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Surviving British Academia in the Time of COVID-19: A Critical Autoethnography of a Woman of Color

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Abstract

This critical autoethnography is an account of my experiences as a WoC (Woman of Color) academic at a predominantly White institution in the times of COVID-19 and the consequential turn to online teaching and learning. It reflects on how the pandemic has exacerbated my experiences of discrimination, marginalization, isolation, and the struggles to find a balance between my personal and professional identities. Guided by intersectionality, the article explores the ways in which multiple forms of inequality are perpetuated within academia through my own lived experiences. It also explores the ways in which I, as a WoC and an ECA (Early Career Academic), learned to navigate the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and motherhood amid the pandemic. In writing this article, my hope is to adjoin the voices of WoC in British academia calling for an urgently needed open dialog with those in positions of power.

Keywords: Critical Autoethnography – intersectionality – gender – race – ethnicity – motherhood - women of color – academia – COVID-19 pandemic.

Prologue

I wrote and rewrote this article while sitting at my dining table in my 50m² (538 sq. ft.) flat, where I spent most of the COVID lockdowns. In writing, I felt compelled to reflect on my feelings of apprehension, anger, frustration, and exhaustion. In only a few months of my appointment as a permanent lecturer in a British higher education institution, the “system faced a sudden transition to remote teaching and learning,” (Malisch, et al., 2020, p. 15738). because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The story I tell here is about my experiences during the pandemic. But for the reader to understand these experiences and their implications, I must first, tell the story of my experiences before the pandemic; experiences that mirror many who preceded me, and certainly many who will follow. Despite feeling fortunate to be one of the few PhD graduates who find a career in British Academia, I am stumped by the inequalities I must endure. I was the first WoC appointed, and the least paid among all newly hired—both male and female in 2019. This is in addition to experiencing microaggressions, marginalization, dismissal, and other unpleasant situations. I share these experiences with the intent of encouraging academics from underrepresented populations to persevere.

Introduction

For a long time, the stories and lived experiences of WoC in British Academia have been ignored or dismissed by institutional leaders. Statistics on gender and race suggest that White men, followed by White women, continue to occupy advantageous positions in higher education compared to BAME (Black, Asian & minority ethnic) women and men. The most shocking evidence is the dearth of senior BAME academics, especially women. In 2018, “in comparison to 3895 white female and 12,455 white male professors in the UK, there were only 345 British WoC professors” (Mirza, 2018, p. 4). This is because WoC academics are less likely to be shortlisted (Pilkington, 2013), are on more precarious contracts, often have to

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wait longer to be promoted (they are being paid less to carry out work at a higher pay grade) and are on the lower tiers of the pay scale (Dar & Ibrahim, 2019, p. 1247) And despite this, gender equality has remained the priority (Bhopal, 2020a). Efforts like Athena SWAN (Scientific Women's Academic Network) Charter, a framework and accreditation scheme established in 2005 to recognize and celebrate good practices towards the advancement of gender equality, have mainly reflected the gains made by White feminism. But women of color still find the door firmly shut in their faces.

Within discourses around equality and diversity, institutional culture is often framed in terms that overlook the ways in which White privilege is perpetuated by implementing procedures and policies that generate disparate outcomes for people of color (Comer et al., 2017). "White privilege," is defined as the inherent advantages that White people enjoy because of their race in societies marked by racial inequality and injustice. Both White privilege and a hierarchy of oppression have resulted in a discourse of denial in which gender, as a competing identity, has been given greater significance and prominence compared to race (Aouragh, 2019; Bhopal, 2020b). The few published works in the past two decades are evidence that the narrow focus on gender within diversity agendas in British universities permits a sector-wide fictionalization of WoC career trajectories that overlooks Whiteness and Class from the analysis of why they are the most bullied, precarious, and underpaid (Gabriel & Tate, 2017).

British Academia neglects "Whiteness as a system of privilege and oppression," instead reframes inequalities "as issues to do with the individual ('lean in') or lack of representation ('diversity')" (Dar & Salmon, 2019, p. 64). And while contributions from WoC academics are now more present in British diversity discourses, they have repeatedly been used to promote a seemingly representational agenda "whereby the appearance of Black bodies in the workplace is used as evidence of equality" (Dar & Salmon, 2019, p. 64). The

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latter constraints explain the marginalization of WoC academics at predominately White institutions (see Gabriel & Tate, 2017, and Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012) for similar analysis in the US higher education context). Turner (2002, p. 77) describes the way in which women of color live with “multiple marginality ... situations in which a woman of color might experience marginality are multiplied depending on her marginal status within various contexts.” Young (2000, p. 42) describes the act of marginalization as “the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions ...” (in Baxley, 2012, p. 47). In the literature, WoC repeatedly discuss the barriers that lead to marginalization. These include isolation (Mirza, 2017), silencing (Ahmed, 2012), tokenism (Tate & Bagguley, 2017), and lack of support (Shilliam, 2014).

In many ways, my struggles as a WoC academic mirror these experiences. My journey also has its unique constituents, which I present here. I am an ECA whose workload includes teaching, supervising dissertations, writing academic articles, and taking on the responsibility for a heavy load of administrative work and student personal tutoring. At the time of writing this article, I was also a student, finishing my PhD corrections, and studying for a Post-Graduate Diploma of Academic Practice (PGCAP). I am a single mother whose duties include maintaining a household on a single-person’s salary and nurturing a teenage girl. I am a “migrant worker,” a status that results in being barred from access to public funds, like child support, tax relief, and more. Before the pandemic, I already had my hands full. In 2020, with the beginning of lockdown and the turn to online teaching and learning, emerging disparities arose, which have manifested and multiplied the challenges that I was already facing. As a WoC academic, with the shift to virtual classrooms, I experienced greater prejudices and implicit biases from students and staff alike. As a woman, I was more than ever expected to do the “invisible work in academia” (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017, p. 228). As a mother, I faced the perpetuation of the ongoing

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struggle for work-life balance (Kachchaf, Co, Hodari, & Ong, 2015; Yoo, 2020) as I negotiated my daughter's home-schooling and anxieties while juggling my own. And as a migrant worker barred from access to public funds, I am left more economically vulnerable and exposed.

After discussing the autoethnographic process in the next section, the body of this article consists of two main sections. In the first, I discuss my entry to academia through which I have been exposed to several discriminatory practices. Sharing my experiences before the pandemic is essential for understanding the ways they have been exacerbated by the pandemic. In the second section, I discuss my experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In concluding, I speak of surviving with regards to my emotional and spiritual growth; my endurance, determination and perseverance, and my hopes to be an agent of change in my various roles within and beyond my institution. I believe that it is by being vocal about who we are, what we've been through and how we feel as we fight, that transformative work happens. Collins (1990, p. 221) asserts that "new knowledge is important for social change." Gabriel & Tate (2017, p. 148) argue that "social transformation occurs when individuals develop the critical consciousness to change the nature of the relations that govern oppression." The precise act of refusing to be silenced through telling my story, in and of itself, can encourage more WoC academics to initiate action to fight the epistemic violence we typically confront in academia. This critical autoethnography, therefore, is an attempt to highlight the nuances and complexities of how various hierarchies of oppression play out in day-to-day interactions through my own lived experiences. My aim is not to invoke sympathy, but to help readers develop a critical consciousness that enables them to recognize the subtle yet impactful ways that intersectional discriminations occur, their material consequences, and the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified

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and exacerbated them. It is only then that the attitudes and behaviors of individuals that perpetuate Whiteness and contribute to unequal power relations may change.

The Autoethnographic Process

Autoethnography brings the personal experience, the concrete facts, and an emphasis on storytelling to academic scholarship, but scholars often feel the need for clear and strong theoretical frameworks that help understand how such stories inspire and steer the change that they are demanding. Critical autoethnography provides such frameworks because the term “critical” is a reminder that “theory is not a static or autonomous set of ideas, objects, or practices” (Jones, 2016, p. 228). Jones (2016, p. 229) describes the term “critical” in critical autoethnography as a method that engages in the process of becoming, and therefore, helps envision ways of embodying change. She argues that theory is “a language for thinking with and through, asking questions about, and acting on—the experiences and happenings in our stories” (Jones, 2016, p. 229). “Critical” autoethnography distinguishes between autoethnography that focuses on the self and autoethnography that captures the reflexive approach with which cultural and institutional contexts are examined. Boylorn and Orbe (2014, p. 20) explain that critical autoethnography combines three aspects of critical theory: “to understand the lived experiences of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination.” As such, critical autoethnography helps me recognize and celebrate my unique voice as I define myself as a WoC academic who is determined to change how the world views her and other WoC “rendered invisible” in academic discourses (Baxley, 2012, p. 52).

While I use the term “women of color,” I write this autoethnography from my particular raced, classed, gendered, sexed positionality, identifying the distinctions between

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how and why I view the world through my lens and what makes it similar to others, different from others, or both (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014). I draw on critical autoethnography to engage the complex ways in which my identity could be understood through explorations of intersectionality; “the cultural synergy that is created through interactions” of race, ethnicity, gender, motherhood, and more (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 16). Cultural change does not happen merely by gathering data because the data don’t give an understanding of the subtle ways intersectional discriminations are experienced. In social, political, and academic discussions, the term “women and minorities,” as Chavous (2018) explains in a blog series, is often used in ways that “ignore the overlaps between the two.” Such framing, she asserts, “contributes to a conception of womanhood that excludes women of color and a conception of race based on experiences of maleness” (Chavous, 2018). Responding to this type of erasure and critiquing traditional feminist and anti-racist theories that have historically neglected the experiences of women of color, Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality.” The term describes how race, class, gender, religion, and various other individual characteristics intersect, overlap, and combine with one another (Crenshaw, 1989). As an analytical tool, intersectionality ensures that social divisions are not examined as isolated cases but as factors that influence one another rather than being mutually exclusive.

Guided by intersectionality, exploring the development of my critical consciousness has become the foundation for this autoethnography. And because many of those who interact with me daily have often doubted my ability to make claims about my own experiences and knowledge— “are you sure this happened to you?”, “are you sure you’re not exaggerating?”, “you’re too sensitive!” —I present my story as a subjective truth, which represents ongoing “theoretical interpretations” of my “reality” as a woman “who lives it” (Collins, 1990, p. 22). The following narrative comes from memory, notes I have scribbled in

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my journal after a particular incident, and conversations with people I consider close to me. I draw on my experiences from 2017 to 2021 as a PhD researcher, hourly paid lecturer, then ECA. Several aspects of my identity were/are salient. I am an Egyptian woman who had a fortunate upbringing compared to many. I immigrated to the UK to pursue a career in academia, grappling with distance from my family and consequential isolation. I am a single mother, and a secular Muslim, aspects that have made it arduous for me to remain in Egypt. I came to the UK to research and write about secular women like myself, but my new positionality as an immigrant and a WoC academic has made me realize the salient ways in which interlocking systems of oppression function within my experiences. My intersections afford me levels of privilege and disadvantage simultaneously. Because of these intersections, I realize that the COVID-19 pandemic impacts me and my emotions in different ways than it may impact someone with different intersections. Along these lines, I argue that my autoethnographic account, when combined with other accounts of WoC in British academia, provides a deeper understanding of the nuances and complexities of these experiences. If critical autoethnography offers a way of giving an account of oneself and one's lived experience, it does so because it is, as Butler (2005, p. 130) brings it; "an acting for, and in the face of, the other," and because of this, it becomes "an occasion and commitment to transformation" (Jones, 2016, p. 234).

Entering Academia: A Journey into Whiteness

Everything in my life from battling for gender equality since my early 20s, leaving a patriarchal, militaristic country, escaping abusive men and a society that has become increasingly Islamized, had not prepared me for what I have experienced in British Academia. I could not have predicted the discriminatory practices, institutional barriers and multiple challenges existing at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and motherhood

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that WoC academics experience (Muhs et al., 2012; Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Anderson, Goodall, & Trahar, 2020) in spaces I believed to be “civilized,” and “diverse.” I relate to what Valverde (2013, p. 372) articulates as “naively” struggling through “invisible barriers” essentially blaming myself instead of recognizing the early signs of “systemic wrongdoings.” I was not prepared to fully understand a system that is supposed to be a space for “intellectual discoveries and critical investigations,” (Valverde, 2013, p. 372) yet holds the same societal biases that engender discrimination, exclusion, and violence.

I came to academia after a journey of gender-based activism in Egypt, founded on a personal story. As a result of daring to speak against *Shari'a*, I was labeled “western,” “infidel,” “loose,” “reckless” and sometimes “anti-Muslim” by the media and the public. The impact of these personal experiences was so profound. I discovered the relationship between the liberation of women and the liberation of a country from a corrupt regime and a rising Islamist ideology. This was precisely what brought me to academia. Fighting for gender equality became a matter of life or death to me that I abandoned my former career, pursued postgraduate studies in gender, and devoted my life to fighting gender-based violence in all its forms. I volunteered for several NGOs, attended conferences around the Middle East, wrote blog posts and opinion articles, participated in televised debates, and became a serious and recognized active challenger of women’s status in Muslim countries. Despite all my work, my public demonization did not stop.

I vowed to continue the battle. In 2016, I moved to the UK to pursue my PhD in gender and social policy. Ultimately, what I really wanted was to write, because “writing is a political act, a way of reclaiming power” (Behl, 2019, p. 88) and of finding my own voice. I remember going to the British library when I first arrived, standing in the middle of its courtyard, spreading my arms, and saying “I will cherish this opportunity and promise to work as hard as I can.” I thought at the time that because I had succeeded in securing a PhD

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scholarship, I would be able to write freely and unrestricted. Ironically, I harnessed the same institutional narrative of “individual (lean in)” (Dar & Salmon, 2019, p. 64) that I am now criticizing. I have inherited the belief that I could become prosperous entirely based on individual merit and hard work; I was wrong. Fighting misogyny and gender-based violence was everything I have lived for in the previous ten years. It was in the UK that I understood the meaning of racial disparity. It was in the UK that I learned the significance of intersectionality. It was in the UK that I realized that not only my gender, but my race, class as well as my motherhood were all linked to my identity. Only then did I begin to understand that the assumptions others held about me, which include, but are not restricted to my gender, would carry consequences. I also understood that those assumptions were informed by larger cultural narratives of Black women, stereotypes that are sometimes resisted and sometimes reiterated (Boylorn, 2014).

Marginalization, Isolation and Dismissal

During these early years, as a PhD researcher and hourly paid lecturer, in many instances, I was ignored in situations where my presence and contributions should have been acknowledged. I was not seen by my colleagues as an authoritative, legitimate knowledge producer; “Postcolonial Feminism? Is this even a theory?” “Narrative method? Does it matter?” I have experienced both hypervisibility due to looking different, speaking differently, and thinking differently, and invisibility due to being dismissed as a result of these differences (Lander & Santoro, 2017). At times, I thought I was paranoid observing what I now understand to be examples of micro-aggressions; “everyday slights, insults, indignities, and invalidations delivered toward people of color” (Sue, 2015, p. 7). This left me concerned of whether “I was the cause of or imagining my own mistreatment” (Hill, 2019, p. 209). I was positive that my experience would eventually be different. I was wrong. From

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being told to “go home” by administrative staff to being advised to “downplay” the racial and gendered aspect of my research by academic staff, as “they seem self-indulgent and exaggerated,” my understandings of intersectionality became clearer.

Despite being grateful to have been offered the opportunity to pursue a PhD at a leading academic institution, I have not felt a sense of belonging, rather “othered” because of my gendered and raced positionality (Behl, 2017, p. 581). The realization that people of color were presumed inferior intellectually, “incompetent,” (Muhs et al., 2012) but allowed in the “Ivory Tower” only to fulfil a “diversity” quota (Ahmed, 2012), has made me work harder to prove worthy of the place I have been offered. Despite, or maybe because of these existing stereotyping and marginalization that eventually lead to isolation and silencing (Baxley, 2012), I found refuge and salvation in studying critical race and feminist postcolonial theory. I aspired to become an activist-scholar like Sara Ahmed, bell hooks, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Heidi Safia Mirza, and others. I continued to rise above such instances, pretending to be unaffected by these micro-aggressions, hopeful that once I finished my PhD studies and discarded the “student” gown, my experiences would transform; I was wrong again.

In 2019, having reached the end of my PhD scholarship, my international student visa was about to expire, and my residence status was threatened. I felt as if I had suddenly turned into a tourist in a country I had called home for the previous three years. In addition to my own anxiety, I had to work on comforting a teenage girl anxious about our uncertain near future. This future was entirely dependent on finding a job in a highly competitive market, a task that proved near impossible for many WoC academics in their early career (Mirza, 2017; Hill, 2017). In August 2019, after a two-month marathon of job applications while editing my final PhD thesis, I was shortlisted for a permanent lectureship; I was flattered! Soon after entering my “dream job,” I realized that not much was going to change in the way I was treated. As I write this, I am saddened to recognize that the confusing and painful situations I

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encountered earlier may continue to be my commonplace experiences as I move in my career to a permanent member of staff at another Higher Education institution.

Caught up in the fantasy of this seemingly “perfect” job, I all but ignored, or at least attempted to downplay, the early warning signs of bias. For instance, within the first weeks of my new appointment, one of my colleagues reassured me that they would do their best to “British me up,” as I struggled to fit in a department of predominantly White academics. And despite my 10 years of international research and teaching experience, I was treated by a white female manager as if I had just completed my undergraduate studies. For almost a year she called me “kiddo” until one day I politely but firmly said, “I’m not a kiddo, I am a full-grown doctor.” Such comments were not all that I experienced early in my appointment. My experiences included feeling completely dismissed by some of my colleagues who speak to everyone else in the room except me; being ridiculed when bringing suggestions to curriculum development and course management; and being micro-managed when teaching on a module led by a White male academic. I was and continue to be constantly referred to as a “student” by university staff despite having a staff ID card. I question if my feelings of marginalization and dismissal are encounters of subtle everyday racism or if gender plays a role. Nevertheless, the writings of WoC academics indicate that when it comes to explaining their experiences, gender alone is insufficient (Collins, 1998).

Precarity, Underpayment and Overworking

Being a woman in and of itself has a negative and significant association with where women are in their academic rankings. If they are ECAs, they are expected to spend most of their time on teaching and service (Santos, Dang, & Phu, 2019). The amount of time spent on these activities may be considered both a cause and a consequence of the gender gap (Santos et al., 2019). In addition, WoC often face discrimination at the intersections of gender, race,

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ethnicity, and motherhood, etc. They often know that bias exists but are unaware of its extent and are sometimes even shocked by the academic culture that creates and sustains this hostile environment. I am a WoC and an ECA, but I am also a foreigner stereotyped through images that are perpetuated in the media and public discourses, in a hierarchically gendered organizational context, which has made my experiences even more complex.

In my new appointment, I was expected to teach and supervise both undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations and undertake admin work and personal tutoring. I was also expected to finish my PhD corrections on time and commence to study for my PGCAP, all during the first term of my appointment. All in addition to my aspirations to prosper in research. I was thrown into a deep-sea the day I started my new job, being required to deliver teaching sessions on the very first day of what should have been my induction. I was already doing more than other colleagues hired on a higher pay despite having less qualifications; no PhD, no research experience, and less teaching experience, than mine. And despite having queried several times about the justification for my lower pay to both my seniors and HR personnel, I never received a clear explanation; neither have I taken a formal approach. I preferred to present myself in ways that center my strength and “suppress my anger,” careful not to be seen as the “Sapphire”; shrill, loud, hostile and aggressive (Boylorn, 2014, p. 131). I ended up paying a high price, which I discuss in the following section.

And then Came the Pandemic

It was overnight that the “system faced a sudden transition to remote teaching and learning,” changes in examination and marking, and a “loss of access to research resources” (Malisch, et al., 2020, p. 15378). Consequently, changes in household work, child and elder care, and physical restrictions have increased students’, as well as academics’ mental health issues and reduced the time available to complete academic work (Malisch, et al., 2020, p.

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15379). This meant that even among those in privileged positions, women were likely to bear a greater load. This may be even heavier for those facing interlocking systems of oppression, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and motherhood, etc. (Gabster, Kim van Daalen, Dhatt, & Barry, 2020). Like others, as a full-time member of staff, I also experienced the dramatic changes that came with the transition to remote work. In addition, the challenges that I was already facing before the pandemic have now become my everyday encounters.

Within the present discourse of higher education where academic institutions act as service providers, and students as customers, performing emotional labor is “required both for a successful delivery of service to customers, but also as a strategy for coping with the need to conceal real feelings” (Gibbs & Constanti, 2004, p. 243). From the beginning of the lockdown in mid-March 2020 until August 2021, emotional labor—the process of regulating emotions as part of the work role (Nyanjom & Naylor, 2020, p. 1), had become an integral aspect of my everyday professional and personal lives. I have had to carry on showing enthusiasm to my students even when I was being verbally attacked by them. I had frequently held back from expressing how I felt towards colleagues’ increased dismissal of concerns that I attempted to raise in virtual team meetings. As a WoC academic aspiring to change structural inequalities within higher education, I have taken many seats in diversity, decolonization, Athena SWAN and widening participation committees, which have added to the “invisible work in academia” (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017) that I am expected to do. As a mother, I faced the challenge of managing my child’s learning while juggling my own, a perpetuation of my earlier ongoing struggle for work-life balance (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). And as a migrant worker, I have borne an additional layer of legal and financial compliance in the form of immigration considerations, which has left me more economically vulnerable and exposed than most of my colleagues.

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Negotiating my Authority in Online Classrooms

Given the intersectional aspects of their identities, WoC academics learn early in their careers that their bodies impact the way people perceive and treat them (Mirza, 1992; Hill, 2017; Gabriel & Tate, 2017). Research on WoC academics has shown evidence of the negative perceptions and treatment they encounter from both students and colleagues (Yao & Boss, 2020). Although the online setting can, hypothetically, provide a shield to how identities are embodied, it does not remove the cultural, historical, or socio-political aspects of these identities. Research has also shown race and gender to be salient to power dynamics in the classroom, particularly between WoC academics and their students (Rodriguez, 2009, see also Vargas, Proglar, Denzin, & Steinberg, 2002). Before teaching became my full-time job, I had not noticed such issues as clearly as I do now, or perhaps I had ignored them. The pedagogic approaches that I have aimed to follow when I entered academia as a full-time permanent member of staff are intertwined with both decolonization and feminism. These pedagogies promote the commitment to enhancing inclusive education (de Jong, Icaza, & Rutazibwa, 2019); encourage teaching practices that share power with students; and democratize the teaching setting by adopting styles that are non-authoritative (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005). Unfortunately, a growing body of literature demonstrates the difficulties (yet possibilities) of engaging in such pedagogies (Tabar, 2014). In the classroom, “student resistance to a societal critique seems to form a continuum” (Tabar, 2014, p. 8) with many refusing to engage, and others overtaking the discussion denying their own privilege. This reveals a conflict between feminist and decolonial pedagogies and the lived classroom experiences of WoC academics.

Before the pandemic, during in-person teaching, I had experienced hostility from students and challenges to my intellectual ability. I had, on occasion, read students’ feedback

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that discloses statements like “she doesn’t know what she’s doing,” “she doesn’t smile enough,” “we prefer [a name of a white male lecturer] to her,” etc. Such comments, at times, left me feeling vulnerable. I had to battle my way on my own, struggling to find ways to balance the adoption of a non-authoritative style while at the same time being able to maintain a level of control. My feminist training reminds me not to be concerned with maintaining power. But my experience tells me that I do not have the luxury of respect my White colleagues naturally receive from their students. In the end, I felt I must claim authority first before I share power with my students. In the classroom setting I chose to dress formally, stand or take the center seat, write my title “Dr” on my PowerPoint slides, and monitor students’ engagement by encouraging silent students to talk and closely censoring those who monopolize discussions. I succeeded, though I realized that these tactics may increase students’ perceptions of my competence yet decrease their perceptions of my approachability (Oliver et al., 2021). This has become a double bind for me, one that has afforded me the authority I needed yet positioned me at risk of further negative feedback from students. Certainly, student evaluations can be helpful for lecturers to improve their practice, but only if these comments are constructive rather than statements which aim at attacking instead of improving. Past research has shown that in instructor evaluations students are biased against women (Carillo, 2007; Young, Rush, & Shaw, 2009; MacNeill, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015). Research has also shown that instructors who are female and persons of color receive lower scores on student evaluations than those who are white males (Chávez & Mitchell, 2020). This bias is particularly problematic because it perpetuates the precarity, underpayment, and overworking that I had been experiencing before the pandemic (Huston, 2006).

In virtual classrooms from March 2020 to August 2021, I experienced even greater prejudices and implicit biases. When students had the freedom to turn off both their cameras

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and their microphones, while I was obliged to keep both on, I have found it much easier for them to attack me via the chat function and respond to each other's comments with further bullying directed at me. One of my earliest online sessions during the academic year of 2020/21 was an introductory live lecture delivered to over 200 level-6 students on Microsoft Teams. As a relatively new member of staff, I have not had the chance to meet many of those students in-person before the pandemic. Just as the session started, I had to endure reading comments such as "this is bullshit," "we want our money back," and "why are we even studying this module?" etc. I wondered if they would have acted similarly to a white male academic. In fact, I decided to ask a white male colleague to join me for the following session and, as I have expected, students acted more respectfully.

I have been muted by students on many occasions during that and subsequent sessions. I have been told "you look scary on the screen" by one of my students. These comments exemplify students' expectations of me as a nurturing WoC, "who should validate students, not intellectually challenge them" (Behl, 2017, p. 581); the "Mammy" stereotype seen as selfless and warm (Boylorn, 2014). And while the issue of teacher bias in online classrooms has only started to garner attention (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018), to this point student bias toward the teacher during online settings has received little or no attention. As the students continue to be regarded as the "customer" and I am expected to maintain professionalism and conceal my emotions, I enter my virtual classrooms with a mortifying amount of apprehension and unease. The tactics that I have taken on in brick-and-mortar classes could hardly be utilized virtually. In this atmosphere, as a WoC academic, the feminist and decolonial pedagogies of my experience leave me asking: where is my authority in the classroom?

Finding my Voice in a White Virtual Space

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Since the turn to virtual work, my department has decided to run weekly team meetings, instead of the monthly departmental meetings we had before the pandemic. My previous experiences of marginalization, isolation and dismissal have been hugely intensified during these virtual meetings. I have been misunderstood at times. I have been asked in a seemingly “polite” manner to stop “shouting”, “being defensive,” “being overly sensitive,” and “being too emotional.” I have been talked over, interrupted, and sometimes ignored more often in the virtual setting than I had experienced in-person before the pandemic. I felt like I have been further isolated working from home. During virtual meetings, it seemed that my colleagues were kept updated more than I am. And there was no way I could tell whether some meetings were being held without my knowledge if emails and conversations were taking place privately rather than inclusive of the whole team, and decisions were being made at the expense of some.

Implicit biases, harassment and micro-aggressions in virtual environments are not limited to interactions with students (Goodwin & Mitchneck, 2020). Recent research shows that virtual meeting rooms are playing out to magnify pre-existing biases that female academics have been experiencing (Catalyst, 2020) such as male executives taking the floor (Brescoll, 2011), men being more likely to interrupt their female than male colleagues (Reeves, 2019), and women speaking up less than men (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, & Shaker, 2012). As a WoC, I have experienced the hypervisibility and invisibility that I was already experiencing more often during virtual meetings. I have experienced hypervisibility when something related to my work is discussed. One incident of salience to me was concerned with a module I have been asked to lead in the academic year of 2020/21 entirely delivered virtually. This “theory and method” module was the least “liked” or “understood” by third year students in the preceding years, evident in student evaluations of the module. And despite the ongoing and sometimes exaggerated support that I have provided students with

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throughout the year—discussion boards, additional introductory sessions, Q & A sessions, and recorded videos, I was singled out in virtual team meetings as the “problem,” rather than the already problematic module. This issue appeared to have become the license for colleagues to “lecture” me on how to deal with students on multiple occasions, as if my ten years of teaching experience have suddenly vanished. But I have also experienced more invisibility when general discussions about the course were considered. Many times, my raised hands were ignored or overlooked. I was being interrupted many times and when I finally succeed to get a word in, I couldn’t gauge anyone’s response. I couldn’t tell if anyone agreed with the points I was trying to make. I just saw blank stares and an invitation from the meeting convenor to move on to the next issue.

As a WoC among predominantly White colleagues, I believe that virtual meetings have further affected my ability to speak up. COVID-19 has not only revealed the double bind of gendered and racial discrimination in interactions and experiences, as well as the feeling of dismissal I have experienced during in-person meetings before the pandemic, but it has also exacerbated them with the move to virtual work. At times, I felt powerless to challenge my colleagues knowing I will be interrupted again, talked over again, and ignored again. And since I was facing challenges on many fronts, I chose to put this issue aside preferring instead to focus on other priorities, such as working on negotiating my authority in the classroom, and trying to find some work-life balance, which I discuss later.

More “Invisible Work” and Less Access to Resources

It is widely accepted that there are various types of work that must be done within higher education institutions; research, administration, teaching, advising, and service. And it is also widely recognized that “these five components— all of which are necessary— are not valued or rewarded equally” (Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group,

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2017, p. 230). As a WoC academic, I am often expected or even required to do extra work, advocacy, and mentorship, much of which is not formally recognized (Leathwood, Maylor, & Moreau, 2009). In addition, and because my aspiration is to change structural inequalities within my institution, I have voluntarily taken many seats on Equality Diversity and Inclusion, Decolonization, Athena SWAN and widening participation committees. If I don't do it, who will? This has most certainly impacted my ability to complete the requirements for my career progression without working through weekends and annual leave days while my White male colleagues who are unbounded by institutional barriers (racism, and sexism in this case) are free to pursue more highly rewarded work and enjoy some time off.

When I started my permanent job in academia, I questioned whether I was ready to set aside my research ambitions, which may also mean putting promotions behind me. But with the pandemic forcing all academics to turn to online teaching and learning, I was left with little choice. In addition to teaching, I prepared sessions from scratch, recorded sessions, mentored, advised, and supervised dissertations, read and commented on drafts of papers, wrote letters of recommendation, and provided personal tutoring and pastoral care. Adding to this burden, I was expected to attend to anxious students, which, before the pandemic, was dealt with by professionals (Gender & Society, 2020). By expanding the academic pillars of service and teaching, COVID-19 has left little, if any, time for me to pursue and maintain my research or other scholarly activities, echoing current experiences of many women in academia (Malisch, et al., 2020). But those seemingly short-term changes in my ability to produce "enough" publications may affect my long-term career outcomes.

Before the pandemic, resources were already tight, especially for ECAs. After the pandemic, with the heavy workloads and the lack of support, my opportunities to advance my research capacity and enhance my promotion prospects have been further reduced. While some academic facilities such as libraries and archives have opened with social distancing

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measures in place after the easing of the first lockdown in July 2020, others have remained shut or with restricted access (Watchorn & Smith, 2020). My ability to conduct face-to-face interviews, group work or engage in fieldwork was also severely hampered (Watchorn & Smith, 2020). And in-person conferences remained severely curtailed. As a researcher in her early career, I often depended on conferences to grow my networks, find potential collaborators, build my profile, and get noticed. All this was almost gone during the pandemic. Having merely written this autoethnography and struggling to make room for another project, along with finishing my PhD corrections and starting my PGCAP, being exhausted has become a marker of my gendered and racialized struggles across life and work. As Emejulu & Bassel (2020, p. 405) suggest, this exhaustion operates quite literally as a “structure of mutual recognition” of the disproportionate degree of emotional labor WoC must endure.

The Compound Factors Impacting my Work-life Balance

Much like the invisible work in academia, women are also bearing the brunt of the invisible work at home while adjusting to the new reality of working from home (Yoo, 2020). Work-from-home obligations and online education have taken on a whole new meaning, transforming households from places of recreation and rest into multi-purpose spaces (Waller, 2020; Pineault & Rouzer, 2020). Mine was certainly transformed. But the challenges of work-life balance I face as a WoC differ from those white female academics face. Although challenges in balancing work/career and life/family are well-documented for women (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013; Gervais & Millea, 2016), very little research focuses on how these issues may differ for WoC (Kachchaf et al., 2015). Because of multiple marginalities, WoC academics are often perceived as far from ideal workers (Turner, 2002). Working under institutional tokenism and structural inequality inherent in much of academia,

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the ways multiple and intersecting factors, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and other marginalized identities, may compound to impact their experiences, which do not only differ from the experiences on white female academics but also from those of male academics of color.

As a single mother, as schools close, I have faced the challenge of negotiating my daughter's learning while juggling my own work. In my tiny flat, with a 15-year-old teenager studying from home, it was sometimes near impossible to focus on my work (that includes synchronous online live sessions) while my daughter too had to attend her online classes. While she had a fixed schedule, I certainly didn't. Having had to adjust a lunchtime during her lunch break has proved to be challenging. I ended up waking up earlier to prepare her lunch, which she had to eat in her own tiny bedroom; a space that had felt like a prison cell to her during lockdown. Having to be very mindful of her mental health issues, I was constantly switching between being an academic, mother, home-school teacher and counsellor. In that situation, my own mental health issues were certainly ignored both by myself and by my institution.

Ultimately, I was unable to address the increase in workload owing to the COVID-19 situation without dropping some of my parenting responsibilities. I ended up never fully enough neither for my home nor for my work. Even before the pandemic hit, WoC academics had generally found it difficult to prevent their work-life from infiltrating their home life, due to the variety of roles they must fill (Kachchaf et al., 2015). During the COVID crisis, with most academics working from home, maintaining work-life boundaries was simply not realistic, let alone in a single mother's household (Guy & Arthur, 2020). Being a working mother is tough in and of itself, but being a mother during COVID-19, with the incompatible and inadequate home-work environment, and the disruptions caused by domestic situations, has proved much more difficult than I could have anticipated. And because as a WoC, I was

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already seen as less competent, I continued to struggle more than others to prove that I am worthy of the place I am given. In addition, I continued to cope with being more visible/invisible, more isolated, more excluded, and more likely to confront various forms of race/ethnicity and gender inequality, such as disproportionately more work responsibilities than my colleagues.

Economic Vulnerability as a Result of my Immigration Status

When I first arrived in the UK, I was granted an international student visa which had cost me around £10,000 (\$14,000). Now PhD students are part of the UK's points-based “Student Route” visa system that was previously known as the Tier-4; the visa type I was granted. This visa is usually terminated on submission of a final PhD thesis. Additionally, the PhD scholarship I was granted, like most available PhD scholarships, only covered my yearly tuition fees rate for EU and home students (a third of what I had to pay) plus a £1,000 (\$1,400) for monthly maintenance. To cover the difference in fees, I needed at least £30,000 (\$41,000) ahead of my arrival. I was only able to secure this large amount of money by selling my flat in Cairo, which barely secured this sum of money with nothing left to save. Additionally, as a full-time PhD student, I was limited to no more than 20 hours per week of work. That meant that I had to live on my maintenance money and the earnings from a few hourly paid sessions. This was hardly enough for rent, basic necessities, and child expenses. I endured the financial hardships of those three years, which only successfully passed because of the help I received from my family in Egypt, which was a huge burden on them given the little value of the Egyptian currency compared to the British.

I was extremely lucky to have been able to find a job as soon as I finished my PhD before my Tier-4 visa was terminated, but the amount of money I had to borrow from my family for my new Tier-2 “skilled worker” visa could have been enough to put a deposit on a

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house. The health surcharge which I have paid for myself and my daughter has cost me £5,000 on top of another £5,000 for our visa expenses, all paid before I even started my job. And while I already pay for National Health Insurance (NHS) in taxes like my colleagues, I am in effect paying for it twice. These expenses amounted to almost half of my first-year net income. Ultimately, there is no guarantee that I will be granted an Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) after my five-year visa ends. The conditions for granting ILR to Tier-2 workers in the UK depend on salary. And as I began my career with the lowest salary among my colleagues, there is no guarantee I will be able to reach the required salary at the “right” time. This means that I may be compelled to wait for another 5 years and apply for another Tier-2 visa that will effectively cost me as much as I have paid before or even more. All this means I cannot plan for the future, because I am living in a state of constant uncertainty, both financially and because of my immigration status. And as performance ratings in my institution have been suspended during the COVID-19 situation, my career progression will be based solely on salary increments of my starting salary. This means that others, who started with a higher salary, will progress in their career regardless of their performance, while I will not, despite the days, nights, weekends and annual leave days that I’ve spent working during the pandemic.

With my Tier-2 visa, I also bear an additional layer of legal compliance in the form of immigration considerations. No recourse to public funds (NRPF) is an immigration condition imposed on most individuals who hold limited leave to enter or remain in the United Kingdom (The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, 2020). The condition is breached if an individual accesses universal credit, income-based employment & support allowance, housing benefit, child benefit, child tax credit, and many others (Silkin, 2020). Breach of the condition is a serious matter and can lead to the person having their leave curtailed or their future ILR application refused. Despite being one of the lucky individuals who have not lost

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their jobs, the interruption of my progression during the pandemic and the extra expenses associated with working from home and home-schooling, I am left more economically vulnerable and exposed than most of my colleagues who have been able to progress during the pandemic and who have access to tax relief, child-support, etc. With more than a year in and out of lockdowns now and Brexit looming, the future is even more ambiguous. The emotional and mental impact of having to live in uncertainty and financial scarcity with a teenager who longs to feel that her future plans won't be jeopardized because of immigration status or lack of money is debilitating.

Carrying the Burden of Emotional Labor

Universities are considered to represent a microcosm of middle-class society. Academic life is often seen to be comfortable and progressive. When I tell someone that I am an academic, they expect me to be financially comfortable while enjoying a great deal of work-life balance. Well, I am certainly not one of those. While some academics used the lockdown as a fruitful period to concentrate on their research and writing, others struggled on many fronts (Watchorn & Smith, 2020). While some had the workspace, money, and resources they needed to continue with their work, others were hampered (Watchorn & Smith, 2020). The intersectional inequalities I had experienced in my day-to-day academic life are evidence of how entrenched structural disadvantage and privilege are. And these conditions have intensified as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, laying bare structural discrimination at the heart of British universities.

Amid the pandemic, many British universities have cut thousands of academics on short contracts (Staton, 2020). Goldsmith, for example, has ended 800 fixed-term contracts over the summer of 2020 (40% of its teaching staff) (Goldsmith University and College Union, 2020). Those contracts are disproportionately held by BAME and female academics

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(HESA, 2021). Knowing this news, I am expected to feel grateful for the privilege of being on a permanent contract. But what follows is the added emotional labor of having to constantly explain the gendered and raced discriminations and microaggressions that I experience or pretend to be color neutral in the face of these experiences. Hussein & Hussain (2020) explain that the perception of people of color as overly emotional, sensitive, and only focused on race and racism, means that within the institution, the resistance to racist structures or the flagging of incidents of implicit bias or microaggression are countered before they occur. If I respond to bias with anger or frustration, I reify the white racial framing of WoC as loud, hostile, and aggressive (Boylorn, 2014), or overly emotional (Evans & Moore, 2015). I am, therefore, faced with the dilemma of either conforming to the emotional labor associated with being silenced, thus participating in my own subordination, or accepting the consequence of appearing “unprofessional,” (either aggressive or emotional) which also involves a great deal of emotional labor (Evans & Moore, 2015, p. 442).

Several texts have recently extended the work on gendered emotional labor to examine the dynamics of race (Evans & Moore, 2015). In an interview with Forbes, Gemma Hartley (2018) defines “emotional labor” as “the unpaid, often unnoticed labor that goes into keeping everyone around you comfortable and happy” (in Wilding, 2018). While I certainly love my job, I admit that participating in white institutional spaces required and continues to require me a great deal of emotional labor. This stems from the stark contradiction between my gendered and racialized experiences on the one hand, and the dominant discourse that minimizes and delegitimizes these experiences, on the other (Evans & Moore, 2015). It is not what I do, but how I do it, that the notion of emotional labor draws attention to. Making the effort to manage and suppress feelings in the face of aggression, both the elusive and the blatant, while at the same time seeking ways that won’t appear unprofessional, requires a great deal of emotional labor. And as higher education navigates the COVID-19 pandemic, if

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anything, the burden of emotional labor has increased. While working from home, the pressure to perform as I would under normal circumstances, without regard to my own emotions was at times intolerable. And despite trying to set hard boundaries, work- and work-related emotional labor continued to seep through the cracks.

Surviving Academia

Survival was not always my principal mode of living. Before I came to the UK, I had a middle-class upbringing, a loving family, and a master's degree from the best university in the country. Despite being demonized by the media and the public, with my family's support, I fought and won every single battle and marked a legal precedent that subsequently resulted in the reformation of personal status laws in Egypt. At the time, these experiences made me believe I could succeed at anything. It was only when I entered British academia that I understood what "survival" meant. Intersections of my identity had cast me as an outsider (Henderson, Hunter, & Hildreth, 2010). Living at the intersection of racism and sexism is far from easy. When I speak of survival, I refer to my resilience, endurance, determination, and perseverance in the face of injustice. When I speak of survival, I refer to my ambition to be an agent of change in my various roles within and beyond my institution. In writing this autoethnography, I realize that as I entered academia, I brought with me personal and cultural assets and values that helped me develop coping strategies, redefine my experiences by constructing views of my own identity, and become an advocate for others. My decision to write this autoethnography to adjoin other voices is also connected with claiming agency in the face of dominant discourses which in many ways, undermined my cultural, emotional, and intellectual assets (Gabriel & Tate, 2017). It is, thus, imperative to show how the different sides of who I am—teacher, doctoral student, colleague, racialized woman, single

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mother, migrant worker, etc.—are intricately connected to the larger socio-political conversation (Santiago, Karimi, & Arvelo Alicea, 2017).

Having said that and acknowledging the emotional labor that WoC academics must endure, I accept that being an agent of change may sometimes involve taking on additional commitments. For an ongoing and open dialog to take place, WoC academics must be at the heart of it, structuring the course of action to tackle the challenges they face. To be able to do so, supportive and empowering communities are needed, both personally and professionally. Finding (or creating) such communities has helped me counter isolation and contest inaccurate perceptions about who I am. Being the only WoC hired in my department in 2019, I was determined I must find a “community”; likeminded people who experienced some of my challenges and can relate to them. I started by searching members of school research groups who had similar research interests. I identified two groups who ran monthly meetings which I attended. This has made me feel less isolated and more empowered. However, due to repeated lockdowns, these groups stopped meeting. Because of this, I believe that, now more than ever, identifying allies and finding mentors who walked the same avenue may be the best support a WoC academic might find in her quest for social justice and social change. After the ease of lockdown, I decided to start searching beyond my institution. I identified a Facebook group called “BAME Women in Academia Support Network,” and a regional network newly launched by the British Academy called “Early Career Researcher Network.” These networks have provided me with a sense of belonging and empowered me to endure and survive British academia.

Past stories show that survival is what WoC academics know how to do well (Turner, 2002; Henderson et al., 2010; Gabriel & Tate, 2017). But to move from “surviving” to “thriving,” it is important for my voice along with other voices of WoC academics to be at the table of decision making. And while acknowledging that staying strong and having a

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voice is important—especially in societal contexts that tend to frame women of color as deficient—the onus for supporting their path to “thriving” and success should not only be on them. Higher education institutions should create policies that address and actively breakdown the heteronormativity, coloniality, and white supremacy entrenched in their structures. They should be responsible and accountable for listening WoC academics, understanding their experiences and needs, and providing tailored support that leverages their thriving. Research highlights the importance of institutional support (Turner, 2002; Henderson et al., 2010; Baxley, 2012). Recruitment efforts to achieve equity (not merely equality) for WoC academics, initiating quality mentorship programs, and creating counterspace and support groups is part of what needs to be done. A more challenging, but necessary, charge to institutions is to include women of color in shaping and reshaping academia, cultures, norms, and policies such that they recognize and reward their critical contributions in scholarship, teaching and mentoring, and service and engagement (Chavous, 2018).

Although equality and diversity policies and initiatives have moved forward in the recent years and the dialog about race has certainly come to the fore, Osho, Jones, & Franklin (2019) argue in an article for the Guardian that “these interventions fail to tackle the frontline pressures and disadvantages that women of color routinely face.” Many universities use equality and diversity statements to promote a seemingly diverse campus to prospective students. However, they do not dedicate the human or financial resources to tackle both sexism and racism among other inequalities. Support that speaks to the unique realities of WoC academics needs to engage multiple levels of institutional stakeholders; academic leaders, departments, and faculty members. Universities need to address the interlocking systems of discrimination to be a truly inclusive space, because right now, women like myself are not afforded this and remain marginalized. They continue to face the dilemma of

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how to adhere to individual and cultural values while doing what it takes to win a battle in academia.

Epilogue

It took me some time to find my own voice and to be prepared to put it in print. In fact, while I am a major advocate of others telling their stories through my focus on narrative theory and creative research methods, I was not entirely comfortable telling my own story. But I find inspiration in Mirza's (2017, p. 40) words which enabled me to articulate the importance of sharing my very own "private experiences ... to make a point." But this process of sharing and making visible this autoethnographic account was not an easy task. Writing to other readers is risky and may expose me to "possible censure" (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 393). The stereotypes used to cast my identity as a WoC as I entered British academia six years ago have often restricted and policed what I really needed to say. I did not want to be perceived by my colleagues as bitter or making a big deal out of what they perceived as "minor" issues. However, the psychological, emotional, physical, and professional toll on me has become burdens that are too great to bear. As Maya Angelou articulates, "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" (in Hill, 2017, p. 208). In finding my voice, I am able to represent myself instead of allowing others to represent me according to their own agendas. As Mirza (2017, p. 41) emphasizes, "we must tell our stories, or others will tell them for us." In writing this autoethnography, I have realized that the cost of not writing for a WoC like myself may be far higher than that of writing.

Recounting some of my personal experiences as a WoC academic required a level of vulnerability that I am constantly advised to conceal and expected to be ashamed of (Brown, 2012). It also required both bravery and readiness to face the consequences of speaking up.

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Taking the time to write this article, in and of itself, required a level of emotional labor. As I broke through the difficulty of recounting my experiences, there were periods when I felt concerned that my colleagues, students, or both, may feel uneasy reading it. I was and still am, concerned of the ways—both overt and subtle—I may be “penalized” for revealing my experiences; the least of which is further dismissal, marginalization, and isolation. Despite these difficulties, I assert that the process has been worthwhile as it has helped me confront the different processes and understandings that I struggled with as I worked through what it is like to be a WoC in British Academia. Through intense reflexivity, going beyond merely recounting facts, and using intersectionality as an analytical tool, I have felt empowered to write.

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