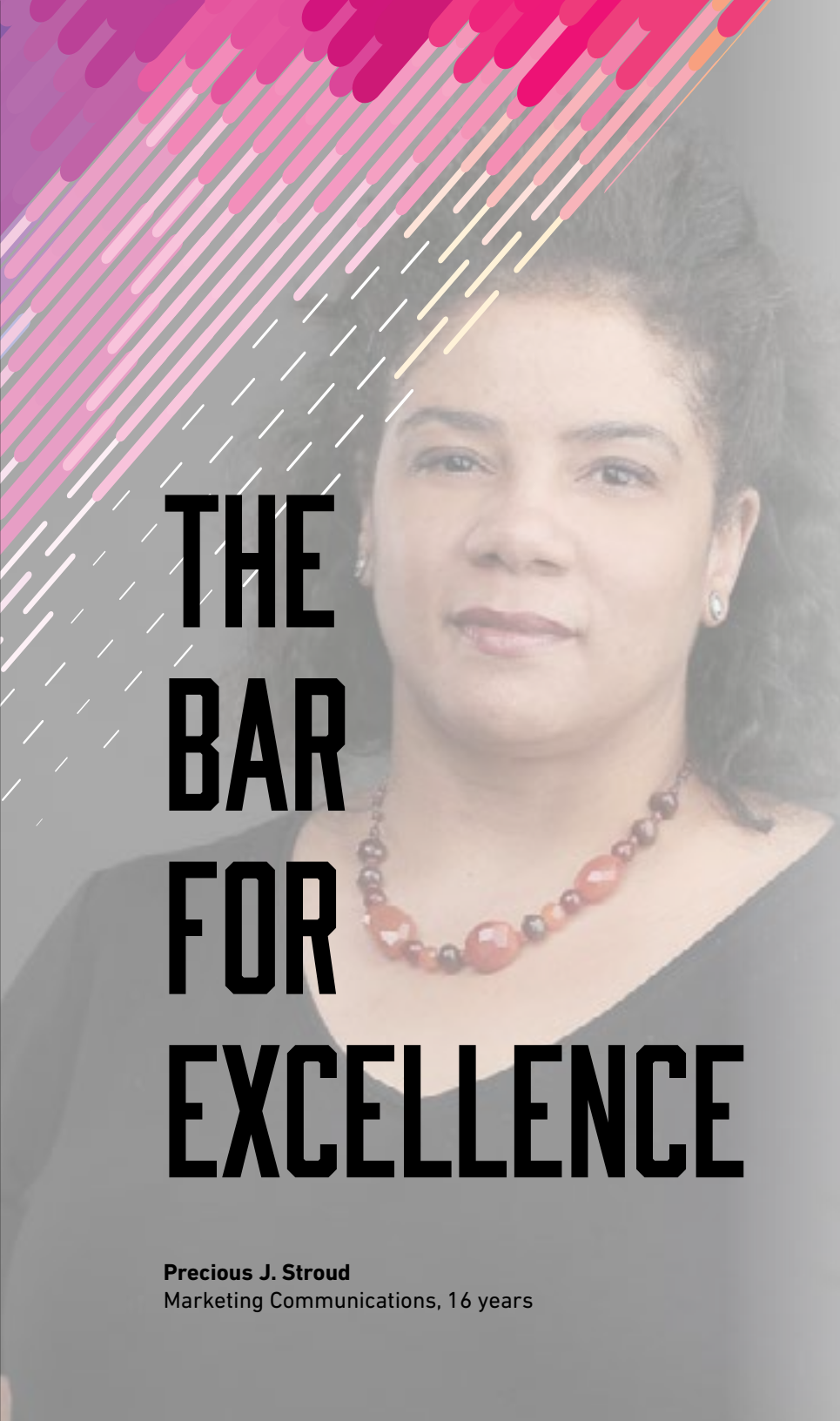

THE BAR FOR EXCELLENCE

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Growing up in the Bay Area, I was not viscerally aware of my experience as a minority. My parents, like many other Black folks, made sure of this. When I was growing up there were Black people everywhere from what I could tell. My parents patronized Black-owned businesses throughout Oakland and Berkeley. I had Black teachers and Black doctors; my parents had a Black accountant; our grocery clerks, bus drivers, bank tellers, and local artists and performers–they were all Black, of African descent, and proud of it. It was the 1970s-80s. Perhaps I should have been paying more attention because the reality was that I was one of three Black girls in orchestra in 1985 (the other two have white mothers); one of two Black girls in college prep English in 1990 (go Yellow Jackets!); the only Black person in my Business Law course in 1995; and the first Black director in a Berkeley-based nonprofit in 2014.

Oakland used to be more than 60 percent Black; Berkeley had a stable Black population; and San Francisco was rich with Black culture. The last census informed us that nearly 40 percent of Berkeley's Black residents left the Bay Area between 2000 and 2010. Like many other neighborhoods across the nation, the predominantly Black block I grew up on in Berkeley, where my mother has lived in our family home since she was fourteen, now has only five Black families remaining.

I am beginning to understand my experience as a minority in a different way – through the lens of someone without a cohesive community.

My parents educated me about African history. My high school had an African American Studies Department and one summer I took an intensive course about the Harlem Renaissance.

Through my family's spiritual practice, I was taught that my identity as a Christian should come first, rather than my identity as a woman or a person of African descent. But I've learned that what impacts my day-to-day experience is how people perceive me, not how much fruit of the spirit I've been able to cultivate.

I wake up every day with clarity of my wholeness. It is through my daily encounters that I am reminded that I am Black and not white. I am not part of the dominant power class. It was critical for me to understand the historical context of this reality. Sometimes the strategy used against me is subtle and the impact is not immediately felt. Other times the strategies are intrusive, destructive, and intended to cause immediate harm.

Navigation skills are a critical part of the Black experience.

I had a boss who said, "I get up in the morning, come to work, and all I have to do is be white. I hire Black folks because they're the smartest people you'll meet. They'll work hard and deliver because they've had to – to survive." Her statement is not a compliment. Her belief perpetuates and normalizes the expectation that Black people must work harder, and it makes clear to me that extra work is expected and the bar for excellence is higher. The added stress of coping with her expectations from day to day showed up in my stress level; national data on the impact of living with racial discrimination in the United States shows up in comparative health data, infant mortality, and life expectancy rates.

An example of how racial difference can complicate a simple workplace interaction: While working at a small nonprofit in Oakland I encountered a white man who had a problem with the word "respect." I used the word to describe an interaction with one of his junior team members and I watched his face change and his body language shut down. He had begun to make a conclusion regarding the entire situation based on my use of the word respect. The word meant something different to him. I quickly gave him examples and rephrased my statement using language that I thought he would relate to. I opened my body language, to appear more vulnerable, with the intention of putting him at ease. My goal for the meeting was achieved. However, I was intrigued by his response and my adaptability.

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Seeking support to understand my recent encounter, I called a friend to meet for coffee. I asked her, "What's the deal with the word respect from the white perspective?" (She is a white Jewish woman who is married to a Black Muslim man.) She said she hadn't thought about it before, but it was true that Black people use the word a lot and white people don't have to. (Because being disrespected on a regular basis is not part of their experience.)

In another instance, a different executive told me, "You seem angry." He is a white man from San Francisco, who now lives in Oakland. I was shocked. You don't get to sum me up that easily. Not the little girl from Berkeley who avoids conflict —You're calling me an angry Black woman? It felt like a rite of passage.

It was disturbing. I will never forget that moment; I learned that for him, when I am impassioned I must be angry.
The executive labeled me because he was uncomfortable with my communication style. Because we worked in a community-based organization with an environment that created space for conversation about race, identity, and power, I had the opportunity to explain that passion looks different on people from various cultures. Frustration looks different; excitement looks different; even happiness might manifest differently.
I had to recount every detail of the previous 30-minute conversation in order for him to understand why I might have a vested emotional interest in the topic.

These conversations don't only happen at work, but also in my relationships with associates and friends. I have a mentor who is a second generation Armenian immigrant. She is twenty years my senior. She has dismissed my experiences since I began to tell her about them. She grew up in San Jose, moved to Oakland with her Black boyfriend in the 1970s and has a quick wit. She told me, "There are always rude people and jerks around; what makes you think it has anything to do with race? In the Bay Area, there is a lot of 'victimhood,' Precious; don't fall for it."

One day, she and I were out shopping in a mostly white suburb in Northern California. Out of the blue, she says, "I don't see anyone staring at you or treating you differently." I realized that something deep inside of her wants to disprove me.
I responded with exasperation and sarcasm: "They'll never do it while you're around; I get a pass because I'm with you. They think I'm your mixed family member!" The thought never occurred to her that there were conditions, levels, or variations around the treatment that I often described. She was processing it through her lens. As a second generation immigrant she is deeply familiar with her family's struggle and finds it impossible to relate to my sense of isolation based on racial identity. So instead, she discredits it. She has no idea what I have to navigate. This experience helped me

understand that well-meaning people who care about me can nevertheless be fully disconnected from my Black experience. If she were to acknowledge that I am systematically disadvantaged, that would mean that she might be systematically advantaged, which she does not—or cannot—believe is true. From her perspective, everyone is on the same unfair playing field. "Maybe your parents had a struggle in the civil rights movement, but you? You've had it all, Precious." Another work situation that I navigated was at a college in San Francisco. Shelly, a coworker and white woman from Wisconsin, said to me, "I hired you because you went to Berkeley High; it is so diverse over there. You know, I have the most diverse team on campus."

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One day I inquired to Shelly about the lack of cultural clubs on campus for students. She responded, "Barb in Student Services told us that those kind of clubs are divisive." I replied, "That's easy for a white woman, like Barb, with blonde hair to say." Shelly reported me to the Human Resources department. I had to consider why I thought our department was a place where I could talk openly about race. I thought Shelly "got it." I realized that she was comfortable talking about everybody else's differences and struggles, but when it came to white women, like herself—that's where the criticism had to stop or be labeled confrontational and offensive. She welcomed my position and was interested in my participation as long as my comments and positionality upheld the status quo rather than challenging it. She was fascinated by nonwhite people, like when one finds a rare object to study.

The human resources representative that was assigned the case listened to my side as I recounted the many exchanges that I had had with Shelly. He replied carefully, slowly placing purposeful emphases on every syllable. "Now, I've known Shelly a long time. We've worked together for seven years; I'm sure she didn't mean any of it that way." Shelly's comments were given the benefit of doubt; they were deemed unharmful or mistaken whereas mine were subject to persecution. After my meeting with the human resources representative, I wrote a letter to the vice-president detailing the instances of offensive jokes and insults made in the office. I was advised that our entire campus would go through diversity training. In reality, the training started and ended with my department, and was facilitated by the same human resources representative who is a friend of Shelly's. He opened the session by addressing me personally, asking, "Do you have an issue that needs to be resolved with your team, Precious?" I was assured ahead of time that my specific complaint would not be discussed. However, my confidentiality was not protected. This is an example of how Black women's emotional security is violated as a practice in organizations.

Angela, a Black woman from the south, sat proudly next to her confidant, Shelly. They were an odd pair. Many people of color see the world through the dominant society's lens. They buy into the false construct that light is right, and so they despise their Blackness; if a co-worker is too "hood," they keep their distance. Angela was empowered by being Shelly's right-hand in the office. With every professional step forward Angela dissociated more and more from other Black women. As a power move, she aligned herself with every other minority group on campus. By aligning with others, Angela projected an air of concern for social/cultural issues. Her actions let people know that she cared. But she negated to come forward regarding issues related to Black students and staff on campus. In this moment when I was alone, she aligned with the white woman and the power structure that had been "good" to her; she beamed as I felt smaller and she earned credibility through my isolation. She enjoyed all the perks of being a token.

In workplaces, oppressive conditions exist to maintain the status quo.

It seems that, as a new leader in a medium-sized nonprofit, I had to be put in my place. About two months into the job I was pulled aside by the vice president. He told me that I needed to prove myself. I said, "What exactly is the concern?" He replied, "What exactly have you accomplished?" That was his first move to make me question myself and my professional ability. At that point my supervisor suggested that we focus on a few quick wins. Over time, my supervisor became burdened with cheerleading my work to the executive team. With a growing workload and unrealistic expectations, my stress level became unmanageable.

I was told plainly that I couldn't write, that I should never apply for a job like this again, and that maybe they should hire someone for me to learn from. During a team meeting the president expressed his dissatisfaction with a colleague's writing: "This language is so feminine," he said, as he tossed the paper across the table at me. I had already suspected that he did not respect female leadership and it was confirmed by his actions that day. It explained why the women who served as directors seemed so uptight and on edge. My Blackness added to his displeasure.

My employer never acknowledged or appreciated what I brought to the leadership table. My Blackness and femininity were not welcome, while my color was welcome for its ability to diversify the team—in appearance, at least. They wanted me to look different, but to be like them—to engage the way that they did, to value what they valued, and to communicate the way they communicated. I had to learn all of their ways, while they devalued mine. They repeatedly told me I wasn't good enough. (An intimidation tactic used to disempower.)

The criticisms and my resulting lack of confidence led me to a writing coach who asserted, "Until you move into a workplace where you are valued you will not be successful." Turns out that my work-related stress was showing up only in my work-related writing. For other projects, my writing and thought process were intact. After two years and the onslaught of migraine headaches, I decided to draft my resignation letter. Before I could submit, a situation arose and I ended up negotiating my transition—a process that took nearly six months to complete.

The negotiations moved slowly. My supervisor was my only advocate; he was told not to talk to me as the president and vice president tried to wear me down, assigning projects over holiday weekends and giving contradictory directives every step of the way. My supervisor validated my contributions and was aware that women and people of color were being discriminated against. He found himself in conflict because of the professional opportunity afforded him and his position of privilege in the organization. During our final meeting over lunch, my supervisor said, "You let them off the hook."

My supervisor meant that I let them off the hook by not continuing to fight for myself and other women and people of color in the organization. The systemic inequalities and obvious bias made him uncomfortable. Yet, since he was not a target of the oppressive conditions, and he did not feel justified to lead a charge for change—he believed it to be my responsibility, our responsibility. From his perspective, by walking away, I was giving the executives a pass to continue bullying and treating employees poorly with disregard.

I reminded him that coming into a space where I am not valued or respected, told repeatedly that I am not meeting expectations, and talked about jokingly behind closed doors is not healthy for me. There is a negative funk that permeates the office space—weighing down the air. It became harder and harder for me to breathe. The pressure I experienced is intentional, and is not exclusive to any one organization. Non-profit missions are often used as weapons to bleed work and self-criticism out of those most vested in the vision. "They will never see me as successful," I told him, "because in their eyes, I don't look like success—it is a culture, race, and gender issue." Defeated, he dropped and shook his head, and said, "I know." He knows.

On my last day, the president apologized for putting me in an untenable position. "You did the best you could. We never communicated our expectations and they were unrealistic for you to achieve." Hmm. I asked for clarification, "You mean the uncommunicated expectations were not achievable for me?" "Yes, that's what I mean," he said. The president was appeasing me saying that I failed because they were not clear in their directives. Factually, I was not successful because there was no vision for me to align my work with, but I kept trying to hit a moving target based on feedback received from my superiors. I thought the feedback was constructive criticism, but it was confidence deflating and not tied to strategic objectives or deliverables.

I was told for months that my work was subpar; I was bullied and intimidated. My goodwill had been taken advantage of

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and used as a strategy to guilt me into catering to leadership's inefficiencies. I had deep subconscious dissonance and rejection to this notion, but I was not able to articulate it at the time. The misalignment of values showed up only as physical discomfort and pain.

Across the organization there were women and people of color who were emotionally battered daily; even through tears they tried to make sense of the insults under the guise of "critical feedback." These staff members wanted to figure out how to be better employees so they could advance the mission of the organization. It was difficult to watch because it was also happening to me, but I could not see myself in the cycle of oppression.

This manifested in the form of repeated questions about my qualifications and credentials. I felt like I was constantly justifying why I deserved to keep my seat at the table. I wasn't ill-equipped; I was simply different than they were. They didn't see leadership in the ways I presented material, expressed myself, and body language because they couldn't see themselves in me; I wasn't imitating them.

Literally, my Blackness was rejected, my humanity was challenged in order to maintain the status quo, a.k.a. business as usual. There is a way to live above these oppressive conditions; it requires being strategic and for most of us, an understanding of how structural racism and sexism operate within work environments and social structures is the key. The intensity and focus that is required to be competitive without this information is isolating and leads to deep emotional and physical pain.

In these environments, there is no space for new ways delivered by new voices. There is a vital need to maintain the old ways of doing things. If one in a position of power feels like he is losing power, for survival's sake, he will fight to maintain his advantage. These realities are aligned with

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the history of this country and how it has perpetuated—even spearheaded—the belief that whiteness (the way it thinks, looks, behaves, moves, jokes, hires, fires, invests, shows up at work, etc.) is the only standard of professional appropriateness and success.

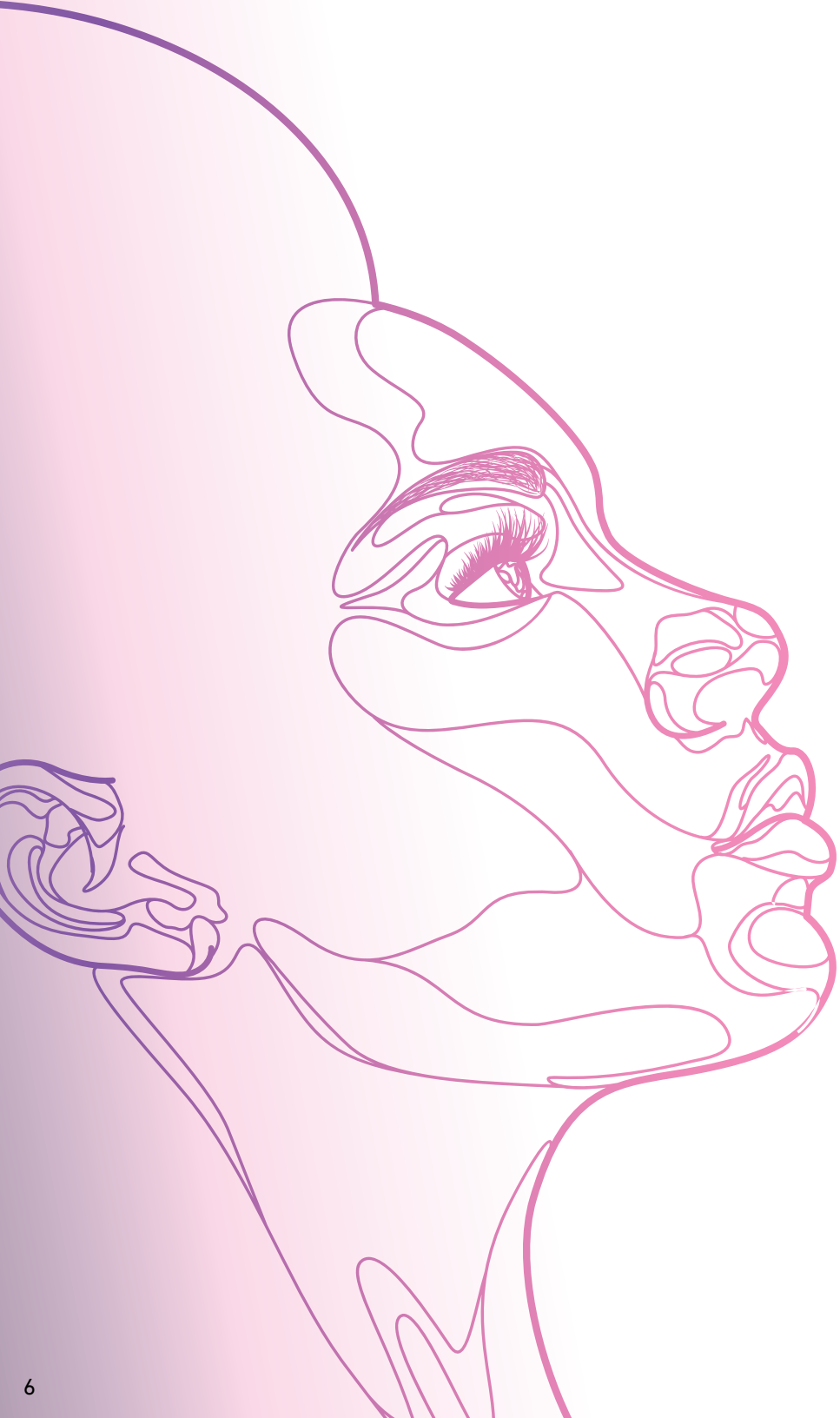
We are now seeing these beliefs stated proudly and brazenly in mainstream media. These direct proclamations of whiteness as superior never would have happened five or ten years ago. Today, they motivate our colleagues and infect our communities. Contrarily, you can turn on the television and hear words like, "global white supremacy" or "structural racism." Two years ago when I started writing down my work experiences with the thought of sharing them, these terms were not being widely discussed.

For years, friends have dismissed my experiences as one-offs or bad days.

No more making excuses, co-signing racist behavior, or trying to help people understand. The dehumanizing enslavement of African people happened in the United States; our ancestors were bred to work and fuel the economy of a world power. There are residual effects from this 400+ year effort to dehumanize and destroy the mind, body, and community ties of kidnapped Africans. There is a white power structure, and we live in a racist society. It is critical that we acknowledge the influence of this reality in our analysis of the workplace today. I have not been programmed to believe that racism exists, and I don't pull out the "race card," an idiotic term created by someone in search of a sound bite. I have lived it. You have lived it. We continue to live it.

The global systems that measure and reward success only through narrow Eurocentric practices and whiteness dictate our behaviors, shape our collective values and inform our beliefs. Some of us are sheltered from it, work around it, or fight to overcome it. But, most of us maintain it through ignorance and compliance. We cannot talk about solutions until we comprehend the many nuances of societal problems that Black women navigate every day, with grace.

After talking to several Black female colleagues across various organizations, I learned that they had also been told they were not meeting expectations, got in over their heads, or oversold themselves during the interview process. These are accomplished women, with multiple advanced degrees. What we all had in common was working at Bay Area organizations and being Black. I realized that I was not alone in my experience—the same scenario was repeatedly playing out. Upon realizing, I knew that I could no longer be silent. The dismissal and hushing of Black female voices in workplaces has to stop and I cannot be afraid of losing a job or contract when my character and integrity is at stake.
I am strong enough to tell the truth, smart enough to be strategic, and committed enough to share my story.



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