I WILL MAKE ALLOWANCES FOR YOUR CREATIVITY

Additional findings of the Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association

February 2012
I WILL MAKE ALLOWANCES FOR YOUR CREATIVITY

Maria Inez Winfield
First Baptist Church of Hampton

There is a violent white female in the Deep South: she probably teaches very young children. I know she is violent because she kicked me in the small of my back. She probably teaches very young children because she attacked me while she was a student in a Pre-kindergarten to 5th Grade Language Arts Pedagogy class that I taught for preservice teachers in their final semester of course work. This aspiring teacher, my student, kicked me while we were in the classroom in front of other peers. She enacted this vicious battery with absolute impunity.

Shortly after the assault, she admitted she did not respect me. She had tried: she just did not. She could not explain the disrespect. Even as I write this I wonder how she would have dealt with a white male instructor. I just cannot imagine that she would admit to his face that it was impossible to respect him. Her statement is significant because even though she would not acknowledge it, I know enough about racism to realize that she disrespected me because I am African American.
She confessed that she had never been taught by an African American instructor. The fact that she openly admitted her disdain to a teacher who was responsible for her grade is notable because her inherent sense of White privilege allowed her to speak this fact without fear of repercussion (Paley 2000; Singley & Bell 2002). Most compelling to me, however, is not the fact that she failed to acknowledge my authority. The fact that this future teacher would most likely teach in a classroom full of African American children is chilling, since 90% of most public school classrooms are filled with African American children (Delpit & Dowdy 2002; Kozol 2005; Ladson-Billings 2001; Perry, Steele & Hilliard 2003). The treatment these vulnerable students could expect from a woman who violently attacked her African American college instructor is frightening.

Even more troubling, twenty-one white female students, her cohort in the pedagogy class, condoned her behavior. Not one of them came forward to protest on my behalf. For two years, I taught preservice teachers in their last semester of coursework at a large predominately white research one institution. My class was among those required prior to student teaching. This particular class met once a week for almost three hours at the beginning and end of the semester. In the middle of the semester, the students completed teaching practicums; I supervised them in the field. Of four classes that each averaged twenty students per class, approximately four students were male, two were Black women, and all others were white.

As a Black woman, I was frequently expected to perform as one of two stereotypical characters. Black women are often assigned the roles of Mammy or Sapphire. The role of “Mammy” according to Bell & Nkomo (2001) “refers to a motherly, self-sacrificing black woman who takes care of those around her.” A woman assigned the “Sapphire” role is typecast as a “dramatic, bossy black woman who is full of complaints and mistrust” (Bell & Nkomo 2001, p. 246). During my first two semesters of teaching, I was about 30 pounds over my healthy weight. Recently divorced, I did not take care of myself, often wore a head-wrap and looked the Mammy part. I mention this because my students loved me when I was fat. When I began to take better care of myself, I lost the weight and the problems began. Then, I was not a Mammy figure, but neither was I a drama-queen. I was not aggressive, insecure, or in any way like Sapphire. My white female students could not neatly place me into either role because neither role had room for an authority figure, teacher, expert, or purveyor of knowledge. In other words, these young women literally treated me as though I could not teach them anything. Each day I entered a battle zone. Every assignment was questioned. Each idea was argued. Eyes constantly rolled; teeth and tongues were consistently sucked. For my students, I was a problem.

These young women turned what should have been a village mentality into a mob mentality. Instead of moving with compassionate understanding for the communal good, these Eurocentric women used a mob mentality to bully the weak into submission to the strong—right or wrong. Usually the one
with the most money was the leader. My assailant was ostensibly one of the most powerful members of the cohort.

I optimistically entered the predominantly white research one institutional classroom fully aware of the racism that I might encounter. After all this was my third experience with teaching preservice aspirants and my second time teaching the Pre-kindergarten to 5th Grade section. Still, I was not prepared for the personality of this cohort. They were combative from day one. They made no pretenses. They were out for blood. They verbally assaulted me and visibly balked at all assignments except a writing workshop. For the writing workshop, they had to create portable writing kits that included supplies such as assorted pins, markers, crayons, scissors, tape, paper, stickers, and any item that they identified as helpful in the writing process. They were almost always actively engaged in their personal writing pursuits during this segment of class. Most of the students enjoyed writing freely within their own choice of genre.

I am a firm believer in theory coupled with practice. As an extremely hands on instructor, I realized that my creative methods were uncomfortable for some students and acknowledged it consistently throughout the semester. I often reminded students to use their discomfort as instruction for the ways students in their own classes might feel. I encouraged them to use their uncomfortable experiences as an impetus for monitoring and adjusting their teaching strategies. Eventually, most of my students signed a truce; putting their personal prejudice aside and they did the work. However, there was no reasoning with the young woman, who physically attacked me. I will use the pseudonym “Amyjoy” to describe the experience.

The physical attack came on the day that I had scheduled a three-way conference with Amyjoy, my supervising professor, and myself. I decided to talk to Amyjoy about prior inappropriate behavior. Previous encounters with Amyjoy provided evidence that she would not behave appropriately one-on-one. In fact, the conference was scheduled after Amyjoy approached me in anger with a loud voice after the previous class. I will not soon forget the day of the conference for several reasons.

As a class, we had discussed Peggy McIntosh’s article about white privilege. My supervisor scheduled her periodic observation of my teaching skills to coincide with the subsequent conference, and I arrived early to rearrange the desks because I wanted to have a discussion circle with plenty of room around the perimeter. The reason for the conference was the escalating viciousness of Amyjoy’s verbal attacks and the blatant disrespect that she exhibited. I had also learned from experience that the incendiary McIntosh article was often confrontational and decided to videotape the session. I was glad that my professor would be in attendance, and hoped that she would help if the discussion became too heated. Finally, we often had too little room to manoeuver around the desks and I was returning an important assignment. Since I was accustomed to explaining and justifying the grades that my students earned, I wanted to have room to move freely to answer questions.
As soon as the papers were returned, questions flew. After Amyjoy received her paper, she left the room. I did not notice her departure. It was her return that I was painfully aware of. I had stooped down to explain the difference between the ‘A’ one of my students earned and the "A+" she desired, when Amyjoy walked behind me, kicked me hard, and continued toward her seat at the table.

I looked up in shocked disbelief and stated, “You kicked me.” I was almost speechless.

“Sorry,” was Amyjoy’s muted response.

“No,” I said, my anger rising, “You kicked me!” I exclaimed.

“I said….” Amyjoy paused for attention and emphasis, “I was sorry!” she screamed.

Only the grace of God prevented me from losing my mind. I reminded myself of the scheduled meeting, that my supervising professor was in the classroom during the attack, and there existed the possibility that we would resolve these issues.

Resolution did not materialize. Instead, the meeting was a study in Racism. The white student simultaneously expressed her feelings toward me with vituperation. My white female supervisor unequivocally supported the white female student both verbally and physically. Three examples of white racial solidarity emerged during the meeting. First, after Amyjoy confessed that she did not respect me, never had, and never would, my professor asked me what I could do to earn Amyjoy’s respect. Second, although the chairs were arranged in a conversational circle, my professor moved her chair beside Amyjoyso that they both confronted me. Finally, my professor left with the student at the end of the meeting.

The meeting that followed the physical attack was wholly inappropriate and left me feeling not only the physical pain of the attack but the mental anguish of having finally understood that I was completely unsupported by my professor. My supervising professor was a person who I thought was not just a colleague, but a friend. It was all too much for me and I subsequently suffered a critical break down. According to hooks (1994),”We fall into periods of critical breakdown, because we often feel there is no world that will embrace us” (p. 48). After my professor and student, departed I cried alone in my lonely office.

I was in shock for several days. It was not until a friend forced me to face the reality of the paroxysm that I took steps toward healing. I filed assault charges and began the arduously humiliating process of telling the story to white people who made it clear to me that they did not want me to exist. I was again reminded of the inhospitality that suffused my academic atmosphere. African Americans were never meant to survive and sometimes academicians try to destroy us precisely because we exist (Lorde 1978; hooks 1994). The individual reactions each time I recounted the incursion inflamed my wounds. Responses ranged from denunciations.
to ambushes. My supervising professor refused to be interviewed by the police. My major professor did not attend the meeting with the department chair and dean of students. Although the chair defended me to the dean, he attacked me in a later meeting where my major professor came to my defense. When I finally obtained a copy of the police report the statements within the thick document evoked further pain. I was described as a “psychotic black woman.” My attacker was described as an “attractive, young white girl of athletic build.” All of my students provided interviews in support of Amyjoy while vilifying me. None of my colleagues were interviewed. Finally, my report was deemed “unfounded.”

I found myself at another educational crossroad. I could fight racism by seeking justice through the court systems or fight racism by completing the doctoral degree. My decision came after much deliberation. I considered Anna Julia Cooper’s description of a distinctively African American woman’s historical significance:

> when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole [African American] race enters with me. (Anna Julia Cooper as quoted in Giddings, p.13)

Next, I considered the less than a dozen doctoral students who entered the program with me; I was the only African American among them. Furthermore, I considered the fact that my program had graduated its first African American student in 2004. Therefore, I focused on the battle that I could both win and use to help others. I chose to earn my Ph.D. and help others like me obtain their terminal degrees.

As a result of the decision to focus on my Ph.D. instead of the assault, I was the first of my cohort to become a doctoral candidate. Of the graduate students who began this journey with me, I was a member of the small group of three who completed our degrees in four years.

Nevertheless, racism in academe is existent and prolific. Contrary to modern misapprehension, the academic milieu has not greatly improved for African American women. We are still least likely to be mentored, published, taken seriously, or acquire the best jobs. (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith 1982; Johnson-Bailey 2001; Jones & Shorter-Gooding 2004; Scott 1991). We are still more likely to get sick, be single, and suffer (Hill-Collins 2005; Johnson-Bailey 2001; Scott 1991). Yet, if I can advance from G.E.D. to Ph.D. then there is hope for others.

In spite of my experiences in academe, I maintain an indomitable hope. This hope emanates from powerful faith and a sense of purpose that extends beyond my individual circumstances. I wrote a poem “Because... hope” that expresses these sentiments (Winfield 2008-2009). Sometimes, I wonder what is wrong with everyone else. More often, I use my past experiences to undergird me; I use the lessons of the past to fashion the future. I believe in the Sankofa principle that encourages using past knowledge to create positive
present experiences. I came of age during one of the most pivotal periods of American history.

I am the Brown v. Board of Education decision of May 17, 1954 personified. Born on May 18, 1959, I entered the desegregated schools resulting from the Brown decision a decade after it commenced “with all deliberate speed” in the American public school system. As a military dependent, I was most often the solitary Black child in my public school classes, from New York to New Mexico. I began Junior High in the desegregated schools of Springfield, Ohio and dropped out of high school in Baltimore, Maryland’s segregated public school system. I wish my teachers had considered teaching methods that were effective with African American adolescents. They did not.

Desegregation was legislated. Love cannot be. I was successful in school because I love to learn. I was unsuccessful in school when love was absent. In part, the Brown decision states: Where a State has undertaken to provide an opportunity for an education in its public schools, such an opportunity is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

Unfortunately, value and nurture cannot be legislated. For most in the early days of the decision, hatred was the rule; love the exception. In spite of daily discriminations, I was successful in school because I am creative in the areas of language and visual arts and I love to learn. Constant struggle taught me to persevere, hurdle obstacles, and achieve excellence. My early educational experiences initiated an insistent intellectual pursuit irrespective of miseducation.

My most excellent and equally devastating school experiences were in kindergarten. The first of two kindergartens that I attended was in a diminutive red schoolhouse perched atop a grassy hill. Even in the Syracuse, New York snowstorms, I traveled to that home away from home. I don’t remember anything specific about the teacher, only a generalized mood of benevolence, security, and shelter from the harsh elements outside. I do remember sweet graham crackers and cold white milk; these snacks are still comfort foods for me. My second kindergarten encounter was on the Philippine Islands when my air force family was ordered. It was here that my memory recorded its first sense of rejection.

At first, I was teacher’s pet in the converted silver barracks that housed the elementary school on Clark Air Force Base. These classrooms resembled tin-cans, cut in half lengthwise, and placed on stilts. I can recall the melodic rhythms of rain on metal during the monsoon season. The teacher held my hand as we walked to the pond where my classmates and I played, while dragonflies zoomed around us. With an impression of wonder, I watched vivid yellow baby chicks emerge from their shells inside incubators. I wrote my first poem loosely fashioned after Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 and called it “A Time to Learn.” I think my mother still has it. Then Jackie came to town and replaced me in my teacher’s affections. Looking back, I realize that the teacher probably bestowed benevolent attention to each new child. Nevertheless, this was the genesis of my
learned behavior of fading into the background. I became one of the many tropical flowers in the field behind our makeshift school. Kindergarten remains my favorite elementary school experience even though it was when I learned to disappear.

Other incidents that shaped my early educational history were: the Kent State riots, the Black Power movement, the Afro, and Essence magazine. I came of age in a time when Afro-Americans expressed their value, strengths, and uniqueness. Essence magazine was born and I was treated to my first positive glossy magazine images of black people. I discovered that my skin did not have to be white. My hair did not have to be blonde and straight. Even though the popular music group Earth, Wind, and Fire urged my peer group to “keep your head to the sky” I knew my eyes did not have to be sky-hued. Mine were the striking color of rich, life-giving soil and “Black is beautiful” was our pubescent mantra. Yet, desegregation did not have the lasting effects that it could have (Asante 1990; Bell 1992, 2004; Cade 1970; Crenshaw 2002; Kozol 2005). Dropping out of high school was a predictable pathology for the type of miseducation I thereafter received.

After I dropped out of high school, I earned my G.E.D. and graduated from community college. A decade passed before I graduated magna cum laude from The Center for Excellence in Education at Northern Arizona University (NAU). My sister drove me to the mountain campus in a beat up baby blue station wagon. She dropped me off along with the five cardboard boxes that I had covered with felt backed pink plastic tablecloths. These packages represented the sum total of my tangible possessions. In my pocket was a twenty-dollar bill, all the money I had. My food supply consisted of a twelve pack of cheese and cracker snacks. I had saved the money for the summer tuition and books by working as a custodian for the Sierra Vista Public Schools. Possessed of faith, hope, and peace, I knew that I had answered the call on my life. That is when I learned to follow my dreams. Through my rose-tinted eyeglasses, the world appeared dazzling.

My first NAU professor snatched those blushing spectacles from my eyes. I will not soon forget her. Although her name is lost in the fizzy fog of forgetfulness, her words are indelibly etched in my intellectual contemplations. Calmly she stood before our “Introduction to Special Education” class and stated succinctly and authoritatively, “Blacks are proven to be genetically intellectually inferior to whites.” As one accustomed to fading into the background of a classroom, I hesitated to raise my hand. Fear associated with being the only African American student in the class as well as the strong drive to excel created inner turmoil. I raised my hand in spite of myself. She ignored me. Fueled by an affront added to feelings of insignificance, I waved my hand wildly. She acted as if I were not on Earth. Anger forced hesitancy aside and I interrupted, “Excuse me, please…” I tentatively stepped out of the shadows, “Where, may I ask was this research conducted?”

“Somewhere in the deep South,” was her impatient response after she realized that I would not be disregarded.
“Would you care to venture a guess as to why?” I respectfully queried.

“No, I do not! We don’t have time for this right now!” She reprimanded me.

I retreated into my shell. The classroom paled to monochrome. I became a deaf mute, anxiously anticipating a prompt evacuation. Shame was a tidal wave overhead, pulling me under. Honorably, my classmates threw me a raft. I climbed on and floated. They surrounded me as soon as class was dismissed. They wanted to know what I was going to do. They wanted to know how they could help. I had to act. I learned that a community of learners is a valuable support system.

I lodged a formal complaint with the dean of students. I never saw that professor again. More importantly, she was prevented from poisoning young minds with her peculiar brand of racist propaganda. Ironically, her husband became the head of the special education department in my senior year. I had no alternative. I enrolled in his class. Just as his wife before him, he had no alternative; he had to give me the straight As that I earned in both of their classes. The genetic inferiority of the African American was and is a counterfeit supposition. That was when I learned to take a stand.

I will make allowances for your creativity
As creatures of habit, humans tend to travel a common path. I trekked across a snow-covered field on my way to the Education building and stayed on a path that had been carved through the snow. Two people traveling in opposite directions could not be on the path simultaneously. I was focused on putting one foot in front of the other when a pretty blonde girl on the narrow path distracted me. I smiled automatically. She did not return my good manners. When we were eyeball to eyeball we stopped. One of us would have to step off the path and enter the fifteen-inch snow bank to let the other pass. There had been innumerable occasions when I had performed that civility. This was not the day. I stared her down. She sucked her teeth, flushed an angry scarlet, and walked around my frozen inflexible mass. She had crossed the path of the wrong African American female on the wrong icy evening. I did not give a millimeter. Unnoticed by me, there was a Native American student behind me on the path. When we reached the building, our conversation went something like this:

“I saw you ahead of me on the path and I am glad that you did that.”

“It was really immature of me but I had a bad day and I was tired.”

“No. I am really glad you did that. It has happened to me. White people just look at me and assume that I will move out of their way. They never think that they might be in my way.”

“I thought I was the only one who noticed that.”

“No, I’ve noticed too.”

“Thank you.”

“No. Thank you.”

I never saw her again. It was as if she appeared on the path that evening to grant forgiveness and rise back up to heaven. This incident was a pertinent reminder because it illustrated how a group of people often assumes superiority and then takes it for granted. This was a microcosmic example within the myriad series of undergraduate school lessons in institutionalized racism. These experiences prepared me to survive in spite of the impediments of hatred set before me. I learned that racism exists in a dichotomous way, in vicious verbal abuse and fragile courtesies.

My educational and work experiences are binary and dichotomous. In the early years of my education I made straight As in spite of the nameless teachers for whom I was invisible. I detested school because there was a pervasive sense of foreboding that hovered over me. I was always afraid there was something inherently wrong with me and I never felt safe. The bulk of my education came from a passion for reading, compassion for others, absorption in art, and a creative spirit. I have struggled vigorously to remember what I learned in school. I cannot.
I loved to learn but I hated school. Of all the teachers I had from elementary school until high school, I only remember the name of my sixth grade teacher. I would like to reminisce about her compassionate loving kindness but she was unforgettable because of her cruelty. She emotionally and verbally abused her *Negro students*, as we were labeled in her classroom. Her actions proved she considered us inferior. She used a seating chart to segregate her Negro students from her White children and relegate us to the back of the class. We quickly learned not to raise our hands because she ignored us when she was not screaming at us. Nieto (1996) advises educators to listen carefully to students because their “voices sometimes reveal the great challenges and even the deep pain young people feel when schools are unresponsive, cold places” (p. 106). It was this coldness that resulted in an act of desperation. The sheer frustration that we all shared finally caused one of us to snatch her wig off. It was wrong, but it felt like victory because we stopped being afraid. I became a teacher because I wanted to be the kind of teacher I never had.

I have maintained, and instilled in my students, the belief that the sky is the limit. This belief propelled me through a Master’s program. My Master’s program admirably prepared me for dissertation work. I had some of the best professors in the United States and the United Kingdom. Three of these professors encouraged me to get a Ph.D.; one actively recruited me. The only graduate school that I applied to accepted me due in large measure to her advocacy and initial support. My graduate school experiences have a great deal to do with why I taught at an historically black university. Still, it is the entirety of my life’s experiences thus far that have made me who I am.

Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company?

It’s beyond me. (Hurston 2004, p.88)

I began my doctoral program with a symphony of subjective questions about my divine purpose within the academy. Why had I survived the traumas of my life? Why was my life spared from the mind numbing professions within which other high school drop-outs are condemned to a lifetime sentence of labor without parole? How was I able to dismiss the predictions of my teachers that I would end up on the welfare line with too many children? How was I able to shake off the cruel words of professors who said, “Blacks are genetically, intellectually inferior to Whites” and “I have made allowances for your creativity, but you still have to prove yourself”? My schooling narrative is coincidentally and antithetically related to Racism in the Academy. I know better now than I knew then, that answers to these questions are a deeply spiritual matter. I knew then, the answers to these questions would facilitate survival in my doctoral program. I know now, finding and sharing the answers to these questions may help others to navigate within the academy or discover avenues away from arduous atmospheres.

I believe that my personal triumphs predict success for
others with equivalent experiences. I sought answers in books that encouraged me to keep, “making a way out of no way” (Johnson-Bailey 2001); and listening to “the echo in my soul” (Clark & Blythe 1962). Other African American women scholars taught me to acknowledge “the skin that we speak” (Delpit & Dowdy 2002); and of my responsibility to “teach to transgress” (hooks 1994). African American women scholars explained that “shifting” (Jones & Shorter-Gooding 2004) is a substratum which sustains “the habit of survival” (Scott 1991). Even though I am a “Sister Outsider” (Lorde 1984); and “all the women are White, all the blacks are men, …some of us are brave” (Hull, Bell-Scott, & Smith 1982). Like my “Black Foremothers” (Sterling 1979), I am divinely led to respond with my existence. “I believe we are here on the planet to live, grow up, and do what we can to make this world a better place for all people to enjoy” (Parks 2004, p.82). I believe humankind is responsible for changing intolerable facts of life, otherwise we tacitly agree with imparities. I add my educational testimony as example and inspiration for the next generation.
References

Bell, D. A.  

Bell, E., & Nkomo, S.  

Crenshaw, K.  

Delpit, L. D., & Dowdy, J. K.  

Dillard, C.  

Etter-Lewis, G.  

Giddings, P.  

hooks, b.  

Hull, G., & Bell-Scott, P.  
(1982). *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black women’s studies*. Old Westbury: Feminist Press.

Johnson-Bailey, J.  

Jones, C., & Shorter-Gooding, K.  

Kozol, J.  

Lorde, A.  
Nieto, S.
(2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

Paley, V. G.

Perry, T., Steele, C. & Hilliard, A.

Rothenberg, P. S.

Scott, K.

Singley, B. & Bell, D.

Winfield, M.

Warren, E. *SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES,*