

Softness, Scholarship, and Survival as Black Woman at a PWI

From the moment a Black girl becomes a Black woman, civilization begins writing our story for us. We take on stereotypes before we comprehend their generalizations, with labels like “angry”, “too much”, “strong”, “intimidating”, or “hard to handle.” These narratives are constantly repeated everywhere: from media, classrooms, politics, to even daily interactions that make the world think it already knows us. But my experience being a Black woman at a predominantly white institution has taught me that these narratives don’t just causally float around in the background; they actively shape how people treat me, see me, and anticipate me to behave. My counter story exists because I refuse to let stereotypes, like those rooted in political rhetoric, racism, or hollow "gimmicks" define who I am or who I’m becoming.

When Bettina Love talks about “Theory over Gimmicks” she perfectly explains that real liberation work must be grounded in purpose, values, and honestly not superficial portrayal (Love). Love describes the “North Star” as an established point: the core truth that keeps you consistent when humanity tries to distract you with expectations, ploys, and stereotypes. For me, regaining my humanity, softness, and intellectual identity as a Black woman is my North Star. In a society that continuously tries to turn us into performers, symbols, or some sort of political talking points, grounding myself in who I am actually becoming forms a resistance.

The Racist Rhetoric lecture makes it evident how dangerous superior stories about Black people can be, notably when powerful personages repeat them for political gain. When politicians casually suggest that Black communities are dependent, lazy, uninterested in success,

or uneducated, they intensify narratives that seep into workplaces, classrooms, and institutions (Erase Racism). I feel the influence of those narratives every single time someone seems surprised that I write well, I'm articulate, or that I am majoring in English and minoring in Music. There's a primary assumption that Black women, specifically at PWIs, must be either extraordinary or struggling, never solely human. These presuppositions did not come from just nowhere; they are a direct outcome of racist rhetoric normalized in the educational and political systems we grow up exploring.

In an academic space, these stories become personal. I've experienced that odd double-vision; being unseen until someone needs that "Black perspective," and then suddenly becoming hypervisible. I've seen classmates and sadly even professors look shocked when I raise my hand and speak with confidence or distinction. I've had people treat my accomplishments like exceptions instead of the standard norm. Bell hooks writes about the misrepresented ways Black women's voices are viewed in academic settings, and I believe that every time someone confuses my calm moments for attitude or my limits for anger (Hooks). And these aren't coincidences; they're the results of the main narratives that define Black women as either emotional problems or hardy machines.

My counter narrative interrupts that.

I am not just the strong Black woman society expects me to be. I am curious, soft, ambitious, emotional, and allowed to learn without having all the answers. I deserve gentleness, community, and understanding. My softness does not erase my strengths; but it expands it. As Bettina Love advises, we cannot build a liberated identity from gimmicks, labels, quick fixes, and/or stereotypes that don't create truth (Love). Instead, my lived encounters became my

compass, my theory, my North Star. Loving myself to the fullest as a Black woman is a political act because mankind benefits from reducing us into stereotypes. Me choosing softness is my rebellion.

At the same time though, my academic individuality challenges another set of inaccurate narratives. The Racist Rhetoric lecture highlights how harmful it is when leaders characterize Black students as incapable or unmotivated (Erase Racism). Yet my reality disputes this every day: I write, I study, I perform music, I learn, I grow, I show up. My motivation does not exist in spite of being a Black woman, but it exists through it. As Solórzano and Yosso explain, counterstories disrupt dominant myths and assert the truth of marginalized experiences (Solórzano and Yosso 26). My story reveals that Black women are not exceptions to success; but are constantly reframing what success looks like.

Navigating a PWI means always choosing to take up space even when the atmosphere was not built for you. It means learning when to rest, when to speak, when to protect your energy. It means grasping the difference between the identity you built for yourself and expectations being placed on you. It means finding your North Star and holding onto it, even when generalizations try to drag you off course.

My counter narrative states that being a Black woman is not a problem a stereotype can fit into or to fix. It's a layered, complex, beautiful identity full of intelligence, softness, joy, vulnerability, creativity, and strength. By telling my story in my own words, I question the idea that humanity already knows me. **And newsflash it doesn't.** And with every step I take, whether emotionally, academically, or spiritually. I move closer to my own North Star, guided by truth over liberation and gimmicks over limitation.

Works Cited

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