

Chapter 5

Masks Off: Portraits of Black Female Diversity Practitioners During a Double Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the perceptions and experiences of Black female diversity practitioners during the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning of 2020. Using portraiture as a methodology and Black feminist thought (BFT) as a framework, this chapter gives voice to two Black women who worked at Ivy League institutions as diversity practitioners from March 2020 through June 2021. This chapter places the portraits of Black female diversity practitioners at Ivy League institutions within the larger discourse about the impact that the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and the racial reckoning of 2020 had on higher education administrators.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides Black women a place and space where they can tell their stories, which contain the truth of their human experience. The portraits in this chapter can be used as a vehicle for reimagining the best practices organizations can use to support, retain, and improve work environments and cultures. In addition, these stories can provide guidance and tools of the trade to new practitioners in the field. Delgado (1989) stated, “stories can provide a way of uprooting unjustified exclusion, allowing individuals to rethink and reconstruct institutions” (pg. 24). Stories challenge our assumptions and can shift our core beliefs. Personal narratives have shaped the ways in which Black women have found solace and community.

Several studies that center the experiences of Black women in predominately white institutions reveal that they often spend much of their time and energy planning for and responding to the expectations others project upon them (Collins, 2001; Wallace et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2018). The intersections of race, gender, and class are always present as they navigate the academy. The multiplicity of identities that

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they hold contribute to the multiplicity of oppression that can and do impact their emotional, physical, psychological, and social well-being (Willis, 2019).

This chapter is situated in the framework of Black feminist thought (BFT), which is an authentic form of liberation (Collins, 2001). BFT allows Black women to be the producers of knowledge; it provides them the opportunity to tell their stories on their own terms. These stories are written in the form of portraits. Portraiture, a methodology developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, is a form of writing that allows the investigator's voice to be purposefully woven into the portrait, which is created as a result of the writer's interactions with the actors in the story (Hackmann, 2002).

Portraiture captures the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of the human experience. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are documenting by illuminating their voices; their visions; and their authority, knowledge, and wisdom (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). The portraits in this chapter can be used as a vehicle for reimagining best practices for supporting and retaining Black female diversity practitioners and improving their work environments. In addition, these stories can provide guidance to Black women who are new to the field.

REFLECTIONS ON THE DOUBLE PANDEMIC

I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigated pain. It is important to share how I know survival is survival and not just a walk through the rain. —Audre Lorde, The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House

A Portrait of Zora

It was a Friday, and as usual I had back-to-back meetings with no break in between. I purposely scheduled Zora as my last meeting of the day so I wouldn't have to rush our conversation. I was grateful that she agreed to be interviewed, considering that she was a senior administrator who had a highly visible role at her institution. I wanted few or no distractions, so I could be respectful of her time and fully engaged in our conversation.

As I signed into Zoom, I tried to gather my composure, fix the loose strands of curls that had been going rogue all day, and skim through my notes. As I popped into Zoom, I could see Zora was patiently waiting for me. Her smile gave me permission to relax. I felt my shoulders droop and took a deep breath. It was the first time today that I'd taken the time to just breathe. I felt the tension melt away from my body, and I smiled back and said, "Sorry, I'm late. It's just been one of those days."

"No need to apologize," she said. "It's good to see you!" Once again, Zora had centered and humanized me. I felt a sense of calm rush over me. I put my screen on speaker view, and her image came into focus. Her almond-colored skin glistened as if it had just been kissed by the sun, and her locks loosely framed her face and cascaded down her back. She was fully present.

We started the conversation by checking in and sharing stories about our week. Ten minutes in, I realized we hadn't even discussed why we were meeting. Pivoting the conversation, I asked her for permission to record. The red recording light showed up in the corner of my screen, and that was my signal to begin: "I'm looking to explore the perceptions and experience of Black women who are di-

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