

Resistance Meets Spirituality in Academia: “I Prayed on it!”

Vonzell Agosto¹
Zorka Karanxha
University of South Florida

Abstract

We describe the lived experiences of a Black Woman educational leader who has studied and worked in the academy and in the field of K-12 education. This partial life history, excavated through the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), illuminates the social construction of race and the pervasiveness and permanence of racism. We determined through a series of interviews that the participant's resilient resistance is guided by critical spirituality so that circumstances and people who challenge her also confront this source of power. Her lived experience, from student to faculty member, conveys the challenges and opportunities she faces and adds to the scholarship to better understand anti-oppressive education. As a result of our study we derived implications for practice which include suggested institutional efforts to build support structures for Black women and shift academic culture. Also, there are recommendations which include conducting socially and culturally responsible and responsive mining of the contributions of Black women and providing culturally relevant support to sustain Black woman scholars and practitioners in education and educational leadership at all levels.

Introduction

The experiences of Dr. Annie Heafy Nero (pseudonym), a Black woman educational leader who has studied and worked in the academy and the field in and outside the United States, are described in this article. The study from which this article derives contributes to the scholarship about Black women by

¹ Address correspondence to Vonzell Agosto, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620 or vagosto@usf.edu.

highlighting events and her responses to them in her professional and civic life. Specifically, she worked in and beyond the academy in the areas of Civil Rights and education. One of several projects of great importance to her described here was leading a professional development project for the development of culturally competent leadership in several school districts. This exploration of lived experiences, from student to faculty member in higher education and across regions of the United States, conveys the challenges and opportunities she has confronted. We, the authors, as tenure earning professors at the assistant professor level who work with aspiring and practicing educational leaders to further socially just leadership, found ourselves to be especially curious about Dr. Nero's strategies for countering the resistance to equity and justice she encounters in education.

This partial life history, excavated and viewed through the lenses and tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), illuminates the social construction of race across time and contexts as well as the pervasiveness and permanence of racism. We describe how her resilient resistance is guided by critical spirituality so that circumstances and people who challenge her also confront this source of power. In this article we explore stories in which friction, resistance, and the contestation of power were prominent. We found her stories of lived experiences critical given the large amount of time and energy she invested in telling them and the significance her stories seem to hold for her personally and professionally. Our study increased our understanding of the growing body of literature that we feel adds to the scholarship that can inform those who work from various positions in academia about ways to enact anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

Black women in academia are confronted with challenges and barriers that are due to a large extent to the social construction of race across time and contexts as well as the pervasiveness and permanence of racism and sexism. Exploring how they confront racism and sexism through reliance on their sources of power to work for social justice adds to the limited extant literature on the culture of academia. In this article we share one woman's story analyzed through CRT. We wanted to know: (a) what lived experiences of a Black woman in academia are like, and (b) how a Black woman deals with resistance that seems to be fueled by sexism and racism.

We considered the oppositional stances that have been the tradition of CRT in law and more recently in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and found them to be an insistence on race consciousness, systemic analysis of the

structures of subordination, and intersectionality or multidimensional critiques of power relations (Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). The tenets of CRT derive from decades of scholarship in law. In drawing on the work of Ladson-Billings (1998), Stovall (2006) asserts that the CRT project in education operates to: (a) name and discuss the pervasive, daily reality of racism in US society; (b) expose and deconstruct seemingly ‘colorblind’ or ‘race neutral’ policies and practices; (c) legitimize and promote the voices and narratives of non-White people as sources of critique of the dominant social order; (d) revisit civil rights law and liberalism to address their inability to dismantle and expunge discriminatory socio-political relationships; and (e) change and improve challenges to race neutral and multicultural movements in education. In this article we draw on the work of critical race scholars, past and present, and the stories that derive from the broad and long range experience of a non-White woman working in higher education to portray race as a social construction which, when backed by power and prejudice, supports racism that is so pervasive that its permanence seems likely (Bell, 1992a). CRT affords an analysis of how race is realized (Bell, 1992b) as it intersects with other social aspects such as gender (Crenshaw, 1991). As is common in the use of CRT, we engage the participant in storytelling that begets counter-narratives that challenge dominant discourses. The intersection at which we interpret her stories is constituted by race, gender, and spirituality.

The literature that we discuss in the following paragraphs provides the context for the pending discussion and revelations generated through Annie Heafy Nero’s stories. We situate her stories in the extant literature on women of African descent in academia and educational leadership before turning to the literature related to the salient themes of resistance and spirituality. Our discussion of literature is followed by an analysis of Annie’s stories which draw heavily on her recollections which include some quotations to center her rich experience and remind readers of what is possible for Black women who work in academia and what is still needed to systematically secure the possibilities they seek.

This discussion of relevant literature focuses on salient themes we have garnered from Annie’s stories as they pertain to the experiences of Black women, especially those of African descent in the United States who persist in educational institutions despite racism and sexism.

Literature Themes

Black Women in Academia

Black women in the academia are doubly bound by discrimination that is related to both gender and race (Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2002). Thus Black women tend to be over-burdened and under-appreciated in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) of higher education, and therefore play out their various roles above the standards while balancing multiple roles. In recognition of the double bind, Harley (2007) metaphorically describes Black women scholars as maids of academe which structures their teaching as childcare activities, research and scholarship as field work, and service as housework, cooking, and other duties. Harley also documents the ways Black women cope with psychosocial stress while working in PWIs by: networking, adhering to principles reflected in Kwanzaa, relying on family and the community; and achieving by believing in hard work, cooperating, taking responsibility, and evoking ancestral wisdom, religious beliefs and rituals (including prayer) that serve as cultural forms of resistance (Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Utsey et al., 2000). Such methods of coping and strategies of persistence are challenged by the cultural context of Western society as it has occluded expressions of resilience based on race, gender, political ideology, sexuality, and spirituality (Scott, 2001).

Black women are underrepresented in higher education while their presence increases at a glacial pace. For instance, “in 2005, only 1% of full professors were Black, 1% Asian, 0.6% Hispanic, and 0.1% American Indian” (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008, p. 140). Networking and mentoring of Black women by Black women is also limited due to their under-representation in the United States higher education system. Furthermore, hostile work environments in which Black women work can impede their persistence in academia (Aguirre, 2000; Dowdy, 2008; Turner & Meyers, 2000). Although under-explored, the literature on the experiences of Black women in academia is consistent in its findings that higher education institutions need to work more in order to improve their working conditions is needed to prepare and retain them in the academic ranks (Benjamin, 1997; Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Robinson & Clardy, 2010; Turner, 2002).

Black Women in Educational Leadership

The underrepresentation of Black women is also evident in the echelons of educational leadership (i.e., high school principals, superintendents) as “school leadership continues to be monopolized by White males in both

Western and post-/neo-colonial spaces, with slower progress than could be anticipated of women moving into leadership...” (Blackmore, 2008 cited in Blackmore, 2010, p. 2). Currently, Blacks “represent only 11% of all school principals (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002)” and “remain severely underrepresented in leadership preparation programs and in their appointments to administrative positions” (Brown, 2005, p. 586). Despite the attention that scholars have given to the role of race and gender in education the discourse in educational leadership preparation continues to be constrained (Rusch, 2004). Jean-Marie and Normore (2010) suggest that further research is needed in order to understand how female leaders negotiate gender and race in historically sexist and racist work environments. Research on Black women in leadership describes the challenges and opportunities they confront in the field of education as they symbolically and materially challenge social injustice at the intersection of race and gender (Alston, 2005; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Dillard, 1995; Doughty, 1980; Johnson, 2006). Scholarship on Black women (primarily those in the United States) has linked the spirituality, mentorship, service, and public intellectualism to the resilience of Black African American women educators and administrators (e.g., F. Brown, 2005; Cusick, 2009).

Resistance in Relation to Power

According to Moll (2004), “power never goes unchallenged: it always produces friction, resistance and contestation” (p. 126). This statement echoes Foucault’s (1980) assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 95). As answers to questions concerning the participant’s response to resistance seemed present but elusive in this study, we instead turned to what Abu-Lughod (1990) has suggested that researchers ask: How does resistance make tangible the locations of power and dominant relations? Thus we explore the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) of Annie’s identity amid interlocking systems of oppression (hooks, 1989) (i.e., sexism, racism) and within secular contexts of the public university and school districts where she works. In our analysis, we approach her experiences with resistance as indicators that power operates and is exchanged across social and historical relations between individuals, societies, and institutions embedded within a matrix of oppression (Collins, 1998). We intend to demonstrate the ways in which race, gender, and spirituality intertwine in Annie’s stories and spiritual narratives of resistance and expose how sexism and racism operate in the academy so that we might, as she does, resist becoming complicit in the perpetuation of social oppression.

Resilient Resistance for Survival and Liberation

Resistance has been linked to racial and ethnic identity and the effort made by women to talk back in order to recover themselves (hooks, 1989) or come to voice (Collins, 1998) in order to challenge the damaging images that power produces and socially structures (Rolon-Dow, 2004). Solórzano and Delgado-Bernal (2001) have examined resistance through Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and offered a theory of resistance that challenges those that present resistance as self-defeating and reproductive of domination. They identify four types of resistance: (a) reactionary behavior, (b) self-defeating resistance, (c) conformist resistance, and (d) transformational resistance that is internal or external. For instance, internal transformational behavior involves a social justice agenda and subtle behaviors such as silence or academic success linked to a critique of oppression. While external transformational resistance involves more “conspicuous and overt types of behavior...” that “...does not conform to institutional or cultural norms and expectations” (p. 325).

Tina Yosso (2002) extends the category of transformational resistance in her research with Chicanas/os and visual culture. She used the term *resilient resistance*, defined as “surviving and/or succeeding through the educational pipeline as a strategic response to visual microaggressions” (p. 180) and practiced in order to prove others wrong about the incapacity of Chicanas/os to succeed in higher education. Similar to resilient resistance is the notion that there are two faces of resistance offered by Robinson and Ward (1991). They observed that Black female students engage in *resistance for survival* and *resistance for liberation* as two faces of resistance that involve an acknowledgment of what is oppressive and a demand for change. While these aforementioned theories of resistance typically describe students who negotiate between both resistance to cultural hegemony and participation in the culture of power, they can be useful frameworks of inquiry into a life of study and leadership in educational institutions.

Critical Spiritual Pedagogy

According to Daniel Hay, spirituality is relational and underpins all ethics. It is at the same time subversive and politically significant because it counters the dominant culture which is secular and individualistic. Furthermore, Hay advocates for spiritual education. In a similar vein, Ryoo, Crawford, Moreno and McLaren (2009) advance a pedagogical notion of spirituality that resonates with the ideas of intersectionality and anti-oppressive education. They describe

critical spiritual pedagogy as a pedagogy of integrity that recognizes all aspects of identities as opposed to fragmentation which occurs when educators only recognize the intellectual subjectivity of learners. Critical spiritual pedagogy works toward humanization as it counters fragmentation, Othering, and exploitation to provide interdependent communities of support and love that uplift the capacity of others to act against oppression (Ryoo, Crawford, Moreno, & McLaren, 2009). More recently, studies of educational leadership have begun to examine critical spirituality in relation to social justice leadership (Dantley, 2003; Scanlan, 2011). Scanlan (2011) found that the principals' demonstrated critical spirituality reflective of what Dantley (2003) described as a blending of internal convictions with external actions and that their social justice leadership was unique to their contexts. This blending of convictions and actions was evident in an earlier study by Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, and Capper (1999) in which spirituality and critique were core dimensions in the culture of the school leadership practice demonstrated by a principal in her efforts to create an inclusive school culture.

Scott (2001) argued that there is ambiguity in researching spirituality because it has multiple meanings and expressions that can change over time to make it an elusive concept. He suggested that researchers exploring this concept should have some comfort with uncertainty, and further advocated for a narrative inquiry approach that relies on storytelling. "It is not about mastering an understanding of spirituality in order to research it but rather opening a space for engagement and for narration of experience that requires participation and shifts in our epistemological certainty" (p. 127). In a study of four Black women principals, Witherspoon and Taylor (2010) used life history methods and womanist theory to examine the intersectionality of race, gender, and religio-spirituality in the development of proactive and defensive strategies. Witherspoon and Taylor refer to these strategies as "spiritual weapons" with the word WEAPONS serving as an acronym for Word, Wisdom and Witness; Ethic of Religio-spirituality; Naming; and Spiritual Fruit. To engage in telling and documenting spiritual narratives is to forward counter-narratives to the dominant discourse in educational leadership where critical spirituality is marginalized (Dantley, 2003).

Method

Researchers' Background

We, the authors, are colleagues in a department of educational leadership and policy studies. We suspect that our lived experiences growing

up in multilingual households have preconditioned us to see the value and beauty in linguistic diversity, code-switching, and accents. We recognize that we are privileged and Othered as we have experienced upward social mobility through the educational pipeline despite our positions and histories as women who do not hail from Western Europe. We work to bridge theory, practice and reflection into a praxis of insistence, and wage multi-level and multi-directional critique in a process of self-assessment (Agosto & Karanxha, in press). In our work with students, we attempt to model hope and we advocate for equity of opportunity, condition, and outcome and engage in resilient resistance and multi-level critique of public educational institutions. Our interests in leadership preparation and development among non-White women have led us to collaboratively explore the life of Annie Heafy Nero. Like Annie, we use culturally competent leadership as a framework in the courses we teach in the leadership preparation program. We wanted to know more about her experiences in higher education and imagined that this inquiry would help us in our efforts to prepare aspiring principals to engage in critical social justice leadership. Additionally, scholars such as Paulo Freire, Kevin Kumashiro, Nell Noddings, Michael Dantley, and Colleen Capper have inspired and influenced our decision to engage in this particular research and scholarly work overall.

Participant Selection

We selected one woman (Dr. Nero) whose life story and narratives would speak of experiences in the academy. The wide scope of her experiences, length of service in education, and (inter)national experiences compelled us to tell her life story. We were familiar with some aspects of her work when we invited her to participate and regarded her as a resource, co-researcher, and mentor. Dr. Annie Heafy Nero, a pseudonym we use to retain her anonymity, identifies as a Black woman of African descent, with ancestry in the Caribbean and North (Native American Cherokee) America.

Data Collection and Analysis

We discuss findings from one participant's story told over interviews conducted over a span of three months. During five sessions (approximately two hours each, except the first one which lasted one hour), we asked semi-structured, open ended questions about her experiences in the academy. We digitally recorded and selectively transcribed the interviews. As much can be lost in translation, we listened in order to hear how she told her stories. The data were mined for the repetition of themes and narratives associated with major experiences, memories, or anticipations. In addition to interviews, data

in the form of memos, notes from debriefing sessions between researchers, publications of the participant (protocols, policy briefs), and feedback garnered through member checking by the participant allowed for triangulation.

Counter-storytelling as characterized by Critical Race Theorists is an analytical approach to be used in qualitative inquiry allowing for the expression of non-dominant narratives where race is central yet intersecting with other forms of marginality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through counter-storytelling, Turner (2002) argued that non-White women in academe can express their marginal experiences related to race and gender or gendered racism. Stories of lived experience validate the positionality from which Black women, and non-White women in general, work to carve a space in the academic knowledge base concerned with equity and justice in education. Using life history methods (Van Manen, 1992) we conducted interviews that focused on the participant's background, philosophy, pedagogy of professional practice, resistance, and persistence.

Findings

Social Construction of Race: "I am Black."

Annie Heafy Nero's life story starts with her maternal grandmother who was part Irish and part Black who became an orphan when she was six years old. Authorities from child welfare services placed Annie's maternal grandmother in an orphanage for White children only to be moved from there because "her skin became creamier and her hair wavy" (Dr. Nero's quote). She was then sent to an orphanage for Indian children where she was perceived as White; in other words she said she was, "not Black enough." Nuns at the orphanage and in her schools were influential in her upbringing. At age 16, she married Annie's grandfather who was 30 years old. He had just emigrated from Antigua and worked as a cook. Annie claims that he basically raised her. Together they had 16 biological children who identified as Caribbean. Of the 16, only 10 reached adulthood.

Annie describes her paternal grandmother as part Cherokee from Virginia and of African descent. With Annie's grandfather she had 10 children; one of them was Annie's mother. Annie's mother, later worked as a photographer in Brooklyn, and father, a restaurateur and later jeweler, had two children. They identified as Caribbean and colored. Annie was a teenager when the Black movement and Black power was growing. She started to identify as Black initially as a sign of teenage rebellion and later as a political act that was met

with resistance from her family which, as Annie describes, was an issue. The social construction of race was reflected in the shifting terminology and identity politics of the larger society and permeated the Heafy Nero family resulting in generational differences about racial identification. According to Annie, “I identify as Black...because that’s the walk!”

Permanence of Race

At New York University she began training for the NY school district on the *Children of the Rainbow* curriculum after the district was embroiled in controversy with the unit titled *Heather has two Mommies*. It was at this time that Dr. Nero began diversity training and started her private consulting company which contracted with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) to work with school districts in most of the southern states that were placed under desegregation order. She has worked in some northern states and almost every southern state in the United States. She asserts,

Racism is everywhere. I am not talking here about some distant time. I do not have to beg for my rights. This is what people deserve, I am not asking for something people are due. Poor minority people have the right to access of public education of quality (Dr. Nero’s quote).

Annie H. Nero married a doctor with whom she had two children. They were the first Black family to move into an affluent all-White neighborhood in New York. Neighbors came to welcome the family as was customary, and thought she was the maid when she opened the house door and invited them inside. Their next door neighbors who moved in later tried to drive them away by organizing a petition to force them out of the neighborhood. Unknown actors wrote 666 on the dream home they were having built and tried to burn it down. The emotional and financial toll proved to be costly for her marriage which ended in divorce. The house they had spent so much time and money building was sold. While this might seem to some a thing of the past, Annie states that Jada [her daughter] went through similar experiences as the only Black student in the school. At one point, public school officials offered to find her a scholarship to enroll her daughter in private school with only Black students. Although her daughter remained at the school with students who were predominantly White, the other children did not invite her for sleepovers or birthday parties until a teacher in the second grade intervened. He told students that Jada was a good model, and asked kids to do what she was doing. Annie’s

story and that of her daughter's experience are similar despite the lapse in time. Their experiences are shaped by racism and its influence on their personal and professional lives.

Resilient Resistance to the Internalization of Racism

Annie Heafy Nero attended a historically Black catholic school in New York where her maternal grandmother worked as a dietitian. Born in the early fifties in a tight knit extended family that lived together in a neighborhood where class issues were visible and influenced her interactions, (in Annie's words, "a neighborhood with houses and apartment buildings"). She lived a sheltered childhood surrounded by family. While she had experienced some instances of racism before (mostly children in the neighborhood) she encountered institutionalized racism in high school. Annie was not aware that she had internalized the effects of racism until one day in tenth grade a nun at her high school started the chant, *Eeney meeney miny mo - catch a...* and stopped, and the other children turned to look at her. Although Annie was not familiar with the racially offensive version (which would have continued with the "n" word), this encounter with racism was one she felt deeply. She stated, it "disturbed my spirit." The second event Annie recounted was when the guidance counselor discouraged her from applying to Vassar College and suggested applying to a vocational school. However, despite these experiences, Annie was raised to have high expectations and felt that she was "destined to become someone" (Dr. Nero's quote). Hurt but undeterred Annie attended a catholic university and finished Magna Cum Laude with a degree in elementary education. She later became a teacher. She also received her master's degree in special education and later her doctoral degree in leadership from New York University (NYU).

When she talked about her pursuit of a doctoral degree, she cried as she recalled the emotional, material, and other assistance her mentors provided for her to be able to complete her dissertation. This was a very difficult time in Annie's personal life as she doubted that she would be able to complete her dissertation due to limited access to facilities. A mentor, unbeknownst to Annie, worked late in order to open the door to the education building so Annie could enter and work on weekends to finish her dissertation. When another mentor contacted her to check on her progress over time sensed something was not well with Annie, she asked, "What's wrong? Something is wrong with your spirit." The mentor then invited Annie to come to California to complete her analysis of the data. With just a plane ticket and no money she went to California praying that God would somehow provide for her. Her mentor covered all expenses upon her arrival and arranged for Annie to work with the best statistician to conduct the data analysis.

The support of her mentors, family, and community has surrounded Annie all her life. The support of these Black women in her personal and professional spheres has had a profound influence on her sense of worth and capacity. It has shaped the way she now works with graduate students and young scholars as she is committed to “paying it forward.”

Spirituality as a Source of Power

Annie’s maternal grandmother (an orphan from age 6) was raised by nuns and later worked as a dietitian at the convent. She attended catholic schools and a catholic university. The school Annie attended was the same school her mother attended. So there was a constant connection between church and school. According to Annie expectation was a key piece. “Since early on, there was always an expectation [in the family] that you would make it. My grandfather was dying from cancer when my mother was pregnant with me. He died when I was 3 months” (Dr. Nero’s quote). On his death bed she was placed on his chest every day. They claimed he waited for her birth. Her mom was a favorite of his and Annie was her first born. According to Annie, “that helped him hold on.” The expectation was that she was supposed to do something coming up. This was also the expectation held by many working at the Catholic School—to go to college.

“I prayed on it!” was an expression we heard Annie say multiple times during interviews. The first time she used the expression was when she described the trip her mentor had arranged for her to work on her dissertation in California. She used the same expression when she described the steps she would take to address the situation with a White male professor. “I prayed on it! I decided to talk to the superintendent.” Annie recounts in detail a spiritual experience while working with a superintendent’s cabinet in Georgia, who wanted a multicultural education course/a workshop to solve their issues. Annie on the other hand believed that they needed to understand the respect and value in people.

I started to share with them what I thought needed to happen systemically and I really believe from the bottom of my heart it was not coming from me...it sounded so good that I went hold, on hold on, I have to write this. I know it’s not something I had studied and I know it was coming from somewhere else and it’s God. So, I do know its God. What I say, it’s God protected, it’s directed, and I reflect all the time (Dr. Nero’s quote).

Annie also relies on her belief in God when the stress of trying to change people's beliefs and values in order to improve children's education. According to Annie, being confrontational does not work in shifting people's norms and values. However, her approach is very direct when she talks about issues of racism, inequity, and injustice, in the hope that she will impact people with whom she works. She stated, "I hold on to prayer, that's the only thing that can get me through even when the people are acting crazy" (Dr. Nero's quote).

Annie Heafy Nero emanates a sense of calm and peace. She does not tend to talk about resistance or *pushback*, but prefers discussing successes big and small, finding solutions, increasing awareness of educators on issues of race and its impact on achievement, and bringing justice where there is little to none. However, during an interview session devoted to the subject of resistance she discussed the following experience for more than half an hour and was visibly flustered when recounting this episode.

Grants, Money, Power, and Corruption in the Academy

Writing grants is an important part of the job description for academics. The professional worth and status of grant recipients is elevated by the award. The more substantial and prestigious the grant, the higher the elevation of worth and status granted to the recipient within the academy. Grants symbolize job security (especially for tenure seeking professionals) and increase faculty capacity to conduct research, and therefore to publish. In other words, it is a very important aspect of academic life. Annie Heafy Nero is very successful at acquiring grants. Indeed in her first year at the research intensive (RU) university, she had received five out of the five grants for which she had applied. As part of the five grants related to cultural competence that she received, she wanted to include a professor who had pertinent content knowledge. She invited a White male professor to serve as Principal Investigator (PI) while she served as co-PI on a smaller portion. Annie described how from the beginning, the professor started to engage in behavior that undermined her work and disrespected her expertise even though she had spent the most part of her life's work on multiculturalism and diversity. According to Annie, despite his lack of understanding he never talked to her regarding her area of expertise and attempted to exclude her from the grant even though she was the one who invited him to participate. In his attempt to exclude her he faced a roadblock at the university due to the support she had from the center's director, he then tried to involve the district PI (one of his students) to remove her. He risked smearing her character and reputation and mistreated the students who worked for Annie on the grant.

She received a phone call from one of the district evaluators, from downtown, who was aware of the professor's attempt to remove her from the grant. The district evaluator provided an email which had information from the professor instructing one of the district supervisors who was the district PI on the grant to take the grant money away from her. The professor proceeded to engage in behavior to discredit Annie's character, and she wondered how these events were going to impact the relationship between the university and the school district. She recounted, "So I prayed on it!" Annie was able to discuss the matter with the district superintendent and provide documentation about the research which allowed for district intervention. Additionally, she refrained from interacting with the professor. Instead, the director of the center and a doctoral student interacted with the professor. Annie claimed that he no longer existed in her universe. Still she protected the students who were part of the grant, two Latino students she claimed he treated badly, and found additional funds for them to finish their degrees. Word that the superintendent had defended Annie Heafy Nero and curtailed what the district director could or could not do traveled to other school district directors who, she felt, did not trust her anymore. This incident and related events transpired approximately six months and changed her. She became very mindful in deciding with whom she worked.

While the enactment of White privilege for men in the academy when interacting with Black women has been documented in the literature (e.g., Lin et al., 2004; Pitman, 2010), this incident details an expression of the privilege White men experience in institutions and the persistence of a Black woman who relied on resources to persist with dignity and professionalism, including help from allies. The expansiveness of the network of allies available to Black women is an area to be considered in attempts to understand the experiences of Black women (and non-White women in general) who attempt to persist within the academy.

A School District Context

The issue of race and its wider implications for the education and promotion of non-White people is important to Annie. This became clearer as she recounted her varied experiences across the country. Her experiences in many locations illustrate how widespread and persistent the inequitable support principals of different races receive. According to Annie, "You can be average and become a principal (if you are White), you have to be a super star if you are Black." Once in leadership position Black principals and White principals receive different support on the basis of race. Her observation is supported by

literature which demonstrates that majority of Black principals are employed in large, urban school districts that are underfunded and have scarce resources (Brown, 2005). The experiences, exposure to success, and access to support and resources are different for Black and White principals. The assistance provided (or not provided) to minority principals is inequitable. These differences in levels of support are widespread across systems rather than isolated cases.

While in Texas she noticed that there was a difference in leadership at high poverty minority schools and suspected there was a lack of networks and knowledge about successful and effective leadership. The problem she described surfaces when racial minorities get to the point they are heading a school and do not receive the same access and support as their White counterparts. While participating in a project in Texas she worked with principals in three underperforming schools: A White female, Black female, and Black male. She noticed that each time she visited the school headed by the White female there were central office people in the school and it had high visibility as it had received news coverage. On the other hand, she never saw anyone from the central office go to offer extra help in the schools headed by a Black female and male. She suspected that the Black male and female principals did not know of the differential treatment. Given her vantage point as a visitor to all three schools she could see how different the principals were treated. In conclusion, Dr. Nero did not think that the support structures offered by the district were distributed equitably across these high-needs schools.

Additionally, she noticed networks of support among principals that were advantageous but unevenly distributed. For instance, she noticed clusters of White principals who used professional development money together. The study she conducted started to show these informal collaborations with, as she states, "White principals mentoring each other, and pulling in money and resources together." In contrast, she noticed that the two Black principals did not connect similarly with each other. She suspected they were busy surviving. She concluded that if a principal does not have access to success, and access to generations of administrators, they might not know how to lead successfully or have people who would say, let me show you how I did it. Dr. Nero's concern is that the network of support she witnessed does not happen that often among racially underrepresented leaders. Compounding the issue of the availability of resources was the vast differences Dr. Nero noticed in students' socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, affluent parents in one school raised \$70,000 when they hosted a carnival. In the other school, with high populations of Black and Hispanic students and a Black principal, the parents were not affluent. Thus when the Black male principal shared with her that when he tried to start a

parent-teacher organization and none of the parents had a credit rating sufficient for opening a bank account, he created a foundation that could do bake sales in order to purchase supplies for the school. Dr. Nero left Texas with the impression that the disparity in resources and in the relationships of support across racial different was incredible, even in the same district.

Culturally Competent Leadership

The definition of culturally competent leadership we considered while conducting this study bridges effective leadership (related to student achievement) and social justice leadership (related to equity) to enable educators to work effectively across the cultures their students represent (Agosto, Dias, Kaiza, McHatton, & Elam, forthcoming). The first cohort of principals Annie Heafy Nero worked with on culturally competent leadership (as part of a grant she received) was largely committed to this leadership framework. On the first day that the second cohort met, a White male principal told Annie and the rest of the cohort, “No one will do that” [apply the principles of culturally competent leadership]. Annie explained to us that when she pointed out his lack of participation to the superintendent she learned that he was privileged and being groomed to assume a more powerful leadership role in the district. Recognizing that the principal was buffered, Dr. Nero simply followed the dominant rules and expectations. When he did not submit the data needed for the study, Dr. Nero did not send him a reminder. The cohort of principals moved on without him. He was also the principal of an elementary school in a predominantly Black urban area. When Dr. Nero visited the school he greeted her in the presence of parents with the statement, “Welcome to the war zone!” (Annie’s quote). The principal did not complete the training. However his failure to participate fully in the training has not slowed down his ascension to higher levels of district administration. He has moved up the administrative ranks and holds a significant district position.

The principal openly confronted Dr. Nero and resisted the district sanctioned yearlong training. This incident reveals resistance at the intersection of race and gender, and indicates where power is accumulated. That his promotion came at a time when the school at which he was serving as principal received a failing grade (as measured by state standardized test results) is further illustration of the system’s structures and *good old boys* network at play. The policy and practices determining who gets promoted, who is chosen to succeed, and in whom we see potential for success in educational leadership have remained static. They are reflected in the enhanced opportunities of heterosexual, non-disabled, White men. This example is another indication of

how deeply entrenched White privilege is in formal educational structures. It is contradictory that a school district would engage its personnel in culturally competent leadership training for principals while ignoring the gendered racism exhibited by this former principal and newly promoted district administrator.

Annie Heafy Nero talked about this particular individual during two different interviews. The issue she found disturbing and upsetting was not simply his resistance towards her but his deficit views of the school community he (dis)served and what she, a Black woman represented. Annie was particularly upset that this individual tried to “rewrite history” (Annie’s quote) by using an abbreviated form of the name of the Black person for whom the school he headed was named. Annie Heafy Nero is passionate especially about such schools because of what they stand for: they are symbols that represent all the struggles for justice by Black people in the past, present, and future.

Discussion

In our study of Annie Heafy Nero, we find her to be resilient, intelligent, and hard working. Her story shows a person of integrity deeply invested in building relationships that would lead to improved conditions for children to learn. She is nurturing and a healer of wounds. She sees need, hope, and possibilities for collaboration. These characteristics are coupled with a strong commitment to improving the lives of non-White people through education. She attributes her educational success to high expectations and support she received from family and mentors. She models these characteristics in both her personal and professional relationships.

In the field, when working with school districts under a desegregation order, Annie Heafy Nero derives her power from the courts, institutions (that have also disadvantaged her as a Black person), and God. However, the resistance she faces as a representative of institutional power is confronted by the resistance of others who, for instance, challenge court orders and the work she performs. In many instances Dr. Nero has had to demonstrate to people she was more than qualified. In Annie’s words, “Black people have to have degrees” for people to believe in their intellectual abilities.” In her life’s work, Annie Heafy Nero is part of an interlocking system of power and oppression where she is both an actor and an enforcer of the power of institutions (i.e., courts). Yet, she also is a resistor of institutions that perpetuate mistreatment and injustices against non-White people. She resists individual, institutional, and societal racism and challenges its pervasiveness and permanence.

Although her strong sense of spirituality was evident to us, it was when we directly asked her how important spirituality is to her practice that we truly understood its significance in her life. She passionately shared that it is her belief that a higher power guides her work, and that she herself is a servant of that higher. Here is how she described the role of spirituality in her practice:

[The role of spirituality is] major. Major. If it wasn't for my belief in God I wouldn't be able to breathe. That's how I hold on. I pray every day, every single day before I speak, and sometimes well I pray a lot but I have learned how to really step into prayer, I ask that my words touch the hearts and the minds of that I am allowed to speak and make a difference right before every keynote, the workshops that's what I do. Every day I wake up I ask God to let my words make a difference. Guide me wherever you [God] want.

In her professional and personal life, especially during trying times, her spirituality is at the core. She sees spirituality as a source of power and wisdom and herself as a servant of a higher purpose—for good.

Dr. Nero understands the struggle to have a voice and have these (counter) histories heard. In another incident she challenged a White male principal's attempt to shorten the name of a school named after a historical figure who represents Black public intellectualism and the Civil Rights movement, two movements that are sacred to her. Likewise, Dr. Nero has worked tirelessly against discrimination, social injustices, and inequities in all levels of education and has encountered multiple forms of micro-aggressions (Yosso, 2002). These lived experiences reflect the kinds of struggle she faces in academe and other educational institutions - public and private. Similar experiences of gendered racism have been documented among non-White women faculty while teaching despite the challenge that White males have posed to their authority, teaching competency, scholarly expertise, as well as the subtle and not so subtle threats they have posed to non-White women faculty and their careers (Pittman, 2010).

The challenges that Annie faced concerning the grant and actions of a White male professor lasted almost two years and a high level of stress and fear ensued. The experience and its effects threatened her career and reputation as the intricate web of manipulations weaved by a professor had ramifications for her work with the district. Annie Heafy Nero was rather new at the university while the professor was tenured and well established, therefore the institutional power exemplified in rank and relationships within the university was subtext

in the story of her negotiations as were the social locations (embedded in the superstructure of gender and race relations) from which they became entangled. Annie used multiple sources of support to help her cope with the experience. She relied on her family (two adult children she talks with daily), friends at the district who alerted her when emails about her character and exclusion from the grant circulated, a higher ranking colleague who protected her interests and ran interference, and last but not least her spirituality. The findings discussed here have implications for how teaching, research, and service is evaluated and conducted in the academy and can be useful for guiding tenure and promotion guidelines, and more broadly, academic culture.

Implications for Practice

The question we have for the academy is what steps and structures do administrators in higher education institutions implement to act as buffers for Black women for they continue to be vulnerable regardless of their position/success. Dr. Nero's story of a White male professor who conspired to oust her from a grant she initiated is an example of the precarious position in which Black women can easily find themselves despite great success. In Dr. Nero's case, she had the support of powerful allies who intervened to protect her professional reputation. The issue then becomes, how do universities protect junior Black women in the academy who might not have such protectors or buffers? Strategies for creating a more conducive environment for Black women can stem from recognizing and valuing their sources of power when developing and implementing race conscious policies.

For instance, the role of spirituality as resilience in the experience of many Black educators is well-documented (Siddle-Walker, 2005). Tisdell (2006) situates spirituality into the discourse of critical multicultural education and questions its exclusion in the role of teaching in higher education. Given the history of spirituality in the Civil Rights Movement through the work of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, its absence in critical multicultural education (as an outgrowth of this movement) is puzzling. Tisdell advocates for a culturally responsive approach that recognizes the roles of positive cultural identity and spirituality in learning, research, and teaching. Furthermore, she argues that teaching in higher education "needs to be based on a culturally responsive epistemology" (p. 24), and cites Dillard (2000) who suggests that culturally responsive epistemology is both an intellectual and spiritual pursuit. Although civil rights law and liberalism (i.e., liberal multiculturalism) have been unable to dismantle and expunge discriminatory socio-political relationships that Annie H. Nero has witnessed and resisted,

she is assured by her resilient resistance and critical spiritual pedagogy in the belief—as was Asa Hilliard (1991)—that we have the tools to secure excellence in education. For Dr. Nero, the re-articulation of multicultural education as culturally competent education and critical traditions of the Civil Rights movement continue to hold promise for equitably excellent education.

A critical spiritual framework understood from the perspective of cultural competence and relevance opposes the extremes of cultural assimilation marked by loss and anti-assimilation marked by isolation.

Each person brings a unique cultural background to their experience. Who you are shapes the types of questions you ask, the kinds of issues which interest you, and the ways in which you go about seeking solutions. ... The backgrounds [non-White women faculty] bring to academia need not take a back seat. ... They can be placed in the foreground of our work (Turner, 2000, p. 133).

We concur with Turner (2000, 2002) and urge institutions of higher education to increase positive experiences for non-White women faculty, and Black women specifically, by creating a climate that is welcoming to them. Educators must “break the conspiracy of silence that has ensured the perpetuation of racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization and exclusion in the university” (Ng, 1997, p. 367 cited by Turner, 2002). Ignoring the integration of spirituality and persistence among Black women working in institutions of education, for Black women in particular, amounts to a race neutral or color-blind approach that helps to fashion academic cultures and systems of support that honor and affirm the path they journey toward education, equity, and ethics.

Systemic changes (i.e., policies, structures, and practices) in institutions of higher education need to take into account the challenges that Black women continue to face in the academy, act against their dehumanization, and celebrate their contributions. Their courageous voices, new scholarship, and critical spiritual pedagogy are beneficial contributions to academic cultures. They challenge social injustice at the intersection of race and gender and reveal the pervasiveness of racial inequity in the educational system that continues to Other and disenfranchise Black women as well as other women from groups with a minority political and ethnic standing. Stanley (2006) offers an extensive list of recommendations for faculty and administrators to consider in the attempt to support Black women in academia. The lessons provided by this and previous studies can guide higher education away from stripping

Black women of their sources of strength and toward the practice of mining for their contributions using socially and culturally responsible and responsive methods. As an identified source of strength, critical spirituality among those leading in academia can support the development of practices and policies that help to sustain Black women in education and educational leadership at all levels. We agree with Scanlan's (2011) suggestion that critical spirituality can embolden educational leaders (in public or private institutions) in their struggle to promote educational opportunities for all citizens.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1990). The romance of resistance: Tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women. *American Ethnologist*, *17*, 41-55.
- Agosto, V., & Karanxha, Z. (in press). Searching for the needle in a haystack: Social justice orientation of aspiring leaders. *Journal of School Leadership*.
- Agosto, V., Dias, L., Kaiza, N., McHatton, P. A., & Elam, D. (in press). Culture – based leadership and preparation: A qualitative meta-synthesis of the literature. In L. C. Tillman & J. J. Scheurich (Eds.), *AERA handbook of research on educational leadership for diversity*.
- Aguirre, A. (2000). Women and minority faculty in the academic workplace: Recruitment, retention, and academic culture. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, ERIC Digests. Retrieved from ERIC database (ED446723).
- Alston, J. A. (2005). Tempered radicals and servant leaders: Black females persevere in the superintendency. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *41*, 675-688.
- Benjamin, L. (Ed.). (1997). *Black women in the academy: Promises and perils*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Bell, D. A. (1980). *Brown v. Board of Education* and the interest convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, *93*, 518-533.
- Bell, D. A. (1992a). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. New York: Basic Books.

- Bell, D. A. (1992b). Racial realism. *Connecticut Law Review*, 24, 363–379.
- Berry, T. R., & Mizelle, N. (Eds.). (2006). *From oppression to grace: Women of color and their dilemmas within the academy*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Blackmore, J. (2010). Disrupting notions of leadership from feminist post-colonial positions. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 13, 1-6.
- Bloom, C. M., & Erlandson, D. A. (2003). African American women principals in urban schools: realities, (re)constructions, and resolutions. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 39, 339-369.
- Brown, F. (2005). African Americans and school leadership: An introduction. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41, 585-590.
- Collins, P. H. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women and the search for justice*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Cusick, C. M. (2009). Anna Julia Cooper, worth, and public intellectuals. *Philosophia Africana*, 12, 21-40.
- Dantley, M. E. (2003). Critical spirituality: Enhancing transformative leadership through critical theory and African American prophetic spirituality. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 6, 3-17.
- Dillard, C. B. (1995). Leading with her life: An African American feminist (re)interpretation of leadership for an urban high school principal. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 31, 539-563.
- Dillard, C. B. (2000). The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13, 661-681.

- Doughty, R. (1980). The Black female administrator: Woman in a double bind. In S. K. Biklen & M. B. Brannigan (Eds.), *Women and educational leadership* (pp. 165-174). Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Dowdy, J. (2008). Fire and ice: The wisdom of Black women in the academy. *New Horizons in Adult Education*, 22, 24-43.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality: An introduction*. Vol. I Translated by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Harley, D. A. (2007). Maids of academe: African American women faculty of predominantly white institutions, *Journal of African American Studies*, 12, 19-36.
- Hay, D. (2001). Spirituality versus individualism. In J. Erricker, C. Ota, & C. Erricker (Eds.), *Spiritual education, cultural, religious, and social differences: New perspectives for the 21st century* (pp. 104-117). Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.
- Hilliard, A. G. III. (1991). Do we have the will to educate all children? *Educational Leadership*, 49, 31-36.
- Jean-Marie, G., & Normore, A. (2010). The impact of relational leadership, social justice, and spirituality among female secondary school leaders. *International Journal of Urban Educational Leadership*, 4, 22-43.
- Johnson, L. (2006). Making her community a better place to live: Culturally responsive urban school leadership in historical context. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5, 19-36.
- Keyes, M. W., Hanley-Maxwell, C., & Capper, C. A. (1999). "Spirituality? It's the Core of My Leadership": Empowering Leadership in an Inclusive Elementary School. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 35, 203-237.
- Kumashiro, K. (2000). Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education. *Review of Educational Research*, 70, 25-53.
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97, 47-68.

- Lin, A., Grant, R., Kubota, R., Motha, S., Tinker Sachs, G., Vandrick, S., & Wong, S. (2004). Women faculty of color in TESOL: Theorizing our lived experience. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38, 487-504.
- Moll, L. C. (2004). Rethinking resistance. *Anthropology & Education*, 35, 126-131.
- Pittman, C. T. (2010). Race and gender oppression in the classroom: The experiences of women faculty of color with white male students. *Teaching Sociology*, 38, 183-196.
- Robinson, C. C., & Clardy, P. (2010). *Tedious journeys: Autoethnography by women of color in academe*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- Robinson, T., & Ward, J. (1991). A belief in self far greater than anyone's disbelief: Cultivating resistance among African American female adolescents. In C. Gilligan, A. Rogers, & D. Tolman (Eds.), *Women, girls, and psychotherapy: Reframing resistance* (pp. 87-102). New York: Haworth.
- Rolón-Dow, R. (2004). Seduced by images: Identity and schooling in the lives of Puerto Rican girls. *Anthropology & Education*, 35, 8-29.
- Rusch, E. (2004). Gender and race in leadership preparation: A constrained discourse. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40, 14-46.
- Ryoo, J. J., Crawford, J., Moreno, D., & McLaren, P. (2009). Critical spiritual pedagogy: Reclaiming humanity through a pedagogy of integrity, community, and love. *Power and Education*, 1, 132-146.
- Scanlan, M. (2011). How principals cultivate a culture of critical spirituality. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 14, 293-315.
- Scott, D. (2001). Storytelling, voice and qualitative research: Spirituality as a site of ambiguity and difficulty. In J. Erricker, C., & Ota, C. Erricker (Eds.), *Spiritual education, cultural, religious, and social differences: New perspectives for the 21st century* (pp. 118- 129). Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press.

- Shorter-Gooden, K. (2004). Multiple resistance strategies: How African American women cope with racism and sexism. *Journal of Black Psychology, 30*, 406–425.
- Solórzano, D., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*, 23-44.
- Solórzano, D., & Delgado-Bernal, D. (2001). Transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education, 36*, 308–342.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). A critical race counterstory of race, racism, and affirmative action. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 35*, 155–168.
- Stanley, C. A. (2006). Coloring the academic landscape: Faculty of color breaking the silence in predominantly White colleges and universities. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*, 701-736.
- Stovall, D. (2006). Forging community in race and class: Critical Race Theory and the quest for social justice in education, *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 9*, 243-259.
- Tisdell, E. J. (2006). Spirituality, cultural identity, and epistemology in culturally responsive teaching in higher education. *Multicultural Perspectives, 8*, 19-25.
- Turner, C. S. V. (2002). Women of color in academe: Living with multiple marginality. *The Journal of Higher Education, 73*, 74-93.
- Turner, C. S. V. (2000). Defining success: Promotion and tenure—Planning for each career stage and beyond. In M. Garcia (Ed.), *Succeeding in an academic career: A guide for faculty of color* (pp. 111–140). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Turner, C. S. V., Gonzalez, J. C., & Wood, J. L. (2008). Faculty of color in academe: What 20 years of literature tells us. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 1*, 139-168.
- Turner, C. S. V., & Myers, S. L. (2000). *Faculty of color in academe: Bittersweet success*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Utsey, S. O., Adams, E. P., & Bolden, M. (2000). Development and initial validation of the Africultural-Coping Systems Inventory. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 6, 194–215.
- Valdez, F., Culp, J. M., & Harris, A. P. (Eds.). (2002). *Crossroads, directions, and a new Critical Race Theory*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1992). *Researching lived experiences: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Witherspoon, N., & Taylor, D. L. (2010). Spiritual weapons: Black female principals and religio-spirituality. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 42, 133-158. DOI: 10.1080/00220621003701296
- Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race media literacy: Challenging deficit discourse about Chicanas/os. *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, 30, 52–62.

Copyright of Negro Educational Review is the property of Negro Educational Review, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.