

Chapter 59

Black Joy as Emotional Resistance: A Collaborative Auto-Ethnography of Two Black Queer Married Academics as Contingent Labor

Shaneda L. Destine

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

Shaina V. Destine

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, USA

ABSTRACT

This research situates the experiences of two married Black Queer women from working-class backgrounds, who are young academic professionals working in contingent positions in the Midwest during Trump's first year in office. Using a critical collaborative autoethnography, the authors situate their social media posts, reflections, and stories in the broader literature that denotes the challenges of spousal accommodations and diversity positions in corporatized universities for faculty and staff of color. The findings extend the literature by outlining the various ways in which we experience oppression as married Black Queer women in the university, surrounding community, and are burdened with diversity work without systemic intervention and institutional buy-in, in the Midwest. They share their stories to combat the silencing of their struggles and provide a path toward survival under these circumstances. They outline how the use of social media, writing, and creating intentional spaces of Black Joy have aided them as they move through their careers.

INTRODUCTION

In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women. (Lorde, 2012)

During the brutality of chattel enslavement and the era of white-dominated sharecropping, Black people wrote and performed songs of resistance, reaching into the inner-recesses of their suffering to uncover balms of joy. They sang of “gospel trains” and “sweet chariots” coming to rescue them and of not having long to “stay here.” While some have claimed that these songs of joy symbolized Blacks’ passive acceptance of subservience, Frederick Douglass, the formerly enslaved abolitionist, claimed that ‘Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.’ While Black bodies were chained, Black psyches weren’t.” (Greer, 2015)

In this moment, Black people, it is just as important that you treat yourself and each other with the grace, gentleness, love, and compassion that this country has always denied us. This means doing things and being with the people who make you happy. Cultivating Black joy will be instrumental to developing the resilience needed to fight another day. Nurture your physical and spiritual self – however that looks. Go to the grocery store, grab your water, incense, some live food, turmeric, garlic, local honey, some lavender, some sage, and some Palo Santos. Get some whatever you may need in case you decide not to leave the house, or your body just needs to be still. (Black Youth Project 100 [BYP100], 2017)

In the Spring semester of 2017, we were greatly anticipating graduation. Shaneda was graduating from the illustrious Howard University in Washington, D.C., with a Ph.D. in Sociology. Shaina was graduating from the University of Maryland in College Park with her master’s in Library and Information Science. Having grown up in New York and attended graduate schools in the Washington, DC-area—both places having a wealth of diversity in cultures, languages, foods, and religions—made us take a huge step back during the campaign of Donald Trump in 2016 and the beginning of his administration in 2017. We were not naive enough to believe we were in a post-racial America, but the vengeance with which a violent type of extreme white nationalism reared its ugly head was startling. The intensified racist, xenophobic, and homophobic tensions seeped their way into university campuses across the nation, which provided a barrier when contemplating permanent academic employment (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017).

Trump’s ascent to presidency presented several other difficulties. The 45th presidential administration began with travel bans, funding cuts, hiring freezes in federal employment, tax incentives for the rich, and criminalization of Latinx and Muslim immigrants—compounded with the killing of Black people by police with impunity and decreased federal oversight (Coates, 2017). The political backlash for any academic, particularly those from precarious positions and marginalized communities that might express discontent, was swift and well-publicized, alongside the visible racial discontent on campus (Coates, 2017; Grundy, 2017; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). Lists of liberal professors were aggregated on websites and universities saw an increase of alt-right speakers being invited to campus (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017).

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