to appear racist gave lip service agreement but did not change anything about their practice.

Racial issues can be very volatile, divisive, and widespread. I was called into meetings about the disconnect between some faculty and students. I was called into other meetings about disputes among faculty members *in other departments*. My role in these meetings was to bring clarity and facilitate a path forward. Sometimes, we got there, and other times, we did not. Regardless, I experienced the emotional exhaustion of feeling responsible for people of color (Erskine et al., 2020). Again, this was all done without compensation of any kind.

Mentorship and Building Community

My great responsibility and privilege are to welcome and support women of color as students, scholars, and colleagues. I have participated with them in research collaborations, manuscript publications, and conference presentations. This type of mentoring and community building has been a joyful experience. A few years ago, we hired two new faculty members—women of color. My responsibility as

chair was to onboard them and orient them to the university, the college, and our department. My first thought was to set them up for success so they would not have to experience some of the unfair scrutiny I faced. I immediately invited them to co-author with me to publish their first article in a refereed journal. Our article was well received and started the momentum and confidence they needed to continue writing independently. Although one woman left the university after her first year, she learned invaluable lessons about herself and the academy.

Mental Health and Resilience

I had never really given my mental health any serious thought. I certainly understood job-related stress in the pit of my stomach when I was approaching a big deadline, but I thought all of that was normal. The COVID-19 global pandemic caused the world to pause, consider what was essential, and rethink how we did things. It was not until I truly reflected on the root causes of my coping strategies that I recognized in myself many of the characteristics of the Superwoman Schema (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). This framework of how African American women interpret stress, strength, and health has been viewed simultaneously as an asset and a liability. The Superwoman Schema (SWS) outlines five characteristics: 1) an obligation to manifest strength, 2) an obligation to suppress emotion, 3) resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, 4) the determination to succeed despite limited resources, and 5) an obligation to help others.

Even though I developed many of these characteristics as an adult, they are an inward construct with an outward-facing persona witnessed by the beholder. They are all a mask to appear unflappable in the face of attacks and chaos. Chance’s (2022) phenomenological study of Black women in leadership revealed that many Black women even “use adversity as fuel, thus helping them develop the necessary skills to prepare them for leadership” (p. 69). These characteristics might be perceived as being a diva: a woman who is talented and driven, confident, strong-willed, high-performing, and demands the best from herself and others.

Sisters and Self-Care

I purposely gravitated toward and reached out to other successful Black women. I formed new relationships or rekindled old ones that I had ignored because I mistakenly believed that although we meant well, we were just too busy being “strong Black women”. Liao et al. (2020) describe this moniker as “a race-gender schema that prescribes culturally specific feminine expectations from [Black] women, including unyielding strength, assumption of multiple roles, and caring for others” (p. 84). We have seen and recognized our brilliance through shared stories and built solidarity and support networks within and outside the institution to create a sense of community in what can sometimes be an isolating environment. Ferguson et al. (2021) espouse the benefits of sister circles for Black women faculty in education. Sister circles appear to offer many of the components Black women desire to combat anxiety. Mine has been an ad hoc sister circle (Boyd, 1993), an informal support group that builds upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and community among African American females. We have maintained this for several years and have shared similar experiences regarding our racial socialization and our experiences with armoring, John Henryism, and the Superwoman Schema. We realized together that our intersectional identities were not without struggle.

As women “of a certain age,” we were beginning to feel the effects of our years on the planet. Chronic sore joints and muscles, illnesses, and other health issues were common topics of our conversations. We laughed and chided ourselves for sounding like old ladies discussing their aches and pains. However, we eventually realized a pattern when analyzing our ailments in light of being Black women in leadership roles. In other words, *the body keeps the score*. In his book of the same name, van der Kolk (2014), a medical doctor, described how people are affected by traumatic stress, including its effects on the mind and body. Menakem (2017) examined the damage caused by racism in America from the perspective of body-centered psychology. He asserted that all bodies suffer from intergenerational trauma. Black bodies exhibit specific stressors; White bodies exhibit

other stressors, and police—or blue bodies— exhibit still other stressors. In his studies of Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith, 2023), explains how the social environment (e.g., institutions, policies, practices, traditions, groups, and individuals) perpetuates race-related stressors that adversely affect the health and academic achievement of students of color and the health, professional productivity, and retention among faculty of color.

Successful Black women are not automatons or unfeeling robots. The National Institutes of Health (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011) has supported the work of sister circles for African American women coping with anxiety. Our sister circle shared stories and shed tears about the double-edged nature of some of our coping mechanisms. While armoring was good at protecting us, it could also further isolate us from others who would benefit our existence. John Henryism produced a mountain of work but could harm our health in the long run. The Superwoman Schema may preserve self-identity and uplift the Black community, but it can hurt close relationships that require vulnerability and the need for others. We have been able to be transparent with each other and show both our shero and diva sides without judgment. We have also been able to look past our ingrained coping strategies and mechanisms to see each other’s humanity, which, if ignored, could put Black women on the endangered species list.

The Journey Continues – Personal Impact

During three years as an associate professor, doctoral coordinator, and Department Chair, I again produced a lot of good work, such as innovative teaching methods, several research publications, facilitating our faculty advising and support, resulting in the completion of several doctoral students, and expanding my racial equity consulting to include several school districts across the state.

At this point, I inquired with my dean about her thoughts on my early promotion to full professor. She gave me her full support, and I again took several months to assemble a “perfect” dossier. I updated and expanded my website to include my accomplishments over the last three years. I rewrote my accompanying and augmented

45-page narrative to reflect new insights and applications of knowledge with live links to evidence and artifacts. The dossier was completed a few days before the deadline; still, I was terrified of pushing the “send” button. I agonized over every word choice, relentlessly searched for any typographical or formatting errors, and repeatedly uploaded and re-cropped images to fit the color scheme and flow of the website. I could not risk anything looking amiss as I felt it would reflect poorly on my intelligence, preparedness, and deservedness. I battled internal questions of doubt: “Who do you think you are, diva?” Thinking of the adversity I have endured due to my Black and female identity and how it better prepared me for leadership (Gaudiano, 2019), I answered back using the armoring strategy I was taught as a child to preserve my worth and dignity. I echoed the chorus of my sister circle: “I am my own shero.”

Conclusion

This autoethnographic narrative combines personal storytelling with critical reflections on the systemic issues within academia, offering a comprehensive look at the racialized experiences of Black women faculty and researchers. Even though working in higher education has been and continues to be challenging, I am very grateful for my work, my colleagues, and the difference I have made systemically and individually for our students. I have experienced intellectual, professional, and personal growth. Still, there is much work to do, as many institutions face issues of recruiting and retaining Black women. I urge academic institutions and individuals to recognize and actively address the racialized challenges faced by Black women faculty and researchers. This can be accomplished by being aware of the predictably inequitable circumstances in which Black women are routinely placed and evaluated. Further, this can be achieved by spotting the telltale signs of racial battle fatigue and finding ways to mitigate it. These clues might escape the academy. If all else fails, ask. By seeking the stories of Black women—and believing them—the academy will realize what many of its mission and vision statements claim to aspire to.

Disclosures

Conflict of interest

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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