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(Em)Bracing Ourselves: Women of Color in the Academy Supporting Each Other Through Troubling Times

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Abstract: Educational institutions in the U.S. face imminent changes to programs and curricula due to politicized attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion. As four women from various marginalized backgrounds, we find ourselves consistently processing the threat of suppression as we attempt to establish an Office of Inclusive Excellence within a college of education. The notion of vibe (Miles, 2022) helps us individually and collectively examine "the often-unsayable [yet conscious] ways racial structures organize day-to-day life" (p. 375) as we interact with social structures that impact our sense of safety. More specifically, in this manuscript, we use co-autoethnographic methods (Coia & Taylor, 2009) to consider how the vibe of our institution impacts our experience of racialized emotions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). Through our content analysis of individual journals on pre-determined topics, group conversations, and observation notes, we consider the questions: Where and why do we feel most (un)safe in this work? How do we respond to the threat of suppression of us and our work? Our findings highlight how we, as Women of Color, navigate academia with a keen awareness of our positionality and challenge norms while maintaining our sense of self. From this perspective, we explore our realities as higher education administrators/faculty and students leading diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice initiatives and emphasize the importance of cultivating supportive relationships as a key strategy for maintaining personal well-being.

Keywords: co-autoethnography, racialized emotions, Women of Color in higher education, vibe

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Introduction

Educational institutions in the U.S. face imminent changes to programs and curricula based on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) bans (Lange & Lee, 2024). Being situated in a university that touts diversity as its strength should mean that these politicized attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion are inconsequential to the work we are doing to establish an Office of Inclusive Excellence within a college of education. Yet, we find ourselves consistently processing the threat of suppression not just of our work but more importantly of our full selves as Women of Color[1] in higher education.

Across the country, new state policies have led to DEI offices being rebranded or dismantled, race-conscious curricula being restricted, and cultural centers being renamed or shut down altogether; spaces that have long served as lifelines for marginalized students and faculty (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2023; Museus & Ledesma, 2024). These are not isolated events; they are part of a wider backlash against racial justice efforts in education that tries to make conversations about race, power, and inequality sound divisive or unnecessary, all in the name of neutrality or merit (Ray, 2022). All of this has reshaped what it feels like to work and study in higher education right now. It is frustrating and honestly exhausting to watch universities talk about "diversity" as a core value while quietly cutting the very programs that make it real. For many of us, this moment feels like sitting inside that contradiction—trying to hold onto the belief that what we are doing still matters, even as the ground keeps shifting under us.

Particularly for Women of Color in academia, there is a unique emotional, psychological, and spiritual toll that we experience (Hoff, 2020). We are expected to fix "diversity problems" of an institution, to mentor students who look like us, to serve on panels, task forces, and advisory boards. Our labor is consumed, but rarely reciprocated (Duncan, 2014; Harley, 2008). In the context of historically and predominantly white institutions, the labor exhausts us as we navigate our responsibility to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives against institutional structures that often reinforce white superiority and further marginalize us as representational tokens (Turner et al., 2011). Yet, instead of expressing the myriad emotions we often feel, we are expected to minimize our emotions because of racial and gendered stereotypes (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2009).

Authors' Intersecting Identities and Positionalities

As four women from various marginalized backgrounds, our experiences within our institution are compounded by our intersecting identities. Vanessa Núñez is the daughter of

[1] We capitalize Women of Color to visually and symbolically counter the marginalization and minimalization that non-white women too often experience.

Mexican immigrants and though born in the United States, considers herself a Mexicana. Vanessa grew up in a traditional Mexican household, and her culture aligns more with that of her family which still lives in Mexico. As a child, she didn't speak English and was only allowed to speak Spanish in the home. She remains connected transnationally to her family and is proud of her roots. The U.S. has taken away so much from her family and her that she refuses to let it take away her identity. Growing up in poverty, Vanessa's roots and ancestral connections run deep and have been a source of sustenance. She is a first-generation middle-school, high-school, and college graduate, and the first in her entire lineage to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D). As a sociology Ph.D. student, her research focuses on the undocumented student movement in southern Nevada. Vanessa has experienced harm and consistent attacks on her spirit, mental health, and overall well-being during her doctoral journey.

Catharine Lory is an assistant professor of special education whose work focuses on addressing educational inequities and promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities. While Catharine feels compelled, and certainly no shame, to check the "Asian" box in every form that asks for race and ethnicity, she never thought of herself and was never labelled by others as "Asian" before living in the United States. Because for those of us born and raised on the Asian continent of close to 50 countries and thousands of languages, "Asian" is not a legitimate distinction nor a unifying identity in race, ethnicity, or cultural and linguistic heritage. Therefore, Catharine is quite Asian by American definition, but more accurately, she was a refugee and immigrant raised in the Southeast and East Asia regions. After fleeing her birth country Indonesia with her family to escape racial and political violence, she experienced multiple relocations across countries, through which she learned that safety, belonging, and access to opportunities are never equally granted to folks who are othered. Catharine dreamed of creating more inclusive spaces for the marginalized and found her path as an educator and scientist.

Camisha Fagan is a Black and Filipino first-generation Ph.D. student in sociology, whose research focuses on how climate change impacts communities of color in southern Nevada and how inequality manifests in built environments like cities and universities. As the second oldest sibling, she learned to carry responsibility early—an experience that continues to shape the way she navigates higher education, always balancing care, pressure, and persistence in institutions not designed with her in mind. She lives and works with both physical and mental disabilities. These are not side notes to her academic life, but daily negotiations of energy, capacity, and visibility. In a field that often equates rigor with overwork, her disabilities force a different rhythm: slower, more intentional, and more critical of how academic norms leave disabled bodies and minds—especially those of color—out of the conversation. For Camisha, "rigor" does not have to mean "exhaustion"; it can mean thoughtful, sustainable scholarship rooted in lived experience.

Iesha Jackson is a tenured associate professor of teacher education and associate dean. As a Black woman with deep roots in the southern United States, her upbringing provided a Christian foundation and included gendered roles and expectations that she learned to challenge early. Iesha is also a first-generation college graduate from a working-class background who began her career as an educator with a strong commitment to addressing educational inequalities in urban schools.

Conceptual Framing

Our individual paths to higher education and layered identities shape the work we are doing to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in a college of education. The institution we are part of has a student population that is 70% from historically minoritized backgrounds. It also holds designations as Minority Serving, Hispanic Serving, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving. The county's population is about 40% white, 31% Latinx, 12% Black, and about 11% Asian (City of Las Vegas Statistics, 2025). We acknowledge the historical legacy of exclusion and marginalization that impedes our ability to feel safe to exist in higher education without compromising pieces of ourselves (Dortch et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2025). Given our positionalities and lived experiences, we regularly oscillate between bracing ourselves for the next painful assault on our being and embracing the fullness of who we are in our work.

White institutional spaces in the U.S. frame and embody racialized social structures and reproduce these structures and processes to shape individuals' racialized experiences (Moore, 2020). While white spaces may be physical locations, the notion also applies to social locations and ways of being (Brunsma et al., 2020). White spaces are built and maintained through systems of power that can be felt; these feelings contribute to what Miles (2022) describes as vibe. According to Miles (2022):

> Vibe is a mode of making sense of relational processes in ways that push back against rationalistic and objective ways of knowing to make room for the possibility that something important can occur absent of us being able to develop a language to approximate that experience. (p. 368)

Though the language does not exist to capture the fullness of certain experiences, the experiences themselves are embodied on an emotional level. Colloquially, vibe can be understood as the way something makes a person feel, whether good or bad but usually not neutral. From a sociological perspective, Miles (2022) uses vibe as "an analytical tool used to make sense of racialized experiences and a linguistic tool used as a metalanguage to communicate what and how one feels" (p. 368). More so, the vibe of a space does not emerge in isolation; it is shaped by social relations, histories, and structures that render certain racialized bodies hypervisible while others remain invisible.

Notably, race itself is not a biological fact but a social construction or organizing principle produced and sustained through institutions, everyday practices, and cultural meanings (Collins, 2019; Omi & Winant, 2014). The affective charge of white spaces, then, is not accidental but rooted in these historical and structural arrangements that normalize whiteness as comfort and belonging while marking other racial identities as out of place. This is why understanding vibe as both embodied and socially produced matters: it captures how racial power is not only seen or spoken but also felt—in the body, in the room, in the silence. This tool is particularly useful for Women of Color in higher education because of the myriad social systems, expectations, and behaviors we manage in our jobs.

Literature on the racialized experiences of Women of Color in the academy highlights more negative experiences than positive. From being presumed incompetent (Harris & González, 2012) to being tokenized and undervalued, navigating multiple marginalities drains our energy (Turner, 2002; Dortch et al., 2025) and causes undue stress. Cepeda (2024) describes insults and stressors that Women of Color experience as intersectional aggressions rooted in interlocking systems of oppression. This work builds on previous scholarship from Patricia Hill Collins

(2009) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) that argues Women of Color, specifically Black women, experience gendered racism/racist sexism that is unique to their marginalized positionalities as both women and people of Color. It is noteworthy that studies centered on safety most often mention the labor Women of Color exert to create and maintain safe spaces (see Mena, 2016; Ong et al., 2018) instead of explicitly naming identity taxation (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012), surveillance (Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009), racial battle fatigue (Quaye et al., 2023), and spirit murder (Tijerina Revilla, 2021) as sites of "institutional violence…that produces psychological and physiological consequences—particularly to women's bodies, minds, health, and quality of life in the academy" (Cueva, 2014, p. 218). Despite not being named as hindrances to safety, racialized experiences of Women of Color in academia are viscerally felt.

Combining racialized experiences with feelings, Bonilla-Silva (2019) defines racialized emotions as the physiological sensations that one experiences during interracial interactions, whether direct (e.g., social interactions with individuals or groups) or indirect (e.g., watching the news, thinking about an interaction). He argues that racialized emotions are rational based on various cultural, social, and ontological positions of specific racial groups. This notion of rationality is important when connected to vibe; the inutterable experiences that People of Color feel are structured by histories of social and cultural domination.

As Women of Color in academia, we experience white spaces within our institution that shape how we make sense of its vibe and how we experience racialized emotions. The conceptual framing of the vibe and racialized emotions produced in white spaces allows us to consider where and how we feel (un)safe. Our narratives are not wholly unique as they align with literature that examines how Women of Color navigate white spaces in higher education, how we negotiate feeling unsafe, and what well-being entails for us in academia.

Purpose

Our intentions in writing this article are two-fold: first, in sharing our stories we seek to better understand our experiences for and with ourselves. In addition, we believe that there is power in expressing the things most difficult to utter, especially the experiences for which there are no words. The notion of vibe (Miles, 2022) helps us individually and collectively examine "the often-unsayable [yet conscious] ways racial structures organize day-to-day life" (p. 375) as we interact with social structures that impact our sense of safety and well-being. More specifically, in this manuscript, we use co-autoethnographic methods (Coia & Taylor, 2009) to consider how the vibe of our institution impacts our experience of racialized emotions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). To share our experiences with each other and for a broader audience that might relate, we consider the questions: Where and why do we feel most (un)safe in this work? How do we respond to the threat of suppression of us and our work?

Methods

To craft a cohesive and composite narrative, we utilized Coia and Taylor's (2009) approach to co/autoethnographic methodology, which the authors describe as a cyclical and dialogical process designed to uncover how our individual identities and positionalities are shaped by our lived experiences with and in relation to others. Coia and Taylor (2009) highlight the significance of agency in defining oneself and making choices; this sense of agency was

essential for our examination of when and why we feel safe, how we respond to suppression, as well as what and how to share in our work.

Co-autoethnography is a methodological approach rooted in the poststructural feminist belief that "we are the stories we tell and are told" (Coia & Taylor, 2013, p. 4) while accepting "uncertainty and unknowability" (p. 9). In order to construct such stories, scholars using co-autoethnography use various methods to collaboratively examine and understand themselves in relation to other people, past experiences, and hopes for the future. Coia & Taylor (2005) contend that:

> [S]pecific contribution [in defining co/autoethnography] lies in what happens in the interweaving of our stories: the reliance on the reflection that results from our stories being in dialogue, the role of the other in this dialogue adding validity, and analysis. (p. 26).

We relied on this methodology to collect, analyze, and craft the data for our study. Our process included individual construction of journal responses and narrative drafts as we considered prompts inspired by our theoretical framework, such as "How do we use vibe and emotion to create boundaries and/or relationships to others?" and "What are our perceptions of vibe and safety? How do those two concepts relate for us?" Journals were constructed from August 2024 through June 2025 using various mediums, including pen and paper, Google Docs and Slides, Padlet, and photos. We intentionally allowed various modes of expression to prioritize content over format, and each author chose the medium that best captured her self-expression at a given time. For example, Iesha took photos around the campus and used the Artificial Intelligence (AI) image (previously "I can't draw") feature in Padlet to capture visual reflections for her journals.

We scheduled time during in-person or virtual meetings, which lasted one to two hours per week, to discuss our individual narratives, develop a collective understanding of thoughts and experiences, and generate new insights and prompts for further reflection and journaling. To write this manuscript, we scheduled a date to share initial drafts of individual narratives and collectively reflect on our experiences. Based on our theoretical framework, we discussed connections between our narratives and their alignment with existing literature. The connections and alignments became the basis for our analytic process. Initially, we outlined 23 phrases and concepts that appeared in at least two narratives. For example, Vanessa's "slow death of spirit murder" and Iesha's "My soul is tired" were highlighted as phrases that illustrate spiritual damage. Then, we independently selected three themes that captured the essence of our collective insights and reflection. It is important to note that while our analysis began with identifying phrases and concepts that unified our narratives, we did not ignore divergent experiences; instead, the themes are amplified through the nuances that are present in each individual narrative. In other words, our analysis highlights commonalities in our reflections based on our shared identities as Women of Color; yet our different positions and positionalities inform the narrative drafts we constructed. In a follow up dialogue to solidify core themes (Coia & Taylor, 2005), our analyses coalesced into the following: (a) the conditional and contextual nature of safety, (b) the emotional and spiritual toll of our work, and (c) the importance of community and reciprocal relationships. We elaborate on these themes and offer insights into how Women of Color experience, interpret, and navigate embodied, often ineffable forces or vibes (Miles, 2022), and how that shapes our feelings of safety, belonging, and suppression within historically white spaces.

In the following section, each author provides an individual narrative of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in relation to the research questions. Next, we provide a summary of themes that are present across the narratives, while drawing specific examples from the narratives to support our collective interpretation. Finally, we conclude with what we learned in our path of resistance and describe the ways we em(brace) ourselves on this journey.

Vanessa's Narrative

The institution of higher education is often romanticized as a place of liberation, a space to challenge oppressive structures and reimagine what justice can look like (Freire, 1970). But for Women of Color like me, it is often the opposite. It is a place of harm, surveillance, and persistent exclusion. It is a site where our minds are celebrated only when detached from our bodies; it is a place where our labor is consumed, but our voices are feared. For those of us engaged in work that is being targeted by the state -- like research on undocumented student access, immigrant justice, and racial equity -- what we experience is not just opposition. It is suppression. And often, it is spirit murder. But how do we survive this? Moreover, how can we continue to protect ourselves and remain whole?

I often recall an academic talk I attended by Dr. Anita Tijerina Revilla, where she expanded on Patricia Williams' (1991) concept of spirit murder. She spoke with piercing clarity about the ways institutions enact violence against the souls of students and faculty who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This violence is not just through direct discrimination, but through the chronic, cumulative harms of being silenced, surveilled, and unsupported. She described racial battle fatigue as just one symptom of a broader, multidimensional fatigue that affects the whole being: mind, body, spirit. Her words stuck with me because that is what my experience in graduate school and in DEI related work has felt like. I can still recall the exact moment I had the first thought of dropping out of my doctoral program. It was the end of the spring semester, and we were working on completing a short ethnography as a final project. During this time, I was working full-time and enrolled full-time as well. My mom had called me to let me know that my cousin had disappeared. In my family, I am often the person that is asked for help as it relates to immigration, education, and other areas because I have some knowledge of these systems. Frantically, my mom asked me to see if I could find him and told me she had a neighbor tell her he had been picked up by the police. I went online to search arrest records, I made calls and couldn't find him. I took a few days off from work and wrote to my qualitative methods professor asking for an extension due to a family emergency. When I returned, I explained to him that my cousin had disappeared and that our fear was that he had been deported, and he would not have any resources to get back to our home state of Jalisco or worse, it had been a week since we last heard from him. My professor looked at me and emotionless said that as an immigrant he understood that deportation happens, but that I was still responsible for completing my final. That I should rethink my decision to complete a doctorate. That perhaps I was not ready to put in all my effort. I remember walking out angry and hurt because although he is an immigrant, he is a white man with a French sounding accent who is not regarded in the same way Mexican immigrants are. How could he understand? The dismissal of the gravity of the situation, the disappearance of a loved one who was "lost" for a month, still haunts me. Why was a project given more value than the life of someone I loved. I felt like this was a space that would never understand that my responsibilities and loyalties lie with my family and loved ones. I understood then that the academy was set up to support a certain type of student, and I was not one of them.

If you had asked me a year ago where I felt most unsafe doing DEI work, I might have pointed to certain people. I could talk about specific colleagues, hostile administrators and faculty, or even conservative campus groups that I encountered. But now, I see more clearly: unsafe is everywhere. I wish I could say that I feel most unsafe when I am alone. Still, it is the opposite; it is in the rooms filled with white folks who I know enact “sincere fictions” and participate in colorblind ideologies, while still participating in the recreating and furthering of racism and exclusion of people of color. I feel unsafe when people hear me speak out, nod, smile, and tell me, “you are so brave,” “I’m with you,” but remain silent and don’t act. It is instances when I am asked about my work and my research on undocumented students, racial justice, and working to build an office of inclusive excellence might not only be misunderstood or judged, but weaponized against me. I often rely on my gut to help me navigate these spaces and feel out the genuineness of the people or space. Am I safe, or did I say too much and now my safety is at risk? I am asking: what does the vibe tell me about this space’s capacity to hold me as I am?

And, as Miles (2022) argues, the vibe is never neutral. It reflects the underlying structures of power, inclusion, and exclusion. My sense of the vibe becomes a strategy, a way to tell whether the atmosphere is one of genuine care or simply performative allyship that masks hostility in the rooms I enter. And yet, despite this pervasive danger, I remain. Not because I am unafraid, but because I have found ways to resist the slow death of spirit murder. Resistance and survival have meant a focused and intentional search for spirit protectors and restorers.

Tijerina Revilla’s (2021) writing gave me the language I didn’t know I needed: spirit protectors and spirit restorers. These are not just my mentors or friends. They are mostly Women of Color who have intervened at critical moments in my academic life to keep me from falling apart or dropping out. They are the ones who remind me that I am more than my scholarship, more than my productivity, and more than the roles the institution wants to cast me in. They remind me that I exist in this space as a whole person. They are people who see me. They see me not just for what I can produce, but for who I am. They check in when I disappear: when I have had losses that I never imagined would come. They reach out with words of affirmation after having my worth discussed in front of me by white women professors in my department, as if I do not exist. When I am heard speaking Spanish and being told that “It’s so cool to hear someone speak Mexican.” They remind me I am not the problem. They remind me that my anger, fear, and disappointment are valid. They remind me to rest. My spirit protectors are my armor against suppression. They help me process the ways this work and institution chips away at me. They refuse to let me internalize the lies of white supremacy. They are the reasons I’m still here, still doing the work.

bell hooks (1990) teaches us that homeplaces are not necessarily physical; they are psychic, emotional, and spiritual sanctuaries. For me, homeplaces are the graduate student of color collective I helped build. They are the Zoom calls with my mentor, who reminds me “you do not owe this institution anything!” They are the friends who invite me to take part in activities that are self-care and restorative.

These fugitive spaces are how we survive the institutional demand to perform while being dehumanized. But even homeplaces are vulnerable to infiltration by white heteropatriarchy, by internalized oppression, by the seductive pull of recognition. We must tend to them. Protect them. Expand them. Tijerina Revilla (2021) challenges us to build teams of spirit restorers. These teams are collectives of people committed to each other’s healing and survival. I am learning to do that, one relationship at a time.

So, where do I feel safe? Nowhere fully. And yet, I feel safer when I am with people who understand this terrain: with my spirit protectors. With those who have refused to let the institution hollow them out. With those who are fighting not just to stay in the room, but to dismantle the room entirely.

Catharine's Narrative

Countless encounters in academic and professional contexts have consistently demonstrated that I am not allowed to exist effortlessly in historically white spaces, of which the majority of colleges and universities consist (Bonilla-Silva & Peoples, 2022). As a graduate student, I walked by a group of students on campus who leered at me, one of whom remarked with a dramatic rolling of her eyes, "makes me feel like I'm in Chinatown." Girl, if your reaction to being in Chinatown was rolling your eyes, you are sorely missing out.

As a faculty candidate interviewing and delivering a presentation at a large public university, a faculty interrupted me to yell at students and did not offer any form of apology. I was appalled that no one else in the room—faculty of various ranks and roles—made any attempt to address the disrespectful behavior. I was disappointed at the complicity and permission to disregard me when I was in the room. What happens when I am not in the room? Who would speak up for me?

As a university faculty member, a student was on the verge of tears told me, as she held my hand, she was so happy to see someone like me in this role. I felt the weight of representing people who are like and unlike me because there are still too few of us in academia.

Being an immigrant for most of my life, I have been conditioned to overperform to meet extensive unspoken expectations in order to access similar opportunities my peers did. I adopted such a manner of functioning to be visible *and* invisible. I had to be visible to demonstrate that I was excelling and sufficiently worthy of opportunities. I must also be invisible, to show that I could be all the things they were—I was not too different, not a threat. I became skilled at this duality of being, to construct safety for myself. However, I recently began to realize I was not always at my best when I participated as a member of our team consisting of Vanessa, Camisha, and Iesha because I felt safe to be flawed. I painlessly exist in and appreciate all the passion, brilliance, sadness, anger, and honesty that everyone in this team brings to our space.

While it is difficult to emulate the exact sense of safety that I experience with this team in other spaces without them, safety does exist in different forms. For instance, I generally feel safer walking on my current campus because of the racial and ethnic diversity within the student and faculty populations. This means that there is a reduced likelihood that people would unleash their incivility on me for daring to cause discomfort by making historically white spaces more colorful or for refusing to shrink myself in consideration of others' fear.

Professionally, a tenure track faculty job comes with some privileges, including employment security. I am conscious of the power I hold, even as I have not obtained tenure, to engage in behaviors that align with my core motivations. When evaluating the professional, social, and personal risks of doing something that may disrupt the norm or displease others, I always struggle with these questions: Am I going to upset them? Am I going to risk too much for an unpredictable outcome? Often, the answer is yes. But am I going to get fired for it? Unlikely. Hence, I convince myself to continue to take risks and optimistically imagine what the risks could be worth.

When I join a space full of white people, which is not at all uncommon in higher education contexts, I have learned to minimize my uneasiness by claiming my space and drawing

confidence from the things that I am, instead of the things perceived or assumed by others. Yet I remain hypervigilant, because of the vibe in these spaces (Miles, 2022). The environments and events that I have experienced trained my mind and body to be extremely conscious of the interaction between myself and others; it is my response mechanism for survival, for decades, that I am unable to unlearn. As Bonilla-Silva (2019) so fittingly described, racialized emotions have a materiality because they are "a constitutive force" (p. 11) and produce observable impact. They shape my movement in this world.

In addition to ever existing challenges to safety, the current sociopolitical climate emboldens ableist, racist, sexist, bigoted sentiments and behaviors all over the nation. Presently, suppression is neither a buried past nor a looming threat—we are engulfed by it. Such explicit, anti-DEI suppression has effectively paralyzed racial progress and created legitimate spaces for not only white hegemonic inaction, but also for counteraction (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2025). As an educator, I am constantly battling the desire to disengage and duty to educate. This battle has ensued in every single course I taught as a university instructor, across both predominantly white and minority serving institutions.

As a scholar, I explored the literature to identify solutions. Bhandaru (2013) described inaction in the violent mechanics and products of white normativity, rather than individual acts of racial discrimination, as the major cause of contemporary racism, and argued for "an active opposition to white normativity" (p. 243) to battle the abandonment of non-white races. Although I have some reservations in agreeing with the entirety of Bhandaru's argument, the proposed solution offers a tangible method to engage in antiracist behaviors. I began strengthening my voice and actions to more explicitly challenge norms and behaviors that maintain white normativity in academic and educational contexts. I don't always succeed, and setbacks are frustrating and punishing. Even if I succeeded, the process is emotional and stressful.

As a Woman of Color working on DEI initiatives in higher education, I look to the guidance of my team, who possess incredible strength and knowledge. Our collaborative work, thinking, conversations, and care allowed me to explore new paths and do this work in ways that sustain me. We are transparent with one another about our intentions. We celebrate successes, discuss challenges, problem-solve, and make dedicated efforts to preserve our being and protect our work.

Camisha's Narrative

My feelings of safety have always been complicated — fluid, never static. I trace much of that back to 2015 when I became deeply involved in activism during my undergraduate years at my current institution. Taking on leadership roles — as president of my institution's National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Chapter and co-founder of our Black Lives Matter Chapter — placed me directly in the crosshairs of racialized power structures. I constantly balanced empowerment with deep vulnerability.

In those activist spaces among Black women, students of color, and community organizers — I felt a sense of safety rooted in what Miles (2023, p. 381) might call a "vibe of mutual recognition." There was a shared emotional rhythm that affirmed my existence and work. We laughed, organized, cried, and strategized together. Our racialized emotions (Bonilla-Silva, 2019) weren't weaponized but held and validated. That collective understanding created a kind of insulation — a sense of "we got us."

But safety was never absolute. The deeper I got into the work, the more I realized we were being watched — literally. White men showed up at our events with thinly veiled hostility;

police surveillance was routine; our social media monitored. Our presence on campus became politicized, cast as a threat. This hyper-surveillance, particularly from the local police department, was a physical manifestation of racism embedded in everyday institutional practices (Bonilla-Silva, 2019). It was chilling. I remember feeling a constant undercurrent of fear and anxiety; a gut-deep alertness that something could snap at any moment. Vibe also carried a haunting inversion here: the vibe shifted when law enforcement or counter-protesters entered the space. It was no longer about mutual recognition but mutual threat. Our emotional frequencies spiked with cortisol — hearts racing, eyes scanning. That fear wasn't abstract; it was visceral, bodily.

Safety, I realized, was perceived, conditional — vulnerable to rupture at any moment. If the alt-right wanted to dox or harm us, they could. And often did. Now, as a Black Ph.D. student, that sense of unsafety has shifted but not disappeared. While I am also Filipino, that part of my identity hasn't shaped my experience in the same way, partly because it functions more as an ethnic category for me. In contrast, I am consistently racialized as Black in academic spaces.

The recent school shooting at my institution sharpened my hyper-vigilance. I walk campus with my head on a swivel — not just because of the risk of random violence, but because I exist in a white space never designed for me to thrive. In my overwhelmingly white department, the weight of racial battle fatigue is constant. I know that in a moment of crisis, many of my colleagues would prioritize their comfort over my humanity. As Bonilla-Silva (2019, p. 7) notes, they benefit from emotion management systems that buffer them from racism's weight — while I carry that burden daily.

Safety, I've learned, is not a destination — it's a negotiation. A conditional contract shaped by surveillance, silence, and the ever-present threat of erasure. More so, survival requires strategy. One of mine has been embracing the very stereotype white supremacy tries to weaponize against me — the "angry Black woman." If they're going to project it anyway, I might as well reclaim it on my own terms. This isn't surrender to caricature, but using it as armor. As Miles might say, this is part of the vibe economy; recognizing that my emotional expression is both constrained and performative, but also a site of resistance. My anger becomes a tool for asserting boundaries, protecting my labor, and preserving my mental health in institutions that demand my erasure.

Still, I'm not naive — this tactic has costs. The emotional toll is real. Constantly performing strength, calibrating rage into something palatable yet potent; it's exhausting. As Bonilla-Silva (2019) emphasizes, these racialized emotions are not personal flaws, but systemic outcomes. My fatigue isn't failure, it's evidence.

Women of Color, particularly Black women, carry a unique emotional weight in academia. We're expected to be institutional saviors — mentoring, representing, repairing — while receiving little care in return. We are seen, but not supported. Our labor is consumed, our truths requested, but when the consequences come, we often stand alone. And still, despite the watching, the battle fatigue, and the performance of safety — community sustains me.

In those activist spaces of 2015, I found more than strategy — I found soul. That vibe of mutual recognition (Miles, 2022, p. 369) wasn't just shared experience; it was survival. We created a rhythm that held us — through grief, anger, and joy. Furthermore, my sister circles are more than affirming — they're lifesaving. These relationships ground me when imposter syndrome creeps in, call me in when whiteness tries to co-opt my work, and remind me I'm not alone. As Miles (2022) would say, our shared vibe becomes a "politics of resonance" — a collective pulse sustaining us in the face of isolation.

Now, in my role as a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) Fellow in the College of Education, I've found something close to stability, a rare kind of safety. That space, shaped by Women of Color— has become a refuge. Amid political attacks — book bans, DEI rollbacks, state-sanctioned silence — we've modeled care in ways the institution never taught. They let me be complex, flawed, brilliant, and soft.

Now, even as I've scaled back visibility to protect myself, I hold tight to the collective because my safety has never just been about me. I worry for undocumented students vulnerable to ICE surveillance. I worry for Palestinian students and allies organizing for divestment, cast as threats. The university profits from genocide in Gaza while silencing dissent. That's not just policy — it's complicity. So when I speak of safety, I mean it in the most radical sense. Safety that doesn't extend to all of us isn't safety at all. To survive this work, I build with others. I care strategically. I resist relationally. Because survival isn't just about protection, it's about connection. It's about ensuring none of us feels alone in the struggle.

Iesha's Narrative

In November of 2024, I read a Facebook post from a Black woman professor who is being targeted by conservative groups because she's teaching a course on anti-Blackness. This reminded me of a conversation I had with a colleague who left Florida because of the email attacks she was facing with no institutional support, and her telling me that one of her mentors recalled an experience with receiving death threats. I do not believe that Black women doing racial equity work can ever be completely psychologically or emotionally safe, but I also have to question if we can be physically safe as well.

The denotative meaning of safe is "1: free from harm or risk: unhurt; 2a: secure from threat of danger, harm, or loss" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I have never felt 2a at work and only feel unhurt on a day-to-day basis. I actually think there is a danger in believing I can be secure from the threat of harm (emotional, psychological, physiological) in higher education. I think doing so might change the way I navigate and make me more susceptible to being hurt. At the same time, I am sure there is a toll on my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual being that stems from always trying to protect myself from harm.

An antonym of safe is at-risk. While scholars including myself have rejected this label for students, I am more critically considering its utility in this sociopolitical moment. I feel more vulnerable, more exposed, more at-risk than ever before because of my positionality as a Black woman, my title, and my research agenda. At the same time, I am clear that this feeling of exposure is only an amplified version of the lack of safety I generally feel and not a new feeling at all. In some ways, being hyper aware of the ever-present risk of harm seems to be more helpful than hurtful. Exhausting? Yes, but it is also a reminder that I should always be ready for what might come. The feeling reminds me of the safety briefing on an airplane. If you do not take your safety for granted, you are more likely to be ready to act should the need arise. But, this makes me wonder what additional impact(s) this approach has.

Exhaustion is probably one of many results of always bracing for impact and never really feeling safe. Stress, physical discomfort, a lack of sleep, and poor eating habits are all likely related to not moving through the world with a sense of safety. Since the start of the Spring 2025 academic semester, I have found myself frequently saying that I'm exhausted, but that is not capturing what I'm feeling. My soul is tired. I am emotionally drained. I feel like I have very little to offer anyone and am trying to protect what peace I have by limiting my interactions with other people. I imagine there is a level of psychological safety (or lack thereof) that plays into

how I am experiencing fatigue in the midst of what has felt like a constant onslaught of everything I fundamentally believe in and value as a scholar.

For me, I honestly doubt that a “good vibe” mitigates the concern that I ultimately am not safe in this work. I think feelings of unsafety are heightened in my Associate Dean role versus my faculty role because my visibility is heightened. Speaking truth to people who do not want to hear it is never safe but is a central part of my role. I find myself trying to be gentle and not hurt anyone's feelings by being too direct, but meaning definitely gets lost during the navigation process. The lack of safety I feel in these spaces or during these times is complex in that it reflects an unwillingness to engage deeply enough to push people to look at themselves more honestly from other people's perspectives. I do not fear the consequences of that kind of conversation, but I am definitely not willing to do that kind of emotional labor with everyone.

Even when sitting alone in my office, I have begun to notice how unsafe (emotionally, spiritually) I feel. I often have my cellphone on (either with volume or on vibrate) and email opened. I do not know how many times a day my planned workflow gets interrupted with other people's drama. Some of it is minor, but too much of it is not. From microaggressions, people feeling targeted by administration, now the impact of various executive orders coming from the White House, I am bombarded with issues that impact other people and therefore me. I am reminded that I am deeply community oriented; I truly believe that my well-being is enmeshed with those around me. I would probably be able to feel safe if I could disentangle myself from the emotions of others, but then I do not think I would be a version of myself that I would recognize or like.

One way I respond to the threat of suppression and my lack of feeling safe is by cultivating trusting relationships so that I can create spaces where I feel safer than in other spaces. I have recently begun to reflect on fugitive spaces within fugitive spaces. Fugitive spaces here refer to covert physical and relational places where I, as a Black woman, feel free enough to be all that I am–intelligent, emotional, vulnerable, powerful–without judgement or repercussion (see Stovall & Mosely, 2023). Fugitive spaces within fugitive spaces in a concept that allows me to acknowledge that Women of Color, particularly Black women, in higher education need a sense of community through affinity, yet everyone should not be invited into every aspect of one's life. This concept further helps me understand that even an affinity space will generate differing relationships within the group that will bring some people into deeper community while others stay in the "outer rooms" so to speak. Reflecting on safety has helped me understand that I feel most safe by myself simply being authentic and true to who I am. I am both safe in my identity as a Black woman believer in God and unsafe because of the confidence I have in who I am. What I mean by this is, at the end of the day, I feel physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally safe to do the work I am called to do in higher education and in life. However, being confident in my call can be threatening to those who lack and/or envy what they see in me. This contributes to being unsafe from triggering racialized emotions.

As I think about how I respond to the threat of suppression, I am more committed to doing the work I do in alignment with who I am. It may sound simple, but the way I navigate is by being steadfast to/in a higher purpose. I am safe in my identity and my calling.

Collective Analysis

We summarize our collective experiences in response to our first research question, where and why do we feel most (un)safe in this work, in two themes that we discuss below. This

manuscript concludes with our synthesis of how we respond to the threat of suppression of us and our work.

Safety in Our Work Is Always Conditional and Contextual

Across our experiences, none of us describe feeling fully or consistently safe in our roles—as faculty, administrators, or students—doing equity and justice work in higher education. Safety, when it exists at all, is temporary, negotiated, and fragile. It is impacted by our racialized and gendered identities, our work's visibility, and the sociopolitical climate. The so-called culture war that is shaping legislation and attitudes away from supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion (Lange & Lee, 2024) is not theoretical for us but deeply personal because we live our commitments. Importantly, we experience a lack of safety as more than just a concern for physical well-being; a lack of safety also manifests, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

For example, Iesha describes never feeling truly safe as a Black woman Associate Dean and scholar and discusses the emotional exhaustion from hyper-vigilance. Additionally, Camisha recounts the illusion of safety and physical and emotional exhaustion in activist and academic spaces, due to the constant threats of surveillance and racism. Sometimes the concern for our safety begins with a vibe, a knowing and understanding that we feel but cannot name; the spaces we encounter have a history, and that history informs the vibe (Miles, 2022). In most institutional spaces, especially when the vibe is off, or there is an internal sense that we should not feel safe, we feel the need to be hyperaware, cautious, and strategic just to exist and do our work. Catharine specifically references Miles (2022) and discusses performing visibility and invisibility simultaneously to manage risk in white-dominated spaces, where the vibe is almost always off. Similarly, Vanessa discusses how "unsafe is everywhere," particularly within institutions that claim progressiveness but demand emotional labor and silence.

Our experiences highlight our reality that being hyperaware can also provide safety. Using vibe as an analytic tool reminds us that "It is often through the social nature of emotions that our bodies are first made aware of the bodily, social, and material implications of social structures" (Miles, 2022, p. 366). When we learn to listen to our bodies, allow ourselves to feel racialized emotions, and consider personal as well as political implications for our decisions, we can better mitigate foreseeable harm. However, having to be hyperaware in order to feel safe comes with its own emotional risks.

This Work Takes a Deep Emotional and Spiritual Toll

All of our narratives acknowledge the ongoing exhaustion and depletion that comes with being constantly "on." We are not just dealing with institutional politics or heavy workloads; we are also navigating spaces that often demand our labor while refusing to care for us in return. The cumulative effect of racism, surveillance, microaggressions, and being expected to perform emotional labor without support leaves many of us, as Iesha put it, not just tired but soul tired. For some, this looks like racial battle fatigue. For others, it shows up as anxiety, spiritual exhaustion, or burnout. Regardless of how it manifests, the emotional cost of doing this work—while also being who we are—is something we all carry. Vanessa connects this cost to spirit murder, which seeks to limit who we can be or become. Spirit murder occurs when, as Catharine reflects, she is not safe enough to be flawed in most spaces, therefore minimizes herself and her emotions to be perfectly composed. For Camisha, the exhaustion of performing strength and

managing emotions in hostile spaces impacts her quality of life as she carries the burden of racial battle fatigue.

Our stories, like those of other Women of Color in the academy, are not without hope. We each find people and spaces where our sense of safety is heightened, where we feel unafraid to be ourselves. These spaces are often not found but cultivated over time as we learn to trust certain people and ourselves in community.

Conclusion and Implications

Our collective analysis helped us realize that we all navigate academia with a keen awareness of our positionality and challenge norms while maintaining our sense of self. More so, our testimonies highlight how change within the institution often demands personal risk, resistance, and deep emotional labor. In the current sociopolitical climate that is vigorously attacking diversity, equity, and inclusion, our work is even more challenging as we who are often excluded from white institutional spaces are called upon to transform them. Ahmed (2018) poignantly reminds us that “diversity work is work” (p. 331); though not always visible or valued, the labor Women of Color in the academy exert is fraught with racialized emotions. In response to the potential harm, we each describe the importance of community—especially with other Women of Color—as a critical strategy for survival and resistance.

Whether through fugitive spaces, spirit protectors, trusted teams, or sister circles, we all rely on relationships that affirm us, challenge us, and hold us accountable to ourselves and one another. We cultivate intentional spaces of care, strategy, and protection that allow us to be seen in ways that the institution often cannot or will not. They help us stay grounded in our purpose while also reminding us that we do not have to carry everything alone. For example, Camisha describes sister circles that affirm her and serve as emotional sanctuaries. Similarly, Catharine finds restoration in a team dynamic where she can show up authentically and be safe to be imperfect while Vanessa discusses how she cultivates trusting relationships and believes her spiritual identity anchors her resistance. Vanessa reminds us all of the importance of building coalitions that prioritize healing over institutional performance; citing hooks (1990), she is able to establish homeplaces within higher education. Though some Women of Color in the academy find themselves unwilling or unable to share their stories or fully process the traumas they have faced (Harris & González, 2012, p. 11), we draw on vibe as a means of uttering that which we have no other words to describe.

We realize that our experiences are personal but not completely unique; as Women of Color, we are socialized to accept white supremacist ideologies that often become internalized; addressing that internalization contributes to our racialized emotions and requires emotional labor. While much of the literature on the racialized experiences of Women of Color in the academy depicts hardships (Duncan, 2014; Hoff, 2020; Mena, 2016), Miles (2022) is careful to position vibe as an analytic tool that allows us to make sense of an experience in the absence of words; these experiences do not have to be negative. We find and create spaces where the vibe is right, where we embrace each other in the fullness of our emotions and imperfections, and where we draw from the communal well of strength that allows us to brace ourselves for another day.

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