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Power WithIn.I'm New to Putting Me First

Dr. Michael R. Williams, Ed.D.

I'm kinda in this new space where my space is my space and I don't care about nobody but me, only me (Samoh, 2019, 0:56).

In a field that exists at the exigency of civil policymakers, tranquil institutional borders, and the revolving demand for connectedness, I'm new to putting me first. No one is below me, but I understand the need for integrated clarity—valuing the basic needs of my existence in the workplace. In this article, I outline how social media, Hip-Hop, and non-violence communication strategies enabled me to protect my space and reduce burnout as a scholar-practitioner.

Keywords: BlackCrit, Burnout, Hip-Hop Pedagogy

I understand that my work and praxis sit in an often immoral, hypervisible, power-driven, and self-absorbed system. Yet, I tried to work within it. I tried to work it away; but it just made me sadder, I tried to keep myself busy, I just ran in circles (Knowles & Saadiq, 2016, 0:56). I'm describing the root of experiences by (myself and) marginalized community members in higher education or, as this article continues, educational systems in general. This scholarly personal narrative (SPN) evokes a multidisciplinary approach by continuously weaving Hip-Hop Studies and Black Critical Theory to deconstruct our allegiance to burnout and savior complexities. By reading this article, I hope current and future scholar-practitioners will gain knowledge and best practices on the various ways to advance or connect with their inner-self and prioritize their needs over the harsh oppressive system(s) of Higher Education/Student Affairs (HESA).

In this article I will explain the journey I took to reach this current point of understanding my position in this generational war, the songs that have helped, and a few theories and/or models that helped me shape my scholar-practitioner lens.

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Perhaps you should grab your headphones and follow along, since the creative lens will cite lyrics from select musical artists or groups. My aim is to provide a new advancement in literature that conveys the multidisciplinary approach needed to engage in self-care and deconstruction. This narrative begins with my first position then evolves to this current writing. I hope you enjoy reading, but most importantly, I hope you follow the lyrics. During the first year of graduate school I was introduced to a chronic encounter with burnout. Burnout will be identified in this body of work as “the extinction of motivation or incentive, especially where one’s devotion to a cause or relationship [work] fails to produce results” (Scott, 2019).

There’s a weird feeling of imprisonment that automatically comes in your first semester as a graduate student. The mere experience tends to follow your career. The pseudo-official capacity can only be exonerated by forsaking the extensive reach of capitalism and property in our field. This introduction to burnout as a graduate student is vexing as you begin to examine the oppressive techniques experienced by marginalized community members. Graduate assistants of color are thrown into living case studies of discrimination and oppression within the field of HESA. The traumatic experiences of being a character and narrator of these case studies compounds the level of burnout experienced. Exhaustion hits. Yet the pain and exploitation are stratified across various identities, which is why we need more diverse voices in this conversation (Clark, 2019). Oppression tends to manifest differently as it assaults every community and every person negatively. Once I noticed this manner of iniquity in myself, I was eager to learn more about the depths of this field and relieve myself of this chronic encounter with burnout. In the next section, I outline how scholarly personal narrative accompanied with music can be utilized as the vehicle to unpack burnout as a result of combating HESA.

“Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy” (Hersey, 2019d).

Scholarly Personal Narrative

Throughout this article, you will notice pop-culture lyrics are intertwined to consistently shape the narrative on self-examination, unlearning problematic personal and/or practitioner beliefs to (re)learn better strategies to preserve oneself in this field. I noticed that the preparations and warnings given to new professionals when standing in front of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) come from an inward self-serving disposition. In part of me recognizing the self-serving warnings, I was also a willing participant to warn new practitioners of the potential horrors of entering this field. In the same manner, I would frequently describe these climatic battles from continuous encounters with systemic oppression without seeking a solution myself. My fascination with the realm of HESA lies in the linguistic manner of words we select that still covertly serve the purpose of oppression. There are nuances between

the understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion; yet the rooted definitions of these words do not transform the consciousness of the oppressed persons and the entire community, nor do they attempt to liberate the oppressor (Duran, 2006; Duran, et al., 2008) as practitioners often investigate ways to unpack oppression in this field. When HESA professionals use words and associated practices, they train you on how to navigate and cope with oppression. Very often, we look at the root of oppression and the ways each of us enter/exit the revolving door. For me, this revelation of identifying the disassociation between the words of diversity, equity, and inclusion and the work needed to be done happened after a series of mental breakdowns on the job.

As a most important introduction to Scholarly Personal Narrative, I would be remiss not to mention the work initiated by scholars at the University of Vermont. Since its introduction, Scholarly Personal Narrative continues to be a first choice of scholarly research for underrepresented, marginalized students (Nash & Viray, 2013). As I recall various pre-mental breakdown instances of work before my self-care, this research methodology remains essential to describing my encounters with this prevalent cycle of courting burnout. SPN rests within the writer's narrative of their experiences and goes back and forth between individual narrative and theoretical commentary (Brookfield, 2013). My commentary regularly revisits my previous allegiance to extending myself to complete work, positioning myself as a savior within my community, and hitting the wall of frustration. The intertwining of vivid personal experiences with relevant scholarship puts the self of the scholar front and center (Nash, 2004; Heidelberger & Uecker, 2009). The beginning of this chapter noted my graduate school experiences and my introduction to burnout in coursework as a rite of passage. Next, I will discuss my first full-time professional role in student affairs and the pervasive culture of burnout.

While still eluding burnout from graduate studies, I officially became a full time professional at a small private institution in the south. During my time in this role, I took the biggest challenge of relocating to a different state to pursue my career goals. It's time to step out on faith, I've gotta show my faith (Arie, 2001, 1:11). This change of customs and scenery intensified my professional experiences with burnout as I moved away from my immediate family circle. I've noticed in numerous instances how burnout was amplified for me due to my change of location. Not only do marginalized community members have to deal with institutional policies, but we frequently have to engage with community navigation and building as well. If money doesn't fall from trees, maybe we can make believe today; all I need is company (The Internet, 2015, 0:55). I made the move believing it was worth the money, only to regularly miss my community. Oftentimes the complexities of the workplace add an additional level to burnout as we begin to experience emotional exhaustion. This emotional exhaustion causes people to feel drained, unable to cope, and tired even to the point of lacking energy to get work done (Scott, 2019).

My emotional stability and commitment towards wanting to complete tasks over a period of time took a toll. I often found myself on uneven ground while attempting to still remain visible to students and colleagues who I knew were in similar situations. As burnout progresses for marginalized community members, we gather together to develop support groups, passing the baton of shared experiences. During these sharing circles, I immediately noticed how the implications of burnout engulfed our lives beyond the boundaries of work. Our conversations would immediately shift to problematic areas of our departments and manifest itself during conversation. Now you're lost, lost in the heat of it all (Ocean, 2012, 0:39). In being lost, my work became my main identity. Yet scholar-practitioners have not examined the intrinsic difficulties of marginalized individuals balancing the various factors previously mentioned. In addition to utilizing SPN as the vehicle for this narrative, I also selected Black Critical Theory as the navigation system to examine policy and advocacy that attends to the significance of Blackness in the social construction of White supremacy, especially in education (Dumas & ross, 2016).

“Rest is undoing what history has done” (Hersey, 2019c).

Black Critical Theory

To fully understand the depth of Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit), I must explain the foundational tenets of Critical Race Theory. This framework heavily illuminates the abundance of work required to unhinge our grasp on capitalism. During my brief time at my first professional role, I remember countless nights clinching frustration over the malpractice policies that hurt both practitioners and students. Ultimately, I noticed that marginalized community members are called on more frequently than their privileged peers to serve as the ambassador in practice when it comes to solving these institutional concerns and supporting students of color. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is composed of five tenets: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Ladson-Billings et al., 2006; Hiraldo, 2010, McCoy, 2006;). In this article, I center the final tenet of critiquing the doctrine of protecting and enhancing the freedom of the individual to be the central problem of politics. Yet CRT does not specifically speak to the Black experience but paints a broad-brush stroke for all people of color/non-white community members as a result of racism.

BlackCrit anchors CRT as a general theory of racism and explains precisely how Black bodies continue to become marginalized, burnt out from work, and disregarded and disdained within public spaces, particularly the realm of higher education (Dumas & ross, 2016). As a Black scholar-practitioner systematic exclu-

sion immediately introduced me to the mutation of excluding Black bodies from education as I consistently worked in a field to cure this disease, all while seeking to remain immune to the mutation myself. My awareness of this critique allowed me to foster community in spaces where I lacked support. However, in this instance of reclaiming selfcare, my awareness taught me to center myself and not the work that previously engulfed me. What we need is awareness, we cannot get careless (Public Enemy, 1990, 1:49). In my attempts to avoid the careless traps of centering my work instead of myself, I learned two critical self-centering techniques. The first step to defeating burnout is centering yourself and searching for your authentic being. Authenticity may be considered a cornerstone of the modern age, with self-expression and aesthetic creativity on one end and instrumental reason and rational thought on the other (Nosek, 2012). My authentic journey reignited my curiosity and love for Hip-Hop music. Shadows of your smile will always remain (Avant & Wyatt, 2012, 0:55). Next, I will describe how I utilized Hip-Hop to combat burnout in the workplace.

“Our bodies are a site of liberation” (Hersey, 2019b).

Hip-Hop Studies

The reader should notice by now that there is a recurring theme of pop culture lyrics placed in this text to encompass a multidisciplinary approach to liberation by remaining authentic. As this final section begins to situate Hip-Hop Studies as promising practice, it is important to truly understand the reader’s core beliefs towards the profession and your rightful place to disrupt and deconstruct this immoral institution. The premise of this entire article is to help the reader seek a plausible way to save themselves first, then find their place in the field of HESA. For me, music has constantly returned as a coping mechanism when dealing with the frustrations of the field and escaping burnout. On a regular basis, Hip-Hop music and artistry allowed me to dive deep into the lyrics in order to mesh it with my profession. Once I started to intertwine Hip-Hop Studies into my life, I noticed how listening to the music was a method of practicing resistance against oppression in this field. Scholars of Hip-Hop Studies center socio-political analysis and representation of marginalized communities (Akom, 2009). In this framework and practice, I saw myself highlighted and centered. I saw refuge that allowed me to heal from the ongoing battle of struggling to find work life balance. Hip-Hop has become an astute public teacher to those who care to listen to its weighty messages and learn from its many lessons (Miller et al., 2014). Hip-Hop was the first step in reclaiming my time.

“I’m new to putting me first, But me first kinda works” (Samoht, 2019, 1:21).

Myspace¹

As briefly mentioned earlier, it took extreme circumstances for me to understand how important taking care of myspace was. My environment was cluttered with work, proverbial policies that sought to center inclusion were crashing, and I sat there in the midst of it all. I was sinking into an empty pit and my well was running dry. As the proverb goes, “You can’t give from an empty well.” Suddenly, I hit the bottom. I realized I was burnt out. For over four years, I kept going in cycles. Cycles of (re)engaging with an institutional system that sought to retain its power dynamic.

To appreciate my personal space, I first had to unlearn my allegiance to burnout culture. I pledged my allegiance to burnout culture by assimilating myself with the “American Dream”. I was consistently burned out because I wanted the American Dream to be true, despite the odds stacked against my skin color. I sought to be acknowledged within a systemic culture that praised long hours of meticulous work, working while sick, and the infamous “grind.” The foundational tenet of burnout culture is capitalism. Capitalism forces one to neglect their innate recovery measure. Capitalism forces one to believe self-care is a reward only after hard work, and capitalism forces you to work beyond your breaking point to reach new heights within your profession. Reclaim your space. Reclaim your time. Reclaim your identity.

“You are not a machine, stop grinding” (Hersey 2019a).

Lastly, the process of reclaiming my space allowed me to listen to the needs of my authentic self. My attempts to grow authentically challenged my previous ways of communicating. I learned through non-violent communication strategies that the formation of language, poetry, or art is a search for a reference to elicit a common and shared understanding (Nosek, 2012). The amount of times I discussed burnout prior to liberating myself was not a method to end it, but only to endure the process. In putting me first, I (un)learned the pervasive ways of capitalism to (re)learn the proper coping mechanism of liberation. By turning a critical eye on our professional and personal activities of healing, we liberate ourselves as well (Duran et al., 2008).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to position burnout culture in a new sense and framework. I sought to peel back the multiple layers of engaging burnout within this profession with the hope of reminding the reader to search for their authentic self. I wanted to deconstruct the profession that consistently births practitioners

[1] Myspace is to denote an individual’s sense of wellbeing

into a field that assists them to endure burnout, but to not end it. Capitalism is the foundational tenet of burnout, and marginalized community members are affected the most while seeking the coveted “American Dream.” In addition, I aimed to introduce Hip-Hop Studies and BlackCrit as a vehicle that assisted me in reclaiming my space.

Finally, I introduced two plausible actional steps to putting oneself first in this field. The initial step is acknowledging your authentic self to relinquish our grasp with capitalism. Understand that resting is a necessity and your space to rest might reside within some of the songs referenced throughout this article. Next, the way we unlearn previous behaviors and (re)learn healthy communication strategies in this profession needs adjustment. As scholar-practitioners begin to ponder and expand on the concept of liberation and how the manifestation of liberation works within the field, the active learning vehicle will be utilized more frequently. The active learning process requires us to investigate biases and unchecked trauma. The unpacking experience itself is traumatic because we have boxed away these feelings. Capitalism fuels our trauma by creating a mirage that “rest is earned” or “with more money comes more responsibilities.” These are falsehoods that marginalized community members have lived with for generations and passed down through storytelling. Combatting burnout starts with the necessary work within ourselves to deconstruct our internal practices and beliefs, then turn our efforts toward this immoral system. **Choose You.**

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