Pyrrhic Persistence?: One Road to STEM Full Professorship at an

Historically Black College and University (HBCU)

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"Not too long ago we got the good news for a promotion to full Professor for Dr. Owens. . . .This [is a] collective achievement. . . .Of course, we know this didn't just happen because [of] the individual person, it was true collaborative work . . . so this, this is a celebration for our faculty group."

- Dean at a Faculty Meeting

Without fanfare, he just moved on to the next agenda item. After he moved on, I received a text from another colleague on the recorded Zoom meeting:

"Am I reading too much into it or did he basically just say that you got promoted because of collaborations and not your own independent hard work?"

This exchange, which occurred two days after I received the official notification of my promotion to full professor, catalyzed a shift for me. I became engulfed in a simultaneously painful yet numbing fog that lasted the entire fall semester.

The scenario reminded me of an affirmation that I wrote soon after achieving tenure nearly a decade earlier. With it came the realization that tenure did not change much in terms of my treatment in my academic unit. My campus office walls are covered with encouraging and motivational words, many of which are mine. "You can't work yourself into the respect and regard of people who are determined to never respect or regard you." I revisited my own words as a necessary reminder of my reality. The daily fare included incivility, lack of collegiality, and the expectation of extra uncompensated physical and emotional labor by faculty, staff, and students. Then, there was the gaslighting about said conditions. I persisted.

But I'm a full professor now. So why was I hurt? Even with the daily reminder of my quote, apparently somewhere deep down, I thought that swimming the moat, surviving the

gators, sharks, and rattlers, slaying the dragon, and climbing the promotion tower to ring the full professor bell would make a difference.

I made full professor. As a singular academic Black woman in STEM, my existence has been described as an exceptional case (Moore et al, 2019). Across all disciplines, Black women comprise less than two percent of full professors in the United States (Gayles, 2022; Williams & O'Leary, 2021). Black women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) are even less, but it is more likely to find more at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Lee et al., 2022; Owens, 2020).

The first Black woman to gain tenure in my STEM academic unit at Florida A&M University (FAMU), a large HBCU, I am also the first woman of any race/ethnicity to persist long enough to go up for Full. Since the unit's founding in 1995, five women, three White and two Black, have been hired as tenure track faculty. Two of us stayed long enough to seek and earn tenure. The other three left without trying. Knowing all but the other Black woman, I know the women left because they knew or were told that would not meet the tenure and promotion requirements.

In fact, at year two, under the guise of an unofficial third year review, I was advised to leave because I would not make tenure. However, because of a split appointment (50% of my time was dedicated to a university grant at the request of the provost), it was only year two, and I had to document and correct the erroneous assertion that I had a negative third year review. I also needed to correct the record of the exact year that I should go up for tenure, because even if you meet all the other criteria, going up in the wrong year would yield a denial of the tenure application. This was also calendar year three of me being told that the faculty didn't want me;

supposedly the only reason that I was hired from the two finalists was because I could do assessment, an unpopular and time-consuming administrative function (Owens, 2020, p. 239.)

This interaction was a sign of what was to come. Yet, I persisted. My family was uprooted for my professional opportunity and my husband was now also tenured at his *alma mater* in his hometown. Because I persisted, I was tenured and promoted to Associate Professor in 2013. It wasn't easy. I persisted. Although advised to be quiet for six years by the same person who told me that the faculty didn't want me and gave the erroneous third year review, I did not remain silent in my isolation. Elaine Welteroth, the first Black editor in chief of *Teen Vogue* articulated a perspective that is transferrable to Black women across sectors:

> "Our culture loves to celebrate a first. We love to hold a Black woman up to show that we're making progress. You're expected to be grateful and just take it with a smile. . . . and yet here I am, in this awkward situation that I felt I had to be quiet about. . . . It's why we break the silence and tell our truth. So it doesn't happen to the second, the third, or the fourth." (Shoenthal, 2022)

So, I wasn't quiet. Rather, I suggested new policies, spoke on inequities in terms of startup packages and suitable research space, advocated for students, and served as a member of the Faculty Senate. I persisted.

In complete contradiction to the dean's declaration of my success as a collective one, there is nothing about collaboration in the unit tenure and promotion criteria. In fact, collaboration with me was minimal to non-existent in my journey to tenure. As an interdisciplinary unit, I am the only faculty member who is both a natural scientist and a social scientist. My research is mixed methods in a world where quantitative research conducted on lab

benches or boats is valued over qualitative. My students often hear that their environmental policy and human dimensions research is not "real research."

As a tenured associate professor, I became less idealistic and realized that collaboration with departmental colleagues was neither required, nor available to me, largely because of disciplinary boundaries and biases in an interdisciplinary unit. However, I persisted. I became a student of the promotion process and endeavored to not only meet but exceed the criteria to do what my colorfully expressive Mississippi-born father termed, "kill a gnat with a sledge-hammer," to leave no doubt. In traumatic anticipation, I almost talked myself out of going up for full in 2021 because I didn't have enough of a cushion of publications beyond the required minimum number. Thankfully, another Black woman STEM colleague in another unit insisted that we would go up together in solidarity.

Tenure and promotion are structurally violent. Women delay going up for full because of not wanting to relive the trauma experienced during the tenure process. Tenure is required because your job is at stake when you take the singular opportunity to go up at year six. Promotion to full is optional. It was my goal, but I only wanted to do it once because of the structural violence (Hamer & Lang, 2015), stress, and—frankly—trauma, involved in the process. It took me nine years after tenure and promotion to associate professor to go up for full.

In 2012, I wrote about microaggressions against Black women at HBCUs (Owens, 2012). In 2018, FAMU was awarded a National Science Foundation (NSF) ADVANCE: Institutional Transformation cooperative agreement (EES-1824267). The overarching goal of FAMU ADVANCE is to transform institutional climate, culture, policies, and practices to employ the concept of cultural humility in seeking institutional transformation toward gender equity in STEM and the social and behavioral sciences (SBS). Cultural humility is a lifelong process of

self-reflection and self-critique whereby the individual not only learns about another's culture, but one starts with an examination of their own beliefs and cultural identities (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

The grant intentionally focused on Black women faculty in STEM/SBS because the numbers of Black female full professors is so small that we are often rendered as statistical outliers and therefore not studied (Nelson & Brammer, 2010). Although the numbers are still small, HBCUs provide the best opportunity to capture quantitative and qualitative data about the existence and experiences of Black women.

As Principal Investigator, the proposal was informed by my experiences as first and only. With years of therapy and the gaslighting trigger of the faculty meeting, I am coming to realize that my experiences and resilience are trauma informed (Clements, et al., 2022). In 2020, in my essay in *Presumed Incompetent II*, I offered:

> "After reading my own experiences, I ask myself: Why am I still here? Why do I stay? . . . In the overall scheme of things, what I have shared pales in comparison to my experiences of growing up in the segregated South, graduate education at PWIs, career stints where I was the only Black person, and daily experiences of navigating the nation and the world as a Black woman" (Owens, 2020).

However, I reiterated the former questions regarding staying after making full professor; but I was led to ask another question. Did making full professor cost me too much? One of my former students who now works in corporate America, wisely asked me, "Dr. Owens, was making full professor a Pyrrhic victory?" (Fordham, 1988). That question began the process of cost-benefit analysis, actually weighing the costs of making full professor. Most obvious are the fiscal costs. Each year of delay represents thousands of dollars of unearned salary and compound

interest. However, the physical, mental, and emotional costs go unarticulated and uncounted for various reasons.

I do not feel safe. I do not feel physically safe. And institutional trauma renders me afraid and ashamed to say so. (Even though I'm writing this, the fear and shame remain.) As the only woman in a faculty meeting, when a male colleague slammed the table, stood up, leaned over, and yelled at me because he disagreed with me, I did not feel safe. No one intervened. No one checked on me. After that meeting, I said to the dean, in the presence of a different male faculty member, "I don't feel safe." He laughed and asked the colleague "Does Dr. Owens have a reason to feel unsafe?" The colleague said that it wasn't for him to say. I mentioned this in a conversation with an administrator and subsequently received a call from the Equal Opportunity Programs (EOP) Office asking whether I wanted to file a report.

In hindsight, I surmise that the primary motivation of the administrator was an effort to protect the institution, not necessarily an effort to protect me. Ironically, and perhaps by design, Black women oversee EOP, Title IX, and legal affairs. As my contemporaries, they were also raised to be strong and loyal Black women with unrealized internalized misogynoir (Bailey, 2021). Prior (2022) reviewed the literature that offers the ways that violence and fear of violence are used to silence and socially control those who live at the intersection of gender and race (Smith & Freyd, 2013, 2014).

So, I declined to file a report because I already had firsthand experience with adverse outcomes and fallout of reporting student complaints as a mandatory faculty reporter. My experiences have yielded the unfortunate situational wisdom of understanding that the primary mandate of the recipients of such complaints is to look out for the best interests of the institution. I also know firsthand about overt and subtle backlash for doing so. Because I am the only Black

woman, many Black women students seem to feel most comfortable reporting to me, their issues of actual or perceived harassment. I now fully understand my mother's protective admonishment to "take that tissue box off your desk," as I finally understood the high and often unappreciated costs of being the open door and shoulder to cry on. The women students, however, do not realize or even care about my personal and professional impacts when they report to me. Their telling me triggers legal and ethical obligations for me to file a report with appropriate campus authorities. If I do not, when it happens again, they could and likely would say, "But Dr. Owens knew about this." Students often do not follow up or are only willing to provide anonymous statements. Yet, as a mandatory reporter, I remain exposed to a phenomenon described as institutional betrayal, long after the student has graduated (Smith & Freyd, 2013).

Smith & Freyd (2013, 2014), in their Institutional Betrayal Questionnaire measuring the phenomenon, list the difficulty of reporting the event and being punished in some way for a particular experience. Each time I have honored my obligation, adverse impacts have followed (removal from a grant, fear of physical violence, lost paperwork, and payment delays). In one class, one male student allegedly engaged in threatening behaviors with several women students. There were alleged incidents of inappropriate behavior, in and outside of class, with single, married, graduate, and undergraduate students. I had to change pedagogy by doing away with group assignments, because women did not want to be in a group with the man. He wasted an exam answer by sharing his personal opinion about my psychological status when the correct answer to the question was not unique to me.

Police escorts were deployed to escort women students after class. Then suddenly, they stopped without formal explanation, resulting in anxiety for the women students and me. The withdrawal of university-ordered protection increased the likelihood that similar experiences

would occur, implying that what these women and I experienced was not a big deal (Smith &

Freyd, 2014). As faculty, I was interrogated by academic affairs administrators about a perceived

bias on my part and whether my alleged bias would negatively impact the grade of the Black

male student.

In one interrogation focused on protecting the rights of the male student, an administrator

saw me frown and bite my bottom lip; perhaps he spoke from one of his biases when he said, "I

see that smirk on your face!" My response was that it wasn't a smirk. Rather, I was biting my lip

so that I wouldn't cry. At that point to my supreme anger and embarrassment, the tears flowed.

Why was I embarrassed? Crying at work is against every tenet of my university administrator

mother's teachings (Owens, 2022) and the expectations of the StrongBlackWoman as described

in *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Walker-Barnes, 2014). "It is

common for the StrongBlackWoman to avoid crying, both publicly and privately, because they

believe it to be an unacceptable display of weakness" (Walker-Barnes, p. 21). The

StrongBlackWoman should endure "life's struggles without complaining. Indeed, she evinces no

sign that she is under duress" (p. 17). It lets the person in power know that we have lost control.

It is viewed as "failure, rather than a normative emotional experience." We are expected to

persist, with a smile and without tears. We are expected to persist. Period.

"Because Black women's strength has become such a cultural mandate, their suffering is

often viewed as normative." Accordingly, we do not recognize the "emotional and physical

distress that is a result of her stress but take it for granted as a normal consequence of life" as we

repress and suppress stress responses (Walker-Barnes, p. 23). As expected, I repressed and

suppressed after that classroom experience and the administrative interrogations. A key result

was that my blood pressure rose to a dangerously high level as I modeled the pathological

strength of the StrongBlackWoman for my Black women students while also avoiding any further display of tearful "failure" to students and Black men administrators.

Even though I have been threatened with actual physical harm (Owens, 2020) and feared physical harm in other cases, I fought to maintain the appearance of strength. By fighting back tears, like the StrongBlackWoman (Walker-Barnes, p. 75), I endeavor to hide my emotions and resist the appearance of vulnerability or dependency. Finally, by staying at my institution and making full professor, I have ignored, minimized, and pushed through the impacts of the pain and demonstrated a dogged determination to succeed despite not having typical investments expected to cultivate and yield future success, such as startup funds or a suitable research laboratory.

Gayles (2022) cites increased resignations of Black women full professors. I thought of writing this in the form of a resignation letter. A couple of female colleagues, including my therapist, believed that taking that approach may be cathartic. However, the possibility spurred even more anxiety regarding the traumatic prospect of actually submitting the letter, so I did not write it in that form. In contemplating the possibility of this route, I was asked whether doing so was a tool for further persistence or whether imagining resignation somehow compounded the harm of 20 years of persistence at this institution.

An imaginary resignation neither compounds nor negates the damage of past persistence. Instead, it reminds me that I can resign or retire as a full professor at my current demographic stage. I have persisted to the point of having viable options. The fact that I can walk away at any moment is liberating. I cannot go back and change anything, and I am learning to avoid the "what ifs" in terms of past responses. Instead, I can and do talk to others about my lessons. I can write about my experiences and the lessons. An escape into the fantasy of real possibilities has

literally kept me alive. Black women university presidents Joanne Epps and Orinthia Montague died two days apart in 2023, and many speculate about the roles of stress and institutional trauma in their untimely deaths. Crystal deGregory (2023) reminded Black women of our disposability (Gayles, 2022) by describing that after the collapse of Epps, "the program went on as planned."

Even closer to home at an HBCU, Antoinette "Bonnie" Candida-Bailey, a Vice President at Lincoln University in Missouri, died by suicide after alleging bullying and harassment by the sitting president. In her final email to the president on the day of her death, she outlined her wishes of who should speak to her family and that the president should not "have any contact. You've caused enough harm and mental damage" (Turman, 2024). This statement in her email was chilling, as it mirrors actual conversations that I have had with family, friends, trusted colleagues, and former students to make sure that certain university colleagues are not allowed to enter or attempt to say anything should I die. Thinking of bouncers at my funeral and writing this piece brought me to another level of awareness of the costs of my traumatic persistence.

Since I have become a full professor, I have heard the voices of those who made full professors and left the academy, including other HBCUs and PWIs and administrators who have never reached the rank of full professor because of decreased research efforts. I have also been told that now is the best time to leave, that my work is bigger than my institution and bigger than HBCUs.

However, I am just plain tired. My mother often used a common saying, "Better the devil you know than the devil you don't know." Reviewing my experiences, I ask, "Why does there always have to be a devil?" Can Black women in the academy, or anywhere, ever expect a devil-free existence? My experiences at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) showed me different devils. After 20 years with this particular set of HBCU "devils," I persist.

Black women's "strength and power" are not dependent on our "abilities to persist." Instead, we are strengthened when we are affirmed instead of gaslighted into silence (Grant, 2021, p. 943). Informed by *Gaslight*, the 1938 play, the term "gaslighting" means that psychological manipulation that occurs to the point that the victim begins to question reality and their sanity (Hamilton, 1938). "This type of psychological abuse causes people to second guess their experiences, emotions, knowledge, judgment, memories, and ultimately their humanity" (Wood & Harris, 2021). Although the play had no racial context, Wood and Harris offer the term "racelighting" to describe a unique type of gaslighting experienced by people of color. In racelighting, people of color wonder whether they are overly sensitive when questioning the reality of their mistreatment or microaggressions. Layers are added for those of us who live at the major intersection of race and gender.

Upon the initial drafting of this piece, the fog began to descend again, but it did not engulf me. However, reviewing the FAMU ADVANCE statistics and annual reports, and a timely therapist appointment, inspired me to adjust my lens. Is it a Pyrrhic victory? Indeed, it has cost me a lot. I am still counting the past costs and incurring new costs. But then I reviewed the annual reports from the first five years of FAMU ADVANCE at this institution. In Year 4, I was one of a historic class of three Black women in STEM to earn the rank of full professor in one year at my institution. In Year 5, another Black woman in STEM was promoted to full. Adding the one full professor in SBS from Year 2, five Black women in STEM/SBS have been promoted to the rank of full professor since the grant was awarded. Three of the five served as FAMU ADVANCE Faculty Fellows; as the PI, I am the fourth of five. FAMU ADVANCE is still making a difference here, even in the face of the costs.

Most of the women at HBCUs are Black. Most faculty, staff, and students are Black. While we may not experience issues of race identical to Black women at PWIs, Black women at HBCUs still face many intersectional challenges as we work in environments or in STEM or other disciplines with few female colleagues and fewer female academic leaders (Moore et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2022).

A foundational impact of the project is the intentional monitoring of the number of female faculty members in STEM/SBS. Since the awarding of FAMU ADVANCE there has been a net decrease in female full professors in STEM/SBS. The 2018 baseline of 21 women decreased to 16. The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with several retirements. Six women, full professors in STEM/SBS, retired in 2021. There have been promotions to ease the imbalance, two of whom were FAMU ADVANCE Faculty Fellows. Both credited their participation in the Faculty Fellows Program as giving them the boost to seek promotion. Additionally, eight Faculty Fellows have been tenured and promoted to Associate Professor, signaling that Black and other women of color are on the pathway to Full.

However, in Fall of 2022, three Black women were promoted to Full Professor in STEM/SBS disciplines. This brings the number of female full professors back up to 23, a positive trend toward the potential increase of female full professors. There are tenured associate professors in 10 other STEM/SBS units on campus. This means that women are also on the pathway to full professor in several STEM/SBS disciplines. This underscores the need to focus on retention as well as promotion. Several FAMU ADVANCE Faculty Fellows and members of the rank-based affinity groups that began in 2023 are on the tenure and promotion pathway, potentially increasing the numbers of tenured associate and full professors.

Maybe reading this information years from now I'll be able to smile, but at this moment, there's grief, sorrow, sadness, pain, fear, and yes, tears (private ones). The trauma, gaslighting, and racelighting may continue, but so will the healing.

In 2022, my therapist asked for the second consecutive month after my promotion: *Have you celebrated your accomplishment?* For the second successive month, my answer was "No." *Why?* Now, in 2024, I still have not celebrated. In preparing to write this reflection, I revisited the documentation that supported my assertions to ensure the accuracy of facts and experiences and ensure that the seeds of gaslighting had not taken root. However, reviewing the draft complaints that were never filed, those that were filed and withdrawn, and related documents resulted in the fog descending and anxiety returning.

We talked about the question of the Pyrrhic victory. Did the triumph of full professor cost me too much? When I relieve the trauma and pain, I think that it did. And just because I made full, it doesn't mean that the trauma will end. It just changes. Hopefully, the pain and numbness will subside, and then the wounds will heal into painless, yet visible, scars of memories. This brings me to a critical dilemma. The struggle always leaves something. How much do you stay with the remnants of the struggle, and how do you allow yourself to move? The more you stay with the trauma, the more you live in it rather than step out of it and transcend it. So, the challenge is to transcend the trauma.

My therapist asked me: *"Are you surprised that you made full professor?"* I responded (surprisingly quickly), "No, I'm not surprised that I achieved; I'm more surprised that I survived." Then she retorted, *"Are you evaluating and viewing your success through the lens of the assailant? What does it mean for YOU?* At that point, I recognized that I live so much in evaluating my worth from the perspective of those who do not value me, and that should not be

the measurement. She asked, "*Why hand them the power? Why make them the measurement? Is it only meaningful to you because they must now see you as full professor? Is there something else in it for you*?"

The conversation led me to realize that although I earned tenure and two promotions via a traumatic system that was not designed by me or to benefit me, I still managed to do some things that were meaningful to me. I persisted. I see the system. I know that the system is peppered with landmines of institutional betrayal, but I also see the change I have brought and hope to bring. The system is hard-wired to characterize me as "hostile, aggressive, overbearing, illogical, ill-tempered, and bitter" according to the silencing stereotype of the "angry Black woman" (Motro et al., 2022; Collins, 2022). Rather, I stand as witness to the progress that the just, justifiable, and productive anger of Black women can bring (Griffin, 2012). So, the goal is not to merely stay in the system. Rather, the goal is to transform and transcend it. The system sees how high you can jump. Transcendence allows you to set your own goal height.

My therapist asked, "*Do you ever give yourself the credit? Do you ever enjoy what you have done?"* At that moment, I mentally called the roll of my former students, both graduate and undergraduate, and the difference that I have made in their lives. We got through a lot of "this and that" together! As I reentered the classroom in the second semester of Year Five of FAMU ADVANCE, I realized my work is vital to current and future Black women students. After the first day of class, one wrote: "I appreciate you telling us about yourself and your career. I agree that science is political, and I enjoyed hearing about your grant and *your efforts to make it an equal playing field for us"* (emphasis mine).

Thus, I am challenged to adjust my lens. Tamron Hall, the first Black woman to host the *Today Show*, put it this way: "Every time a young girl comes in and asks me for advice if you

start your conversation with, 'how hard is it as a black woman?' or 'how hard is it as a woman?', I turn you around. 'We cannot look at the roadblocks and see the road at the same time.'" Upon reflection, I am cultivating, albeit painfully, the ability to recognize, challenge, and change the roadblocks while keeping my eye on the road.

This essay began with the statement of a dean who went a circuitous route, far out of his way, to discredit my achievement. By their own subjective rules, I was deemed worthy of the rank of full professor. Remember, I followed my Daddy's advice by "killing the gnat with a sledgehammer"? The twisted statement of the dean was a lot of work to go through to discredit a singular achievement. As my affirmation states, he is determined to neither respect nor regard me. Writing this essay convinced me to stop nursing the wound of his words and lance the boil of bitterness. The new joyful affirmation is, "I am a full professor." Rinse and repeat.

Here is advice to myself and to others who are similarly situated. Don't judge progress by how much you fight the system and how fast you're running after the carrot. If we continue to run after the carrot, the proverbial "they" will continue to move it. Stop living your life in proof that you are smart enough, good enough, and resilient enough. Focus on the road more than you focus on the roadblocks.

My therapist then asked, "*If there were other measures of the success of my fighting, what would they be?"* The answers flowed like a healing rain but without tears. There would be more Black women in tenure-track positions in STEM. Faculty numbers in STEM at HBCUs would be more representative of the student population. Black women and girls would be encouraged to seek STEM majors and be mentored to succeed. Black women will be clear about who they are and what they bring. The number of women who succeed anyway while we continue to seek institutional transformation will increase. When one Black woman retires or

otherwise gives up the fight, another would be behind. Another and another and another . . . That's the measure of the cost.

Admittedly, it was difficult to name my experiences as academic trauma and institutional betrayal. Why? The expectation that Black women should display strength accompanied by abject loyalty and smiling, grateful positivity is engrained. Why? Because "if you lie to yourself about your own pain, you will be killed by those who will claim you enjoyed it" (Walker, 2011, p. 106). Naming problems and counting the costs are considered negative, and naming solutions that are too expensive or require individual and institutional transformation is problematic. Even writing a three-million-dollar grant was problematic because I wasn't supposed to achieve it.

Although some things will never change, I was born to ensure that some do. One Sistah Scholar Friend told me that because I became the first, no other Sistah student or colleague must go through what I've gone through. My persistence and survival have made a difference. My writing what has derisively been called "The Girl Grant," has made a difference. Three million girl dollars "ain't half bad."

In full context, I can declare victory. Through the lens of personal institutional trauma, academic betrayal and their roadblocks, my persistence has been indeed Pyrrhic. On a personal level, it simply cost more than it should have; but I'm still here. I persist. For me, the long-term costs of Pyrrhic persistence have been related to physical and mental health. I also realize that my penchant for naming inequities will not help my prospects for promotion to administration but will plant seeds of institutional transformation that I personally may not get to glean. I stand in hope that there will be a Black woman here to reap a bountiful harvest. However, I also recognize that I can speak more freely as "just" a full professor. Ultimately, my individual cost

and that of other Black women result in reducing the collective cost. The net reduction makes the

victory worth it. Focusing on the road is vital to what I will simply name victory.

      Our challenge is to persist and focus on the road.

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