

Chapter 1

An Ode to My Daughter: Navigating PWIs in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to elucidate on how socio-cultural practices and systems within private and public institutions of higher learning influence and regulate Black women's attitudes, behaviors, and agency utilizing a womanist/feminist lens. Historically, Black women's bodies have been a topic of discussions relating to body images. These bodies have been undermined, disrespected, and shamed, portrayed in the media as angry, ugly, hypersexualized. These tropes and more have a bearing on how Black women are received or deemed invisible daily in various spaces i.e., PWI. A Black woman's positionality, femininity, hair, and identity politics, coupled with other unique identities, affect the social and political context impacting how systems are navigated at PWIs. The ability or inability to endure assumptions, stereotypes, and aggressions can confuse those that cross the line thinking that behaviors of disrespect are acceptable. Suggestions/advice are offered for success and keys for thriving, not simply surviving, at PWIs.

INTRODUCTION

In December 1922 *Crisis* magazine, Langston Hughes published 'Mother to Son', a poem conveying a mother's warning to her son utilizing the analogy about the stairs one's forced to climb called life. This analogy speaks to the determination necessary to make it up the proverbial stairs of life. The imagery of stairs is the mother's attempt to explain how arduous life will be. She admonishes her son about how the journey will be difficult with obstacles, but for him not to give up.

Hughes, a product of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote comprehensively on racism and oppression that Black Americans endured. Understanding his background, the poem depicts the struggles a young

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Black man will encounter as he grows up. The extended metaphor of the staircase represents the adversities of life, and the mention of it not being a “crystal” referencing that the stairs would not be smooth, but dangerous, torn up, filled with “tacks” and “splinters.” Hughes’ twenty-line free verse inspired the conversation with my daughter who is working as a postdoctoral researcher at a Predominately White Institution (PWI). She had constant questions on how to navigate the institution and processes, and these inquiries prompted a conversation about how Black women survive these spaces, without losing their integrity and their minds. This chapter focuses on lessons learned from one Sistah to another, in this case from mother to a daughter, utilizing Hughes’ poem as a guide for providing advice. We will briefly examine the historical positioning of African American/Black women and discuss three pertinent concepts: femininity, hair politics, and identity politics. Utilizing a Womanist/Feminist approach, we will elucidate on a Womanist social justice perspective, transitioning into a conversation with Black women at PWIs and briefly analyzing their experiences while cultivating strategies to thrive and not simply survive.

Mother to Daughter

*Well daughter, Here’s the word
Life at a PWI Ain’t been no Ivory tower
It’s had microaggressions,
And microinsults,
And mircroassaults.
And places where no one looks like you are present, Lonely!
But, every day,
We keep going back,
We keep trying, standing, believing
And sometimes that Imposter Syndrome sneaks in,
We doubt ourselves, and second guess our thoughts.
So, girl don’t you question, don’t you doubt, that Black girl magic.
You are strong, intelligent, and powerful
Cause if you weren’t, they wouldn’t be working
So hard to keep you feeling unwanted
out of place, and down and out!
And, when you find it kind of hard,
don’t forget we’ve been here before,
So, girl don’t you question, don’t you doubt, that Black girl magic!*

BACKGROUND

Historically, Black women’s bodies have been the topic of negative discussion, whether relating to body images or reproductive issues. These bodies have been undermined, shamed, and portrayed in film and media platforms as distracting, ugly, fat, big-boned, and/or hypersexualized. Cooper (2018) summarizes the negative discussions with “We are told we are irrational, crazy, out of touch, entitled, disrupted, and not a team player” (p.2). Black women are often slated as the “angry Black women” when they are passionate or simply defending their point of view or perspective. These tropes have a bearing on

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