

**“The Aesthetics of Voice & Vulnerability:
A Black Feminist Exploration of how Black Women Navigate Power in
Predominately White Public Spaces**

The BURN Project
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“Pain prevents us from death. Our skin, our muscles, our bones are sensors to keep our body from dying. Burn without pain is a tragic & a sure death.”
Antoinette Ellis-Williams, Sabbatical Fall 2020

In June 2019, I suffered a 2nd and 3rd degree chemical burn from an ice pack. I placed the ice pack on a bandage then applied to my aching shoulder/neck for twelve to fifteen minutes to numb the pain. Unbeknownst to me the ice pack traveled to my upper arm causing permanent damage. The pain in my neck vanished; I felt nothing, just relief. Upon removing the cloth, I discovered my skin falling off and large bubbles emerging like angry lava. I felt nothing for hours. But by the next day the pain was unbearable. Every day I have some pain, but I have learned to live with the pain. This injury propelled my scholarly and creative work to a place I never imagined.

I was denied sabbatical four times in four years. The first two times were painful. Then I became used to it until I felt nothing. I dubbed myself the “Susan Lucci of Sabbaticals.” Admittedly one of my sabbatical proposals may not have been my best work, but did I really suck that much? Were there zero advocates for me in decision making spaces? I was powerless to folks who knew little about me, my discipline, or my work. A respondent interviewed for my project stated, “I think every day in every way, we get burned as black women. I think that's like constant. I think that it's so prevalent that our skin is really numb to it because it's so prevalent. I think we have a tougher skin because it happens constantly.” I agree with her.

Perhaps my denials had nothing to do with race. But I sure felt invisible and defeated. bell hooks argues in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) that, “Often our work was ignored or ruthlessly critiqued, deemed not scholarly enough or too polemical.”¹ Black women get to a place where we cease to feel the pain, and normalize the burn. My fifth sabbatical application was my most authentic and exciting proposal. My first professional sabbatical was approved after working for twenty-eight years in academia.

The BURN Project was born. I began to think about how black women navigate public and private spaces constantly balancing our intersectional identity. Audre Lorde (1984) boldly states, “We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is black and female.”² A respondent added, “Maybe as a black woman, you sometimes don't feel as if you belong to anyone.” Belonging is hinged on ownership of and voice in the space. Occupying space without power is akin to living in a perpetual state of inertia. Nonetheless, Black women must move beyond the inertia.

Brittney Cooper (2018) reiterates the necessity for black women to constantly dodge, reimagine, negotiate and resist burn when she says, “We had weathered the storm.”³ One respondent when asked about surviving burn poignantly said, “I think you can recover from anything. I mean, even death.” She went on to say, “I decided to stop suffering.” This is what Black women have done and continue to do. We recover and are expected to recover from everything. Chaneque Walker-Barnes (2014) argues that “The church reinforces the mythology of the Strong Black Woman by silencing, ignoring, and even romanticizing the suffering of Black

¹ Watkins, Gloria, (Ed.) hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, New Edition. New York: Routledge, 2015

² ibid

³ Cooper, Brittney, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018.

women.”⁴ The mythology around Black women’s capacity to “fly” has been widely embraced by those within and outside the African American community. In 1979, Michele Wallace sounded the alarm of the myth of the black Superwoman. Black feminists have continued to dispel this myth. We must ask some hard questions: What do Black women do with the pain from predominately white institutions (PWIs)? How does this manifest itself in publications, graduation and retention rates, tenure, grants, and fellowships? Are black women professionals, faculty, and staff expected to mentor every Black girl and serve on every committee to meet diversity quotas? How does this additional burden and cultural labor contribute to promotion, rate increases, and/or sabbaticals?

“America asks too much from us. We choke on injustice forced to swallow. How much pain can Black women (people) take?” Antoinette Ellis-Williams

The BURN Project-Identity, Reality & Healing Black Women is a multi-disciplinary visual, poetic, literary and ethnographic study on how history, socio-political, cultural, economic, and familial relationships shape identity, reality and healing black women. The project is divided in three phases: (1) Origin & Activism, (2) Representation, Body, Beauty & Girlhood and (3) Healing & Memory. Phase I Installation shines light on resistance and revolt through digital video, sounds, 2D & 3D work. To date, I have interviewed 14 black women for my project. The interviews help inform the artwork created. I examine how black woman navigate public and private spaces. Why and how do Black women survive and ultimately heal from systemic, cultural, familial, and personal burns?

To deconstruct the BURN process, I have reimaged the Creation Origin Story (*In the Beginning*) from the perspective of a Black woman⁵. Many standardized benchmarks or best practices assumes we have accurate tools to measure success. Some assessment models rarely consider the possibility of interdisciplinary measurements (e.g., storytelling, call and response, oral histories, play, visual interpretation) that utilizes intersectionality as a mode of inquiry when framing researching, teaching, learning or practice. Oftentimes the scales and indices are biased, flawed, one-dimensional and/or insufficient when considering the work and merit of Black women in white spaces. I begin with a reset of “normal.” An excerpt from Phase I ORIGINS & ACTIVISM Installation:

In the beginning God created the first woman, black. Molded from Mother Earth, she was everything. She was perfect from her hair to her hips, to her snap and her wit. She was perfect.

In the beginning, black women loved and lived in communities as leaders, teachers, healers, innovators, judges, and mothers. Black women relied on kinship networks to build strong families and compassionate sisterhood with one another. They found ways to ease the pain and bring joy. In the beginning black women created tools, crafts, art, music, dance, storytelling, and food to nourish the bodies, minds, and souls of those around them. Black women celebrated their beauty with vibrant colors, elaborate hairstyles, and unique cultural flair. Their laugh caused the birds to sing. In the beginning, black women were perfect and whole. But as colonialization, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and misogyny slithered into their garden, their agency was tempered through physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual violence, poverty, and oppression. Their culture was decimated, appropriated, and reappropriated into unrecognizable splinters. They were erased, caricaturized, brutalized and misrepresented throughout history. In the beginning, black women resisted against systemic oppressions. Black women became Fire aka “FIYA” to fight the BURN.

⁴ Walker-Barnes, Chanequa, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014.

⁵I fully know and agree that Black women are not a monolith and are incredibly diverse (ethnicity, nationality, class, race, sexuality, religion, ability, age, etc.) people. But for the purposes of this research, I am loosely connecting the narratives.

Black women resist. bell hooks frames black feminism inquiry squarely on the work of black women activists. She says, “Drawing on the work of the activists who had launched women’s liberation, creating manifestos and position papers, female students everywhere were encouraged to examine the past, to find and uncover our hidden stories, and feminist legacies.”⁶ *BURN Phase 1: Origins and Activism* is informed by the Black women’s activism of the 1712 NY revolt, 1881 Atlanta Washwomen Strike, and the resistance of Stagecoach Mary, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Sojourner Truth, Ella Baker, Barbara Smith, Lorraine Hansberry, to name just a few. It is with this past that we are able to contextualize the work.

My interviews with the fourteen participants reveal complex narratives around the Burn construct, including but not limited to, queer identity, religion, gender oppression within the community, family, forgiveness, motherhood, politics, and healing practices. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will focus primarily on the data surrounding PWI colleges and universities and share one of the signature pieces from Phase 1 to further unpack BURN.

Research on predominately white institutions conclude that Black female students, faculty, and staff oftentimes face stereotyping, invisibility, unhealthy social relationships, and neglect (Mitchell, 2021; Shabazz, 2015; Robertson, 2017). My research confirms what other studies have identified. The dominant themes emerging from my work surrounding BURN in PWIs are **Isolation & Alienation**. Thirteen of the respondents interviewed are college graduates. Seventy percent of those interviewed mentioned how painful and isolating it was navigating predominantly white colleges and universities (PWI) even decades after graduating. Some still carry the pain. One respondent talking about her experience at a PWI said, “I wasn't one that was used to reaching out for help. I feel like the resources were not there. If someone [staff/administrator] saw something, it wasn't like they reached out to [help] you in the way that my friends who went to HBCU. They [HBCU students] had that type of support.” The default assumption by some in PWIs is that black girls are strong. They will speak up and advocate for themselves. We internalize this message from a young age. But this not the reality. I, too, kept my feelings of isolation to myself until I was able to find staff and faculty who loved and supported me. Some of these mentors remain in my life. These relationships made a world of difference to help lift me to a place at Seton Hall University where I thrived. PWIs cannot simply offer programs or events and expect students to just show up. PWIs must create an environment where Black women are able to build a safe, inclusive, and familiar community. Until then, these students will continue to feel isolation or alienation.

Perhaps some faculty are naïve, or lack the preparation, or consider it “Not my problem. I am a XXXX professor not a therapist.” Yes, I have heard this before. Somehow equity and inclusion are a not associated with college success. Arguably to be effective in diverse spaces, addressing isolation and alienation are essential ingredients. A respondent said she felt as though some peers and professors were trying to “gaslight” her to make her feel like an imposter. She goes on to state that, “Every place on campus Black women walk into they are worried. Am I smart enough?” While this respondent was on full academic scholarship, she felt unprepared upon her arrival. Granted this is a universal feeling regardless of race or gender, especially for first-generation students however, it is further exasperated by overt and covert racism. Some participants faced blatant racism in college. One respondent said of a racial incident, “I was traumatized.” She goes on to talk about how she navigated and continues to navigate PWIs.

As [black] women, we're always trying to navigate how angry do I seem? How angry do I look, let me appear nicer than I want to, because anything, my normal could be seen as coming off condescending. I must over produce and overexerts so that I can make people comfortable. And that's dehumanizing. When you have to always wear a mask and always falsify, what is real to make people feel safe... Isn't that crazy, ? I have to perform my rage so that you are not offended. And so, my performance of rage makes you think that I'm entertaining you.

⁶ Watkins, Gloria, (Ed.) hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, New Edition. New York: Routledge, 2015

The dance of reassurance. This is what “nice” Black women perform in PWIs. Manage your rage, smile, mention the weather, immediately find common ground. Mary-Frances Winters author of *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body and Spirit* says, “The ‘angry black woman’ is probably the most fatiguing stereotype to manage.”⁷ My own BURN stories in academic spaces are numerous but includes an incident with a white colleague running her uninvited hands through my hair after my big chop while I was walking to the Gilligan Student Union Building. In recent years, I have publicly raised questions of whiteness and/or race in meetings with colleagues and administrators. At times I was the only black woman in the room. Most times all I heard was silence. No ally. No administrative agreement. No formation of a committee. Just deafening nothingness. It’s exhausting, to say the least. Silence and isolation are perhaps the most dismissive tactics Black women navigate in predominately white spaces. Other tactics includes guilt and shame for not stepping up to help fight the “problem.” “You are Black, this is your fight.” We have come to a place where dominant majority groups must take on this work. Chairpersons should know where to find qualified diverse faculty in their discipline. This is not the responsibility, work, or burden for Black women. The notion that people of color ought to take the lead in educating, growing, and nurturing healthy inclusive work spaces is destructive and unfair. Keeange-Yamahtta Taylor makes the claim that, “eliminating racism in the white women’s movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.”⁸ The same is true in PWIs.

Another respondent said, “There are certain ways people respond to you sometimes in your work that you just feel like sometimes if you were a white woman, white man, that they would respond to you differently, talk to you differently, respect you differently.” Yes, this is exhausting and uncomfortable, but this is the work for those truly committed to an inclusive “beloved community” with shared governance built around equity and justice. The burden to build a system free from oppression is one froth with doubt, skepticism, and dissent. But the greater burden to do nothing is heavier and simply untenable.

Another respondent eloquently argues that “I don't think injury is ever a good thing. And even if you do recover from it, even if it quote, unquote makes you stronger, you, if you're hurt, if you're injured, you're starting behind the starting point. But at the same time, I think part of what you're calling them burn is part of the identity. And so as there's less of a burden or not a burden, then our ideas about black woman identity get diluted, diluted.”

The BURN Phase 1 Installation exhibition includes almost 40 pieces of art. The first pieces I worked on during my sabbatical seeks to imagine the “weathering” process of Black women’s bodies. This weathering approach borrows from public health scholar Arline T. Geronimus Hillemeier’s work on “The weathering hypothesis and the health of African-American women and infants.” Her research investigates excessive mortality rates across race and age. She concludes excessive patterns of mortality rates in African American communities is due in part to impoverishment and race. With my own burn I was fascinated with replicating the weathering process on the bodies of Black women to examine the changes, harm and how these scars are imprinted on Black mothers and daughters.

My process began with treating and laying a piece of canvas in the back yard in August 2020 until December 2020, that I called the “mother”. Every few days I would move the canvas around to minimize or maximize sun or rain exposure. I placed leaves, charcoal, sticks, ashes, graphite, water, solvents, and anything I could find in the yard to see their reaction to the canvas. In October 2020 I added another canvas to the weathering experiment. This second piece is the “daughter.” I documented the process with digital and video images. I captured this image as the canvas was on the fence and sun shined through the canvas.

⁷ Winters, Mary-Frances. *Black Fatigue: How Racism Erodes the Mind, Body, and Spirit*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2020.

⁸ Taylor, Keenanga-Yamahtta (Ed.). *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Chicago, IL: Haymart Books, 2017.

Black women will find light even when placed in spaces that fence us out or keep us in. This process was remarkable and was a surprise. My BURN journal entry 11/22/20 reads:

“To tell the truth is painful & remarkable.

This project is taking a toll on my back and joints. My arthritis is more present as the seasons change and the pandemic extends into a more dangerous second wave.

Studying, listening, and sitting in the narratives, history, interviews, and music I feel the pain. The weathering project continues to bloom in so many unexpected ways. To have mother and daughter evolve side by side I’m struck by the ways in which the materials are similar. I try to catch the light through the leaves, trees, and wind.

Today’s wind is too much for me to hang the canvas on the fence. So I leave them on the ground. The painted twigs are placed on top of the canvases. I call them Fire sticks.”

The photo below *Feel My Heat! Smoke & Fence* was upstaged. I glimpsed out the window, the sunlight glistening through the canvas. It was breathtaking. Behind the dark rough places on the surface of the canvas the light is visible.

Feel My Heat! Fire, Smoke & Fence, Photograph 38” x 27” on Canvas (2020)

[Please insert picture.]



The Weathering Process is a metaphor. For me this piece is a visual representation of the Isolation and Alienation in PWIs. Black women carry generations of thick rich herstories. What is possible, is light. I truly believe that we have the tools to provide light if we collectively do the work to allow the light to shine.

Epilogue

I am pleased to note that in 2021 some of my white colleagues demonstrated true allyship with the creation of WSFARE (*White Staff, Faculty, and Administrators for Racial Equity*), previously known as the *NJCU White Ally Group*. This group gives me hope and demonstrates leadership and a commitment to inclusion and equity.