

CHALKING UP: HOW MICROAGGRESSIONS SHAPED MY CULTURAL
EXPERIENCE AS A BLACK WOMAN GYMNAST

by

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ABSTRACT

The subtle and obscured nature of microaggressions make it possible for these harmful instances of covert racism to go unnoticed, unspoken, and thus uncorrected. Encountering microaggressions in spaces that heavily shape identity can significantly impact cultural experience. In my study, I analyze how cultural experiences are affected by microaggressions presented in settings that largely shape identity. I adopted an autoethnographic research method to reflect on my experience with microaggressions as a black woman in competitive gymnastics, and to investigate the impacts of covert racism in sport on the overall cultural experiences of black athletes. With the execution of this methodology, I found that I made significant rhetorical changes to the structure of my autoethnography in order to satisfy the writing style. The implications of my study indicate how others can use this method to investigate ambiguous, controversial, or difficult topics in order to expand upon an overall cultural experience.

CHAPTER I: Introduction

Pushing past the fear, we grew from the pain. Pushing past the fear, gymnastics became our name. We began to train longer hours as gymnastics became more demanding, and before we knew it, my teammates and I spent more time in the gym than we did anywhere else. Due to my dedication to the sport, I didn't have the time to get a job, hang out with friends, go to school dances, attend school football games, or even stay up late on Friday nights. Instead I went to practice directly after school, then completed homework directly after practice only to wake up at five in the morning to start the cycle all over again. My summers consisted of early morning practices that ended in the afternoon. I gave all of myself to gymnastics until there was no distinction between who I was as a person and who I was as an athlete. Gymnastics was no longer the most important thing in my life, it was my life. I had made so many sacrifices to be in my sport because it gave me a sense of purpose and belonging that nothing else could seem to satisfy. I was my most powerful and my most confident when I was in my element. Gymnastics not only created structure and order in my life, but it molded my identity into who I am today.

My connection to gymnastics is a huge part of my identity, yet upon reflection I now recognize how my race has strongly influenced my experiences as a gymnast. My identity as a black woman has defined the way gymnastics has defined me. I trained in a space where the implications of my differences were unbeknownst to me but subconsciously presented in the form of microaggressions by the people within my environment. Although I was unaware at the time, these subtle instances of unintentional discrimination significantly impacted my athletic experience and thus my self-identity

overall. Experiencing microaggressions in an environment that shaped my identity affected both my athletic and cultural experience as a black woman in gymnastics. As a contribution to the literature concerning the different forms of racism seen in sport settings, my study will reveal how cultural experiences are affected by microaggressions presented in settings that largely shape identity.

Oftentimes, microaggressions go unnoticed by everyone except the person encountering and internalizing them which can prove to be a lonely experience. It could be argued that the lack of awareness about the way microaggressions present themselves lends into why these instances go undiscussed and thus uncorrected. Additionally, microaggressions could be misconstrued as small or insignificant due to the prefix micro; however, the prefix micro refers to the ways in which this form of aggression is hard to see or camouflaged. Microaggressions have macro effects. In order to explore this idea, I plan to use an autoethnographic research method to reflect on my experience with microaggressions as a black woman in competitive gymnastics and investigate the impacts of covert racism in sport on the overall cultural experiences of black athletes.

I begin my study by inviting the reader into the place where I believe this all began. The way in which I structure this portion of my research does not reflect the proper way to construct an autoethnographic study as I also aim to illustrate my growth in applying this approach throughout my exploration. Then, I plan to identify the way in which I will structure my autoethnography by reviewing literature concerning the proper ways to construct an autoethnographic study as well as apply effective strategies utilized by researchers who have executed this unique methodology. Using the information gathered through the literature review, I will then dive into my autoethnography where I

expand upon my background as a black woman gymnast and how my cultural experience was affected as a result of microaggressions. Next, I will examine the results of how I explored my story prior to the literature review compared to how I explored my story after gathering knowledge from the literature review. This section will illustrate my growth in applying this methodology as well as analyze the rhetorical changes made in order to satisfy the writing style. Lastly, I will explore the implications of this methodology where I elaborate on how this approach made it possible to articulate a huge cultural challenge in the context of my own personal experience. This section will allow me to indicate how others can use this method to investigate ambiguous, controversial, or difficult topics in order to expand upon an overall cultural experience.

CHAPTER II: We Need to Change Everything

Our hearts were beating out of our chests, bodies dripping with sweat, trying not to fidget under her intense gaze. My teammates and I had been working extremely hard ever since she had walked into the building only an hour into our practice. She hadn't said a word, but she didn't need to in order to strike fear into our little hearts because, as a gymnast, nothing is more intimidating than the moment the owner of the gym shows up out of the blue to analyze your every move. We were released to get a drink of water, but as soon as we returned it was time to start cross tumbling for our floor routines. The owner was an extremely critical judge with unbelievably high standards, so as I slid into my beginning pose with determination pulsing throughout my entire body, my floor music began signaling the start of my routine.

When my first teammate finished her routine, she was hit with a harsh sting of disappointment. The owner told her she was sloppy and couldn't control her body even if her life depended on it. I flew into my first tumbling pass, landing, then shuffling to my second. She had no sympathy for the second gymnast either, telling her that she couldn't even do the basic skills that those in lower levels already knew how to do. I was nearing the end of my routine and my breathing had become increasingly rapid; however, I couldn't decipher if it was fatigue from my routine or having everyone's eyes glued to me, including the cheerleaders who patiently waited as we encroached on their practice time. Drawing in a much needed breath, I took off for my third and final pass. The owner told the third gymnast that her routine was just simply hard to watch and that maybe gymnastics wasn't the right sport for her. As for the fourth gymnast, well, I had just finished my routine. My floor music ended, and it was instantly replaced with a round of

applause from everybody in the gym. The owner never said anything directly to me, but she did refer to my three discouraged teammates and told them that they should strive to be more like me. Although I happened to meet the owner's unbelievably high expectations, I was still upset for my teammates because they didn't deserve the harsh criticism that they had received. From that day forward, my teammates and I took our practices more seriously, trying to one up the other in friendly competition. Unfortunately, our days were numbered and sooner rather than later our gym home had shut down and our gym family had to split up.

I began practicing at a new gym where the floor was bouncier, and the trampolines led into a pool of foam waiting to cushion any flip you managed to flop. My eyes widened at the limitless possibilities; however, I could not shake off the feelings of anxiety that accompanied being the new kid. My new coach insisted that I perform my floor routine, so I nervously shifted into my beginning pose, as I had so similarly done only a month prior at my old gym. I drew in a deep breath to settle my overpowering nerves, but I could feel the eyes of all of my new teammates burning into me as the music began. My body started to move as if the choreography was second nature, and before I knew it, the nervousness that I had once felt was replaced with confidence. The instruments within the music grew louder and I found my movements becoming bolder and more passionate. I flew into my tumbling passes and exceeded what I even thought myself to be capable of. This was the best routine that I had ever done; even better than the same routine that earned me a round of applause at my old gym. When the music ended, I was filled with a surge of pride. I looked over to my coach whose face was gleaming just as mine was, but that mirror like image didn't last for long as she said, "I

hate it". She chuckled. "We need to change everything". We needed to change everything? Little did I know at the time, she literally meant change everything.

After only a few months of transitioning into this gym, I had become increasingly familiar with a path that none of my teammates seemed to have to travel. I glanced back at my team members as I was being pulled away wishing I could just fit in. My coach and I were once again walking this path together and our steps had fallen in sync as we had walked this path many times before. I glued my mouth shut knowing that anything I said would just add fuel to the already blazing fire. The warmth of the bouncy spring floor ended, and I stepped down onto the wood flooring. I knew I was nearing the end of the path because, to me, the wood floor symbolized the bridge that led from practicing with my teammates to the cold tile floor located in the coach's office. A chill traveled up my spine as my feet once again met with the tile. I was in trouble again. After closing the door behind us my coach didn't hesitate before telling me that I was too crazy, and too loud, and ultimately too much. I was still silent as she spoke trying to really understand the reason I was standing back on the cold tile. I imagined that all of these complaints were the reason why I could not fit in, but at the end of my long list of flaws, she gave me a solution. You just need to change. My heart dropped as her words about my routine rang in my mind. We need to change everything. I came to realize that it wasn't just my routine she wanted to change; it was me.

We exited the office and crossed over the bridge, but as soon as my foot connected with the warm spring floor, I knew I had to be someone completely foreign from whom I thought myself to be. I resisted my urges to bounce and to dance, and to laugh in order to better accommodate the environment, but I couldn't help but wonder

why my identity was completely unacceptable here but encouraged at my old gym. Instead of my coach seeing me as passionate, energetic, and creative, she saw me as loud, crazy, and distracting. It began to dawn on me; I was a black woman gymnast transitioning into a predominantly white environment. I found myself really missing my old gym where my coaches and teammates looked like me. This gym did not know how to embrace my identity, so I was forced to change it. My old gym didn't have the newest gymnastics equipment, but this gym helped me realize that just because the floor is bouncier doesn't mean I can jump higher.

CHAPTER III: Literature Review

Autoethnography: An Overview

An autoethnography uses aspects of autobiography and ethnography writing styles to “describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). I plan to use an autoethnographic research method in order to reflect upon my experience as a black woman gymnast. An autobiography writing style invites a show and tell technique that allows for the researcher to fully express emotion while explaining an experience, yet also provide an analysis that encourages the reader to expand upon their thoughts regarding the message contained in the story. Using this technique, although often found in autobiography writing styles, will enhance my study by establishing an emotional connection between the reader and the story and stimulating abstract thought. Showing my experience through “emotionally rich” and “aesthetic” conversation (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), without the use of telling will not compel the reader to consider the bigger picture, and telling the bigger picture without showing the true nature in which they present themselves in real life will not allow the reader to accept these concepts as tangible. Having the reader relate to my personal story as a black woman gymnast while further interpreting those events will allow me to expose the subtle nature of microaggressions that are often hidden in plain sight.

My autoethnographic study will take the form of a personal narrative because personal narratives, “propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context... and invite readers to enter the author’s world and to use what

they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). This approach to constructing my study will allow for there to be a direct focus on both my personal experience and the overall cultural experiences of black athletes training in a predominantly white environment. Utilizing a personal narrative approach can establish my credibility as a researcher who has lived through and reflected on the treatment and experiences of black athletes. Additionally, this autoethnographic approach will allow me to initiate an important conversation about the effects of microaggressions encountered within an athletic environment. In order to properly introduce this conversation, the personal narrative approach will allow me to best communicate my experience using the show and tell technique mentioned earlier.

Her Own Voice: Coming Out in Academia with Bipolar Disorder

Tiffany Rainey’s autoethnography “Her Own Voice: Coming Out in Academia with Bipolar Disorder” is an example of a personal narrative style autoethnographic study that reveals her experience with managing bipolar disorder and the stigmas that accompany mental illness within an academic setting. One strategy that I noticed within her research was how she began her work by explaining her intention behind sharing her story. As a reader, this allowed me to engage with the larger message at hand while also grasping the harsh reality of how bipolar disorder truly affected her life. I plan to apply this strategy into my autoethnographic study by stating my purpose behind sharing my story. Proactively revealing why I believe my story relates to the cultural experiences of other black athletes will challenge the reader to question why these instances of

microaggressions go unnoticed and unvoiced. Oftentimes, instances of covert racism are only recognized by those actually experiencing it, so I intend to introduce and expand the conversation to include those who are unaware by opening my research with my purpose.

Another strategy that I noticed throughout Rainey's autoethnographic study was her use of shorter paragraphs. As a reader, the use of shorter paragraphs made the study seem more conversational and easier to digest. Especially due to the heavy nature of her narrative, the differing, yet mainly short, lengths of the paragraphs gave an air to the study that could not have been achieved with the use of longer paragraphs. This relates to my study because I can use shorter paragraphs to increase engagement between the reader and the narrative. Although my topic is not as heavy, having my study include short paragraphs may make it easier for the reader to digest the ambiguous nature of microaggressions without becoming confused or overwhelmed. Additionally, shorter paragraphs provide my audience with the opportunity to reflect on how my experience relates to the bigger picture stated at the beginning of the study.

Intentional Inclusion- Thoughts on Galvanizing a Diverse and Inclusive University

In Scott Bowman's autoethnographic study, "Intentional Inclusion- Thoughts on Galvanizing a Diverse and Inclusive University" he explains how diversity and inclusivity have to go hand in hand in order to truly create change within society. A strategy that he implemented was the use of subtitles to guide the reader through his experience with understanding the importance of inclusivity. As a reader, the use of subtitles within this study acted as a guide to lead me through the author's experience

with him. I plan to apply this strategy into my autoethnographic study by incorporating subtitles that guide the reader through my experience as a black woman gymnast. The use of this strategy will help the reader transition their focus from one important idea to another.

At the end of Bowman's autoethnographic study, he challenges the reader to make a change by offering ways in which they could promote and encourage diversity and inclusivity on campus. This call to action compels the reader to gather the information they learned throughout the study and translate it into real life. The use of this strategy allows the reader to not only recognize the problem but also feel empowered and capable of making change. I can use this strategy within my autoethnographic study to offer the reader a way to increase their awareness and combat instances of microaggressions. Initiating a call to action at the end of my study would allow for an increased dialogue concerning the effects of microaggressions on black athletes.

Power, consent and resistance: An autoethnography of competitive rowing

Laura Purdy's et al. autoethnography "Power, consent and resistance: an autoethnography of competitive rowing" is a study that exposes the ambiguous nature of power between coaches and athletes within a team environment. One strategy implemented within this study was the author's further interpretation of her stories. This method reframed where her mindset was during the story, how that story altered her mindset as a result of her experience, and ultimately sums up the major points implied

within the story. As a reader, I felt as though this approach gave the author more credibility due to the use of an analytical viewpoint, and it validated her feelings and perceptions of the experience. I plan to incorporate the use of an extended analysis regarding the different stories included in my study in order to further analyze the bigger picture implied within the perception of my experience. This will allow me to better reveal to the reader the subtle nature of microaggressions, and how they often times go unnoticed to everyone except the person experiencing it.

Another strategy that I noticed within Purdy's et al. study was the use of different titles to signal the start of a story. The titles all had the same theme of water which directly corresponded to her sport and to the tension expected to unveil during that story. This allowed for the study to be very organized and easy to follow. Additionally, separating each story with the use of a title allowed the reader to fully grasp the three instances that comprised the bigger picture emphasized by the author. I plan to use this strategy within my study because it is a creative and engaging way to guide the reader through my personal experience and onto the bigger picture at hand. Also, the use of a title will provide an introduction allowing the reader to have a glimpse of the story before reading it.

CHAPTER IV: My Autoethnography

Chalking Up: Learning How to Code Switch

My transition into this new gym was a rocky one, but as I began to call this place my second home, the nostalgia of my old gym faded away as well as the version of myself who resided there. Day after day, I had become aware of things that came second nature to me but were considered odd or unsuitable for my new environment such as my sense of style or the snacks I was used to eating. Things that I wouldn't have even given a second thought, I now second-guessed. Every fiber of my being was now under construction extending all the way down to the way that I spoke.

When I entered the gym, I tried my best to alter my personality into one that was good enough for the space, but the things I laughed at were not considered funny, and I was too loud most of the time, and when I was quiet it was mistaken for me having a bad attitude. The music I heard my classmates singing at my predominantly black and Hispanic school was different from the music that played during practice, so I learned to find the humor in the things that my teammates found funny, and I tried to be more quiet but not too quiet to where I came across as mad. I learned the words to the country songs and my teammates, and I bounced around to the pop music eventually running out of breath as the song came to an end.

After the pop song ended, we started to laugh so hard at our ridiculous dance moves earning us another drink of water before moving on to our next event. My two other teammates and I had decided to partner up on the beams so that we could continue our fun during practice. Once arriving at the beams, we stomped our feet in chalk in order

to decrease the likelihood of us slipping off of the four inches gymnastics gave us for this event. My coach called out different leaps, jumps, and turns for us to demonstrate, and after falling off of the beam a thousand times and hopping back up a thousand and one, this event was finally over so we could go and get another drink of water.

My teammate asked if she could have my second water bottle because she had already finished hers, and without giving it much thought, I told her that I had already drunk it. Both my teammates threw their head back in laughter, clutching their stomachs, and losing their breath as I stood there very confused. I asked them what was so funny but neither one of them could catch their breath long enough to give me an answer. Through the fits of laughter, one of my teammates managed to choke out the word “drunk” as if she was mocking me... but I was still confused. “Drunk?! You mean drank?!” My other teammate roared while laughing harder. I still didn’t understand. “Aja it’s drank... not drunk” my teammate clarified as if she believed I was dumb. I couldn’t blame her because at this point I felt just as dumb as she probably thought me to be. I was extremely embarrassed, and I didn’t want to talk to anyone else for the rest of the day in fear that I would make another rhetorical mistake that I had learned to be okay.

Our next event was bars, so my coach told us to get our grips on and chalk up. It seems as though that is exactly what I needed to do in order to fit into my new environment... chalk up. I came to realize that the mannerisms and quirks of my personality were not only different but also seen as wrong because they were unfamiliar to the majority within my environment. And so it began, I received my first lesson in the construction of being black in a white environment... code switching.

Having to shift between one way of speaking and expressing yourself to another

way of speaking and expressing yourself depending on the context of your environment proved to be a hard lesson to master. I had to constantly regulate myself, and I was unintentionally regulated by those in my environment who made me hyperconscious of myself. I didn't have the freedom to be me, so I essentially became a slave to my environment. It was my responsibility to make sure that I was making other people comfortable and changing to accommodate others and the environment. Even more so, this need for me to code switch and alter my personality wasn't seen as offensive, insensitive, or a form of racial aggression because these pressures that forced me to change were built into the fabric of the environment; therefore, the urgency for me to change was viewed as necessary to restore the balance of the culture. In other words, this wasn't seen as a microaggression because those in my environment could only see that I wasn't fitting into the norms of the environment, yet not grasping that the environment was suited for people who were white.

Chalking up: The Angry Black Woman

A significant part of code switching that I did not completely understand at the time was that it not only mattered what words you say but also how you say them. The natural way in which I communicated with others outside of my gym was acceptable, but that same way of communicating could not find a place within my new atmosphere. Apparently I spoke too loud, and I was way too aggressive. My tone gave the impression of an attitude and I was too opinionated. The way my coaches and teammates perceived the characteristics of my speech created a long lasting narrative depicting me as an angry black woman.

This label was really damaging because no matter how many days out of our six day training week I was happy, there was only a heavy focus on the times I would be having a tough day. The belief that I was always mad prevented my coaches from wanting to understand me, and at one point, they believed me to be angry even when I wasn't. We would have these conversations almost weekly where my coaches would ask me why I was mad. I would tell them that I wasn't mad, but they would respond back with, "Yes you are, why are you mad?" Again, I would tell them that I wasn't mad, but they still didn't believe me. "You need to fix your bad attitude," they would say, and I would then acquire the attitude that they believed was there the entire time. My coaches insisted that I was mad even after I told them I wasn't, so essentially there was nothing I could say to convince them otherwise.

One day, I arrived at gym practice challenging the narrative that had been written for me. I wasn't mad; I was sad. It happened to be my birthday, and for a number of reasons I could not find the joy to celebrate my special day. In fact, this birthday had been the worst one to date. I was so upset that the sadness weighed down my body. It was hard to lift my head up and not drag my feet when I walked. It was almost impossible to force a smile much less a conversation, so I sat at the edge of the pit with my feet gently kicking the pit cubes below.

The soft foam comforted me, but I still fought the overwhelming urge to cry. The more I fought it, the harder it became so I let the hot tears run down my face hoping it would offer a sense of relief. My coach sat down next to me and I instantly felt a little better knowing that she cared that I was upset. She asked me what was wrong but trying to verbalize my feelings only made me cry even harder. Through the blurriness of my

tears I could see her began to laugh. She tried her hardest to swallow her laughter, but just as my tears could not be contained, neither could her amusement. She threw her head back letting out the forbidden laugh and I cried even harder knowing that I would not be able to put on a strong face as if I wasn't completely devastated. We just sat there together; her body shaking with laughter that mines shook with sobs.

The narrative that I was always angry made it hard to be anything other than because those in my environment attached the word angry to my name. In their eyes, I wasn't just angry, I was an angry person. Due to this label, no matter how I was actually feeling, I was still angry because that's who they thought me to be. Being mad or having a bad attitude was now a part of my character rather than a temporary response to my situation.

The damaging impacts of that characterization made it challenging to maintain a healthy relationship between my coaches and me. They insisted that I was angry and any explanation from me was seen as me talking back. I was in a position where my coaches could no longer see the best in me, and anything that I may have been feeling was rendered meaningless and insignificant because having a bad day was a part of who they thought me to be. The label placed on me as an angry black woman made it possible for my coach to laugh at my sadness because my emotions were only a product of what they believed I had inflicted upon myself as an angry person, and thus I deserved it.

Chalking up: Transitioning from My New Gym to My Next Gym

Throughout my duration at this gym I had soaked into the atmosphere and created a community that I considered to be like my second family. Despite this sense of unity, I

would still find myself in the coach's office every once in a while as that also became a part of the normality of my stay there. I knew that I couldn't go a long time without doing something that warranted a visit to the coach's office, so I began to grow unfazed by my sense of delinquency.

At one point, however, I had been on a two to three month streak where I was not in trouble for something that I had done. I let that thought bring a smile to my lips as I kicked into my handstand trying to maintain the proper body position I knew my coaches looked for during practice. We were doing line basics on the floor as a warm-up to start the event, but one of my teammates happened to be playing around which my coaches didn't like. After telling her to stop playing around and stay focused, they continued to yell out skills and corrections expected of us to perform. Ignoring the coaches demands, my teammate proceeded to play around causing laughter amongst those practicing around her. The distraction was contagious, and my coaches gave another warning urging her to take practice seriously. We continued with our skills, but not much later my teammate was scolded again causing her to be sent to the office.

Everyone was dumbfounded. While one coach followed my teammate into the office, the other continued to conduct practice just as they would had I been pulled out; however, the difference was that I had never been on this side of the divide. There was a hesitancy from my teammates to carry on with practice due to the complete and utter shock felt amongst my teammates; but after having our coach snap at us to continue, the team reluctantly followed suit. I happened to be the only one who was not fazed by this at all because, in my head, being sent to the office was normal. What was the big deal?

Practice proceeded in an awkward silence, but the tension was overwhelming. My

coach and teammate rejoined the group and soon after, everyone was released for a drink signaling the end of that event. The entire gym buzzed with mumbles and gripes about how unfair the coaches were being. My best friend, being one of the most upset, met with our previously ostracized teammate in the restroom area to discuss her anger, so I followed knowing how unsettled my friend was.

I stood quietly allowing them to vent, but the conversation was cut short as one of the coaches entered the restroom demanding that we return back to practice. My best friend began to cry out of frustration refusing to end the conversation, but any rebellion on her part only made the situation worse for our teammate. The coach ordered our teammate to go home if she insisted on continuing the disrespect. My best friend slammed both her hands down on the sink exploding with rage that our coach was being so unfair. She began to yell at the coach through her tears explaining how this entire situation was wrong; however, the coach was unfazed and gently told her to go back into practice.

I walked with her back into the gym while trying my best to make her feel better. Although I didn't quite understand why everyone was so upset, I hated to see my teammates so hurt. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but wish that people cared this much about me when I was sent to the office. Only moments later, our teammate grabbed the keys to her Mercedes and left practice after a quick goodbye. There was about an hour and a half left of practice, but once she left, it felt as though practice ended. It was extremely hard for the coaches to get us to do anything due to the resistance of the team and the slight rebellion taking place in my teammates' name.

From that day, the resistance secretly grew underneath the coaches' noses and one

by one my fellow teammates would miss practice under the guise that they had school obligations, but in reality they were trying out at different gyms. In about a month or so of time, a majority of the team, including me, transitioned to another gym leaving the old gym behind. My teammate's one visit to the coaches' office caused more uproar than my years and years' worth of office visits combined, and that hurt more than I could have possibly imagined.

Although I had found a place in this space, I was still not considered to be one of value. The silence that occurred when I was pulled aside into the coaches' office spoke louder than my teammates' nice words that convinced me that I was an equal and valued member of the team. Every complaint arguing that it was completely unfair for our teammate to be treated in such a way indicated that their silence during my ostracism meant that they believed it was fair and that I deserved it. I swallowed my pain because I felt like I had to, so my pain was never recognized or seen. Instead, I transitioned into the new gym and figured out the best way to operate in an environment with people that I knew didn't value me.

Chalking up: The Strong Black Woman

My teammates and I soon found a home within this new gym, which happened to be my second new gym, and we expanded our family to include the inviting gymnasts who were already team members at that gym. Although I could not escape the label as an angry black woman, oddly enough, I was also seen as the person who brought joy and motivation to the team environment. I sparked creativity and brought about laughter, and eventually, everyone would feed off of my fun and upbeat energy throughout practice.

This unofficial responsibility proved to become an unhealthy dependency the team required to function properly. I was happy to bring joy and motivation to the team especially if it could help challenge the narrative of me being an angry black woman. Unfortunately, this responsibility didn't allow for me to have bad days. In fact, this duty placed upon me strengthened my reputation as an angry black woman because any time I would happen to have a bad day the effects of my mood were amplified throughout the team.

The mood of the team was low, and I could feel the weight of those implications resting on my shoulders. In addition to my bad day, I was somehow responsible for the bad moods of my teammates as well. Knowing I was having a tough day, I aimed to distance myself so any negative energy would not rub off on the team. I stayed more to myself and focused on completing the tasks assigned to me, but that was not good enough to produce a functioning environment.

My new coach pulled me aside clearly irritated with how my lack of enthusiasm affected the team's motivation and productivity. "You need to fix your attitude" she demanded. Once again my quietness was misconstrued as me having an attitude, so I clarified that, "I don't have an attitude. I'm just having a bad day, so I'm keeping to myself," She didn't care that I was having a tough day, so she continued to say, "You are being so selfish," I squinted at her not completely understanding her logic. "You having a bad day makes it hard for your teammates to focus on their gymnastics, so you need to either fix your attitude or go home," she declared while staring at me intently.

I blinked rapidly trying to digest the fact that I was getting in trouble because other people were struggling with their gymnastics. I shouldn't have been surprised that,

once again, my value was seen as inferior to those of my teammates. Rather than recognizing me as a human who was subject to have bad days, I was just considered to be a means to an end. This idea that I was expected to carry the mood of the team despite anything that I may have been going through created an image of the strong black woman.

The strong black woman narrative placed unrealistically high expectations on me that also perpetuated my stigma as an angry black woman. This depiction of me made my teammates feel comfortable depending on me for things that they already had within themselves such as joy and motivation. Additionally, this label allowed my coach to disregard my emotions and place undue blame on top of my shoulders. Depending on the “angry black woman” to bring joy and motivation to the team was one conflicting dynamic that the “strong black woman” was expected to manage.

Chalking up: My Legacy as the Angry Black Woman

My coach and I had a strained relationship. She and I would constantly stay in conflict with one another never achieving a compromise. The only thing that happened to alleviate some of the tension was the fact that I would be graduating and thus leaving off for college very soon.

During the summer before my first semester of college, I attended my last banquet for that gym. Banquets were held every year after the competition season came to an end in order to recognize the outstanding achievements of all the gymnasts throughout the year. This was the one event of the year where the parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends of all the members on team would gather to celebrate their athlete. At this

particular banquet, my best friend and I gave our departure speeches, cherishing the last moments we had with our teammates before leaving to embark upon new things.

My first two semesters of college went very well, and I had spent a lot of time finding out who I was outside of who I had been expected to be for the past few years of my life. It was the most freeing I had felt in years. Despite this sense of freedom, my identity was still attached onto a tight leash even after a year of my departure.

It was that time of year again where the summer was fast approaching, the competition season was coming to a close, and the banquet date was near. I was unable to attend this banquet because I was still wrapping up my second semester in college; however, my reputation preceded me. After the banquet, one of my old teammates reached out to tell me that our coach had completely “dissed” me during one of her speeches in front of everyone.

During her speech, my coach was aiming to promote an alternative gymnastics program offered at the gym by insinuating that I would have been a better gymnast and a better person had I been a part of that program. She recognized my best event as vault but expressed how I was being brought down due to my trouble with bars. I would have been the perfect fit for this alternative program, she argued, because this program would have allowed me to focus on and compete vault rather than spend my time on the event that I wasn't so good at. In her words, bad events lead to bad attitudes as we could see through me...

In front of everyone, my coach essentially painted me as a poster child for a gymnastics program that had absolutely nothing to do with me, and then proceeded to incentivize parents to sign their children up for this alternative program by proposing that

it would prevent their children from turning out like me. Parents, grandparents, and even some of my own teammates, who had never gotten the chance to actually get to know me, now had this perception of me in their head. The angry black woman. Even after a year of time away from the gym, the negative perceptions of my identity did not fade away. In fact, it has been reinforced to where my legacy as an angry black woman will stand the test of time.

CHAPTER V: Analysis and Reflection

In order to satisfy the autoethnographic writing style, I looked into the necessary literature and made some rhetorical changes to my autoethnography as compared to my first story, “We Need To Change Everything”. (See summary of changes in Table 1: From “We Need to Change Everything” to “My Autoethnography”.) Based on the effective strategies used by others to enhance their study, I have incorporated four key elements into my study that contrasts with how I structured my first story.

The first structural change I implemented into my study was the use of multiple titles compared to using one overall title as seen in my first story. This method was extremely useful in the study “Power, consent, and resistance: an autoethnography of competitive rowing” by Laura Purdy et al. because it allowed the study to be very organized and easy to follow. I applied this strategy by dividing my autoethnography into five sections with the use of indicative titles. Each title aimed to prepared the reader for what was to be expected in the upcoming section without exposing the entire context of the piece. The use of one overall title, as seen in my first story, may have prevented my reader from following along and gathering the necessary insights throughout the piece.

The second structural change I implemented into my study was the use of shorter paragraphs as compared to the lengthier paragraphs used within my first story. This strategy was extremely useful in the study “Her Own Voice: Coming Out in Academia with Bipolar Disorder” by Tiffany Rainey because it allowed the heavy nature of her topic to be easily digested and understood by her readers. I applied this technique throughout my autoethnography with the aim of revealing the subtle nature in which microaggressions can present themselves. Shortening the length of my paragraphs within

my study allowed me to better guide the reader step by step into the heart of a larger cultural challenge. The use of lengthier paragraphs, as seen in my first story, made it harder to dismantle the importance of my personal experience thus creating a potential barrier between the reader's understanding of my story and its intended purpose.

Then, I implemented a rhetorical change where I provide a deeper analysis of my personal experience compared to the lighter analysis seen within my first story. This strategy could also be found in the study "Power, consent, and resistance: an autoethnography of competitive rowing" by Laura Purdy et al. This technique allowed for the author to assess the implications of her story to challenge the readers to think beyond the context of her personal experience. I incorporated the use of an extended analysis within my study by exploring the

overarching implications of my experience. The use of a lighter analysis, as seen throughout my first story, prevented me from challenging my readers to explore the bigger picture implied within the perceptions of my own experience.

Lastly, I incorporated a rhetorical change where I engaged in a more conversational styled approach rather than placing my focus on the aesthetic imagery as seen in my first story. Throughout all of the autoethnographic studies I reviewed, I noticed that there was a higher emphasis on the telling through aesthetic conversation aspect rather than showing through aesthetic imagery aspect of the methodology. The article "Autoethnography: An Overview" by Carolyn Ellis et al., explained how both aspects of showing and telling are important in order to reveal a bigger picture using the context of a personal experience. I incorporated both a show and tell styled technique using aesthetic conversation by drawing the reader in with engaging dialog, then

transitioning into a more imagery based conversation throughout the piece. Having an increased focus on the aesthetic imagery, as seen within my first story, emphasized my own personal experience while shifting the focus away from the overall cultural experience.

Table 1: From “We Need to Change Everything” to “My Autoethnography”

We Need to Change Everything	My Autoethnography
One Overall Title	Used Multiple Titles
Longer Paragraphs	Shorter Paragraphs
Little Analysis	More Analysis
More Aesthetic Imagery	More Conversational

CHAPTER VI: Implications

Using an autoethnographic research method made it possible to articulate a huge cultural challenge in the context of my own personal experience. Without being able to use the unique aspects of both an autobiographical and ethnographical writing style, it would have been hard to analyze my personal experience to better understand a larger cultural challenge. Offering the best of both worlds, this methodology introduces a problem, shows how that problem presents itself through the lens of the author's story, and stimulates abstract thought about the broader implications of that study.

This method can be used by other researchers to explore ambiguous, controversial, or difficult topics that may be hard to explore using a traditional method of research. Having a direct connection with the reader through the use of an autoethnographic method establishes a sense of relevancy that a traditional research method has trouble establishing. This relevancy challenges the reader to explore the bigger cultural implications presented by the study and actively make a change.

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