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Unexpected Accomplices: Effective Mentoring between a Black and White Woman Despite Historical Issues of Privilege, Power, and Positionality

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Abstract

In this reflection piece, we, a Black woman faculty and a white woman postdoc in a research-intensive College of Engineering, discuss our relationship in the context of cross-racial mentoring where our positionalities (distinguished professor and postdoc) do not follow racial power historically (Black and white, respectively) in the United States. We describe how our professional relationship began during inflection points for both the Black professor and white postdoc and during the turbulent national and global events occurring in the final months of 2020. Despite this, our mentorship quickly developed into one led by humanity and based on an understanding of intersectional feminism. We identify core components of our relationship in efforts to lay out a conceptual framework that can be useful by other such mentorships and to situate our experience in the broader literature. We describe how we use the elements of Dialogue, Sisterhood, and Agency / Accountability to navigate complex issues of power. We hope that this piece will invite discussion on how white women trainees can develop cultural competencies in their relationships with Black and other Women of Color mentors. Broadly, we aim to facilitate discussion in the Engineering Education community about how positionality and power can be acknowledged to grow cultural competencies of the historically privileged while simultaneously preventing inequities and injustices of leaders from historically harmed and excluded groups.

Introduction

The idea for this paper emerged when our relationship flowed seamlessly. Dr. Meagan Ita is a white woman postdoctoral associate from the Midwest. Dr. Ita was an undergraduate at the university where she was hired to work on a project under the supervision of Dr. Monica Cox, a Black tenured professor from the South. Given workplace issues and the racial trauma preceding and following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Dr. Cox wasn't involved in the immediate hiring of Dr. Ita for the project. Our supervisee/supervisory relationship could have been disastrous given our backgrounds, remote working, and the rocky racial history of the unit where we work, but it wasn't.

We completed our assigned work tasks for an entrepreneurial engineering project with ease but soon recognized that our ability to flow professionally and discuss real-time racial issues in our organization and the world was unique. A portion of our work time included time for reflection and healing as people died from COVID19 and grappled with systemic oppression, racial violence, and avoidance of deep conversations and accountability for deep-seeded isms in the world. We processed the workplace and life through our lenses, discussing several books about feminism and race in the process.

We want to write this paper for several reasons. First is the dearth of literature about work relationships between Black and white women in higher education, particularly in engineering

environments. Anecdotal reports from diversity leaders say that women in engineering programs often attract white women, thereby embracing gender empowerment through the lens of white feminism. Many Black women in engineering participate actively in minority engineering programs instead, thereby having to choose between their gender or their race in their engineering professional and leadership development. This also means there's an absence in literature about what power dynamics look like between Black and white women in a male-dominated field such as engineering. Second, we genuinely like each other as people. Our values align, and we kept returning to the question of what made us personally and professionally compatible. Finally, we know there are unresolved tensions between white women and Women of Color (WOC). Any number of books highlight this. Rarely, however, are there spaces and places for women in engineering to discuss these tensions. We wanted to create space so those coming after us can do the real work to move toward sisterhood.

Race affects cross-racial mentoring relationships at all levels of higher education including senior faculty to junior faculty, faculty to postdocs, and faculty to graduate students [1]–[3]. For example, common factors that shape cross-racial mentoring of Faculty of Color include "an awareness of the mentee's cultural experience" by the mentor, "open-mindedness", and "trust, comfort, and common ground" [3]. Davis and Linder [4] further call to action the necessity to acknowledge and candidly discuss whiteness in cross-racial relationships between women, in parallel with a commitment to self-work on the white woman's part. These studies and the broader literature identifying the effects of race on cross-racial mentoring in academia predominantly focus on relationships where the mentees are individuals from historically excluded groups and the mentors are individuals from historically privileged groups. In other words, the mentor-mentee *positionality* relationship follows the *power* dynamics of historical race relations in the United States.

Questions that guided our work included the following:

- What are the implications when the racial positionalities in the authors' power dynamic are flipped?
- When trainees from white, privileged groups are mentored by Black faculty and leaders, what factors ensure authentic, just, and meaningful mentoring relationships?
- What factors lead to presumed competence?
- How do factors such as leveraging privilege and using cultural capital play out when the mentee holds the historical privilege?
- How can vulnerability and authenticity both build community between the mentor and mentee *and* be potentially dangerous to the Black mentor in the context of hierarchical institutional dynamics?

Background

Intersectional Feminism

Feminism is at the heart of this paper since both authors identify as feminists. Before our relationship, we may not have identified ourselves that way but over time we realized our approaches were anti-racist and that we embrace all aspects of identities in the exploration of

feminism. Thus, we provide definitions of white feminism, intersectional feminism, and Black feminism as we understand them in the context of our relationship.

When many authors speak of feminism, they are referring and defaulting to white feminism [5], [6]. In our paper, we use Jackson and Rao's definition of white feminism: "seeing everything through a gender lens, erasing other marginalized identities, including race" [5, p. 152]. This definition is consistent with other texts on white feminism [7].

Intersectional feminism was introduced and established by Black women and Women of Color; therefore, its definition is inextricably linked to the definition of Black feminism. The term intersectionality was popularized by Kimberlè Crenshaw in her 1989 and 1991 publications that explore the intersections of race and gender in the context of violence against WOC [8], [9]. Crenshaw distinguishes *structural intersectionality*, "the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender" position them differently (in the context of violence) than white women, from *political intersectionality*, where "both feminist and anti-racist politics have functioned in tandem to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color" [9, p. 8].

Foundational to the definition of intersectionality is the understanding of oppressive systems, not merely an analysis of multiple identities, as the excerpt from Crenshaw articulates. Intersectionality is a consideration of how multiple identities (e.g., gender and race) situate an individual in *multiple* systems of oppression; an idea that has unfortunately been neglected as the term has gained popularity [10], [11]. Intersectional feminism is thus a framework that works to undo oppressive systems when one of the multiple identities held by an individual is the female gender. Kyla Schuller quotes Pauli Murray's apt description of this in *The Trouble with White Women*:

> Since the problems of race discrimination and sex discrimination meet in me," Murray wrote, "I must consider both as equally important." For those who live at the crosshairs, she revealed, these forces compound one another, multiplying in effect, such that it is Black women, not white, that experience the fullest brunt of sexism in Black and white spaces. [6, p. 170].

Beddoes and Borrego define the "intersectional branch" of feminist theory succinctly as one where "gender must be understood in relation to other identities or hierarchies that form complex intertwining of identity and oppression" [12, p. 285]. At the same time, intersectional feminism is a complex set of ideas that are difficult to define in a sentence. Moradi and authors [10] summarize these complex ideas from the voices of Black women and WOC as:

> key ideas that (a) race, class, gender, sexualities, and other axes are systems of power; (b) these systems of power are interconnected and function together to result in inequalities - privilege and oppression - that shape people's lives; and (c) activism for social justice must move beyond single axis and single identity politics to dismantle interconnected structures and systems of oppression and privilege [10, p. 152].

Black feminism can perhaps be distinguished from intersectional feminism in that it centers the voices and experiences of Black women specifically [13], [14]. Black feminist theory calls

attention to the struggle that the "feminism" in the women's liberation movement was really "white feminism" [15]. For example, in her landmark novel *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins describes how Black women are excluded from feminist movements because they assume whiteness, and at the same time are excluded from Black social movements because they assume maleness [13]. Hill Collins further discusses the distinguishing features of Black feminist thought using standpoint feminism and synthesizing the thoughts of many Black feminist theorists, including her own [13].

It is worth reiterating what several of the previously cited literature on feminist theory state: that the definition of feminism, in all its forms, is dynamic and ever evolving, and therefore nuanced in its relationality [16]. In this light, we emphasize that we are not comprehensive in our citation of scholars and works that have contributed to the definitions of feminism over time, nor do we attempt to provide a systematic literature review here. We encourage our readers to turn to more comprehensive reviews [7], [10], [17] and original texts [8], [9], [13], [14], [18] on feminism. Moreover, we call particular attention to the Black feminist theorists that contributed to the foundations of intersectional feminism, who are underrepresented in citation practices [10], [19]. Indeed, several of the contributors to foundational ideas of intersectionality that we do not explicitly cite here include the ideas of Floya Anthias, bell hooks, Nira Yuval-Davis, Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Ida Wells-Barnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Demita Frazier, Toni Morrison, and Beverly Smith [10], [19].

Feminism in Engineering Education

Although the assertion that most feminism's presence in Engineering Education aligns most closely with white feminism may be difficult to prove, we assert that the majority of feminism's presence in Engineering Education is *not* well-aligned with intersectional feminism or Black feminism. This notion is supported by the finding that of papers in the American Society for Engineering Education's (ASEE) repository between 2011 and 2020 that mention the work "intersectionality", only four of the Black feminist theorists foundational to the establishment of the term are mentioned [19]. Moreover, in an analysis of papers in three major Engineering Education journals across 14 years, Beddoes and Borrego [12] identified eighty-eight articles that mention feminist theory and assessed the articles within five branches of feminist theory. The authors found that a majority fell within the "liberal feminism" branch. The authors describe the problematic nature of this finding:

> Liberal approaches can certainly be valuable; however, scholars should be aware of their limitations, particularly that they do not necessarily deconstruct problematic hierarchical social categories and tend to universalize white, western, middle class women. For example, critics of liberal feminism would contend that Women in Engineering initiatives that focus only on attracting women to (and retaining them in) the current masculine culture of engineering are problematic if they do not address the biases and limitations of that culture. As readers will see, the vast majority of publications in the dataset are (implicitly) in the liberal tradition [12, pp. 285-286].

Note that two of the other branches that were less represented than liberal feminism were standpoint feminism and intersectional feminism, two critical theories used, and developed by, Black feminist theorists and WOC [8], [9], [13], [14]. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that historically, Engineering Education scholarship has focused on feminism in a way that does not emphasize intersectional feminism and, we assert, reinforces white, patriarchal, oppressive structures.

It is worth calling attention to the date of publication of Beddoes and Borrego's study as over a decade ago in 2011 [12]. We do not aim to ignore positive change in the field over the last decade toward true integration of intersectional feminist theory. Indeed, in a study preceding that by Beddoes and Borrego [12], Riley, Pawley, Tucker, and Catalano [20] presented sets of questions for three feminist frameworks in Engineering Education, one of them being "Learning from Antiracist and Liberatory Feminist Approaches." These works and others have certainly contributed toward institutional transformation to address oppressive systems.

The notion of a move toward positive change is articulated by Kristen Moore and colleagues that, despite problems associated with citation practices, evidence of the word intersectionality itself indicates a disciplinary movement of "growing awareness of how identity markers affect student and scholar experiences in the academy (and beyond)" [19]. The existence and increasing submission rates to journals such as the *Journal of Women and Minorities in Science and Engineering* is also promising. Of note is an increase in the number of studies published by WOC about intersectionality in Engineering Education (Main et al. [21], McGee et al. [22], and Cross et al. [23] to name a few).

In Our Own Words

How It Started

Dr. Cox saw *The Trouble with White Woman* by Kyla Schuller, a white woman Associate Professor [24], advertised on Instagram. The book presents counterstories of white women and WOC and merges stories of white feminism and intersectional feminism. Although the title was intriguing and controversial, she had no idea how the text might relate to Engineering Education.

In May 2022, a Black woman on Twitter shared a post about attending a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training where the white DEI facilitator had the team watch the movie *Roots,* which graphically presents the experiences of the U.S. slave trade and the experiences of slaves in the U.S. In the age of anti-Blackness I (Dr. Cox) am not saying that *Roots* isn't a worthy film. The experiences it depicts are valid and raw. The issue is its use in a workplace that most likely hasn't done the foundational work to process what the slave experience means to Black people in America. In a space where Black people are expected to code-switch and assimilate [25] to make most people comfortable, the trauma induced by the facilitator was unwarranted. The Black woman admitted the experience traumatized her, but she couldn't leave her job at the time since she needed the fiscal security it brought.

Since Dr. Cox was reading Schuller's book at the time she read the Black woman's tweet, she recognized several terms in the text that spoke to that woman's experience and to her own

workplace. The term “torture porn” emerged such that people relive the stories of past harm in ways that magnify experiences without doing anything to stop the harm in those experiences from occurring.

As Dr. Cox read about the tensions between Harriett Beecher Stowe (a white women who wrote about the slave experience in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and Harriett Jacobs (a Black woman who lived the experience of a slave and chose to tell her own raw story, anonymously), she connected conversations between herself and white women who professed to be her ally. Dr. Cox identified their lucrative neutrality, which Schuller defines using Harriett Beecher Stowe’s adopted position during the abolitionist movement; Schuller describes Stowe’s reluctance to fund the actual practice of antislavery reform with her earnings from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in order to “stay out of the dirty business of politics, particularly the conflict roiling between different branches of the antislavery movement" [6, p. 62]. Dr. Cox connected this idea of lucrative neutrality to her supposed white allies, who teetered on the side of white supremacy and the patriarchy when it benefited them yet gravitated toward anti-racism when it was an expectation or fad (refer to the summer of 2020 and the U.S.’s temporary racial awakening also known as white urgency [5].

The issue with this book is how close it ties to the academic engineering profession and the reality of Dr. Cox’s experiences as a Black woman. How many times had she attended diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) trainings that opened up wounds of workplace trauma but did nothing to repair and restore her in the workplace? Although Engineering Education professed to be open and inclusive, why were there no public conversations by leaders about the profession’s intentional and unintentional harm to Black women?

My White Woman Perspective

When I was hired into my position with Dr. Cox as my supervisor, I was in the months of Summer 2020 completing the last experiments of my dissertation research in a lab that just reopened after the closures of COVID19. I was finishing my doctorate in Bioengineering and beginning my postdoc in a few months in a different field of Engineering Education. I was exhausted, and viewed completing my dissertation (or rather, “escaping,” as I quite literally viewed it at the time) as critical to my mental health. It was my toxic relationship with my supervisor at the time, filled with emotional abuse and gaslighting, not the failed experiments and long lab days, that was the most damaging.

This context is important because it resulted in me going into my relationship with my new supervisor, Dr. Cox, with 1) an expectation that power will be abused and leveraged against me and 2) to minimize harm to myself, I was going to set up as many boundaries as possible. By setting up “boundaries,” I intended to not discuss anything “personal” i.e., anything about my personal life, money, politics, religion, or race. I wanted to keep my relationship with Dr. Cox as “professional” as possible. Here, I refer to professional in quotations because it is professionality as I understood it from a historically patriarchal and white perspective.

In my first conversation with Dr. Cox, we discussed many of these “personal” and “unprofessional” topics. Dr. Cox was open with me. She seemed genuine and authentic. She shared personal traumas she was going through related to her life in the context of the many

national crises at the time. I was immediately challenged with my preconceived intentions of setting up boundaries to discussing topics such as my personal life, politics, and race. And honestly, I felt fearful and unsure, not because Dr. Cox seemed threatening or disingenuous, but because I had developed a strong distrust of hierarchical academic structures. I thought, "What's the ulterior motive here?" I was skeptical of true kindness.

My initial meeting with Dr. Cox coincided with the national surge of white urgency [5] following the murder of George Floyd. I was a part of this white urgency wave, having donated to organizations probably with the unacknowledged motive to make myself feel better [5]. I was listening to Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* [26] and for the first time began to recognize that I hold racist beliefs by the definition of being white in America. (This is embarrassing for me to write publicly and admit, and I hope it will challenge others to question their own unacknowledged biases.) I had never had a Black woman supervisor. I had no idea how to navigate my privilege in this new relationship (and frankly did not think about it much at all), especially when I was just starting my own anti-racism journey.

My Black Woman Perspective

The college of engineering I joined was quite comfortable discussing and lauding its diversity and celebration of women. The white male leader bragged about women's diversity numbers and women's ascension to leadership positions in the organization along with a future where fewer white men would be in power. I was the first Black woman hired in a department chair position in the almost 150-year history of the university. Despite that progress that was bragged about endlessly, race/ethnicity demographics were atrocious, and most members of the organization upheld systemically racist practices that added to the constant questioning of my credibility as a Black woman and to the failure of the organization to offer the institutional support I needed to be successful as a department chair [25], [27], [28].

I supervised and worked with a lot of ambitious white women. The idea of sisterhood with which I was familiar didn't exist despite the College of Engineering's strong, public focus on the advancement of women. I now know that when supposed allies spoke of women and women empowerment, they were talking about white feminism (viewing oppression through the lens of gender, without a racial analysis [5]) not Black feminism or intersectional feminism. It took me years to realize that their definitions of womanhood didn't include my nuances as a young, Black, Southern woman. For that reason, there was countless unspoken drama between white women and WOC.

Women of Color in this space I knew often had to choose between their race or their gender as engineering educators. There was no in-between. That meant, I was either a woman or was Black, and if I chose to be Black, I'd be penalized heavily for that choice. When I shared my concerns about anti-Blackness with my supervisor, I was told it wasn't as bad as it used to be. End of story. Everything race related was delegated to the Black man diversity officer who was kind but a token, holding no real fiscal or policy-making power in the college.

I'd been a department chair for several years in the department where Dr. Ita would work. My relationship with white women was rocky at every level in my organization. I supervised many

of them, and it had not been a pleasant experience on average. I often was gaslighted by leadership and told I was the problem. Those who were kind remained silent about my oppression when I needed and expected them to speak up on my behalf. People focused on my positionality when it was convenient, but when I asserted my expectations as a leader, my authority was undermined.

This meant that I was held accountable to do my job *and* produce results for the system. When I called the system out for oppressing me as a Black woman, I became the problem. I was too "young and inexperienced" because I couldn't bring unity to my unit. I know now there was nothing I could have done to bring peace, because it is outside the job description of a Black woman leader to erase racism and sexism of the people she supervises.

People said I was loud (although I am soft-spoken). I made white women cry because of my tone and my directness. I was "mean" and "intimidating" when I told them to learn the skills they needed to do the jobs they were hired to do and when I told people in leadership positions in the college to step in and do their job to address the ongoing "isms." I knew I would be scrutinized intensely for their mistakes because I was the supervisor. That is how the world worked, and this organization was no different in their approach and response.

When people spoke to me in a meeting, I expected a direct answer. Say what you needed to say in my presence, I thought. There was no need to lie to my face, talk to someone outside my office, or report me because I hurt your feelings. If you lied to the people asking you a direct question, how could you establish trust? Being a person of integrity meant you held your own in a conversation. Your word was your bond. There was no need to cower when I approached you honestly and vulnerably. If you made a mistake, own it and do better next time. Confrontation was a means to relationship-building. Operating this way seemed like common courtesy. Instead of this way of working offering clarity, it often made people cry or complain when I called them out.

I was nervous supervising Dr. Ita because I didn't need her to be another white woman who hadn't sorted through her race-related issues. By the time I supervised her, I had little to no energy for anyone to use me as a guinea pig until they were either enlightened about intersectionality or didn't have the ability to see past her own limitations. Given history in the organization, the organization hadn't proved it had the sensitivity or ability to handle conflicts between white women and Black women well. I knew I'd be on my own if something went wrong. I braced myself and proceeded with caution, not sure what I'd do if our relationship was awful.

Like many Black women in the U.S., I was metaphorically tough, the pack mule who could carry the weight of the world on my shoulders. Reynolds-Dobbs et al. [28] articulate this and other stereotypes of Black women- Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Crazy Black B*tch, and Superwoman.

In my academic position, I represented each of these stereotypes in some way. I was expected to nurture as others played victim and acted clueless (Mammy). As the department chair, I was the leader expected to enforce and reinforce the rules. For example, I went to Human Resources numerous times about concerns, but it was always thrown back to me to resolve problems even if

it wasn't my job (Sapphire). When I called out people in my joking way and on social media, I was told that's not how people worked. As a result, I got this reputation of not trusting people and not conforming to the system and how the workplace game was played (Crazy Black B*tch). Finally, as the inaugural chair of a department, I was expected to make everyone happy and build something that didn't exist. I was expected to do it with a spirit of excellence and a smile on my face (Superwoman). It felt as if the standard was perfection, and if I cracked, I would be punished much quicker than the people who upheld the stereotypes of me as a Black woman.

Unpacking Privilege, Power, and Positionality

Over time, we (Dr. Ita and Dr. Cox) realized three Ps were at play in our relationship - privilege, power, and positionality. As previously articulated by Dr. Kristen Moore and Dr. Cox, among others [11], [29], [30]:

> Positionality denotes the fluidity, intersectionality and flexibility of oppression and identity; privilege describes the unearned advantages that particular groups experience. When taken together, positionality and privilege inscribe power for different individuals and populations, and – as importantly – in any given situation, one's power and agency to act is different. Such differences illuminate the struggle that Black women and white women often have to understand one another's experiences in the academy [11].

Although Dr. Cox, a Black tenured professor, holds positional authority in name, Dr. Ita, a white woman postdoc, possesses systemic privilege in society. Dr. Cox is privileged, however, as a tenured professor from a job security standpoint.

In a functional system where systemic racism is not present, Dr. Ita and Dr. Cox would have been able to work together in a straightforward relationship with few complications. In a dysfunctional, oppressive system where neither intersectional feminism nor Black feminism are centered, the historical problems between Black women and white women can come into play easily.

The focus on gender and not race could allow a white woman, regardless of her position in the organization, to oppress a WOC despite their shared gender. Although white feminism embraces womanhood, it still places a Black woman in danger since it neglects race, an ever-present issue in the U.S. Without an acknowledgement of a Black woman's intersectional identity, a Black woman may not be deemed credible or worthy of supervising a white woman. If she angers the white women in some way, the white women may draw upon tools of oppression that punish the Black woman for not staying in her place [31].

How Did We Do It?

If we hadn't done the work to address the three Ps, our relationship might have been quite different. How did we translate these three Ps to a mentoring relationship where power and positionality were part of the definition of hierarchical roles in academia? What did we do to check in on each other and ensure that lines of communication were open and placed both of us

in positions where we were honest and safe despite our past hurts in our profession and our places in society?

Conceptual Framework

We drew on three areas in our relationship development - Dialogue, Sisterhood, and Agency (i.e., Accountability in our case). Although we didn't start with this framework, we had an aha moment about how we had grown as colleagues despite meeting each other only a couple of times in person during the pandemic. Our ideas are rooted heavily in the accomplice heuristic established for white and Black women in engineering developed by Dr. Moore and Dr. Cox [11] and following Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist epistemology [13]. We feel that this paper is a practical example of how to begin to put Dr. Moore and Dr. Cox's heuristic into practice [11]. We also draw from the three factors that shape how race affects mentoring relationships identified by Thorne and colleagues [3] - awareness of the other's cultural experience, open-mindedness, and trust, comfort, and common ground.

Dialogue

Dialogue requires active engagement through listening and speaking to provide one's perspective and engage in an understanding of others' perspectives [4], [11], [13]. For us, Dialogue means listening to uncomfortable stories (i.e., personal and workplace traumas), embracing differences, and engaging in a conversation about how those differences influence our lived experiences. We have a rapport where it is a norm to share, and listen to, painful experiences, whether it be current (e.g., both authors had family members pass away that influenced their ability to work) or past (e.g., workplace harm experienced by Dr. Cox). Doing this allowed us to show up for each other as colleagues, especially during a global pandemic.

Part of this Dialogue is Dr. Ita listening to stories about Dr. Cox's past experiences working with a variety of white women and lessons learned from those experiences. Listening to such stories can be difficult for white women given how white women's gender has been historically constructed [11], yet we believe that the effectiveness of our Dialogue is dependent on Dr. Ita's ability to sit in the uncomfortableness of such stories without tone-policing Dr. Cox. This Dialogue has helped Dr. Ita to understand why Black women often approach white women with skepticism [11].

The Dialogue we have used to navigate the three Ps may be considered antithetical to professional standards related to speech, work style, and timeliness, among others [32]. What it means to "act professionally" in an organization, however, has been established over time as fact and is centered in whiteness and white supremacy [32], [33]. We have discussed several characteristics of white supremacy culture identified by Tema Okun from years of her collaborative racial equity work [33]. I (Dr. Ita) describe one perspective-opening Dialogue I had with Dr. Cox about the professional standard of "urgency," although I could not have put this term to such a professional standard at the time:

> Less than a year into our mentorship, Dr. Cox connected five women, including me, to work on a collaborative project together. The group had long discussions where all voices

were heard, yet in my eyes little was "getting accomplished." I was impatient that the boxes were not getting checked in a timely way. I came from a doctorate program where *everything* was made to be urgent, and I was ruled by arbitrary deadlines - this working style was exhausting and had negative consequences on my health, yet it had been ingrained in me over many years.

At some point during the collaborative project, I had a one-on-one Dialogue with Dr. Cox. She described how being inclusive and hearing all voices prior to decision-making takes time. Dr. Cox was leading this project with several of the "antidotes" to urgency described by Okun, including a commitment to equity and a work plan based on the experience of the people involved [33]. This Dialogue with Dr. Cox completely reshaped my idea of what true collaboration means and forced me to reflect on how often "urgency" got in the way of inclusive collaboration in my past work. I have grown to recognize my impatience when decision-making is taking a "long time" and to challenge the root of that impatience.

Embracing differences through Dialogue can help develop accomplice behavior [11]. Working with Dr. Cox has challenged Dr. Ita to move from surface behavior of allyship to accomplice behavior that assumes risk. The public authoring of this paper is a first step toward accompliceship because some level of risk is arguably assumed - I (Dr. Ita) am not an established scholar in the Engineering Education space. Will there be any retaliation to my co-authorship of this paper with Dr. Cox that might affect my position in the field? Despite this question of risk, Dialogue, even in the form of this manuscript, is still a relatively safe space for white women and is just the first step toward enduring accomplice relationships [11], [34].

Another inherent aspect of Dialogue is feedback. Constructive criticism from a Black woman supervisor to a white woman subordinate may trigger a defensive response from the white woman including white women's tears. Although white women's tears are typically described as an emotional response to hearing the traumas of the oppressed [26], this response could also be used strategically to undermine the Black woman supervisor, despite the Black woman's positional power in the academic hierarchy.

In our relationship, there was a very real possibility that Dr. Ita could have used the power associated with her white privilege to undermine Dr. Cox. In this way, Dr. Ita could use her cultural capital to harm Dr. Cox's reputation among others she supervised or with whom she worked. Over time, effective Dialogue of the intersectional position of Dr. Cox made Dr. Ita more aware of the possibility of these dynamics. Dr. Ita understood that any critical feedback from Dr. Cox was not an attack on her person or identity and, at the same time, respected the positional authority of Dr. Cox to provide feedback as an expert in this space.

Sisterhood

Sisterhood for us is defined by trust (and vulnerability), presumed competence, and leading with humanity. This follows from the accomplice heuristic activity to "Prepare for real talk, for mistakes, and for vulnerability" [11] and Thorne and colleagues' finding that trust is critical to positive cross-racial mentorships [3].

Sisterhood has been a complicated topic for us to navigate given the different historical definitions of the term between Black and white women that are maintained to this day. Letha A. Lee See examines "why women have failed to unite against this oppressive patriarchal system" [15, p. 32] despite being "sisters-victims" [15, p. 33]. She summarizes her results from a survey of ninety-four Black and white women:

> From these interviews and the survey instrument, it is clear that the alliance that should exist between black women and white women does not. The goals of these two groups, which at first appear to be parallel if not the same, are really different. White women seem to be saying to black women, "Help free us and we'll free you." Black women are saying, "Free your sisters, free yourselves." [15, p. 43].

These same tensions between Black women and white women that See describes over thirty years ago are echoed in modern day literature on anti-racism. For example, Jackson and Rao assert that white women must show up for each other before they have a chance of showing up for WOC [5]. In another example of 120 Black and white businesswomen, Bell and Nkomo identify an element of Sisterhood in Black women's career anchors that is absent for the white women [35].

Dr. Cox has previously written that the idea of Sisterhood does not exist automatically between Black women and white women [11]. It takes deliberate work on both sides for respect and understanding of diverse perspectives to be recognized and even then, Sisterhood is defined differently. Dr. Ita also entered this relationship with a distrust of the power structures in academia, and it was initially difficult for her to think Dr. Cox did not have ulterior motives when Dr. Cox would ask how she was doing or if she was okay.

Jackson and Rao describe the difference between white women's niceness - defined as "something white women aspire to, which means smiling to your face and stabbing you in the back" [5, p. 154] as different from true kindness. Dr. Ita was wary of "fake" niceness from Dr. Cox given her experience with abused power dynamics in the academy, and Dr. Cox was wary of white women's niceness from Dr. Ita given experience with this norm between Black women and white women. Dr. Ita describes her journey through this below.

> Early on, Dr. Cox offered every professional opportunity to me she could - participation on projects and calls, trainings, workshops. At first, my distrusting self fearfully viewed this as manipulative, "I *must* do this, or I will be punished. I am being manipulated." I was used to white women's niceness - I also probably wasn't as used to being deliberately excluded from things due to my whiteness which skewed my perception of "excessive inclusion". I eventually realized that Dr. Cox approached me with kindness, with humanity. This is further evidenced by the following anecdote.
>
> One day I had a call with Dr. Cox to check in on some of our shared entrepreneurial engineering work. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation, Dr. Cox casually mentions that she received (another) threatening email last week. I recall her stating "... that is part of my workday … I reported it" in a matter-of-fact tone that was dissonant

> with the severity of the circumstance. This led us to a Dialogue about workplace harm and how (literally) surviving affects the ability to accomplish daily necessary tasks, let alone work tasks. For context, months previously, Dr. Cox had received a series of very threatening emails and considering this, had called me to make sure *I* was okay, with the assumption being that by association with her, I may also be in danger.

This anecdote highlights several aspects of Sisterhood. Dr. Cox demonstrates trust and vulnerability in sharing a personal trauma and humanity in checking that Dr. Ita was okay, despite Dr. Cox being the person in literal danger. It highlights the oppressive and threatening systems Dr. Cox must navigate while at the same time being responsible for mentoring Dr. Ita. It shows an example of how Dialogue is necessary for Dr. Ita to understand Dr. Cox's experience, which influences their work together. Although we may always have different definitions of Sisterhood given our different lived experiences and identities, this work is moving us toward our own shared sense of Sisterhood.

Agency (Accountability)

Our definition of Agency is a fundamental knowledge of intersectionality, an authentic commitment to independent learning, and accompliceship. Although both individuals must be accountable for all three of these behaviors, the weight of this responsibility falls on the white woman due to the learning gap defined fundamentally by her whiteness. For Dialogue to be effective for example, it is critical for the white woman mentee to be aware of her whiteness and behaviors such as white fragility and white women's tears [5], [26]. These behaviors, if brought into Dialogue with the Black woman mentor, may cause more harm. While the Black woman mentor can certainly be a guide for the white woman on this journey, it is ultimately the white woman's responsibility to take Agency to learn and educate herself, relieving the Black woman of this burden.

A fundamental knowledge, and acknowledgement, of intersectionality has been a critical factor in the success of our relationship. This includes an understanding of lucrative neutrality and the danger of it [6] and an acknowledgment that we are working in a system in which harm has *already* been done. Independent reading has been a pivotal part of Dr. Ita's learning process since the mentorship between the two began. For example, Dr. Ita has read *The Trouble with White Women* (Kyla Schuller) and *White Women: Everything You Already Know About Your Own Racism* (Regina Jackson and Saira Rao), both at the suggestion of Dr. Cox. Dr. Ita has independently read *Caste* (Isabel Wilkerson), *White Fragility* (Robin DiAngelo), and *Black Feminist Thought* (Patricia Hill Collins). This learning is just the beginning but has allowed Dr. Ita to begin to "connect the 'seen' with the 'unseen' and the systemic" [11] of Dr. Cox's experiences, enabling an effective Dialogue that supports true accompliceship.

We have had many conversations about what accomplice behavior is and is not. We have discussed how to "move through" problematic situations as an accomplice. What this means for moving through oppressive systems in higher education has been complex given that Dr. Ita has historical privilege and Dr. Cox has a higher position in the academy. Both have different types of power that could be leveraged and/or challenged in different ways.

For example, in a scenario where Dr. Ita overhears problematic microaggressions about Dr. Cox or WOC generally, should Dr. Ita speak out against this openly in her organization? Yes, definitely, even though it can be easy to hide behind the "lack of power" as a postdoc versus a tenured faculty. How does Dr. Ita, though, move through these spaces as an accomplice?

This is one question Dr. Cox has been working through as a mentor; specifically, how she can guide mentees toward a place of accompliceship? As a starting point, a tangible practice Dr. Cox takes is to "invite power" to those lower on the academic hierarchy. For example, Dr. Cox continually practices asking Dr. Ita, and other mentees, to provide their perspective on situations in their working relationships. We are still working through the answers to these questions, yet we are firm in that accomplices must fight the battles when harm is being done. Moreover, we hold each other accountable.

Implications

The ideas we present in this paper are based on intersectional feminism [6], [8], [9], [13]–[15], [18], anti-racism work [5], [26], [33], and an understanding of how the two operate in Engineering Education and higher education [3], [10], [11], [19], [21]–[23]. Thus, our ideas are founded on the work of others, yet our work is novel in that we provide an *application* of how an accompliceship heuristic [11] can be translated to a relationship between a Black woman and white woman with prior experiences of workplace trauma.

Dialogue, Sisterhood, and Agency/ Accountability are intertwined factors that we have identified as foundational to our effective mentorship and to healing from workplace harm. Dr. Cox began her supervising role of Dr. Ita by leading with humanity, trust, and vulnerability - all parts of what we define as Sisterhood. The vulnerability that Dr. Cox demonstrated could have been dangerous because of Dr. Ita's privilege and cultural capital. Dr. Cox's leadership style, however, enabled effective Dialogue that, in parallel with Dr. Ita's Agency for self-learning, allowed the pair to navigate institutional dynamics and life as accomplices.

> These women [Black women faculty] confront a peculiar dilemma. On the one hand, acquiring the prestige enjoyed by their colleagues often required unquestioned acceptance of academic norms. On the other hand, many of these same norms remain wedded to notions of Black and female inferiority. Finding ways to temper critical responses to academia without unduly jeopardizing their careers constituted a new challenge for Black women who aim to be intellectuals within academia [13, p. 16].

Patricia Hill Collins wrote the above excerpt from *Black Feminist Thought* over thirty years ago (2001, original published in 1990). In 2018, the estimated WOC faculty in engineering disciplines in ASEE institutions was 5.6%, "up" from 2.8% in 2005 [21]. African American and Black women made up 0.5% in 2018 [21].

Given this concerning and continued underrepresentation, mentorships in which a Black woman supervises a white woman may be limited and/or new. White mentees must recognize the power that comes with cultural capital and historical privilege to challenge the academic norms described by Hill Collins [13] that are maintained to present day [25], [33]. An abuse of privilege

by white mentees must not be an obstacle to addressing the underrepresentation of WOC faculty. We are optimistic that the number of WOC faculty will grow, and with this, that their mentees from white, privileged backgrounds can use this reflection piece as a starting point toward accompliceship behavior.

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