#blackwomanatwork: How to Make Yourself Mobbing-proof

Description

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Author's Memo

"#blackwomanatwork" came out of my experiences working in academia as a first-generation immigrant black woman from the Caribbean. I'm the middle daughter of three girls. We were the first generation in our family to get a college education. We came from a poor family with middle-class aspirations which included gaining scholarships to elite and private schools.

I began noticing the commonalities between my work experience and that of my two sisters, who are also academics, as well as those of other black women. I became interested in the phenomenon of mobbing in academe and its reliance on silence to perpetuate itself. Why did smart, otherwise vocal women feel unable to vocalize what they were experiencing to the power structures that could do something about it.

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Around this time the hashtag, #blackwomenatwork started trending on Twitter. The postings reflected my own struggles of being a black woman from a post-colonial background and how those age-old tropes—unconscious to many of us, victims and perpetrators alike– served to further victimize black women who resisted attempts to silence them. I wanted to acknowledge this common reality in a way that challenged those very stereotypes. I wanted to create something that felt decolonizing and spoke

to black women directly, a counterpoint to the very idea of a white gaze.

Aside from the #blackwomenatwork trend, I became fascinated with the public debates among black women on social media about Meghan Markle. The degree to which many black women identified with the kind of language that was being used to vilify and undermine Markle, particular in what was recognized as a work context, encouraged me to approach this short piece from a decolonizing framework. Many black women, wherever they were in the world, understood where the roots of these stereotypes came from: settler colonialism and post-emancipation from slavery when black women first entered the workforce as paid employees. My piece is a response to the frustration expressed by these women at the persistence of these attitudes and treatment.

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A few years ago, #BlackWomenAtWork trended on Twitter. Black women from all over the world posted about the many indignities they suffered at work. Some posts were funny and others were horrifying. Surprisingly, I found all of them relatable in one form or another. Thousands of women found consolation in the similarities of their experience, experiences designed to make each woman feel alone.

#BlackWomenAtWork

The spark for this Twitter trend came from an unexpected source: a widely viewed interview of former actress Meghan Markle, wife of British aristo Prince Harry. Markle had just given birth to the couple's first child when British journalist Tom Bradby asked if she was okay. Ms. Markle, on a diplomatic mission with her husband in South Africa, gave an honest response. In short, she was not. Her vulnerable response struck a chord with many black women professionals. Markle may live an existence very different from the average black woman, but her reaction to being a wife and mother and trying to do her job while facing intense scrutiny and harsh personal attacks felt real for many. Her detractors often used covert and overt racist and sexist language. What intrigued me about her story was how shockingly familiar the nature of the bullying felt.

Samo Samo

Whatever black women's positions or stations in life, the mobbing rhetoric used to control us typically takes the same old tack. As the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat would say, it's the samo samo. The personal attacks I and other black women face at work can be intensely personal, relying heavily on combined anti-woman and anti-black stereotypes. #BlackWomenAtWork described, in haunting detail, events where black women were mischaracterized as dishonest, incompetent, unprofessional, deficient, uncouth, hypersexual, conniving, malicious, uneducated, aggressive, belligerent, loud, domineering, abrasive, unfriendly and so on and so on.

Sadly, many of these encounters (but by no means all) were led by our white female colleagues. As some of these women, our white sisters, professed sympathy for career women, their antipathy to the experiences of their black women counterparts was disappointing. In my case, the mobbers seemed deeply invested in preserving the same racist, woman-hating systems they'd inherited when they now had the power to change it. Why not change a system that harmed you now that you can do something about it. I could never understand their decision to dig in instead of changing things for the better.

#blackwomanatwork

When I started my career as a professor, I approached my job with a great deal of enthusiasm and idealism. My personal experience with college life was mostly positive. I wanted to share some of that joy through learning with my students, nearly all of whom were like me: ambitious, practical children of immigrants. These were working class people, like me, and they knew what it meant to struggle. I wanted to give them all that I could, didn't want them to leave college feeling they were short changed or had missed out on opportunity, threw myself into my work and put in long hours. I expected nothing: I felt truly honored to be in the position that I was, and I enjoyed my students. They possessed a sincerity and drive that I admired and found inspiring. In a few words, I loved my job.

Frosh

I sensed trouble on the first day of work but thought nothing of it. I'd entered a politicized workplace that seemed divided on the bases of age, gender and race. There was a clear generation gap born of hiring freezes and this, I believed, partly explained some of the divisions. I later realized it was more complicated than that. It was simply a dysfunctional workplace where a few longer-serving faculty who had been mistreated were eager to pass on some of that mistreatment. There were cliques and there were many lingering resentments. It never occurred to me that doing my job well and finding great joy in it would make me a target for abuse. There was a "culture of mean" which used shunning, isolation and career sabotage to demoralize targets, chosen at random for their attacker's entertainment.

Early Phase

My troubles began as soon as my new chairperson took over. There were whispering campaigns to the "higher-ups" in the administration and among the more senior faculty within my department that I was actually not the nice person everyone thought I was. My strengths were attacked to create an inverse narrative. I was a good teacher. I got good results with my students, and I got along with everybody. Those facts needed to be replaced with a new set of alternative facts, that is, lies.

Officials who would be making decisions on my reappointment, my tenure and my promotions were being fed a great deal of misinformation. There were many rumors, all of it behind closed doors, where I was not able to defend myself, and pretty soon I was a pariah. No one wanted to talk to me. I started to receive negative evaluations that were contrary to the truth. Before I completed my first year, someone slipped an unsigned evaluation in my personnel file. It said that I was insane and needed professional help. I didn't know proper English and needed training in English grammar. I was a nasty person who no one liked. It went on like that ad nauseum. None of these smears were supported by

any kind of evidence.

What's Happening?

Friends and family began reporting to me that all sorts of things were being posted about me online — things that were meant to question my character and my abilities as a teacher. My personal information (address, family members info) was posted on public sites that would be viewed by others in my academic community with slurs like "crazy" and other insults suggesting I was not to be believed. I later learned that there were others before me. This was standard treatment for the workplace's scapegoats: blacks, women, the foreign-born, and people who were sincere, who took pride in their work, and were apolitical.

I would get supposedly professional emails addressed to "Bootylicious.", had porn pinned to my door and received anonymous mail telling me why I needed to quit. My chairperson called me into her office so she could scream in my ear, "Nobody likes you!!" Or, that "You never do what you're supposed to do!!" I would ask for specifics but none were forthcoming.

Mobbing at Work

It got worse. I would be at home working on Thanksgiving weekend and receive a letter by courier saying I had been non-reappointed. There were never any explanations. What this meant was I had to suspend my professional duties—my life—in order to write pleading letters for various committees where I was asked to appear, during my Christmas break, so I could be accused of things I didn't do by people who had formed an opinion of me based on one person's lies. This happened a couple of times within three years and never once got easier.

Information and Community

I sought the help of my union. I was very lucky. They're one of the good ones and I found real advocates among them. They fought for me and kept my spirits up. They offered community and support, provided me with information on bullying and on the particular dynamics of my workplace, gave me understanding of the situation so I could stop blaming myself for getting sick, for crying every day, and for struggling at work and helped rectify the abuses, won me redress, and changed the workplace by challenging the scapegoating and mobbing culture.

Making Space

For anyone to whom any of this sounds familiar, I would say, prioritize giving yourself space. If you have little choice for leaving and need to remain on the job, be gentle with yourself. Often the folks targeted for this kind of treatment tend to be conscientious, maybe overly so, and prone to feelings of shame or guilt. I'd also suggest finding a therapist (there are a wide variety of modalities these days), or surround yourself with genuine and wise friends. Seek communities of other prosocial people who can affirm the values you hold most dear. Find people who you can be yourself with. People with whom you can cry and be sad and who won't judge you.

What Matters

People who are idealistic may be attracted to professions where mobbing behaviors thrive. Those professions may include public education, public health, and non-profit work. Environments that attract both talented do-gooders and people with a god complex. Be aware of this possibility. Remain open to the world but with the knowledge that not everyone shares your values.

If you're conscientious, then you care about the people with and for whom you work. You may take pride in doing a job that feels meaningful. Try as best as you can to keep your values foremost, despite pressure to change and fit into a more cynical environment. For your own sanity, don't overly identify with your job to the point of losing touch with all the other things in life that nourish or sustain you or offer a sense of fulfillment.

Staying Creative

If you're a caring, sensitive sort then I encourage closer relationships with all of life's goodly creatures. If you like pets and can afford them, get a dog. Get a cat. Grow a garden. Get a plant. A living thing that you can trust and that can show you how to rest and how to ask for what you need and how to be vulnerable and how to grow. Read books you can savor. Tune out anything that doesn't nourish you. Find out what best bolsters you and go get it so you feel more whole and fully resourced. Nurture your more positive relationships with family, friends and other loved ones.

There are damaged people in the world, and, for a moment, you've been turned into one of them. But because you've worked so hard, and because you've allowed yourself to be human, to feel, and to cry, and to be sad, you've heard your heart's wisdom and you know that you have the choice, the freedom to not traumatize in return (not yourself or anyone else) but to use your insights for healing yourself and others.

Boundaries

One of the good things I liked about the #BlackWomenAtWork trend was hearing from other women and learning from their experiences. One of the more common lessons learned was how to value one's own mental health above fake validation. It is so important to nurture our own support system as best as we can. The world may say we are one thing when we are, in fact, another, and we need to know (deep in our bones!!) that, on those specific occasions, the world is wrong.

Then there are boundaries. I can't stress this enough. This is how the world gets black women. If you look closely, most of the stereotypes used against us—mammy, sapphire, jezebel—are there to encourage feelings of shame, especially shame at our saying "this is what I need right now" and "no." Yes, sometimes it feels like the world hates us, but if it comes down to maintaining your peace of mind versus losing it, take the risk. I encourage black women to support each other and do serious decolonizing work, the kind of work we're used to doing for everyone else. It's okay to channel that creative, powerful liberatory energy we're known for towards freeing our own selves.

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4. Volume 4, Issue 4 (2024)

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