I Am Not Just a Body But Also a Soul:

The Power of Erasure Amidst Hypervisibility on a Faculty Search Committee

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And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.—Audre Lorde

*Originally written in Fall 2020, I have chosen to retain present-tense verbiage for these past events (known as translation temporum), as I wish to stay true to the dire immediacy of the events I describe...events that so many others continue to experience in academia.

Prologue

Laying naked from the waist down with a sheet to cover me, I am violated by the gynecologist. Dr. White Woman inserts the speculum without warning, removes the IUD without telling me, inserts the new IUD with no notice, and then digitally penetrates me without permission. I know that she knows I'm here. But my presence doesn't matter. To her, I am just a body, but not a soul.

Background

Though not unique (Washington, 2006), the abuse at the doctor's office, which happened outside of academia, is a physical parallel of what it is like for me as a Black woman assistant professor on a search committee for a tenure track faculty position in my department. Both occurring within the same Fall semester of the same 2020 year in which the devaluing of Black people in the U.S. could not be more apparent. The difference in academia is they say they want us there. But do they really?

The university I am affiliated with at the time of this search* has some understanding of the value of diverse representation on searches. So much so, they require a certain level of racial diversity on all search committees. But that performative diversity (Ahmed, 2012) is where the

understanding ends. Our search committee has two Black faculty on it, of which I am one. I know that they know we're here. But our presence doesn't matter. To them, we're bodies, but not souls.

Since this is academia, our soulless bodies are also presumed to have no knowledge worth respecting. With the institutional betrayals (Smith & Freyd, 2014) being numerous, I cannot help but speak up. After all, my experience on the job market was also full of discrimination (Gómez, 2018, 2020). Through sheer serendipity, I got my job at this institution. A job that confounds me by simultaneously including: 1) remarkable, unwavering exaltation, support, and tangible power and influence on one end; 2) and on the other, the predictable, almost-boring-if-it-weren't-so-harmful, direct and indirect discrimination. *But at this job and on this search committee, I can finally make a difference!* Or so I thought.

Institutional Betrayal Within Search Committee Meetings: An Excerpted Play

Me: *In this excel sheet of applicants, I see columns to check if the applicant would bring diversity to the department by race, gender, or other. This is nominal diversity (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2002). What is the priority for underrepresented expertise, such as commitment and experience to studying Black and Brown populations in their research, marginalized theoretical perspectives, ability to teach and mentor URM students, those kinds of things that would bring diversity?*

Them: *We are looking for the best candidate. Any diversity isa bonus, I would say. We want the best person.*

Me: *I compiled a list of phone and video interview questions from myself and colleagues on the job market from the past several years. I can share it with the committee as a starting point for creating standardized questions for all interviews. This way, we hone in what we are*

looking for with the questions, and each candidate gets the same opportunity. That'll make it easier for us to compare across interviews as well. I'd also suggest that we share this list of questions with all candidates before the interview. That way, we create an even playing field, instead of privileging those candidates who are more prepared for such interviews, since their parents are professors, for example, while disadvantaging first generation applicants. That taps into what we're wanting to measure too. Not people who are more in-grouped or people who are slick at the mouth. But those who are actually the most qualified. This way, everyone has the opportunity to prepare and to shine. I can send the list of questions to the committee after this meeting.

No response. In vivo or to the email.

Next meeting:

Me: Oh, we're talking about phone interviews again. [Reiterates the importance of standardized questions].

Them: But I may have a specific question I want to ask a candidate based on their application. To get clarity.

Me: We could do a combination, right? Same base level questions for everyone. Then one or two questions for each that are unique to their application.

Silence.

I know that they know I'm here....But I'm just a body.

Me: Speaking of these initial, preliminary interviews being on a virtual conference platform, there's one equity concern. Since we're all working from home now [in the COVID-19 pandemic], not everyone lives in a presentable, professional, quiet place to conduct the interview. Kids running around, dogs barking, etc. So I've been reading how phone interviews

might be preferable and not cause this undue burden, stress for some people. They can take the phone call in their car, for instance. And this then reduces the potential for bias on our end.

Them: We've been seeing cats and kids and people in their homes on videoconferencing for months. People in their basement. Not a big deal...I guess if someone doesn't want to do a video call, they can say no. We won't make them. But it'll make it easier for the applicants too, they can see us, know when someone wants to talk. That sort of thing. Less awkward than a phone call.

Now it's my turn for silence: that means that certain candidates will have the advantage of the video call and others won't. That difference will be systematic, based on class and other factors. But I don't say it. Cos now I remember: I'm just a body.

But wait, I tell myself. It's not over. I can't give up. This is high stakes. A tenure track faculty position (big deal), equity in hiring (big deal), and potential to increase the pipeline for URM students by having a professor who instead of conducting research, teaching, and service with White Supremacist ideals actually works from brilliance that is so often marginalized (huge deal!). My gosh! And then, maybe our faculty discussions wouldn't be so painful because it wouldn't just be me, The Black Martian, talking about equity and equality! And then our department culture and climate could be better! And we could change the world institutionally: one university, one department, multiple faculty, and many students at a time!

So I keep trying...

Me: I want to bring up X candidate. They have fewer publications, but one in [very high impact journal], which I know was mentioned as important last time. They're junior, that's true. But their work is groundbreaking. In psychology, using critical race theory (Bell, 1995) to research these concepts is revolutionary. We were just talking about how a theoretical

perspective is important. They have it. And experimental methodology, which has been mentioned over and over again as so central to this position.

[The other Black faculty member on the search committee provides additional points of this candidate's stellar, innovative work].

Them: But...and maybe this is a bias. My general rule is that people who are ABD aren't ready for a faculty position. It's too much. They need a postdoc, some other experience. Cos with being faculty comes a lot of more stuff. And graduate students just aren't ready.

Me: Oh, well, I'm looking here. They have teaching experience as a graduate student. Instructor of record for multiple classes. Very high teacher evaluation ratings and comments from students. So, they're already balancing some of this stuff at this level—research, teaching. Has been funded. Also, for scholars so junior, my frame is that I look for potential. What potential are they showing for future scholarship. They're showing quite a bit here to me.

Silence.

Them: Well, I like to look at the evidence. Maybe they'll go on to do great things, but without the evidence right now, you know, I can't know that.

Many voices screaming in my head: The evidence was just presented!!! Groundbreaking research, published in a high impact journal, and has gotten funding, all while balancing teaching as well! Already! At this early stage in their career! But I feel pretty confident that you are not qualified to assess this candidate given you probably haven't even heard of critical race theory. Maybe you've caught a whiff of it in discussions regarding the recent Executive Order (Trump & The White House, 2020), though you probably weren't able to grasp that either. Fortunately, you have two Black faculty on this search committee who do recognize this scholarship, as well as this candidate's brilliance. Both have spoken enthusiastically and concretely about this

candidate. This is why diverse representation is so important! Until I remember: We're just a collection of bodies.

...moving on.

Preliminary virtual-conference interviews have happened, with two faculty members on each and the student member additionally attending some. For one of my interviews, I augment the senior faculty's written summary that will be shared with the full committee: *Seemed to be not fully developed in terms of incorporating various components of diversity, equity, and inequality into his research (see above) or teaching (see here). Unclear of potential for growth in these domains. [Fleshed out teaching example from the interview]*.

The senior faculty removes my words from the summary, including the example I gave. Instead, she wrote a diluted interpretation of my words, ending with: *Reading Jennifer's comments [her name in the 3rd person] isn't sure it was a contradiction- we moved on to another topic after that without following up*. Of course, there is not a way for the remaining members of the search committee to know what apparent "contradiction" she was referring to—or that a follow-up was unnecessary—given she removed my words of explanation.

This was perhaps the most unequivocal, and painful, silencing. Even I cannot second guess my perception of what happened. It is impossible to misunderstand an interview summary for my colleagues in which Senior White Woman removes my words and publicly disagrees with my erased appraisal.

The Power of White Mediocrity

It is too early to know how this search will end. I do feel confident that, regardless of outcome, this search is neither fair nor equitable, as three themes are self-evident: 1) "just a body"—erased and rendered invisible throughout the process; 2) highest status members of the

search committee are not serious about diversity, equity, and inclusion in this hire or in the hiring process; and 3) coded racism—multiple excuses to uplift inferior White candidates and eliminate superior candidates of Color, are employed, with ignorance, arrogance, and power. As such, this committee is an example of the ways in which faculty search committees reproduce Whiteness (Ray, 2019; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), including using the excuse of “fit” (White-Lewis, 2020). Never in my presence has White mediocrity (Mitchell, 2018) been so heavily concentrated while wielding so much power. The powers that be in this search committee cannot manage to be consistent in delineating what they are actually looking for in a hire, much less provide an equitable appraisal of applicants within a fair decision-making process. As sung by Selena Quintanilla-Pérez in God’s Child [Baila Conmigo] (Byrne, 1995), a mirror of academia: *Es nuestro reino, pero vean lo que hemos hecho!*

What of Resistance?

For myself, I continue to resist by not giving up: not resigning from the search committee, not disengaging from the process, and not being silent. I continue to try. And yet, try as I might on an individual level, nothing felt quite as soothing as a message I got from my friend and colleague, who is also the other Black faculty on this search committee. After one particularly grueling meeting, he sent me a text that said: “Thank you for always being unapologetically you.” The simple comment brings tears to my eyes now just as it did then. That solitary statement touched me deeply, showing me that I am not in fact invisible in this space. We went on to briefly commiserate on the reality of what was happening in these search committee meetings, while sharing joy, respect, and understanding with each other. It is in instances like these where I remember that this fight is not mine alone.

I Am Not Just a Body, But Also a Soul

Though no one has given me negative feedback about my behavior, the highest status faculty on this search committee have consistently shown me what they think of me: Just a body. Just a quota. Just an irritation. Just a squeaky wheel. Just a junior faculty member who doesn't know her Black woman place. Just a bitch nigger.

To them.

But not to me.

To me, I have a soul so beautiful that I transcend all the discrimination, oppression, anti-Blackness, and sheer stupidity that I remain constantly surrounded by. From the doctor's office to the university. And I hold that truth so close and so dear. As a deliberate act of self-preservation and political warfare (Lorde, 2017), I launch the fight for equality within myself.

With that, my internal whisper becomes a rallying cry: *I am not just a body, but also a soul!*

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Footnote: *As of July 2022, I begin my new position at Boston University School of Social Work

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