Multiple Identities in a Trench Coat: Navigating Library Systems While Black and Trans

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The university system is a pyramid scheme. There are a few people at the top with multiple degrees, and considerable amounts of money and influence. The promise of upward mobility, or rising in societal ranks, are whispered to members of each of the lower tiers. The top is advertised as the ultimate goal, but is inaccessible to most. The economic, emotional, and physical costs of education for people at the bottom of the pyramid are devastating, particularly for those of us who have had to navigate these academic systems on our own.

I have put a lot of work into my education over the years, but my education is only a fraction of who I am. This is the main reason I hold some resentment for the academic system; I do not feel my full self represented. I have learned incredible life lessons off-campus that changed me for the better, but lived experience is not valued in society as a reliable measure of one's intelligence. Lived experience doesn't often pay the bills, either.

I am a high school dropout with a master's degree. I had a lot of shame about being a dropout until I got my bachelor's degree in 2016. A few people in my life completed school years before I did, and I projected a sense of failure onto myself because of it. When I did attend

university, I was lucky to have support throughout the experience, for which I am endlessly grateful.

Unfortunately, I felt pressured to enter academia for several years. The people who pressured me never got detailed about why academia was important, other than the insistence that earning a degree was necessary to find life-sustaining work.

Since I was a child, people have told me that I am well-spoken. Their natural conclusion was that I should be in school. Hearing this upset me and made me want to scream. I didn't have the language when I was younger to explain why I had such a painful reaction. Just what was I supposed to do with this information?

I initially reacted by nodding or saying thanks awkwardly in order to get through the interaction as quickly as possible. I learned that not every Black kid around me got the same attention, which made me angrier. I did not understand why strangers were finding me in grocery stores and other public places, and approaching me with this as if it were a cookie.

I believe I understand now. The way that I spoke did not match expectations, and people found that worth celebrating. I wish I could step in front of the child version of myself and tell each of these people to piss off, because I was not interested in being celebrated for that. No one was listening to my actual words, which made each interaction feel superficial and forced. While the adoptive parent I was with would beam at these encounters, I couldn't help but wonder what parts of me had to die so that this well-spoken Bran could live.

Policing behavior—including speech—is one way that people encourage racialised children to tone down certain aspects of themselves that make them so uniquely brilliant. This policing started in my own home. Despite growing up on Tongva land (Los Angeles), which is blessed with such incredible linguistic diversity, I was encouraged to speak what my parent called "proper English". This required adhering to some rigid personal language rules of hers, such as not ending statements with a preposition. I obeyed the rules at home, and disobeyed them at school.

I was good at disobeying all sorts of rules in grade school and would frequently get into trouble. I was receiving excellent marks, but annoyed

my teachers by asking too many questions. I needed more to do on my own. The rules, both at home and at school, seemed concerned with being proper to the point of exhaustion. They did not make sense to me.

I found reading to be a lovely world with fewer confusing rules. I could ask myself questions about the book's contents, and never had to worry about being reprimanded. Reading was partially a form of escapism, but mainly a form of nourishment, especially when it came to fantasy and science fiction. Novels, comic books, and other forms of media allowed me to feed on complex stories led by equally complex characters in spectacular worlds.

Television shows also became especially powerful for me as a kid. *Sailor Moon*, for example, was unlike anything else I had seen. It put grade school girls with extraordinary powers at the centre of the story. Erik-Soussi observes that the series was "raw and honest, putting focus on the huge, mostly female cast's struggles with morality, friendship, jealousy, sexuality, vulnerability, and the desire to protect loved ones."[1] I deeply appreciated these smart, capable, beautiful young women who fought for love, and for a better world. The North American version of *Sailor Moon* attempted to hide its queer themes from the audience, but they still seemed loud to me. In fact, the themes spoke directly to me as I was coming to have a better understanding of myself. The show was foundational for me coming to terms with my own queerness, and my unconventional approaches to gender.

My gender wasn't a big deal for me, but other people loved to make it their business. I was frequently reminded at home that ladies didn't sit the way I did, or run around the way I did when I played. "Maybe I'm not a lady, then," I'd retort, having no idea how soon I'd come to know it.

I found out about National Coming Out Day in 1999, not long after I had turned fifteen years old. I saw this day as a unique opportunity to be more honest with myself, and with the world around me, during

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1. Magda Erik-Soussi, "The Western Sailor Moon Generation: North American Women and Feminine-Friendly Global Manga," in *Global Manga: "Japanese" Comics without Japan?* ed. C. Brienza (Routledge, 2015), 23-44, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315584898.

a time when I felt unappreciated and invisible. I happily came out as bisexual to the people I considered myself closest to in high school. I already knew some people on campus who were out as bisexual or gay, so I felt safe sharing with them. When I got home, my choice to share made me feel unsafe. "I went through that stage too," my adoptive parent murmured unhappily.

This is a very unfortunate way to respond to a person who has decided to be honest and vulnerable. I never thought I was straight. Sharing that felt like a formality. I never backed down from acknowledging my queer identity to anyone, but I did learn to make myself small at home, as it became clear that queerness was not welcome. I made myself small at school, and did the same with my gender, for fear that I would be invalidated again.

I used the word "genderless" to describe myself for the first time in 2007. As I typed the word into my LiveJournal, a certain chill ran down my back. I had already gotten the sense that being out and trans was not very safe, based on my interactions with my parent about being bisexual. I had heard horrible stories about how trans people were treated. I would not begin to get loud about my gender until a few years later, after I moved away from California. I didn't really have much of a trans community until I moved to the Pacific Northwest in 2009.

It was easy for me to feel safe among other trans people. I volunteered for the Gender Justice League (GJL), a Seattle-based organisation that advocates for trans rights in Washington State. The members made me feel at home, which was a new and exciting feeling for me. I also learned to do the same, shedding some of my strange Californian assumptions in the process. "Dude", for example, is not gender-neutral. I still thank the first woman who yelled at me about this, because it forced me to interrogate my own assumptions about the word and its meaning in broader contexts.

Volunteering for GJL was a true joy. I learned a great deal. Trans people are not a monolith by any stretch, and our experiences can vary greatly, but not having to explain myself in certain ways on a regular basis was freeing. People respected my name and pronouns. This feels

very small in the grand scheme of what trans people need to survive, but sometimes the little things matter too. I enjoyed helping to set things up for Trans Pride, which GJL runs in Seattle each year. It was fantastic being in community with other volunteers and attendees during the marches on Capitol Hill. It was like breathing and existing as my true self for the first time.

Being trans is a gift. Realising I was trans helped me to like myself better, and also helped me to understand myself better. It gave me the power to look at myself in the mirror and, occasionally, not be repulsed by what I saw. I have used a handful of words to describe my experience: genderless, genderfucked, genderqueer, agender, non-binary. Each of those are ways of describing that the person I am now is a truer me than the girl I was pretending to be.

I have come out a few times, as there were a few closets I had to escape from. I have been out as gay since 2018, and it feels equally liberating. The more time that passes, the more love I discover for myself and the unique ways in which I move throughout the world.

Feeling stronger in my queer and trans identities was necessary before I could complete university, but that wasn't all I had to wrestle with. I am a first-generation student in every possible sense. I am the first in my family to earn a bachelor's degree, and the first in my family to earn a master's degree. Those achievements come with their own set of unique challenges. Most of my peers seemed to be prepared for university in ways that I could not be. Perhaps their parents paid for their education in full, or were able to give their children tips on how to be successful in higher education, based on their own experiences. I had occasional help with finances, but no roadmap to guide me through surviving university. I wasn't even aware of these things that put me at a disadvantage until I was already in school.

Despite said disadvantages, I flourished at university. My professors welcomed my flurry of questions. I tried my best to reserve the more complicated ones for office hours, so as not to disturb the flow of lecture sessions. I went to university in Canada, and despite the challenges of living outside of my home country, I did my best to get as much out

of my education as possible. I majored in linguistics because I wanted to learn more about how and why people communicate in the particular ways that they do. I participated in my school's Linguistics Student Union and took on plenty of other activities outside my major. I completed my bachelor's degree in my thirties, treating it as though it was my last chance at undergrad, after previous attempts and failures. My passion for studying languages made me take a deeper look at further interests, and librarianship resurfaced almost immediately.

Libraries are a sanctuary to me, but they are not only important in terms of content such as materials and programming. Libraries are also important in terms of space, and how patrons are able to navigate these spaces. Wandering the Los Angeles Central Library as a child made me feel like a whole person. I felt free to explore on my own there. I had the power to ask for what I wanted from a library worker or a kiosk without fear of judgment. I spent a lot of time in public libraries as a teenager as well. My undergrad institution became my first choice because of a visit to the school's library during a campus tour. I easily visualised myself there. I imagined printing assignments, using study spaces, and recharging after lectures by sitting in a chair and looking out the window at the beautiful landscape around me.

In my second year of university, I began to talk about my desire to pursue librarianship to my trusted professors. As a first-generation student, I didn't have the foggiest idea about how to make sure I was a competitive candidate for grad school; I was struggling enough through undergraduate work. Two of the professors I confided in alerted me to an undergraduate scholarship from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) that was geared toward racialised students such as myself. I applied and won my first scholarship ever. The scholarship was one of eleven that ARL granted to undergrads that year. The scholarship allowed me to work in the Special Collections department of my school's library, where I met people who seemed dedicated to doing really meaningful work for their community members. ARL also coordinated sessions that helped us understand what to expect in library and archives work, factoring in nuance for racialised library workers. The scholarship and work

experience only strengthened my resolve to apply to library school. The application process added stress to an already stressful academic load, but I leaned on that support from my trusted professors and librarians. Their expertise was invaluable. It is largely because of them that I went on to be accepted to one of the best Library and Information Science graduate programs in North America.

Prestige looks lovely on paper, but it isn't everything. It doesn't tell you about those pesky rules that you have to follow in a class setting, which I struggled with as a youngster. I learned that I swore too much for the Canadians in my undergrad, and that I also swore too much for the Americans in my grad school. Back home in California, swearing felt like a natural way of expressing oneself. In an academic setting, I learned that it is considered rude.

I have been seen as rude, sassy, angry, uppity, and a number of other adjectives which are coded to describe Black people in terrible ways. Within the walls of academia, it feels especially personal. There have been days where I have had to hold my reactions to microaggressions inside myself. I vented about things at home, when I had the energy. Calling out a racist comment may have made things worse for me at work, and I feared sabotaging my opportunities. Multiple people have addressed me incorrectly in grad school classrooms. Most of the time, I have said nothing in response. Doing so in that moment would have brought a group discussion to a grinding halt. To someone who does not regularly experience these microaggressions (small acts of discrimination), the above events may not seem like much. They do, however, have ways of adding up, and doing long-term damage to a person.

I have often been the only Black person or the only trans person in an academic setting, which feels very disappointing. Being the only one sometimes means having a fair share of encounters where it is unsafe to stand up for oneself. This is especially the case in environments where the appearance of positivity is valued above all other feelings. Through the lens of librarianship, it has a specific name: vocational awe. Fobazi Ettarh describes this as "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that

libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique."[2] Viewing librarianship as an unalloyed good is a very popular belief. It only contributes to the increase of workspaces that enforce "positive vibes only" culture. This sort of culture may help preserve the semblance of good morale in a library work or class setting, but it can have an exponentially negative emotional and physical cost. It also does nothing to establish a safe space for racialised and other marginalised peoples.

As a recent graduate, I feel it is my responsibility to be transparent about my academic experiences, for the sake of those who come into librarianship after me. This includes the stuff I had to overcome. In order to improve upon the things we love, we have to face the harsh truths about them and do the healing work together. I adore what I have accomplished so far in the field, and I am fiercely proud of my profession. We still have to be better. The library field is frequently seen as LGBTQ-friendly, but it is rare that I see interrogation of which of those letters get accepted. I believe we have miles to go in terms of what it means to honour trans identities and racialised identities in library spaces.

Library spaces are overwhelmingly white-dominated, which can make the pyramid scheme of university systems seem all the more impossible if you're not a member of that team. This sometimes means that I have to be less of myself when I am in libraries, or figure out how to express myself in a way that is more palatable to whiteness. I can't be too forward about any problem that I am facing, which is frustrating. Workers are encouraged to share the positives of librarianship with anyone who will listen, but are discouraged from sharing negative experiences, which tends to make the negative experiences worse as a result.

On the bad days, a lot of who I am appears incompatible with library work. It doesn't take long before I remind myself that Black librarians are not new or odd and that I have plenty to contribute that is worthwhile.

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2. Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2018), https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/.

Change is excruciatingly slow within a large system, often making it seem as though it's not happening at all. However, I am well-equipped to handle challenging systems. I can even find ways to flourish within them. It's not my goal to succeed alone, though. I am determined to do whatever I can to make space for anyone who needs it, especially those who have difficulty seeing themselves in librarianship.

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About the Author

Bran Eveland Cron is a Black agender person born and raised on traditional Tongva land (Los Angeles). They have the privilege of living with their wife Mikah on the ancestral, unsurrendered territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples (Vancouver). Bran is an archivist and a librarian. They believe academic research should not come at the cost of the livelihood of its participants, nor should it only be for the benefit of the institutions that fund them. They have a hard time turning their brain off when they are supposed to be sleeping.