

Politics, Identity, Faith, and the Academic Hazing of a Black Woman: A Scholarly Personal Narrative of a Black Woman Doctoral Student

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Abstract

Academic hazing within doctoral programs is often so deeply embedded within the doctoral experience that it becomes normalized. This effort translates into oppressive practices where students are broken down and rebuilt into the ideal doctoral candidate, and the process continues with the next batch of candidates. However, no one discusses the mental, physical, and spiritual burden that academic hazing takes within the lives of its students, especially the Black students. Utilizing a scholarly personal narrative approach (Nash, 2004), the purpose of this paper is to center the lived experiences of a Black woman doctoral student and how politics, identity, faith, and academic hazing framed those experiences. Implications for doctoral programs ended the narrative by recommending doctoral programs take the same effort that they place on diversifying their professoriate that they do caring for the emotional, physical, and mental well-being of their students, especially their Black students.

Keywords: academic hazing, Black women, doctoral experiences, scholarly personal narrative

Introduction

Sitting in the almost crowded dining hall space, I looked around and met eyes with my fellow doctoral students, none of whom looked like me. As a Black girl in the Midwest, I was used to being the “one and the only.” Still, in some ways, the experience of being a Black woman doctoral student in a predominately white program felt lonelier and more isolating. Then I saw her walking towards me, commanding the attention of the entire room; #blackgirlmagic personified she radiated confidence that not only demanded respect and admiration, but also her presence reverberated something deeper within me as a Black woman. Beyond idolizing her as a

Black woman, to me she represented someone who had not only survived her own doctoral process and climbed to the status of a professor but also someone who had still retained her identity as a powerful Black woman. Idealistic as it might have been and whether she had earned it, I placed her on a pedestal before she even uttered her name. However, our relationship as mentor and mentee would be complicated due to the politics of the academy where stories of academic hazing are numerous and doctoral students, many of whom are students of color, are left at the mercy of a system that was not created for their personhood.

In this paper, I utilize a scholarly personal narrative methodology (Nash, 2004) to detail my story of survival as a Black woman doctoral student and share how communities of care provided a respite for my soul—guided by the central research question: How did the politics of the academy shape the journey of a Black woman doctoral student, and how were communities of care utilized for her survival? The paper begins by providing a literature review that underscores the lived reality of Black women in higher education with the focus on historically white institutions (HWIs), then my scholarly personal narrative will follow. The narratives will flow within the following sections: The Risks: Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil, The Beginning: Not all Skinfolk, The Hazing Process: Violence in Isolation, The Interlude: Faith in the Storm, and The Healing Balm: Communities of Care. The paper ends by highlighting connections between the literature and the narratives and implications for doctoral programs as they contribute to existing literature that grounds the experience of Black women in higher education.

Literature Review

The Experiences of Black Women at HWIs

Black students attending HWIs do not enter environments that have been cleansed from the remanence of racism, gender oppression, and misogynoir (Briscoe, 2020; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Hurtado, 1992; Thompson, 2020). This perspective also holds for Black women faculty and staff as they exist within the same sociopolitical context of Black women students (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Thompson, 2020). As Black women collectively, they persist and resist oppressive practices that deem their worth, scholarship, and intellectual acumen inferior (Bavishi et al., 2010; Patton & Catching, 2009; Young & Hines, 2018). They also can encounter racially and gender oppressive experiences in the academy that translates into emotionally and physically taxing experiences due to feeling isolated and marginal

because of the lack of representation (Alfred, 2001; Harley, 2008; hooks, 1991; Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; West, 2015). However, these oppressive practices must be viewed through the lens of intersectionality. More specifically, through their intersections as Black women, it posits an understanding of their experience that differs from white women and Black men (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). In fact, unlike white women who receive privilege and access due to their proximity to whiteness, Black women are not recipients of these privileges, which deems them “deprivileged.” Black women working within HWIs and how they are viewed in relation to white women and white men results in them being labeled the maids of the academe, as they work in spaces where gendered racism and misogynoir are prevalent. In this role, they are expected to handle all of the traditional needs of their position and fix any issues related to diversity and inclusion. This can result in heightened levels of invisibility or hypervisibility due to how they are taxed within the academy (Settles et al., 2019). Determining the most salient element between race and gender operates as a moot point, this is evidenced by Collins (2000) as cited in Harley (2008) which states, “their lives are inextricably linked to a history of racist and sexist oppression that institutionalizes the devaluation of African American women as it idealizes their white counterparts” (p. 21). This translates into Black women feeling the weight of a compounded intersection where they are undervalued, overburdened and pulled in various directions while receiving no reprieve (Harley, 2008). Thus, Black women are situated between distinct paradigms, such as race, gender, and class, that situate and create a unique standpoint of experience (Collins, 1986, 2002).

Black Women Faculty & Staff: The Double Bind of Service

The double-consciousness of operating as an outsider as a Black woman who works at a historically white institution can not only be exhausting but taxing to one’s psyche (Alfred, 2001; Collins, 1986; Lorde, 2012; Mosley, 1980). As they work in spaces that were not created for their personhood, how they conceptualize their experience as Black women can often be dizzying. Alfred (2001) explored this phenomenon of Black women's double consciousness to understand how Black women internalize their location within and their interaction with white-dominated institutional cultures. Utilizing bicultural theory to understand the interrelationships between the individual and the environment, the experiences of five Black women academics were explored. The findings from the study highlight the value of an outsider within positionality and has been discussed in previous literature (Collins, 1986; Lorde, 2012) and further speaks to

the importance of the study. Participants shared the power of self-definition, finding a safe place, the power of knowledge, and the power of visibility, as major themes within the study. One theme that emerged connects to this inquiry speaks to how historically Black parents and within the Black community, Black children are prepared for a world that is often unwelcoming to their presence. Through this socialization process, Black children are equipped with the understanding that they must strive to be better and work harder than their white counterparts and that they must know their worth as Black people. An additional theme that emerged from the study also underscores how Black people as a cultural group can often strategically withdraw (Settles et al., 2019) to create spaces of safety among their own community. This is similar to the concept that bell hooks (1990) coins as a homeplace, these spaces enable the participants to withdraw from an environment that is no longer conducive to their well-being. This practice of guarding one's personhood against the academy was also explored within (Cooke, 2014). As the author shared how she had reached the metaphorical promised land of academia, she reflected on her journey. Due to her status as a Black woman academic, she had a double consciousness which made her acutely aware of the daily microaggressions and microinsults that transpired within her role. She reflected on experiences where she was referred to as a slack hire, treated like the maid of the academy, and other experiences where she felt tokenized. This resulted in her rethinking her new metaphorical seat at the academic table. She knew that as a Black woman working within a historically white space, she must seek out spaces where she could find support (Cooke, 2014).

In both studies (Alfred, 2001; Cooke, 2014) it became apparent that establishing a community of support was paramount to their well-being as Black women academics. Additional literature underscores hostile or unsupportive racialized and gendered climates (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Pittman, 2010; Young & Hines, 2018), being tokenized as Black women in the academy (Cooke, 2014; Mosley, 1980), inconsistent or unclear rules relating to promotion and tenure, and hostile student evaluations (Gregory, 1999; Patton & Catching, 2009; Pittman, 2010; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Smith, 2004). However, one area that underscores a raced and gendered dynamic is how often the literature highlights experiences where Black women working within HWIs were institutionally mammified or treated as the Olivia Pope or the institutional fixers (Harley, 2008; hooks, 1991; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Thompson, 2020).

Mother-Work: Institutionally Mammified vs. The Othermother

Black women must always contend with negative racialized and gendered stereotypes that impact their professional lives and organizational experiences. hooks (1991) supports this claim as she asserts the following, “racism and sexism working together perpetuate an iconography of Black female representation that impresses on the collective cultural consciousness the idea that Black women are on this planet primarily for the purpose of serving others” (p. 153). An example of a stereotype that plagues the workplace reality of Black women is receiving the unwelcomed moniker of the institutional mammy (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Regarding the mammy stereotype and how it functions within the life of Black women working within HWIs, Clayborne and Hamrick (2007) offer the following:

Mammified (Collins, p.281) work of Black professional women involves caregiving within a predominately white organization, similar to the position a mammy played as a Black mother figure in a white home who is expected to make do with the resources provided. The mammy image is an archetypal outsider-within, never being part of the family despite declarations of affection or inclusion. (p. 137)

In this way, through a critical examination of the concept of care regarding the reality of Black women functioning, Black women become the source and resource for everyone but themselves as they can never be the focus (hooks, 1991). This sentiment was represented within the Wilson (2012) study as the researcher shared their research findings centering on the experiences of faculty women of color. Upon discussing one participant who identified as a Black woman and her experience as being regarded as the departmental mammy, she shared that it always felt as if she was underestimated and dismissed by her colleagues. The participant continued that to her colleagues; she always had to be their caregiver and the one who nurtured both the students’ needs and their needs as colleagues. In this way, it was less about how she functioned as a Black woman and more about how her colleagues viewed her as an institutional asset.

However, caregiving within the lives of Black women academics cannot solely be viewed through how they are seen as institutional mammy’s; instead, the analysis must be applied to the concept of othermothering. Through an Africana womanist perspective serving as an othermother holds a collective consciousness that according to Hudson-Weems (2019), “embraces the concept of a collective struggle for the entire family in its overall struggle for

liberation survival...” (p.29). Within the Black community, and other communities of color, one does not have to physically be a mother to be viewed as one, and care is viewed through a collective mentality. Instead of allowing the stereotypical definition of mothering or care, which posits a toxic and racist stereotype, othermothering disrupts the narrative and enables Black women to reclaim caring for their communities. As othermothers, their responsibility is to assist and support blood mothers and share the responsibility of care (Collins, 1990). Within the academy, othermothering can resemble how Black students are mentored and or supported, especially in environments that have a shortage of people of color. Other examples of academic othermothering can be the desire to ensure that Black students are prepared and understand that they will be held to a different standard due to their status as Black students. It can also be how some faculty or staff interpret their success in the academy and how it correlates to the success of their Black and Brown students. In this way, through a village-like mentality that views care collectively, Black women faculty and staff create a community where love and care are made into reality. Othermothering then can become an important facet within the success of Black graduate students (Griffin, 2013), especially Black women, as they can experience an additional layer of burden due to their status as Black women.

Black Women Graduate Students Experiences

Just as Black women faculty and staff can experience the stress of racism, sexism, and gender oppression within the institutional setting, these elements can also impact the reality of Black women attending graduate school. Current literature explores the socialization process for Black women in graduate school (Ellis, 2001; Patterson & Davis, 2015; Patterson-Stephens et al., 2017), while other literature highlights the value of identifying mentorship and support within graduate programs (Patterson & Davis, 2015; Rasheem et al., 2018). Additional literature underscores the value of having support systems outside the graduate school setting for Black women (Patterson & Davis, 2015). However, the experience that frequently surfaces in the literature highlights how Black women graduate students experience the imposter syndrome within the academy.

Imposter Syndrome

The imposter syndrome was first coined in the 1970s, which describes someone feeling like they are a fraud and do not belong in the academic setting regardless of their qualifications. For women, this is especially troubling because it can give the impression that their

achievements are unwarranted and unearned (Edwards, 2019). Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017) identified this trend within their study, exploring the experiences of seven Black women doctoral students. Many participants shared moments where they often felt like they did not belong in their programs and that their efforts were discounted by their families, colleagues, and even their professors. However, the feeling of being an imposter was often complicated by elements that centered a raced and gendered knowing. Although the experience of feeling like an imposter within the academic setting transpires within doctoral programs, this can surface as a larger systemic trend for Black women. Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017), as cited within Carter (2004) and Simmons (2016) supports this assertion when the authors offer the following indictment, “Repetitive messaging surrounding one’s lack of belonging (e.g., perceptions of Black women as Affirmative Action admits), coupled with frequent interactions with overt and covert racism (e.g., professors telling their Black women students they “aren’t Ph.D. material”), can cause Black women to question themselves, despite their abilities” (p.23). Sometimes the feeling that one is an imposter can surface from being the only person of color in their doctoral program or the scarcity of people of color being awarded doctoral degrees (Craddock et al., 2011). Regardless of the onset of the feeling, imposter syndrome can have real and lasting consequences if not resolved.

Historically White Institutions can be spaces of trauma within the lives of Black women faculty, staff, and students. Whether that be due to how they are stereotypically read or treated as outsiders within, these experiences can have lasting implications on their well-being. Through a historical understanding that grounds a critical paradigm, it becomes evident that neither group enters environments that can be characterized as safe places from the harm of racism, sexism, or misogyny. However, the fact remains that they still work to navigate these environments, but that does not mean that they are not unscathed from the effort.

In the Beginning: Narrative of a Black Girl Rising

My narrative is an example of someone who did not leave this environment without experiencing these injuries, whether mental, emotional, or physical. Although the environment served as the background for my reality as a Black woman doctoral student, my experience cannot be separated from the environment. The academic hazing I received was enabled, allowed, and welcomed through the academic environment. This is my truth, and in sharing it, my hope is that it will set others free.

In this way creating a scholarly personal narrative was the best method to detail my story of survival. As a method, scholarly personal narratives have connections to early slave narratives, Jewish Holocaust survivor stories, feminist liberation stories of the 1960s, and postmodern and counternarratives (Nash & Viray, 2013). Scholarly personal narratives create opportunities to share individual experiences of discrimination and marginalization and connect them to deeper insights that can prove useful to others (Nash, 2004; Nash & Viray, 2013). Therefore, it was not sufficient for my story to only be shared in my closed communities and friend groups; it was imperative that I share my story with others to let them know that they are not alone in their experience.

The Risks: Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil

Although liberating, sharing my truth is not without risk; however, I am guided by my foremother Audre Lorde (2013) when she connects her mortality with the value of speaking one's truth. She offers:

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. (p.41)

So, then it is better to speak against practices that operated to steal my peace and voice, and instead, I am choosing to share my story as a way to disrupt patterns that operated to kill me.

The Beginning: Not all Skinfolk¹...

Within the Black community, there is a saying that Zora Neal Hurston is quoted which centers my narrative. The quote states, "All my skinfolk ain't my kinfolk," and it is that quote which grounds my narrative and frames my experience as a young Black woman doctoral student.

Seeing myself as a Black woman in her eyes was how I began my journey as a Black woman doctoral student, and it was with that level of hopefulness, I asked her how I was chosen

¹ This statement is a familiarized quote from American novelist Zora Neale Hurston

to be a student in the program. Although unspoken, I honestly wanted her to tell me that I could belong as she did, and through her support, she could nurture me into being the #blackgirlmagic which she so effortlessly exuded. Unfortunately, that was not the case, and her response both shattered my self-worth and unearthed a new power dynamic that would always leave me yearning for her approval, demonstrating that I would never be enough. She replied that no one wanted me after reviewing my file except for her; however, after my in-person interview, all of that changed. She said that no one made it into the program without someone vouching for them, and for me, it was her. Unsure of how to follow such an assertion and afraid to offer a rebuttal, I nodded an awkward thank you (failing to honestly acknowledge the ridiculous notion that I was nothing without her) and sat there in silence. I had not realized how this moment would place me in a position to prove my worth and dignity as a student constantly, but more directly, as a Black woman doctoral student, and she would be the one who would decide my value.

This constant effort to prove my value as a student intensified as I began my first semester of coursework. As I sat in classes filled with faces that looked nothing like my own, giving insight that left me feeling slightly unprepared, I yearned for the moment where just seeing her face and the confidence she embodied would make me feel as though I belonged. Although that was not the dynamic of our relationship, I could not tell my soul to stop longing for a homeplace (hooks, 1990) within her presence. However, unfortunately, that moment of solidarity and sister-like community never came. In the first two weeks of her class, where I felt like an imposter and that I had no right to be in the room, not only had I lost myself but also my voice. This was indeed a different experience for me as I was always the smart one who was most likely to achieve, so this experience was truly foreign. All I wanted at that moment was for her to see me through this shared experience of black womanhood. Although this burden was not placed at the feet of my non-melanated faculty, regardless, if they were yearning to oblige, as a Black woman, I needed support from another Black woman. Two months later, I finally got the courage to tell her how I felt within the process. Although she did not inquire, I said how intimidated I felt and how it operated as silencing my physical and metaphorical voice. At that moment, in an expression that I now know was pity, she told me that was how the graduate school process was and to get used to it. Feeling deflated and defeated from the exchange, I decided to look for others to encourage and support me. Then the actual problems with our relationship began to emerge...

The Hazing Process: Violence in Isolation

“Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you know my research? What is wrong with you?” Sitting in the office of my chair, feeling as if I had been scolded for talking out of turn, I listened as she began to berate me for an error that she saw as outstandingly egregious. During a class centering on feminist concepts, I asked my white woman professor about a Black feminist idea proving revelatory for my budding development as a Black womanist. The professor was happy to oblige and shared how she loved my insight and passion for the course. However, when this reached my advisor, she made it clear that I had committed the ultimate academic sin...getting help from someone else besides her. With tear-stained eyes, I can recall our conversation... “Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you know my research? Why are you going to others for their assistance? Especially about Black feminist concepts!? If you don’t trust me or value my research or my insight, maybe it’s time that you get another chair! Remember I told you that no one wanted you but me?!”

Shaken from her anger and confusion at the accusation, I apologized profusely, and I assured her that I only was having a conversation with my professor about a concept centered on the Black experience and that it had nothing to do with not valuing her credentials or her scholarship. Upon hearing my shaky explanation, she nodded in approval and ended the conversation. Although she did not explicitly state it, at that moment, it became abundantly clear that she did not want me to seek any support or guidance from anyone outside of her. This was especially true if they were not a person of color. This stance regarding support and her reaction not only felt toxic and suffocating but extremely isolating.

After this, each time I spoke to another professor, especially those who identified as not a person of color, it seemed as though they were fearful of giving me guidance or advice. During one such moment, upon sharing a great conversation with one of my professor’s she paused immediately and apologized for speaking to me. She explained how she did not want to step on my advisor’s “toes” with the conversation and rushed to end the exchange. It felt so strange to see her reaction to speaking with me, and it made me wonder what other professors were told regarding supporting me and my academic pursuits. It is important to underscore that as a budding scholar and a new doctoral student, this experience would set the tone regarding how I spoke to anyone about my academic interests. As a student and as a Black woman, I felt shackled

by the process, and the fact that this violence was perpetrated at the hands of another Black woman was almost too much to handle.

The Interlude: Faith in the Storm

While Riding through the storm, Jesus holds me in his arms. I am not afraid of the stormy winds and the rains. Though clouds become high, He holds me while I ride. I found safety in his arms, while riding through the storm. (Adams, 1997)

Although the pain and turmoil that I experienced during that time felt almost venomous, my faith and connection to God had never been stronger. When I previously read stories of people in the Bible and what they had experienced, it always seemed so distant from my experience; however, all of that changed within the doctoral process. It was as if the passages were written directly for me and applicable to my situation. Times when I wanted to scream in defiance or quit from the toxicity of my new academic setting, I felt a God-like peace that was in direct opposition to my situation. Even Sunday morning sermons and songs felt as if they were written with my name and situation in mind; I felt like the Lord was telling me to hold on and that He would ultimately be my defender. In one such moment when I felt the weight and stress of my situation, I sat in my church sanctuary and wept. As I thought about the past couple of years and how they had impacted every area of my life, from my relationships with my friends to how I showed up in phone calls with my mother and sister, I was not ok. So, when the pastor asked us to trust God with something big, I stood up and lifted my hands in ultimate surrender, knowing that it was impossible to do on my own. Because of that act of trust, and with the encouragement of my sister, I decided to walk to the front of the church altar for prayer. I felt my soul crying out to God, saying to take it all; the weight of my program, my chair, my graduation, the hate that I felt for her, everything. For the sake of my peace, I decided to give it all to God. In that moment of total openness and transparency, as I stood at the altar with mothers of the church and missionaries gathered around me speaking in a heavenly language, I felt the power of God wrap me in a loving embrace. It was like He was telling me that I was finally seen and not alone.

Interestingly, that moment made me realize that I had never truly been alone, but I had communities of care. These people had intentionally created spaces for my healing from the beginning. And like a healing balm or salve, they proved to be invigorating to my weary body and mind, which to me felt like it was the love of God-made flesh.

The Healing Balm: Communities of Care

Having a community invested in my survival outside of the academic setting proved genuinely revolutionary in my healing and salvation. When it became evident that I was unable to trust anyone tied to my program, having a community of women, many of whom were women of color who were invested in the well-being of my heart, was a blessing. Having a space where I could sit in silence or scream in agitation without the looming fear of any information being told to my chair or program restored my faith in people. My community of care loved me back to life. It became the driving force that moved me through the continuous traumatic experiences of my chair as I fought to finish and successfully complete my degree. Even as I expressed my anger and frustration with the academy and how the academic system enabled this hazing process, my community of care told me that I had more to offer. So, when there was an open position for an assistant professor, they encouraged me to see how I could help others have more of a positive experience within the doctoral process. My community of care encouraged me to be reflective and not reactive, which proved helpful for my healing and valuable in my reflection regarding the toxicity of the process and continues to push me to create safe and humanistic experiences for the students I advise.

Connections to the Literature: Black Women in Higher Education

Beyond my narratives serving as examples of a toxic advisor-advisee relationship, it also adds to the literature regarding the experiences of Black women graduate students. One of the connections between my narrative and the literature review center on identifying spaces of care that provided respite for my soul and my emotional well-being. As (Settles et al., 2019) discussed the importance of strategic invisibility, where participants would disengage for their well-being, and as (Alfred, 2001; Cooke, 2014) confirmed the value of that process, it was evident that we created these processes to reclaim our sense of self and peace. Whether these spaces were created with friends, family or were a result of trusted allies within the space, the fact remains that these communities were vital and operated as spaces where acceptance was granted, and a love ethic was central.

Another connection between my narrative and the literature centered the concept of othermothering. Although I had not requested an othermother, I truly yearned for someone who could guide me through the process. When I spoke to my advisor about my fear of not being smart enough to speak up in class, I wanted assurance that I was safe and smart enough to be in

the space. This desire correlates with the literature regarding how Black students value and appreciate the concept of othermothering and how it often aids in them seeing themselves successful in the academic setting (Griffin, 2013; Mawhinney, 2011). Although I did not desire this effort to be at the expense of my advisor through some self-less dedication (hooks, 1991), I just needed her to care for my well-being. My advisor's response indicated that not only was the space not safe for me to vent my frustrations but that she was also unsafe. Although I can see how valuable the process of othermothering would have been within my experience, the fact remains that acting as an othermother is a choice and not a requirement. In part, the decision to act as an othermother surfaces from both a cultural practice and a personal desire to support and advocate for students of color through an ethic of care (Collins, 2002; Griffin, 2013). Albeit a wonderful practice and something truly invaluable within the lives of Black students, for Black women academics othermothering can be an additional burden that can have emotional, physical, and financial implications (Mawhinney, 2011).

As othermothering surfaced as a practice that could have been critical within my doctoral journey, the imposter syndrome also correlated with extant literature regarding Black women graduate students. Although the Patterson-Stephens et al. (2017) article referenced that some of their participants had felt like imposters earlier in their academic career, for me, this was a new experience. Upon deeper reflection, and after speaking with my communities of care, it became apparent that the onset of my imposter syndrome coincided with meeting my advisor. When she indicated that no one wanted me in the program except for her, it set up a dynamic where my intellect and presence would never be enough.

Implications for Doctoral Programs

It creates an incomplete picture to focus solely on the attitude and treatment of my former doctoral advisor and not on the institutional culture which enabled and supported her behavior. Further still, rationales of doctoral processes that posit a mentality where academic hazing is normalized as a part of the culture must be dismantled, especially if we are interested in the well-being of doctoral students of color, specifically Black women doctoral students. Over the years, as I have shared my story with other Black women who, like me, are new to the academy, I learned that my account was all too common. All of the women had their own stories of academic hazing, which points to a larger systemic concern regarding how doctoral programs often create spaces where the roots of academic hazing can grow and thrive. Black first-

generation students entering doctoral programs already face challenges due to their status as first-generation doctoral students (Gardner, 2013; Vickers, 2014; Wallace & Ford, 2021); having a program that sees them as less than human should not be one of those challenges. For the sake of their program and the students themselves, doctoral programs must be just as invested in diversifying their student population and their faculty roster as they are in the well-being and climate of their doctoral programs and spaces.

Conclusion

Three years after finishing my doctoral journey, I now have the honor and privilege of working with new doctoral students and developing new masters' students. So much of my doctoral process was steeped in negativity and toxicity, and I wonder if it was due to the department's culture or reflective of the institution itself? It seemed that no one bulked at the negativity and toxicity of the departmental climate; as long as the program had students of color enrolled, no one asked about their mental and emotional well-being. When the excitement of students in the doctoral program began to shift towards bewilderment and despair; as their time to graduate became longer, no one stopped to ask if the negative culture of the department played a role. Which is not only troubling, but indicative of a systemic issue that must be dismantled in doctoral education.

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