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# No Rest for the Weary: The Weight of Race, Gender, and Place Inside and Outside a Southern Classroom

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# No Rest for the Weary: The Weight of Race, Gender, and Place inside and outside a Southern Classroom

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Barbara Harris Combs<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

In this article, I reflect on my lived experience as an African American woman teaching in the racialized and gendered context of a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Deep South. I use the context of a southern campus in the Deep South to provide insight into the ways place, race, and gender continue to shape experiences of people of color and in so doing highlight the fallacy that the United States is a colorblind or post-racial society. To do so, I utilize counter-storytelling—a tool advanced by critical race theory (CRT) scholars; while CRT is useful to understand the conditions that produce the unequal weight borne by faculty of color, it is insufficient to understand the social processes that create and maintain it. I argue that the dynamic nature of racism requires new theoretical approaches to understand it. For this, I advance a new theory—bodies out of place (BOP). I utilize my narrative to provide greater clarity regarding how BOP fills gaps left by CRT and other racial ideologies. My narrative illustrates how the intersections of race, gender, and place can operate to create a disproportionate burden (professionally, personally, physically, and psychologically) on faculty women of color. Ironically, I conclude that this disproportionate burden often falls on a continuum between empowering and encumbering. However, both ends of the spectrum contribute to racial battle fatigue.

## Keywords

racism, African Americans, bias, body, place, colorblind

Racism is a highly disputed concept, but what is often left out of contested debates on the topic is the acknowledgment that racism is dynamic, and the ever-changing, always adaptable nature of the beast makes it particularly difficult to identify amid ever growing colorblind ideological frames (Alexander 2012). Fighting racism involves a daily struggle in the form of combating microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults (Sue et al. 2007). Repeated exposure to hostile and/or unwelcoming treatment can exact “a toll on the lives of people of color” (W. A. Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2006:301). W. A. Smith (2004) terms this *racial battle fatigue*, which a group of education scholars have defined as “the physical and psychological toll taken due to constant and

unceasing discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotype threat” (Mitchell et al. 2015:xvii).

American society is a “racialized social system” (Bonilla-Silva 1997). The racial hierarchies that emerge from this system maintain continuing inequality. Social hierarchies embedded in this racialized social system are “profoundly influenced

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by socially defined racial categories,” and colorblind ideologies help maintain the system (Doane 2006). Alexander (2012:2) writes:

In the error of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we . . . label people of color . . . and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.

The principle label to which Alexander refers is *criminal*, but the paradigmatic frame she applies is achieved through the ideology of colorblindness, and it is readily adaptable to other labels.<sup>1</sup> In the classroom, I am not simply a professor, I am a black female professor, and even when unspoken, each of those identifiers mediates my interactions in the space.

A number of sociological theories have been extremely fruitful toward identifying the fallacy of a post-racial America (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2014; Feagin 2000, 2006, 2013), but the continually adaptive nature of race-based prejudice in society necessitates new means of interpreting the continuing phenomenon. We need new theories to help explicate the numerous ways in which a racialized caste system not only continues to exist but also thrives in this purported age of colorblindness.

## SETTING THE SOUTHERN CONTEXT

Decades ago, the Supreme Court held that black bodies have a right to receive an education in a classroom alongside whites. However, in the more than 50 years since the Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision in *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, the majority of students in these classrooms—particularly college classrooms in four-year institutions of higher learning—are white. In this context, black, brown, red, and yellow bodies in the classroom seem “out of place.” This perceived displacement can produce a range of responses from students and co-workers, which faculty members of color must manage. Factors like gender and geographic location can further exacerbate this burden. In this article, I explore the weight of race, gender, and place inside and outside a southern classroom.

The educational system plays a meaningful role in asserting and maintaining social control in a society (Payne 1927). The manifest function of the

educational system is to educate. However, it has latent functions as well, not the least of which is social constraint. The educational system reproduces inequality by teaching students their respective “place” in society. Place in the hierarchical structure (and entitlement to unrestricted use of space) is dictated by a myriad of factors, including race, class, gender, and sexuality.

### *The Southern Somatic Norm*

Racial unrest has many layers. The university in question is no exception. In spring 2012, the student body at the University of Mississippi, a flagship university in the Deep South, elected its first black female president. There was little public pushback against this milestone, but there were some private attacks, including an incident where she was “denounced with racial slurs” (Dandridge 2014). However, on the campus known for producing beauty queens, the fall 2012 election of the first black homecoming queen was met with a firestorm of hate speech questioning the wisdom of the choice on grounds as varied as physical size, skin color, and attractiveness (Lucas 2012). Tensions heightened in the runoff election. The hailstorm of animosity was often phrased oppositionally: Social media buzzed with queries like, “How could you choose the black candidate over the slim, attractive, blond candidate?” (Lucas 2012). These attacks point to a need to further theorize the body, especially those bodies that violate the somatic norm (i.e., normative expectation), and in so doing generate disorientation (Puwar 2001, 2004).

Students and others in the university space come from varied backgrounds. Acknowledging this, I also acknowledge that inside the “matrix of domination,” black women occupy a particularly distinct position of marginality (Collins 1986). An expectation of a particular type of presentation of womanhood persists, and those who do not embody it are deemed neither fully women nor fully worthy of protection. This is especially true in the American South. Drawing largely on social science research that examines the employment context, it is easy to see how such women might suffer reprisals distinct from those imposed upon men in the academic arena (Moss and Tilly 2003; Rudman and Glick 2001).<sup>2</sup>

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Gloria Anzaldúa (1990:xxv-xxvi) writes:

Necesitamos teorías [We need theories] that will rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis. . . . We need

theories that will point out ways to maneuver between our particular experiences and . . . [form] our own . . . theoretical models for the patterns we uncover.

Our stories can rewrite history. The stories of people of color are “not simply telling ‘stories’”; instead, they are a form of theory building (McKinley and Brayboy 2005:427). This article introduces such a theory.

### *Origins of Bodies out of Place Theory*

While racism is not new, some of the ways it is performed and maintained are. Bodies out of place (BOP) theory emerged from my attempt to make sense of the social world around me. As a newcomer to the subject institution, I took note of everything, and I reduced a number of those observations to tenets. Many emerged from elements of existing theories—in some cases, extending those ideas and in other cases controverting parts of them. I was also particularly taken by the concept of bodies out of place as expressed in the writings of Nirmal Puwar (2001, 2004), and many of the ideas expressed herein are derived from those works. This article applies BOP as a theoretical framework for analyzing my case study. The aim is to identify its merits in a concrete way so as to make it viable for other scholars to apply and build on.

### *Moving Race Theorizing forward*

Existing theories are useful but incomplete as a means to: (1) understand why members of the dominant society are increasingly employing colorblind ideological frames,<sup>3</sup> (2) articulate how colorblind narratives maintain growing racial inequity, and (3) expand readers’ understanding of the underlying race-based systems behind these colorblind frames. BOP helps fill that gap (Combs 2016). BOP, which makes several basic assumptions about society as set forth in earlier theories such as critical race theory (CRT), standpoint theory, and social identity theory, distinguishes itself from the others in the attention it pays to bodies, context (i.e., place whether as a geographical or social construct), and micro-level interactions (especially how these contribute to the maintenance of inequality on the macro scale).

### *Contrasts with other Theories*

In many ways, BOP can be seen as a complement to CRT, but it also adds an important missing layer.

BOP asserts that racism is sustained on a macro level but begins on a micro level; this is the central idea that both connects BOP to CRT and distances it from it. CRT asserts that racism is endemic and built into institutional frameworks like the law (Bell 1987; Solórzano 1997, 1998). However, while the CRT principle of interest convergence popularized by Bell (2004) suggests whites will support racial justice only when doing so converges with their own economic interests, BOP argues that the overt or express inclusion of protections for minority groups (which has sometimes expanded to other marginalized groups) serves only the interest of whites. There is no convergence of interests. This distinction is subtle but important. It is also not a contradiction of the interest convergence principle. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the nature of racism is dynamic. By embedding language that ostensibly protects minority groups into law, social policy, employment handbooks, and educational/student handbooks, whites absolve themselves from culpability for continuing racial oppression by believing minorities did not take advantage of the opportunities given to them in a meritocracy. Like CRT, BOP recognizes that colorblindness and white property rights have been embedded into our legal structure for some time.

CRT deals well with the macro level, but a void is left in understanding how individual actors contribute to the social processes through which disadvantage is sustained, supported, and maintained. BOP fills that space of “betweenness.” BOP explains how raced-based attitudes (a necessary precursor to racism) continue to flourish in society despite overt legislation to the contrary.

Like CRT, intersectionality seeks to give voice to the voiceless (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; McCall 2005). Amid colorblind discourse—where individuals purport either not to see race or claim that race does/should not matter—it is essential to deal squarely with the body and the concept of the somatic norm. In many ways, the body has been abstracted from overt application in both CRT and intersectionality. In its focus on intersecting effects, intersectionality has lost sight of certain main effects. The body first *is*, and then it is identified as female or black. Still, intersectionality is a helpful but insufficient frame of analysis.

CRT abstractly deals with the body, but an overt focus is absent. CRT privileges counternarratives and critical race stories rooted in the lived experiences of the storytellers (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). CRT recognizes that counternarratives may provide more nuanced understandings of the racialized experiences of others (Solórzano 1998) and that racism

often intersects with other forms of oppression (Espinoza 1998) like gender. These lived experiences are peopled with bodies. Colorblind frames, especially ideas like hard work, individualism, equal opportunity, and others associated with abstract liberalism, abstract the body in a false narrative of being attentive to the individual. BOP places the body as a central aspect of the examination.

### *Merits of BOP*

BOP makes several important contributions to the ongoing discussion of race and racism in U.S. society. Through its articulation of how the structural nature of racism means members of the dominant society's acceptance of racial/ethnic minorities seldom gets challenged (as most interactions occur with people not of equal status), BOP exposes one of the significant bases on which the fiction of colorblindness is maintained in society. Members of the society can hold fast to the ideology of colorblindness in their rhetoric because they are seldom confronted with opportunities to test this value system (Combs 2016). BOP recognizes that the past matters and holds a continuing grip on outcomes in society today. As such, all members of society, not just the dominant society, are complicit in the maintenance of race-based oppressive attitudes.

The language of oppression varies from time to time and place to place, and its vehicles do as well. Structural explanations for racism have relied too heavily on systemic forces while colorblind ideologies have relied too heavily on individuals. There is a need to focus on the interplay between both. BOP acknowledges and asserts that it is the micro level that allows macro-level structures of oppression to be sustained.

Finally, BOP inserts time and place squarely into its analysis. A tension is raised by the use of the word *place*, but this tension is intentional. With respect to African Americans, whites have always defined place in behavioral more than spatial terms. McMillen (1989:23) writes, "Valuing hierarchy more than they feared propinquity, whites casually rubbed elbows with blacks in contexts that sometimes startled northerners. Yet the requirements of caste . . . were zealously enforced." The racial code was designed to "create distance and hierarchy with[in] such propinquity" (Ritterhouse 2006:27). Roots of this complex racial etiquette system persist and demand that place in both an abstract and concrete sense be expressly considered in examinations of continuing racial oppression in America.

Space and place are not interchangeable. Place is fixed and definite, but it need not be a geographical construct. Space, on the other hand, makes place definite by providing a boundary for its existence (Tuan 2001). An overlap exists between the two (Gieryn 2000). Bodies occupy space (Puwar 2004), and sometimes they do so in geographic or socio-political places. BOP posits that marginalized group members' occupation of social space is not problematic as long as minority group members do not occupy spaces and places the dominant members of society perceive as their own (Combs 2016). In sum, black and brown bodies are acceptable but only as long as they "stay in their place."

### *Tenets of BOP*

BOP has eight distinct tenets (Combs 2016:539).

1. BOP relies on the assumption (built into a great deal of colorblind and post-racial discourse) that growing numbers of whites perceive that the social ills in society such as racism, sexism, homonegativity, and so on are not endemic or structural but isolated incidents performed by a few bad actors. Consequently, society wrongly perceives that hard work and merit are the only factors limiting what individuals can achieve.
2. BOP argues the members of society falsely perceive physical integration (in schools, employment, and to a lesser extent, housing) and/or proximity with social integration.
3. Members of the dominant society have a possessory interest in the status quo. BOP argues that those who utilize this frame view the gendered, classed, racial/ethnic, and other patterns discernible in employment, housing, education, religion, political, and other arenas as the natural order and then work to maintain that equilibrium (i.e., status quo), often under the guise that this order is what is best for society.
4. BOP argues that racism is sustained on a micro level but operates on a macro level.
5. BOP theory is relational. Bodies need not be, per se, out of place as much as they are out of place relative to the individual position of the person opposing (sometimes called "the opposer") the heightened (i.e.,

seemingly “out of place”) status of the black or brown body. Additionally, the opposition may come about because the black or brown body seems displaced relative to the position of an individual in a group to which the opposer belongs or is affiliated with through strong kin or friendship ties.

6. BOP produces a response. It is evidenced through an almost compulsory and provoked verbal or nonverbal cue to the perceived displacement (body out of place). The only requirement is that the displacement induces a response. Responses may range from the benign to the violent. The important thing to consider is that the displacement is so disconcerting to the opposer that some response seems obligatory.
7. When invoked through discourse, the opposer uses seemingly race-neutral language, which is laden with race-based attitudes.
8. BOP is necessarily intersectional in its nature and applicable across social structures.<sup>4</sup> While this article focuses on black and brown bodies, it is important to note the theory is applicable to all stigmatized minority groups. The stigma may be on the basis of physical characteristics, racial/ethnic status, non-normative religious views (which may vary from place to place), sexism, or otherwise.

The tenets of BOP uncover a complicated duality; “the body may be accepted; but the body out of place is rejected” (Combs 2016:540). BOP’s attention to the body considers the body as more of a political abstraction or nature than a bodily nature; except with women, where the focus is often on the physical body (Puwar 2004). Puwar (2004:8) writes, “Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically, and conceptually), circumscribed as being ‘out of place.’”

## METHODOLOGY

I utilize BOP as both theory and method. In the latter case, I employ a modified grounded theory to build an interpretive case study useful for the purpose of developing an “inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon” (Strauss

and Corbin 1998:24). Grounded theory is “a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures” involving open coding, constant comparisons, memos, diagrams, axial coding, and theoretical saturation for the purpose of theory generation (Strauss and Corbin 1998:24). My modified grounded theory utilized open coding as well as constant comparisons (and memos) to develop a theory of what is going on. I utilize the interpretive case study method as identified by Merriam (1998).

The interpretive case study method is designed to contain “thick descriptions” like those employed in ethnographic research. Such descriptions are useful to challenge established theoretical assumptions about social processes. My personal (counter) narrative has merit, and it can speak to the experiences of others. Griffin, Bennett, and Harris (2013) and Seidman (1985) find that despite notable distinctions, the experiences of male and female black faculty across institutional types have striking similarities.<sup>5</sup>

Delgado (1989:2436) asserts that “[o]ppressed groups have known instinctively that [their] stories are an essential tool for their own survival and liberation.” Indeed, amid a contrary master narrative, the survival of personal stories or counternarratives is itself an important form of resistance. My methodological approach acknowledges “that the experiential knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education” (Solórzano 1998:122). This experiential knowledge includes narratives or personal stories. I also rely heavily on the ethnographic tool of thick description (Geertz 1973).

I am attentive to place—the physical place of the southern classroom, the southern PWI, and the social construction of “the South.” These multiple notions of place become a framework for situating and analyzing my experience. This attentiveness to place as a historical, situational, and cultural variable situates place as the central lens through which you explore my story. This focus allows the reader to gain greater clarity.

After relaying my story, I analyze my single interpretive case study by utilizing a modified grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990) that first attempts to identify themes in the counter story and, where possible, make connections between those themes, the literature on racial battle fatigue, and secondary social science data. The narrative is strengthened by its juxtaposition against the socio-political and historical.

## MY STORY

I came to the predominantly white institution where I taught cognizant of the weight of its legacy of racial oppression. That knowledge caused me to erect a shield—a protective force field—to keep me from harm. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014:ix) calls it “my coraza”—a “much needed emotional *coraza* (shield) to repel all the racial nonsense of ‘gringolandia.’” But an unexpected onslaught of racial hostility left my armor weakened and my coraza pierced.

### *The Piercing of the Shield*

The words of Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party leader Fannie Lou Hamer, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” have always intrigued me, but on the night of President Barack Obama’s historic reelection, her words became my reality. I was in my second year teaching at the university, and news outlets and social media sites described a “riot” that broke out on campus. The accounts depicted a scene complete with images of at least one white student burning an Obama sign and tales of several such students shouting “Fuck Obama.” By the strictest definition, there was no riot; however, the actions of the students forced a revelation I had buried. Race not only mattered in the halls of my institution of higher learning, but it mattered in the hearts and minds of the next generation.

I contacted several other minority faculty members, and we strengthened each other. I made a conscious decision not to go on the campus the next day. The university is still a place replete with both concrete physical manifestations (in the form of Confederate statues and other tangible items that could lead the uninformed visitor to believe that the South had won the “War of Northern Aggression”) and ingrained patterns of behavior that manifest themselves in social interactions that often mirror those in place during segregation (Combs et al. 2016). One of these social patterns includes some groups of students (white women in sorority paraphernalia are often the worst offenders) walking in such a way as to take up the whole sidewalk. This forces others who encounter them to make a decision—run into them, quickly retreat to a curb, or walk on the grass in order to avoid physical contact.

The performance looks a lot like the established Southern pattern of blacks yielding the sidewalk to whites during Jim Crow. The first time it happened to me, I was slightly amused. My frame is not inconsequential, and as I was of a certain age and

manner of dress to code “professor” or at least professional, I decided to conduct an experiment. Days later, my class schedule again brought me at midday to this well-traveled sidewalk in the heart of campus. As I attempted to make my way, I soon encountered three young white girls dressed in sorority paraphernalia. They were engaged in a conversation, and they took up the whole sidewalk. I did not yield. One ran into me. We locked eyes, and she said, “I did not see you.” No apology. She simply said, “I did not see you.”

On the day following the election “riot,” I was “sick and tired” and knew that if I encountered any such behavior, I would walk through the campus like a linebacker mowing down a running back. I decided it was best for me to stay home. In many ways, the fatigue I felt based on the actions of a “few” unfortunate students on election day pales in comparison to what I felt in the weeks and months after as faculty of color and white allies were called on to defend the university, heal students, and bridge the divide—all while bearing our personal burden(s) in silence. I recount my story (my counter-narrative) for the purpose of unpacking it and analyzing it. In so doing, I discovered three recurring themes: it’s a rollercoaster ride, place matters, and multiple identities/multiple (often conflicting) stereotypes. Each theme is discussed in the following.

### *It’s a Rollercoaster Ride*

I have had great highs and lows at the institution, but it is important to note that the highs were usually based on individual encounters rather than institutional ones. In the process, I discovered numerous unexpected allies, including a department chair, several colleagues (inside and outside my departments), and my former dean. Additionally, a number of my students brought me moments of great joy.

### *Great Highs*

After a classroom viewing of *Central Park Five*,<sup>6</sup> a young white woman came to my office to continue a discussion. She confessed her erroneous, racially biased, stereotypical thinking regarding black men. Her previous thoughts were influenced by friends and family who would make statements like “black men . . . rape white women.” She pledged to do better. Some encouraging moments occurred in class. For example, I recall the moment that a white gay ally in my class helped

another student (a black male), who expressed a homophobic sentiment, see how arguments against the full integration of gays and lesbians into society paralleled the arguments used to suggest blacks and whites should not intermingle. Such moments, while rare, fueled me.

I cannot recall the number of times one student or another stopped by to chat with me. At times, they were so numerous that an unwritten custom emerged where the first two present would sit in chairs opposite me and others would stand. When a seated student would leave, the next to arrive would sit. I have cried, laughed, and prayed with more students than I can now recall by name. They gave me not only a sense of purpose but a reason to remain at the university.

### **Greater Lows**

One of my low moments at the institution came at a time that should have been a high point of my academic career. I was invited to present my work at an international conference in the UK. Because the invitation came nearly 10 months in advance, I was able to incorporate the trip into my syllabus. My students had an assignment, which I discussed in class prior to my departure, posted on Blackboard, and emailed to them. Despite this planning, a white female student emailed me during my absence and indicated she was representing a few other “confused” students who were unclear about what they were supposed to be doing during my absence. This young woman entered into an increasingly hostile series of email exchanges with me where she indicated she did not know what to do and I was not doing my job. I replied that I was out of the country and that she should consult Blackboard. Then I added that her confusion should not be equated with my failure to be clear. The student wrote back that a teacher was supposed to help her students and I was not doing that. The emails became so insistent and odious that I contacted my chair. My chair suggested to the student that she owed me an apology, which she never offered. Instead, she remained in the class and snarled at me each time I glanced her way.

While some of my lows came at the hands of students, I expect my students to be naïve and uninformed regarding social justice matters. With few exceptions, I can take that, but my lowest points came at the hands of what I call (ir)rational rationals. These (ir)rational rationals are educated older white men. Some are middle- to high-level administrators. All are white men dripping with white

privilege. These men refuse to see any merit in your story/view, and they seem especially oblivious to how rational thinkers could hold a legitimate view contrary their own. I will outline one such incident.

I had a series of problematic exchanges with an older white male colleague with whom I was team teaching a class. This series of environmental microaggressions began to escalate in degree and frequency (they involved questioning my reading selection choices; assertions that I was “too much,” which the colleague went on to clarify meant my presence in the classroom was too large and I should talk less; and they ended in a shouting match after one class). The hostility became so intolerable that I wrote a letter to my chairs (I was jointly appointed) and later insisted on a meeting with the offender. The colleague was informed of the meeting, and on the day in question he collapsed during class, was removed by ambulance, and was hospitalized for several days. The purported meeting never happened, nor was there any follow-up discussion of my grievances. In light of his “illness,” my position as victim became undermined, and instead I was branded as an angry black woman.

There have been other low moments. A student once wrote that I was not a good teacher because “all I ever talked about was race” and “we never talked about the wrongdoings of the black people” or the “reverse discrimination” suffered by whites at the hands of minorities. Another low came in the days following the election night incident. The official university report states that although hundreds of students gathered outside on the night of the incident, most of them were simply spectators and not participants in the debasing racially charged language used at the impromptu “political gathering.” During a class discussion aimed at healing, I read Pastor Martin Niemoller’s poem, “First They Came for the Jews.” I wanted students to understand their individual responsibility for continuing racism and their obligation to speak up and not remain silent. After reading the compelling call to arms aimed at bystanders, a white student (in a classroom of almost 70 with only 4 minorities) raised his hand and said, “So, are *you* [emphasis added] calling us Nazis?”

In the preceding example, the class was specifically set aside as a safe space for discussion about the nationally televised incident, but my student, a young white male, felt attacked. A white male colleague with which I was facilitating the class discussion quickly moved in to try to rescue me by

explaining what I meant to the student. My colleague's efforts were well meaning, but I was not speaking in another language or tongue, so no interpretation should have been necessary. Instead, my colleague's white male body mediated the gap between me and the student.

Healing places may not be safe as faculty and students have to navigate through and across hostile spaces to get there. After yet another racial incident on campus, a cross-racial group working on issues of racial reconciliation called an evening meeting. Outside the meeting, I was accosted by a group of young white male students in a truck. All were dressed in button shirts and khaki style pants. As I crossed the street to walk to the building, they yelled out "B-i-t-c-h." Surprised and taken aback, I said, "Excuse me?" As the truck screeched through the heart of campus, several of them turned back and looked me in the eye to again shout, "Bitch!"

The fact that the young men (none of whom I knew) held such sentiments about me was not as surprising as their overt vocalization of the epithet. No student has ever hurled such words to my face; however, as I ponder the encounter, I recognize that the variable of time matters too. Women are taught to be wary of dark corners. Instead, this was the heart of campus just outside the very building where I had the sidewalk encounter. My dress and age conveyed that I was likely a member of the university faculty or staff, but as the hour was after 6:00 pm, I believe that the white male students perceived that the university space, all of it, was rightly theirs to navigate and police. My presence on the campus would be tolerated 9 to 5, but full entitlement to the space belonged to them. I shared my experience in the meeting, and other women (black and white) shared stories of similar encounters.

### *Battered and Bruised, but Still Brave*

The great highs and greater lows produce a kind of insanity. If something is "all good," the choice to stay is easy. Similarly, if something is "all bad," the choice to leave is easy. Further, because racism is endemic in society, one cannot escape it just by leaving. So why stay? I often felt as if I were on a mission from God and that He placed me in a hostile land for my light to shine—despite the dimness all around me. But that exacts a toll. Your choices are to assimilate, be quiet, or speak up. Each comes at a cost; be it your mind, soul, psyche/sanity, health, or career, something has to give. The best

thing I can use to describe it is the DMX song, "Party Up." DMX says:

Y'all gon' make me lose my mind up in HERE,  
up in here  
Y'all gon' make me go all out up in here, up in  
here  
Y'all gon' make me act a FOOL up in HERE,  
up in here  
Y'all gon' make me lose my cool up in here, up  
in here

To avoid that route, many of my minority female colleagues elected to leave. A few years later, I made a similar choice.

### *Multiple Identities/Multiple (Often Conflicting) Stereotypes*

While women face stereotypes inside and outside the Academy, the intersection of being black and female carries a particular weight. In *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*, sociologist Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009) discusses multiple and contradictory images of black women, including the mammy, the strong black woman, the loud black woman, the angry black woman, and others. In the staid halls of academia, these popular stereotypes or tropes about black women serve to further marginalize us—we are present but not fully accepted. However, Collins (1986) keenly observes that this marginalization has equipped black women with keen insight. Collins (1986:S14–S15) persuasively argues that black women have a peculiar "outsider within" status [which] has provided [black women] a special standpoint . . . [to introduce] distinctive analyses of race, class and gender."

Soon after the release of the movie *The Help*, I attended an out-of-town fundraising event for one of my departments. I was the only person of color at the event. Two older white women cornered me and asked my opinion on the film. I chose my words carefully. Soon, one of the women slipped her hand through my arm, looked me in the eye, and said, "We were good to our black people." Then she turned to her friend and said, "And I know your family was good to your black people, too." The other woman eagerly nodded in agreement. Quickly, the first woman whisked me around the home to show me a cherished quilt that her black "help" made for her daughter. Despite my horror, which I did not hide, neither seemed cognizant of how offensive their suggestion of

contemporary ownership of black bodies was, and as they escorted me around the room arm-in-arm, I too felt shackled and like a possession.

With few exceptions, the examples enumerated are not extraordinary. Instead, they chronicle the everyday incidents of microaggressions I navigate in that space. I recognize that my experiences may largely be blind to some well-meaning individuals. White privilege makes this blindness possible. When you embody the privileged norm (maleness and whiteness), being disembodied has little consequence as your very form is the somatic norm. Belonging is presumed. However, at the intersection of race and gender, many black women find themselves to be what Collins (1986) terms as “outsiders within.”

## DISCUSSION/FINDINGS

We participate in social action not as ourselves but in a special capacity or status (Goffman 1959). Numerous scholars have outlined an etiquette surrounding race relations in the South (Boyle 1964; Lavelle 2015; Ritterhouse 2006; L. Smith 1961), but L. Smith’s (1961) courageous *Killers of the Dream* unveils not only the complexity of the social caste system that deemed blacks inferior to whites, but she uncovers a truth seldom acknowledged in contemporary discussions of race and relations: Good people can be racists. Regarding her family, L. Smith (1961:17–18) writes:

The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their “place.” The father who rebuked me for an air of superiority towards schoolmates . . . and rounded out his rebuke by gravely reminding me that “all men are brothers” trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my “soul” taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from my southern tradition.

Later in the work, L. Smith (1961:27–28) continues:

I do not remember how or when, [but] by the time I had learned that God is love, that Jesus is His Son and came to give us more abundant life, that all men are brothers with a common Father, I also knew that I was better than a Negro, that all black folks have their place and must be kept

in it . . . that a terrifying disaster would befall the South if I ever treated a Negro as my social equal.

Ritterhouse (2006:3) writes, “In the South, that special self was always a racial self, for blacks and whites alike.”

Each subsequent generation of Southerners learns race (Lavelle 2015; Ritterhouse 2006). In many respects, they learn to “do race” through a series of performances reinforced by social interaction. Racism is hidden in the daily rituals that are touted to be “just the way it is.” These lessons are taught and learned by both blacks and whites alike. Resistance to these engrained hierarchies exists; however, “whenever blacks rejected the command performance of deference—whenever whites lost the zero-sum game of racial etiquette—violence could and often did result” (Ritterhouse 2006:25). This is the way social control is maintained. “Children who learned to treat blacks as inferiors at an interpersonal level were unlikely, as adults, to question laws and institutions that discriminated against blacks at a societal, structural level” (Ritterhouse 2006:55). Lavelle (2015:5) makes a more overt connection between attitudes in the historical and contemporary South; regarding her study participants, she writes, “They were born . . . were socialized by their families and communities to follow a white supremacist culture . . . went on to socialize others, and . . . accepted or resisted to varying degrees the civil rights movement and the varying changes it ushered in.”

### *Using BOP to Analyze My Story*

Racism is a sickness. Ironically, this sickness is profitable for the perpetrator(s), but it is costly for its victims. It is not popular to publicly express negative views about racial and ethnic minorities, so private race talk occurs in exclusionary small groups and intimate face-to-face interactions (Myers 2005). Tenet 1 (growing numbers of members of society believe racism is something performed by a few bad actors) is implicated in my story and situated experience. I argue that the actions of these few bad actors are widely held but seldom vocalized.

The concept of blacks having a relative “place” in society is not a new one. Lavelle (2015) interviews ordinary white southerners who now range in age from their 50s to their 90s about their memories of the Jim Crow South and the Civil Rights era. One of the clearest lessons white southerners were taught is that

blacks had a distinct, separate, and subordinate position in society to their own position. Sharon, an interviewee in her 60s, tells Lavelle (2015:40): "I'm gonna be very, very honest. (pause). My parents and grandparents, they thought blacks had a place, (pause) and they just didn't think you crossed that line. They thought that *the blacks* [emphasis added] had a purpose—to work—and that was their place." Mae (in her 70s) recalled, "The people that we had contact with were the older black generation. . . . And the ones that we knew were a joy to be around, but they always stayed in their place at that time. You know, they didn't push themselves" (Lavelle 2015:56–57). Mae expresses fond memories of a time when blacks not only knew their place but stayed in it. It is the children and grandchildren of this group that I face in the classroom.

Like most groups, whites are invested with seeing themselves positively. In a classroom discussion of the book *The Help*, my co-instructor (who is white) and I asked the students to identify good, bad, and ugly qualities in various characters. The class was approximately 93 percent white. The students could not identify negative traits for Skeeter (the young, white protagonist who is a recent graduate of "Ole Miss"), and when I offered up some (i.e., she stole the stories of the maids), they shot them all down. The students were personally invested in seeing as Skeeter as Savior. Even Skeeter's leaving at the end of the movie was seen as an act of heroism (venturing out to the great unknown world), but they could not see that the true heroines were the black maids who courageously told their stories and, due to structural constraints Skeeter did not face, had to remain in the segregated South without much hope of escape.

In the growing absence of disparaging public talk about race, growing numbers of people in society hold on to the view that racism is not endemic but an attitude held by very few in society (see BOP Tenet 1). To further evidence this, colleges and businesses create public brochures that represent their campuses and workplaces as integrated environments free of racism. My institution is no different. These pamphlets display the happy faces of racial and ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups smiling alongside members of the majority society. We forget (or choose to ignore) that these photos are staged. The appearance of integration is achieved through the presence of various actors in the social space; however, as Tenet 2 of BOP asserts (members of society falsely perceive physical integration and/or proximity with social integration), this public image does not mean that social integration is taking place. Physical

integration is not social integration. Ingrained patterns of separation—either in sorority/fraternity membership, representation of women and/or minorities in the professoriate, selection of majors, matriculation with a certain major, extracurricular activities, and other voluntary and involuntary homophilous practices—still exist.

Tenets 3 and 4 of BOP are implicated in this examination, too. Tenet 3 (BOP is accomplished by people who assert that the patterns in society are not only natural but good for society) is invoked through the common arguments used to justify prevailing racial and other patterns in society. At the institution, the naturalness of segregation patterns gets framed by assertions that minority students choose not to pledge predominantly white sororities and fraternities or that recruitment searches for faculty and staff always expressly invite minority applicants to apply, so what more can be done? In each case, the responsibility for the continuing state (i.e., segregation) falls on minority group members and not on majority group members or the ongoing structural practices that make minorities feel unwelcome. These attitudes prevail despite the fact that retention of faculty of color is abysmal or that in the recent past black women who have tried to pledge predominantly white sororities have reportedly been denied on the basis that chapter alumni would discontinue their support if black pledges were selected. Each of these positions is indicative of colorblind racism. In this way, it is easier to see how, as Tenet 4 of BOP predicts, structural racism is sustained at the individual level but operates at the macro level.

I now move to Tenets 5 through 7. These three, Tenet 5 (BOP is relational), Tenet 6 (BOP produces a response), and Tenet 7 (BOP is often invoked through discourse), often work together. In my experience, the most egregious negative responses came when I asked students to reflect on their social positions vis-à-vis that of others. In every case, the student who suggested I was calling him a Nazi, the student who asserted that all I did was talk about how white people "wronged the black people," and the white female who accused me of not doing my job all assumed the fault or impropriety was my own. They remained faultless. Puwar (2004:11) describes this as the "burden of doubt 'space invaders' endure." I reflect further on these experiences in the next section.

### *Rejection of Nonconforming Bodies*

In the instances outlined in this article, my right to assert authority or control was challenged. Due to

ingrained white privilege, each individual expected that I would conform my behavior (and in the case of the sidewalk incident, my very body) to comport with their expectations. For example, after literally running into me on the sidewalk, it never occurred to the young woman to say “excuse me,” nor did it occur to any of the young women with her to walk in such a manner as to share the crowded sidewalk. In the case of the student who said I was not doing my job, the co-instructor who suggested I was “too much,” and the student who made the Nazi reference, they were each so troubled by the “body out of place” that a swift response was forthcoming. Consistent with BOP Tenet 7, each rebuke (see Tenet 6) employed seemingly racially neutral language (like “too much”) laden with race-based attitudes. In their minds, my job was to nurture and support them (this is even implicated in the case of the co-instructor who said I was “too much”). I liken it to Sharon’s comment (noted earlier) that blacks are supposed to work. My work was clearly to be women’s work. Men are not supposed to be nurturing, and while women are expected to be nurturing, Beaubouef-Lafontant (2009) makes it clear that the “angry black female” is one of the prevailing images of black women in modern society. Nurture can be stern, but black females are not afforded this reading of their actions. Lacking the ability to control my mind, each attempted to control my body—or at least my bodily actions—through attempts to sanction me through critique guised as constructive criticism.

Tenets 5 (BOP is relational) and 6 (BOP prompts a response) help explain. In the case of the student who made the Nazi comment, his primary response was irritation. The student’s irritation was twofold. Certainly he misinterpreted my comments as derogatory name calling, and that offended him. But he also hinted that someone like me had no right to judge someone like him. His disdain was so great that despite the power differential (and that power differential is the point), he took a tone of reproach that offered a public rebuke of me. In each case, their opposition was not to my presence (consider the colleague with which I co-taught who just wanted me to talk less) but to my black body in that position asserting power either equal to (co-instructor) or over (students) each of them. The same is the case with the student who alleged that I was not doing my job. She remained in the class and glared at me. I liken this to Frantz Fanon’s (1986) discussion of the “white gaze.” The glance or look dissects you, and it operates as a weight (Fanon 1986:110–16). Combatting her gaze required me to put on “the

mask that grins and lies,” as poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896) outlines in “We Wear the Mask.” The constant “accumulated stress of [these] racial microaggressions” (W. A. Smith 2004:301) produce racial battle fatigue.

BOP Tenet 7 suggests that today’s racialized language is coded so as to appear benign, but this seemingly race-neutral language is actually highly racialized. This tenet is especially instructive in interpreting the exchange with the colleague who felt my presence in the classroom was “too large.” Nothing expressly codes “racially charged” in that language, yet I assert that it was racial. As discussed, it is a variation of a common characterization of black women as loud (Beaubouef-Lafontant 2009). Here, *loud* codes uncouth and undereducated. Most courses at the university are not team taught. While some classes in the department in question are always team taught, this particular class is not. My presence in the classroom challenged a space the older white male perceived as his own. His rebuffs were attempts to put me back in my place—a subservient one to his own. While I resisted his unauthorized rejoinder, at the end of the semester I sadly realized it had taken a toll when a graduate student in the class came up to me and asked me, “What happened to you?” I told him I did not know what he meant. The student went on to say that many of the students went out together after the first class and discussed how excited they were about the class lecture and discussion. He went on to say, but after that “you went away.” I did not, of course, literally go away. I just receded to the place the colleague tried to put me in—a marginal spot on the periphery of the classroom but still in it. As such, I was supposed to be grateful for my spot at the table, not seek to be at the head of the table. To detractors, the presence of racial others (in the classroom or teaching the class) signals that discrimination no longer exists. This is another fiction that allows colorblind racism to persist. Sadly, even very minimal amounts of physical integration (e.g., my presence at the party) get coded as equity (see BOP Tenet 2). This is not interest convergence; instead, it benefits dominants solely and reinforces the racialized status quo.

It is important to reiterate that black bodies, especially as an abstract principle, are often accepted in society, but the full expectation is that even amid integration, those bodies will inhabit the physical and social space in a way that does not challenge the normative structure. Bodies out of place must be sanctioned to illicit compliance with the expectations for both the permissible uses of

and time parameters for the “sharing” of social space. This response to bodies out of place can be seen in the negative speech surrounding the candidacy of the first elected black homecoming queen at my institution. The harsh public rebuke and critique of her attributes served to warn other young women who might have had similar aspirations not to try.

### *Attending to Intersectional Matters*

The final tenet of BOP (it is necessarily intersectional in its nature) is implicated in several of these examples. Many Facebook and other social media posts were dedicated to the election of the homecoming queen. Interestingly, these posts did not challenge her right to be on campus. Instead, her suitability as a symbol of beauty was challenged. Black women are objects, not subjects. But even when black women are the object of desirability, particularly of white men, it is communicated as a baser (sexual) desirability, not a pure (intellectual or spiritual) one. Beauty, on the other hand, gets interpreted as purity. Opposers perceive that black women cannot be pure. Instead, terms like *sexy* and *exotic* are employed to “neutrally” signal “other beauty.” These terms are laden with intersectional race-based contexts (see BOP Tenet 7). Similarly, when used to refer to a black woman, references to “mean” or “angry” (or “too much”) seem race neutral, but they are not. The singular (vocal) opposer’s resistance to the first female black student body president at the institution can also be understood in this vein (Dandridge 2014). A leader needs to communicate a certain level of authority, and the actions of black women often get recorded and communicated as anger, not authority. It is imperative to note that not all responses (see BOP Tenet 6) are hostile; however, it is the response and not the hostility that is illustrative of society’s perception of a body out of place. This perception is so ingrained that it persists and is maintained through many members of the dominant society and those outside it too.

BOP expressly interjects the body, time, and place into its analysis. An examination of the body is fruitful for unpacking the “Bitch!” epithet the young white men hurled. I consider the epithet to be an assault or attack. Throughout history, white men have assailed the black woman’s body in similar (and more violent ways), and the black man was not free to defend her. This realization hearkens back to the antebellum South and brings the practice into the present. These young white males attempted to assert their position and dominance

over me in a space (PWI), place (the physical campus), and during a time (after-hours) that demarcates white boundaries of belongingness and ownership. Taken together, their behavior screams: This is our space—go back to where you belong.

My experience with the two white women talking about being “good to our black people” bears further attention. I was the only person of color in attendance at the event. At one point, I went outside to seek escape from the white onslaught. Soon after, someone bid me to come to them. I declined, but they bid again. I did not have the “right” to say no. I was (or at least I was being treated) as a possession. What is more, as the only person of color in attendance, I was a token possession who must be shown off. My presence gave legitimacy to their deeply held beliefs that they were not racists. My singular presence integrated the party, and they could all cling to the false belief that my physical presence meant I was socially accepted (see BOP Tenet 2, which says physical integration is falsely perceived as social integration). As I reflect back on it now, the actual locking of arms with me was an act akin to imprisonment, and the discussion of being “good to our black people” recalls the unabashed historical ownership/possession of black bodies. The women’s possession of me was both physical and mental. That being said, it was nothing short of an act of social control.

### CONCLUSION

Part of what makes the weight of race, place, and gender difficult to bear is that many faculty of color suffer alone and/or in silence. This silence is compelled and enforced from a society that is doubtful that systemic racism still exists and even more doubtful that those who walk the ivy halls of our institutions of higher learning fall within its reach. Bodies out of place<sup>7</sup> theory seeks to explain how racism and negative race-based attitudes prevail despite assertions of colorblindness by academic institutions and the social actors who comprise them.

In the university context, white students at a PWI will often encounter faculty and administrators of color. White students must reconcile the authority faculty of color exert over them, and many utilize the white racial frame to do so (Feagin 2013). This may especially be the case at many southern institutions where visual representations of the Confederate past still abound. Students may select to attend the university because of its history and/or living reminders of the racial hierarchy. As

students work to reconcile the identity that the white racial frame they see through has constructed of people of color, the inherent conflicts may result in pushback in the form of microaggressions. The microaggressions faced by even middle-class blacks (including faculty of color) in everyday life are linked to a number of deleterious health outcomes for the group (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

As America moved from the civil unrest of tumultuous '60s to a new racial era, noted psychiatrist Chester Pierce observed in the *American Handbook of Psychiatry* that “one must *not* [italics added] look for the gross and obvious . . . [instead] the subtle, cumulative mini assault is the substance of today’s racism” (Pierce 1974:516). Pierce (1970, 1974, 1975) describes these subtle mini assaults that are woven into the fabric of everyday encounters as microaggressions. “The accumulative stress from racial microaggressions produces racial battle fatigue” (W. A. Smith et al. 2006:301). Almost two decades later, Pierce (1995:281) clearly establishes the deleterious effects of microaggressions when he writes, “In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence.”

The frequency of microaggressions in the classroom context and around campus seriously calls into question the narrative that the ivory tower is colorblind. Navigating the space requires a concerted amount of emotional energy, and it robs the individual of the opportunity to invest that energy in more productive personal or professional pursuits. This is another important way colorblindness serves to perpetuate white privilege.

Institutions of higher learning are not islands. Instead, “the academy is a microcosm of larger social systems” (Garrison-Wade et al. 2012:90). It is important to recognize that each individual encounter recited here (and the numerous ones omitted) are embedded in a series of encounters that collectively serve to reinforce the academy as a white space. Interlopers (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.) may occupy the space, but it remains a “masculine domain of whiteness” (Puwar 2004:13).

Foucault (1980:95) asserts, “Where there is power, there is resistance and yet or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” To that I add that while the resistance employed by people of color in academia is not futile, it comes at a cost. To be certain, racial battle fatigue is one possible byproduct of the challenge. Still, the cost may be worth the

price. King and Watts (2004:118) write, “[The alternative is to] assimilate or struggle to transform the culture so that it is less hostile for oneself and for future faculty of color.” So we fight. As faculty women of color, some in society may perceive our bodies as out of place—especially when we engage in ways of being that are more agentic than communal (Rudman and Glick 2001), but we shall not be moved.

## NOTES

1. van Dijk (2000:7) warns ideology can also operate as “‘false consciousness’ or ‘misguided beliefs.’”
2. While black men are not the subject of this discussion, I do consider that the experience of black men may be distinct from that of black women. I refrain, however, from any vain and shallow attempts to compare oppressions. Rather, I simply note the observations of a number of researchers. In an article on “Racial Battle Fatigue and the Miseducation of Black Men,” W. A. Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2011:63) write, “Black men’s lives are racialized contradictions” who face not only gendered racism but also “mundane extreme environmental stress.” The article goes on to describe historically white institutions as “prime contexts for producing racial battle fatigue among black men,” especially as the men get closer to matriculation.
3. The four frames Bonilla-Silva (2014:74–76) identifies are abstract liberalism, which “involves using ideas associated with political liberalism and economic liberalism in an abstract manner to explain racial matters”; naturalization, which “allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences”; cultural racism, which “relies on culturally based arguments” to explain the structural position of minorities in society; and minimization of racism, which “suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances” because things are so much better now than they used to be.
4. In many ways, the tenets of bodies out of place theory (BOP) (especially Tenets 1 and 4, respectively) not only embrace but also necessitate an intersectional analysis.
5. In 2014–2015, there were 1,021 full-time faculty at the subject institution. Of this number, there were 122 tenured female faculty—12 of which were black females (8 held the rank of associate professor and 4 were full professors). There were 251 tenured male faculty—10 of which are black males (9 held the rank of associate professor and 1 full professor). Of the 32 percent of faculty with tenure, 5.9 percent are black—black females make up 3.2 percent of the total tenured faculty while black males make up 2.9 percent.
6. A PBS documentary by Sarah and Ken Burns tells the story of five minority youth wrongfully

convicted of the 1998 brutal rape of a young white woman jogging through the upper East Side New York's Central Park.

7. Nirmal Puwar (2004) advances a similar idea in her work. See *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*.

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