

Just Hit Me Already:

Obscured Workplace Abuse, Discrimination, and Institutional Betrayal

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While I only spent a couple of weeks in Seattle during the summer after seventh grade, it was pure magic. My cousin Beth lived there. She was 20 years older than me and so she was really more like an unconventional aunt. She was vegetarian, taught English at night to people who were newly making their home in the US, and was a single woman who owned her own house. She was so different in every way from what I knew, and when I was in Seattle, I could be different too. As a middle school girl at home in Colorado, I wore other people's discarded clothes because we didn't have money to buy our own, not because it was fun to shop for environmentally friendly thrift store finds as Beth did. In Colorado, my clothes were shameful, but in Seattle they transformed into quirky and admirable.

During my stay, Beth and I visited the Olympic Peninsula where we crossed paths with members of the Salish Tribes on their Paddle to Seattle Tribal Canoe Journey. As an adult, I was horrified to learn that I crawled into one of their canoes on the beach. I don't remember this, but Beth told me about her surprise and concern; yet, as Beth put it, the Paddlers' response to me was very gentle. I am filled with unending awe, respect, and gratitude for the care that the elders showed to a settler white girl, as they journeyed to reclaim the traditions stolen from their people by mine.

The overall feeling that I had during my time in Seattle was that of gentleness and safety. I was okay just as I was, and I was offered unearned love and compassion from elders even when I made mistakes. I learned these things from Beth, the Salish Paddlers, and from the forests that provided the wood to the Paddlers for their canoes. The ground in those forests held such softness, each step I took answered with a slight cushioning give, so different from the hard unmoving rocky granite ground in the woods of my Colorado home.

I disembarked from the plane and made my way through the passageway that took me from my Seattle get-away back to my life. I could see my mom and her boyfriend Emmett waiting at the end of the jetway, and as they came into focus, so too did my mom's black eyes. We gave each other a knowing look before we hugged and made our way to the women's restroom, where my mom reassured me, "I know it looks bad, but in some ways it's actually good. As long as the bruises are visible, he's really nice to me."

I used to taunt Emmett, yelling with my face inches from his, "You're a big man aren't you? I fucking dare you. Hit *me*." He never did. Emmett knew that if he left visible signs of abuse on my body that I would use them against him. With physical evidence, I could go to neighbors, teachers, or other authorities for help. I couldn't overpower him, or even protect myself physically against his much larger body, but I could use his own energy and strength against him, if he would just hit me.

I understood pretty early that this strategy wasn't available to most others, including my mother. The only reason that I could have used bruises to protect my mother and me was because, as an agreeable white girl child who got straight A's and participated in every after-school activity possible, I would be the right kind of victim, the kind that others would view as deserving of protection. I learned three important lessons about accessing protection from violence from these early experiences. First, you must have demonstrable evidence, bruises if you will. Second, to be a "deserving" victim, you need to be viewed as innocent and agreeable. Third, systems of oppression (sexism, classism, racism, colonialism, ageism etc.) shape who gets to be viewed as innocent and agreeable.

Obscured Evidence and Invisible Bruises

Over three decades after my childhood safe summer, I found myself back in Seattle, again seeking refuge from violence. I was no longer a child, and the violence was no longer inside my home. This time the violence was inside my workplace, and again, I found myself longing for “bruises” that would give me recourse against my abuser. By this point, I had earned a PhD in Social Psychology and Women’s Studies from the University of Michigan and had held two faculty positions, one in a psychology department and one in a gender studies department, but my current role as an Associate Director for Faculty Engagement in a Center for Civic and Community Engagement (from here forward, referred to as the Center) at a prestigious private university in the US Midwest, was a staff position.

I found my way to this position as a staff person because my prior attempts in academia had also left me with invisible bruises. My first position after earning a PhD was as faculty member in a psychology department where a colleague of mine was being bullied by senior faculty members. In this position, like in my childhood, I was not the primary target, but witnessing and trying to stop the abuse was as painful. Half of our department left within three years, including my targeted colleague and me.

I was part of a “dual STEM academic career” couple, and my partner was a faculty member in engineering at the university one mile from my college. I did not feel like I was ready to go back on the market to find two academic jobs in the same location again. I had one child and was pregnant with my second, and I needed to recover from my prior position. Thus, I took a position in the gender studies department at the same university where my partner worked thinking that things might be different if I changed from a STEM centered department to an interdisciplinary department. This position as a lecturer was a demotion (I was previously an

Associate Professor), but I had the opportunity to build a community engaged pathway through the major and minor; work that I cared about and for which I had expertise. My position was soft funded, but I was able to secure significant grants in my first year that led to more permanent funding. Even so, I was severely underpaid, making \$40,000 a year.

I generally liked my work and so I made peace with being undervalued. However, when my department hired a man with a master's degree to teach in the community engaged pathway that I created, and offered him a significantly easier workload, I asked my department chair for a raise, which she did not grant. When I had an interview at another institution, my partner's chair asked my chair if they could work together to keep us both, and he offered to supplement my salary through engineering's budget. My chair, a white woman who studied labor in Latin America, asked "Wouldn't it just be easier for you to pay him more?" The engineering chair replied, "I don't think that paying him more addresses the problem that there is a highly qualified and underpaid faculty member in your department." And so, my partner and I pursued positions elsewhere. This is how I came to the position described in this paper.

Subtle Abuse and Modern Discrimination

We often think of violence as physical, but it can also take more subtle forms like emotional and psychological violence, which are no less damaging (Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006). In the workplace, violence can also take more subtle forms. Despite the image of the workplace bully as someone who openly berates their subordinates, violence against employees is much more likely to be covert (Baron & Neuman, 1998; Namie & Namie, 2009; Rospenda & Richman, 2004). Additionally, this subtle workplace hostility has been found to be at least as harmful as more overt hostility. Metaphorically, overt verbal abuse in the workplace is the equivalent of

physical bruises from an intimate partner. It is the public evidence of harm that a worker can point to in order to seek redress against their perpetrator.

Similarly, “modern” versions of oppression are more subtle, yet no less pernicious than overt bigotry (c.f. Glick and Fiske, 1997; McConahay, 1983; Nadal et al., 2010). Overt discrimination in workplaces that is based on group membership (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, or disability status) is often illegal, and thus, must take more veiled forms that appear more like generalized workplace hostility, which remains legal in the US (Jones et al., 2016; Marchiondo et al., 2018). In my experience, subtle workplace violence was intimately connected to subtle workplace discrimination, not only because generalized workplace hostility is a tactic that allows perpetrators to discriminate while avoiding legal sanctions, but also because the roots of both are domination, power, and control.

My boss, like most abusers, wasn’t abusive from the beginning. She was complimentary and took me out for meals so that we could talk about the exciting work that we could do together. But a couple of months into my new position, it was becoming clear that things were not as they had initially seemed. Within three months of my starting, one-fourth of our staff in our Center had left their positions. In a little over three and a half years from my starting date, the entire staff that was there when I arrived had left, as well as several additional staff members who came after me. The one exception to the staff turnover was the grandson of the benefactor after whom our campus was named whose salary was not paid through our Center.

There were several early experiences that I had with my boss that left me ill at ease. Targets of workplace violence who have a prior history of abuse recognize the mistreatment more quickly compared to those who do not have prior experiences with abuse (Namie & Namie, 2018). Even so, I initially gave my boss the benefit of the doubt, convincing myself that she did

not understand how her leadership was affecting the staff. As one of the most senior staff in the office, and the only white senior staff member aside from my boss, I felt a responsibility to talk with her about the office culture, with the goal of supporting adjustments that would allow all of us to thrive (myself included) and more fully advance our mission.

Noncooperative Spaces

As I slowly began to understand that my boss's behavior was psychologically and emotionally abusive and not just a misinformed leadership style, I was also learning that her subtle racism, classism, and sexism were not just due to a lack of awareness. My boss publicly professed expertly-worded commitments to equity, though her choices often countered those proclamations. In hindsight, my workplace was what Muzanenhamo and Chowdhury (2022) have named noncooperative spaces, "institutional, organizational, and social environments portrayed by powerful white agents as conducive to anti-racism work and promoting racial equality but, indeed, constrain individuals who challenge racism" (p. 1).

Noncooperative spaces are upheld through deceiving design, indifference to racism by assimilated gatekeepers, and false equivalence (Muzanenhamo & Chowdhury, 2022).

Assimilated gatekeepers include white women who, while traditionally marginalized, are "empowered and integrated into the hegemonic structures by powerful white male actors" (p. 3).

These gatekeepers, though aware of structural inequalities, avoid challenging the status quo to gain acceptance from powerholders. My boss, an assimilated gatekeeper, masked her indifference to racism through appeals to non-partisanship that created false equivalencies, and she used many tactics to create the deceiving design of our Center.

Indifference to Racism Masked Through False Equivalence

I learned early that my boss used our Center's "non-partisan" status as a screen to disallow anti-racist work. When we traveled together to a gathering for staff of similar centers, my boss told me that she was concerned that the staff at our host institution were "allowed" to display "political" Black Lives Matter and Planned Parenthood signs in their offices. As a former gender studies professor, I explained, with examples, that everything is political (the personal is political), and that political is not the same as partisan.

The next day over lunch, my boss expressed dismay that Rashida Tlaib, the first elected Palestinian American in Congress, cussed during a speech shortly after being sworn in. My boss indicated that Tlaib was alienating people who might otherwise support her (implying that Tlaib was alienating her). In response, I explained that my boss may not be part of the audience that Tlaib was aiming to reach, and while I understood that swearing was disagreeable to her, for others like me, swearing felt like "home." I asked her to consider that valued communication norms are not universal, and that her norms were not neutral.

Soon after returning from our trip, our Center was having a multi-day staff retreat. I was excited to see that our agenda included time to discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of our Center, though I was concerned that we only had forty minutes allotted. The "discussions" that took place at our Center typically began with my boss framing the conversations to provide the direction and parameters for the topic. She framed our equity discussion by explaining that Republican students on our campus felt like their views were not valued, and so we needed to ensure that our Center felt welcoming to them.

I was astonished that this was the focus of our DEI discussion. I took a deep breath and said that while I agreed that it would be worthwhile to discuss what it meant for us to welcome

students regardless of party affiliation, it was inappropriate for this to be our DEI discussion. I continued by explaining that political parties alternate holding power, but systemic oppression ensures that certain groups are consistently denied equal access to power. That is, people of color have never systematically held greater power in the US than white people, women have never systematically held greater power than men, etc. Thus, discussing party affiliation in the context of a DEI discussion was drawing a false equivalence between political ideology and oppression. I remember recognizing that my boss was annoyed that I was derailing her plan, though she did not verbalize this. My boss gave me no indication that she understood, or had any interest in understanding, what I was saying. Perhaps because I was feeling strongly about this issue, which was likely detectable in my voice, like Tlaib, I was not saying it in the “right” way.

Deceiving Designs

One reason that I was excited to join the Center was because I believed that this was an opportunity for me to work with others to advance social justice goals, which I explicitly named in my application materials and during my interview process. Additionally, the staff at the Center cared deeply about creating more just communities; brought with them an impressive and broad range of expertise, skills, and knowledge sets; and were racially diverse (six out of 13 staff members that I would be joining were BIPOC, and five out of the six BIPOC staff members were Black). Naively, as a white woman, I believed that the combination of all these characteristics indicated that the Center was supportive of anti-racism work. However, my boss did not empower the staff to utilize their expertise to advance our work. Instead, she maintained *her* power by surveilling and isolating staff, reinforcing organizational hierarchies, and controlling others’ speech.

Surveillance. Just as is true in other abusive relationships, surveillance is used to disempower targets. My boss used many different mediums to monitor staff, telling us that “staff should be accessible via Microsoft Teams, email, text, and phone during their working hours . . . [and] for urgent or time-sensitive matters after hours.” My boss determined what counted as time-sensitive, and her false sense of urgency pervaded our Center. Additionally, we were expected to “maintain clear information about [our] work schedules and locations on [our] calendars, [status updates] on Microsoft Teams, and in ‘[Center] Today’” an email that went out first thing every morning that shared our expected whereabouts for the day. We also had an in/out board with a notes column to write where we were if we were not in the office.

In addition to our comings and goings, we were continually being asked to account for the work that we were doing. We had a Monday morning meeting where we rattled off our to-do lists for the week, one-on-one “supervision” meetings, staff meetings, and senior staff meetings. We also had at least three multi-day retreats per year. In addition to the verbal reports that we gave in all these meetings, we also produced monthly written reports on our work, larger reports two times a year, and reports devoted to the completion of major projects.

Even in situations where my boss should not have had jurisdiction over people’s time, she still exercised her control. One colleague was asked to come in on a Sunday during her FMLA leave, after the birth of her child, to make edits to a publication while my boss literally stood over her shoulder. My boss also often asked people to join “important” meetings prior to their start dates. This happened to me. I was staying in a hotel room with my partner, children, and dogs having just arrived in town from across the country, while we were finalizing our housing and enrolling our children in school which started the following week. My boss asked me to attend a two-day retreat the week before I started my position. While I was concerned

about being able to do the bare minimum to get my family settled before I started, I also did not want to seem disagreeable before I even began. Subtly, my boss communicated that my responsibility to her as my employer should come before ensuring the basic needs of my family. I had no way of knowing that this was a pattern, but after an additional four people were asked to start working before their start dates, I finally expressed my concern about this practice.

The surveillance also took particularly intimate forms. Our office culture was such that there was a lot of discussion about our clothes, food, and hair. Additionally, my boss sometimes stared at my breasts during my supervision meetings. My interpretation was that my larger body felt out of control to her given that she had a much smaller body and readily shared her views about making “healthy” choices related to food and exercise. I remember checking my clothing for wardrobe malfunctions, which were never there. I texted with my sister about it, and she asked if it was obvious enough that I could call her on it. I replied that I felt so weird that I just stayed quiet. After she commiserated with me, we both concluded that there were not viable action-based responses available to me for this kind of an infraction, and so instead we turned our powerlessness into fantasy-based humor (Banyard, & Graham-Bermann, 1993). My sister jokingly suggested that I bring “cat justice” to work and spray her with a squirt bottle.

While I found the body talk and surveillance distressing as a white woman, I did not have to navigate the additional ways that racism in the workplace has been upheld through the sanctioning of Black women’s bodies, hair, and attire (c.f., Cumberbatch, 2021; Patton, 2006). This workplace reality came into particular focus for me when two of my colleagues, my boss, and I attended the same conference and my boss decided that we needed to double up in our hotel rooms. I offered to my colleagues, who were both Black women, that I could be the one to share a room with my boss, which they quickly accepted. What would it have meant for my

colleagues to be required to share their private body care practices with a white woman with whom they work professionally when they had not been given a choice? Further, what would it have meant for one of them to be required to do this with their white boss? Though I did not feel comfortable sharing a room with my boss either, I did not feel like there was a productive way to say to my boss that (1) as subordinates we should not be required to room with her, and (2) there were additional racialized imbalances of power at play in her doubling-up decision.

Social Isolation. My boss's surveillance strategies also contributed to social isolation in ways that were also racialized and classed. As many Black feminist authors remind us (c.f., Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1993; Lorde, 1984; McGhee, 2021), using social hierarchies (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism) to divide workers is an effective tool for maintaining employers' power. Further, these social hierarchies intersect to constrain workers lives in different ways. The varied strategies used to produce social isolation in my Center are illustrative.

The social isolation that I experienced, as a white woman who held a position higher in our organizational hierarchy, resulted because my position literally stood alone on our organizational chart. There were clear opportunities for overlap between my work and my Center colleagues, but they were already so overwhelmed by the expectations from our boss when I arrived that they did not have time to meaningfully collaborate. I cannot help but wonder if my boss set up my position such that my only meaningful connection to our Center was to her, to ensure that I would align myself with her and not with the rest of our staff. Heather McGhee (2021) explains this dynamic when she talks about the challenges of labor organizing in her book *The Sum of Us*. McGhee writes, "Maybe the status quo—where being white actually did make it easier for you to get ahead, where a mostly white management could arbitrarily act to the benefit

of those with whom they felt a kinship—was actually better for the average white worker than a union. . .” (p. 120). In my experience, this dynamic extended beyond unionization efforts, with the assumption that the perks of whiteness would diminish solidarity that I might form with workers of color in my Center, even when that solidarity would also benefit me. McGhee continues with a quote from a white worker explaining white resistance to unionization, “The view is, white people are in charge, I’m in charge” (p. 120). In short, I suspect that my boss thought that I would prefer to be “in charge” (though subservient to her) and alone than to see my interests as aligned with my coworkers.

In contrast, social isolation was enforced very differently for a colleague of mine who was a Black woman who, from my perspective, came to our Center overqualified, and thus underpaid, for her position. My colleague told me that she took her position to “gain entry” to the university as an employee. Our university had a reputation for being difficult to access for people of color, which reflected her understanding and experience. Further, this colleague was the only employee paid hourly at her level of position in the Center, even when others with the same title were salaried. This meant that in addition to all the other forms of surveillance, she was also expected to electronically clock in and out. One day we were eating lunch together, which she was not getting paid for even though we were discussing work, when her alarm went off telling her she needed to “get back to work.” The timeclock made it more challenging for her to connect socially in our office.

The differential treatment that my colleague and I experienced at the different intersections of race, gender, and social class resulted in both of us being isolated in our work, and subordinated to our boss and within the larger university, but as Hurtado (1989) explains in her paper, *Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women*

and Women of Color, as a white woman, my boss/the university initially attempted to seduce me into my subordinate role, whereas my colleague was subordinated through exclusionary practices that made it difficult for her to gain entry to the university in the first place.

Reinforced social class hierarchies. In addition to the intersections of race and gender, social class subordination (as a gendered and raced social category) was also present in the ways that discrimination and abuse materialized in my Center. My boss was very concerned about looking good to people higher than her in social class hierarchies and she communicated her higher standing to those lower than her. This was exemplified through one of our semi-annual meetings with our Center's national advisory council. Our university uses these councils to engage current or potential major donors, and thus, the only required qualifier for serving is that one has "significant" capacity to donate to the university. Unsurprisingly, this means that wealthy older white men are overrepresented on these councils. The chair of our Center's council also served on the university's Board of Trustees.

Prior to one of our council meetings, our Center moved office locations into a former mansion located within the perimeters of our campus. My boss was excited to show our new space to our council, as she believed that our move demonstrated that the university was raising our Center's profile. As a result, my boss hosted a dinner for the council in our new space. Rather than pay our university's facilities management to provide set up and take down for the event as was typical protocol, in a power display, she required the Center staff to clean the house, iron linens and set tables, move furniture, etc. My boss did not participate in any of the preparations or takedown.

Additionally, the "senior staff" were expected to attend the dinner as part of our hosting duties, which fit within our job responsibilities. However, the remaining staff were also expected

to stay unseen in a back room of the house during the dinner, so that as soon as the council members left, they were available to clean up and prepare the space for the meeting the next day. During the dinner, we heard brief laughter from them, which my boss later chastised them for. They were expected to be available but invisible. Each of these staff members had full time positions at the Center that did not include domestic labor in their job responsibilities.

The “senior staff” were not expected to clean up after the meeting, but instead we were told that we should go home so that we could get rest before the meeting with the national council members the next day. In silent opposition, every single member of the senior staff ignored our bosses’ instruction and stayed to clean alongside our colleagues. It felt in that moment that our boss was attempting to use “last place aversion” (Kuziemko, et al., 2014). That is, she assumed that the “senior staff” would be attached to indicators that we were not “last place” in our Center, which she could manipulate to create divisions between those with differential position status in our organization. This effect has long been used to ensure that white poor and working class people align themselves with the white elite rather than other people of color (Battalora, 2021), but it has also been used to create ingroup divisions among people of color, whether using the model minority trope to create divisions between Asian Americans and other people of color (Kim, 1999) or using colorism to create divisions within Black communities (Hunter, 2007). In this instance, I felt that my boss was using social class divisions to create both racial intergroup and intragroup divisions.

It is worth noting that my colleague, who I introduced in the section on Social Isolation, took the linens home after the dinner and laundered them in her personal washing machine. The symbolism of a white woman asking a (relatively) lower status Black woman to act as a domestic servant for the wealthy, mostly white men, while giving other white staff or higher status Black

staff members less domestic labor, felt stark. It felt symbolically as though the white woman master of the house was directing her staff differentially at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

The Making of Undeserving Victims

I have wondered if my boss expected that, as a white woman, I would seek acceptance from powerholders, as she did. When I did not align myself with her, I suspect that she felt betrayed. Beyond not aligning with her, I regularly spoke up against her misuses of power, including about the issues already described in this paper. The fact that I tried several different strategies to get my boss to hear and understand my concerns must have felt relentless to her. I tried personal storytelling, knowing that stories are often a tool that can open pathways for empathy. When that did not work, I tried using analogies since my boss often used them to communicate her own ideas. When my analogies didn't seem to get through, I shared research articles, thinking that if it was validated through academic research, then she could hear what I was trying to say. And when I had exhausted all these strategies, having tried them multiple different times, sometimes simultaneously, I began to communicate my distress much more directly. These attempts unfolded over the course of years, and over the course of more and more departures of my colleagues, all while I was trying to do my actual work.

Willful Ignorance

Applebaum (2020) explores “the role that willful ignorance plays in maintaining systemic privilege and oppression and how calls for civility are demands for dominant group comfort that protect willful ignorance from challenge” (p. 719). Drawing on Charles Mills’ work on white ignorance (2007), she explains, “ignorance is not merely a passive lack of knowledge on the part of the individual, but it is an active distancing from what one does not want to know that has an

entire battery of systemically supported defense mechanisms that shield such ignorance from challenge” (p. 724). The leader of my Center, my boss, employed several tactics to actively distance herself from what she did not want to know, and these tactics were further safeguarded by institutional defense mechanisms.

Leadership Strategies for Maintaining Willful Ignorance

Framing. I’ve already named some of the tactics that my boss employed to maintain her willful ignorance, including framing conversations in ways that precluded conversations that could illuminate information she did not want to know. That is, if we discuss how Republican students experience our Center, she does not have to hear how marginalized students, or even more threatening, our own staff experience our Center, and make changes accordingly. To explain staff turnover, she can tell our advisory council that “I am personally delighted when our staff members are recognized for their talents and have the opportunity to advance their careers. . . . This is a compliment both to them and to us,” as a strategy masking how she stifled people’s careers and created extremely high staff turnover.

Dominating conversations. Beyond framing, she also spoke much of the time in most meetings. She celebrated when she successfully used this technique in an advisory council meeting to keep the conversation from “going off the rails” through her scripted “run of show” that left little time for others to speak. She instructed us to use this tactic, in fact, but did not seem to think we would notice when she was using it to keep us from speaking. She also tried to keep us from speaking to each other by instructing us to stop engaging in “back channel” conversations.

Listening theater. Another way that my boss silenced employee voice was to orchestrate activities that gave the appearance that she was open to listening and receiving feedback, or what Meredith Farkas has termed “listening theater” (2021). Heather Laine Talley wrote,

One effect of patriarchy is that white women have a complicated relationship with power, which leads to regularly denying/ignoring/downplaying how much power we hold. We invite people to collaborate without explicitly naming who holds the power as a decision maker. We invite other people’s feedback and then proceed with our version of what’s best. In reality, we faux-collaborate.

My boss regularly asked our staff for “feedback” on projects of her choosing, for which she set the parameters, having us write ideas on sticky notes that we then placed on poster-sized sticky notes adhered to the wall, which were then typed up by her administrative assistant never to be seen again. She also regularly held “listening sessions” with stakeholders outside of the Center, but rarely incorporated their feedback. For example, when my boss conducted a search for a position vacated by a colleague, my boss shared a “draft” of the job description with community members and campus stakeholders. Despite the extensive and thoughtful feedback that they provided, the only change she made was reordering two bullet points. Her theater allowed her to cite the large numbers of people that she had “engaged” in her decisions. Beyond ignoring feedback, my boss also regularly dismissed staff ideas during meetings. One colleague suggested that we should put a dollar in a jar every time my boss dismissed someone’s idea. We could then use the funds to go out drinking together.

Obscuring information. In addition to “faux-collaborating,” my boss would share pieces of information with different staff, but she would ensure that she was the only one in the office who had access to all the pieces. For instance, she required the senior staff to propose budgets to

her for each of our areas individually rather than for all of us to consider our budgets together in the context of the full Center budget. Doing this allowed her to obscure inequities and avoid any uncomfortable feedback about how our budget reflected our values.

Toxic Positivity. A final strategy that my boss employed to protect her willful ignorance and maintain her comfort was to employ what others have termed “toxic positivity.” Cultural emotion rules contribute to subordination (Hochschild, 1979). Marginalized group members who express “outlaw emotion” (Shields, 2005) implicitly challenge the legitimacy of social hierarchies (Power et al., 2011). As a result, outlaw emotions can operate as a form of resistance (Lorde, 1981), and risk censure. Anger is an emotion reserved for those who hold power, and thus power holders often attempt to suppress anger from those whom they seek to control (c.f. Stearns & Stearns, 1986; Power et al., 2011). One strategy for suppressing anger is to create organizational feeling rules that only allow people to express deferent and positive emotions (David, 2017; Ehrenreich, 2010).

My boss regularly required each staff member to say [Center] Gratitudes or share “good news stories,” particularly when the news wasn’t good “because we could all use some good news right now.” She would expect us to express gratitude and joy and avoid conversations of systematic oppression even when these conversations were directly related to civic and community engagement (e.g., police violence, the denial of tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, the January 6 insurrection). Early in my time at the Center my boss directed us to mask any distress we might feel, and follow the teachings of her father, who instructed her as a child to be like a duck, “cool, calm, and collected on the surface, even when what was happening below the surface was very different.”

Work Retaliation Victimization for Resisting Silence and Sustaining Voice

When employees did not submit to my boss's authority, she engaged in "work retaliation victimization" (WRV) which "involves adverse work-related actions that are often tangible, formal, and documented in employment records. Examples include discharge, involuntary transfer, demotion, poor performance appraisal . . . and typically originates from supervisors, managers, and other employees with authority" (Cortina & Magley, 2003, p. 248). Cortina and Magley found in their research that WRV is intertwined with power such that WRV increased when those who held less power expressed dissatisfaction with higher power wrongdoers to those wrongdoers. They theorized that this resulted because the actions of the lower power victim, by definition, challenged the organizational hierarchy, and thus, the wrongdoer retaliated to "correct this challenge to authority" (p.249).

Another one of my colleagues, Joycelia (her chosen pseudonym), who was a Black woman in an administrative support role, resisted my boss's demands that she regularly perform domestic labor in our converted mansion. Beyond not being a part of her job description, Joycelia also had asthma, making her unable to carry out these duties without putting her health at risk. When she politely refused, my boss said that she was not "welcoming enough to visitors." My boss's claims countered my experience and understanding of Joycelia. Because my primary collaborators came from outside our Center, they regularly interacted with Joycelia and always had positive things to say about her. My boss put Joycelia on a "performance improvement plan," with ambiguous expectations that were thus impossible to meet, and then took careful steps to fire her so that it would not look like it was related to her disability. Joycelia was fired the same week that we were all sent to work from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus leaving her with a chronic respiratory illness without health insurance or income.

The Beginning of My End: Suppressing Challenges to Willful Ignorance through Victim Blaming

The year the COVID-19 pandemic began was difficult for most people. Some were managing children and school while simultaneously balancing additional workloads, others were battling loneliness and isolation, and many were navigating illnesses and the loss of loved ones. This was true in different ways for each of my colleagues, and like elsewhere, the people of color in my office were disproportionately harmed. In addition to the difficulties brought about by the pandemic, the summer of 2020 also meant that people of color were managing the traumatic emotional toll of witnessing the continued modern-day lynchings of Black people and the ongoing hate and blame of Asian people for the pandemic. My boss, like many others at universities, responded with a statement of support for racial justice. She had some of the women of color in our office help her write the statement to ensure that she did not write anything that would make her look bad, though she retained editorial control and did not give them credit.

The day after my boss sent out her statement, she came to a Zoom meeting giddy about the response she had received. Her reaction seemed telling. Lives were lost, loved ones were grieving, entire communities were re-traumatized, and my boss was giddy because she looked good to an external audience. In particular, she was praised by the white chair of our advisory council, a person who inhabits every single category of privilege. She did not say anything about, nor to my knowledge do anything to inquire about, how her letter was received by people of color.

Shortly after these events, our staff organically spoke with a shared voice during a staff meeting where we told our boss that we were not okay, and that we needed to address the culture at our Center that reproduced racial inequity. To do this work, we needed to hire an outside

facilitator. My boss was clearly uncomfortable with our request and told us that she “needed time” to think about how to move forward. She did not hire a facilitator as we asked, but instead created three committees: Equity, Wellness, and Professional Development. While there is nothing wrong, per se, with these committees, her writing of the Equity Committee charge focused our attention outside of our Center, communicating that she remained unwilling to address how racism was operating within our Center. Additionally, she determined who would serve on the committee, did not provide a budget for the committee, or give the members of the committee any decision-making power: all their ideas had to be approved by her.

Feeling beside myself with frustration, I wrote an email to my boss, also including our full staff, excerpting and annotating an article written by Kira Hudson Banks and Richard Harvey (2020), scholars known to those in my Center, titled *Is Your Company Actually Fighting Racism, or Just Talking About It?* In it they wrote,

We have spent the past week listening to Black employees within several different companies. A common theme that emerged from these conversations was the disconnect between a company’s statement or commitment of resources externally and the daily employee experience. This disconnect is not new, but the awareness of its depth is novel for some.

I again hoped that my boss might be able to hear my concerns when they were written by others. In my email, I again asked that we hire an outside facilitator to help us address how racism was operating internally in our Center.

In the face of the twindemic of COVID and racial violence, my colleagues came to Zoom meetings, answered emails, completed projects, adjusted their work to meet the needs of their various audiences, and excelled for yet another academic year. As we approached the end of this

academic year, my boss told us at our staff meeting, complete with PowerPoint slides, that she recognized that this had been a very challenging year and so our “Summer Planning Goals” were to end the summer “rested, ready, and reoriented.” Despite her proclamation that she understood that we were tired, and thus we could use the summer to recover, she continued to add additional major projects to our summer work, including her new pet project that we did not have the human or material resources to accomplish, but that she believed would ensure our inclusion in our university’s strategic plan. The second part of her PowerPoint laid out deadlines for our additional summer work, to which she commented, “I know that many of you are planning to take vacation time this summer, which is great, but if a deadline falls during your vacation, make sure to get your work completed before you leave.”

At my next supervision meeting, where we were discussing additional work that she wanted me to do on her pet project, I expressed my exhaustion and said with exasperation, “Stop saying that our summer goal for us is to rest when you continue to pile work on top of the work we already have to do! You don’t mean what you say! Your actions and words don’t line up! So stop saying that we can rest! Just stop!” She was clearly angry about my tone and my message, and left our Zoom meeting abruptly, because she had “to go to another meeting.” I followed up our meeting with an email that outlined my plan for getting the work done that she was asking for, and said,

I want to acknowledge that our conversation on Wednesday was challenging. We are both clearly frustrated. I want you to know that, for me, this doesn’t feel like a stopping point, but rather, I feel that this can be productive place from which we engage further. I am here and interested in working through these challenges together. Please reach out if and when you would like to pick up this conversation.

My boss responded back with detailed directions related to the work plan and said she would “follow up with a more thorough response tomorrow.” She never did. Shortly thereafter, I left for my vacation to Seattle, longing for gentleness and safety, a place where I was okay just as I was, where I was offered love and compassion from elders, and the forests could respond to my steps with a soft cushioning give.

Like my childhood Seattle safe summer 30 years prior, I returned home to evidence of my abusive reality. I was preparing to run a weeklong intensive faculty development program that began the following week when I met with my boss for my yearly performance review. At my review meeting my boss told me that I was receiving a 2 out of 4, “needs improvement,” on my review because I was “adversarial” and “long-winded.” It is worth noting that the Supervisor’s Manual posted on the Human Resources (HR) website stated that “The performance evaluation is intended to evaluate an employee’s performance as it relates to assigned job responsibilities and objectives.” When I looked at the sections of the review paperwork that detailed my “Job Responsibilities” and “Objectives,” she wrote highly of my work. Therefore, the mismatch between the rating number on my review and the written evaluation of my job performance reflected my boss’s discomfort with my dissenting voice.

My boss and I met for my review meeting on a Wednesday, she sent me the written paperwork on Friday at 4:24 p.m., I was supposed to sign the paperwork and return it to her on Tuesday, and she would then submit the paperwork to my personnel file at the University. Despite my boss’ attempt to disallow me any time to thoughtfully respond, I was able to postpone the date she expected me to sign the paperwork and was able to get my boss to agree to have the campus ombuds, as a neutral party, facilitate a conversation between the two of us about the review. During this conversation, my boss agreed that because she had never spoken with me

about her concerns about my speech that she would postpone my review by six months. In response, the ombuds asked her to share the criteria by which I would be judged. My boss said, “do not undermine me or challenge me in group settings,” that I needed to recognize that she “had to make difficult decisions taking in multiple viewpoints,” and that I needed to be more “professional” by better reading her “non-verbal cues.” I asked her to provide this criterion to me in writing along with examples of what would count as evidence that I had, or had not, met her expectations. She never sent it, and about a month later, after having requested the criteria from her again in my supervision meetings and via email, I was told that these were no longer the criteria, and I would instead be judged by “competencies listed on the HR website.”

In short, the criteria that my boss initially gave me, to evaluate my effectiveness in my job for faculty engagement, communicated her expectation that I perform emotional labor that would ensure her white, social class privileged, and able-bodied comfort and protect her willful ignorance. During our facilitated conversation with the ombuds she also expressed that she felt like I was trying to “call her out.” I had spent years attempting to call my boss “in,” with no success. Her retaliatory behavior only surfaced when I began to name the discriminatory patterns more publicly in staff meetings and emails. It is worth noting that these were the only “public” settings in which I spoke of these issues. Though my public voice was limited to our Center, it still meant that she could no longer plausibly ignore my challenges to her willful ignorance. I rejected her framings and spoke up when she was trying to control our speech through framing and dominating our staff discussions, and so she responded by calling me “long-winded” and “adversarial.” In short, she blamed me for my own victimization. I was not the only person in the office to recognize this. During this time a colleague sent me an Instagram photo for

encouragement from @violadavis (2021) that read, “Manipulation is when they blame you for your reaction to their disrespect.”

While my boss’s grievance about me was framed as being a complaint about my manner or tone, it was clear that it was actually my message that was the problem. After my performance review, I stopped speaking, but this too was a threat to her authority. During a supervision meeting, she admonished me because I was “disengaged and keeping my head down.” I could not speak when I disagreed, nor could I remain silent. The only option left was to agree publicly and enthusiastically. When it was clear that she was not going to allow me to continue in my position, I directly asked my boss if she wanted me to continue working at the Center, to which she responded, “I don’t think you can be happy working at a leader-led organization.”

Institutional Betrayal and Willful Ignorance

My boss misused her power and created a work context that was untenable for long-term employment. After my performance review, I began talking more with people outside of my Center. One person told me that the logo for our office had previously been interlocking gears and that people used to joke that the reason for this was that my boss ran the office like a machine, with the people being gears. When a gear wore out, she would just dispose of it and replace it with a new one. Another person told me that this was the third time that she had witnessed my boss cycle through an entire staff. This reputation also extended beyond our campus. A colleague at an area institution told me that she had known that my boss was a “bully with a smile” for over a decade, and when receiving notice of position openings in the Center, their staff had an understanding not to pass them along.

While people on campus and beyond understood that my boss was abusive, I was expected to metaphorically show visible bruises to my university to access help. The ombuds

pointed me to policies that were relevant to my situation, but as Sara Ahmed details in her book *Complaint!*, these policies were designed to “create the illusion of doing something without doing anything” (p. 60), and instead, were designed to maintain Institutional willful ignorance.

I tried to access a “Problem Solving and Review Process” policy, which stated, “[F]rom time to time there will be disagreements between managers and employees in the workplace. . . . When situations cannot be resolved informally, employees may request formal review of certain disciplinary actions . . .”. When I sought such support from my HR representative, I was told that I could not access this policy because a negative performance review is not considered a “disciplinary action.” I told the HR representative that I had followed their stated expectation that employees try to work through issues with their supervisor directly first, and because of doing this, my boss was using the review process to retaliate.

I shared many of the examples explained in this paper with the HR representative, which were met with his silence. I then asked him if there was some form of evidence of toxic work culture that could trigger a review, like high turnover. My question was again met with silence. I then said, “Turnover is expensive, right? Shouldn’t high turnover be cause for concern?” He then told me that the cost of turnover in our office didn’t affect HR’s budget. Finally, I told him that he did not have to take my word about the Center’s culture, and I asked if they could retroactively conduct exit interviews with employees who had left within some chosen time frame. This too, would not be possible. Finally, I asked if someone who was familiar with me, and my work, could conduct my review, given that I believed that my boss was retaliating against me. He again told me no. There was no way for me to provide, or for them to seek, evidence of the abusive and discriminatory conduct of my boss, and there was no way for me to escape it other than quitting.

My university did have an “Abusive Conduct Policy,” but it was also inaccessible. The policy only provided examples of overt abuse, though it acknowledged that abuse may not be limited to their examples. Further, the policy did not give any information about how to make a report even within a section titled “Reporting Abusive Conduct.” As a last effort I did talk to my boss’s boss, who worked in the provost’s office. I shared my story with her, including that I was experiencing severe anxiety, and I told her that the only thing left that I could do was quit. This high-level administrator enabled my boss’s abusive behavior. She “empathized” with me by saying that she understood why I needed to quit to protect my mental health, but she never offered to address the cause of my distress.

Concluding Ideas for Institutional Transformation

The lessons that I learned from my childhood experiences with abuse were that to protect yourself from abuse you must have demonstrable evidence, be a “deserving” victim, and systems of oppression shape who gets to qualify as deserving. If institutions truly want to transform such that they no longer enable subtle workplace discrimination and abuse, they must actively seek out and listen for evidence of abuse. As Ahmed directs us, “To hear complaints you have to dismantle the [institutional] barriers that stop us from hearing complaints, and . . . that render so much of what is said, what is done, invisible and inaudible” (2021, p.6).

Further, institutions must expand who they consider deserving victims. When I spoke to my HR representative, he told me that my boss could make whatever decisions she wanted, and those of us below her had to accept her decisions and did not have any pathways for challenging them. He said that in HR, they “hoped that supervisors listened to their subordinates,” but that there was no requirement for them to do so. He then told me that my expectations were misguided because I had previously been a faculty member where there was more of an “ethos of

shared governance.” (Incidentally, I never told him that I had been a faculty member.) The University HR representatives were organized by unit, so that they both advised managers on how to avoid lawsuits at the same time they were advising their subordinates to discourage legal action. My representative was likely the one to advise my boss that her evaluation criteria for me were unsupportable, and that she should change it to be “the competencies on the HR website.” Prior to ever meeting me, he was siding with her.

In higher education when we consider the precarity of people’s positions, we almost always recognize the dilemmas faced by junior faculty, who are not able to “rock the boat” until they are promoted and can enjoy the job security provided by tenure. Women and people of color, including from STEM fields, are overrepresented in precarious positions without tenure, compared to their numbers in more secure tenured positions, in higher education. Even when they are successful in these positions, as I was, their employment status remains forever precarious, making it difficult for them to challenge systemic inequity. At each point in my career, I became seen as the problem when I challenged systemic inequity, rather than being seen as challenging the problem. Everyone should have a right to workplaces that are not systematically injurious. Because we are not going to achieve this through the benevolence of powerholders, we must create checks and balances to power (e.g., shared governance) across academic employment hierarchies.

Finally, if we are to identify abuses of power, we need people who understand how power operates. Expressing voice in the face of my boss’s silencing tactics made me an undeserving victim because deserving victims must be innocent, helpless, and agreeable; that is, they cannot fight back. I learned this lesson as a child when laws were instituted that required police to remove someone from the home when they were called for domestic disturbances. My

mother would fight back when her boyfriend beat her up, but when she fought back, she was no longer an innocent victim deserving of protection. The first time my mother was taken to jail, she had grabbed the phone and used it to hit her boyfriend in the head while he was beating her. The police said that she used a “weapon” while he had not, so they arrested her. Like my mother, I fought back, and thus forfeited my claims to innocence. This then enabled my boss and my university to frame me as the problem (i.e., “adversarial”), and not acknowledge that I was responding to workplace violence being perpetrated against me and others. The main thesis of Ahmed’s book is that when people complain of harassment or abuse, they are not seen as complaining about a problem, but rather they become the problem (2021).

It is also important to note that while I lost my claims to innocence, and thus to being a deserving victim when I stepped outside of my prescribed subservient role by fighting back, women of color are not afforded protection from workplace violence even when they do not challenge their subordination.

Near the end of my time at my job, I was talking to my partner about how the feelings I had at work were the same feelings that I had as a child. He asked me, “When you were a child, what did you wish your mother had done in response to the violence perpetrated against her?” I looked at him with tears welling up in my eyes, and I said that I had wished that she would leave her abuser. I playfully and lovingly told him, “Fuck you,” as I cried, because I knew he was right. It was time for me to go. I started working when I was 12 years old as a maid getting paid under the table with my mom to clean motel rooms in exchange for the one that we stayed in. Leaving her abusers was financially dangerous. The prospect of being unemployed for the first time since I was 12 tapped into fears embedded deep within every cell in my body, but I was not in the same position as my mom so many years ago. Leaving my abuser, while financially costly,

was not disastrous for me. This is not true for many others. No one should not have to accept abuse to receive a paycheck.

If we want to transform our institutions, we must talk to the people who have been most harmed by them and use their insights to make real changes. We must listen to their evidence, even when not in the form of visible bruises. We must hear them even if they speak with anger, particularly if they speak with anger, and we must consider the ways that intersecting systems of oppression shape the abuse that they experience. As Sara Ahmed tells us, “The complainers are my guides; they are my feminist philosophers, my critical theorists, and also my collective” (p. 25). The wisdom is there if we listen.

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