

No Country for Us: A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women Faculty's Experiences Navigating Isolating Spaces in the Academy

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***Abstract:** This qualitative study examines institutional factors Black women faculty posit mediate their experiences in academia. Seven Black women describe how racism and sexism permeate and complicate their careers. We employ critical race theory and phenomenology to analyze their narratives. Five themes emerged from the data; (1) race trumps gender and class, (2) “women” assumes white women, (3) all stress ain’t equal, (4) trust no one, and (5) intersectionality matters. Implications speak to a need to better understand how whiteness influences Black women faculty’s professional journeys, call for more work centering their diverse voices, and urge dialogue around policy and practice affecting, and thwarting, their well-being and success. The Black women in this study offer navigational strategies for other minoritized faculty.*

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Introduction

While Black people comprise over 12.6% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), they represent approximately 6% of college faculty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). According to the United States (US) Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2016), three percent of all assistant professors are Black women. Aspirations toward professorships are not expected to decline as Black students find their way into graduate schools. Black women are one of the most educated groups in the US (Reeves & Guyot, 2017), yet remain underrepresented in the professoriate. Literature highlights factors influencing this underrepresentation, including contention with racism and marginalization (Marbley et al., 2011). Black women, specifically, are often met with scrutiny from their peers who question their credibility in macro and micro-aggressive ways. Navigating hostile higher education spaces requires kinds of resilience often unrequired for many of their peers. Navigation strategies often become more complex depending on status and ranking. One in five Black faculty members hold tenure-track positions at historically Black colleges and universities (Krupnick, 2018). Black faculty are overrepresented in non-tenure track positions (Flaherty, 2020). These statistics are not disaggregated to narrowly describe nuanced experiences Black women faculty are having in academe.

This example of erasure is on par with the myriad reasons given to explain why navigation strategies are essential for Black women to survive the academy. Often, support systems center on gendered roles of being a mother, wife, sister, and friend. Ironically, these very sources of support also serve as sources of tension as women struggle to meet the varied professional demands while managing their personal lives. Developing personal and intimate relationships is a challenge, and dedicating time and care to children and loved-ones exacerbates the disparate levels of stress that Black women faculty face. Meaningful connections in and outside of the workplace are even more difficult to establish and maintain with the demands of traditionally defined womanhood (Williams & Hardaway, 2018). Moreover, non-conforming Black women sometimes are not privy to the same kinds of gendered support systems. Compounded, these circumstances make it nearly impossible to remain true to self and easier to assimilate or capitulate to oppressive norms, policies, and practices within the academy.

Feminist Theory (FT) and Critical Race Theory (CRT), when investigating theory and practice (hooks, 1984, 1994), offer multi-dimensional lenses to examine the experiences of Black women faculty as they recount interactions and incidents that threaten to impede their recruitment and retention (Wing, 1997). These lenses are necessary within this paper where we explore the counterstories of seven Black women academicians (Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Black women are no monolith, and a prisms look at their perspectives is necessary to gain understanding of their complex individual and shared experiences (Wing, 1997). The overarching research questions of this study honor women's ways of knowing (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Harding, 1996) What do Black women say are their experiences as higher education faculty? What are the perceptions of access to professional advancement and leadership among Black women academicians? What do Black women perceive to be advantages and barriers to their success in higher education? How do Black women perceive race, gender, and sexuality as mediators of their individual and collective experiences in academia? This paper offers implications to consider when thinking about how Black women are under researched and underrepresented across varied contexts, and the subsequent diminishing effects on an already inadequate pipeline to usher them into higher education.

Framework and Methodology

Critical race theory (CRT) has five tenets germane to educational research, curriculum, and policy formation and critique (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This work brings to focus three of the five tenets; (1) race and racism are central, endemic, permanent and essential in defining and explaining how US society functions; (2) dominant ideologies and claims of race neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness and equal opportunity are to be challenged; and (3) centering the experiences and voices of the marginalized and oppressed is imperative (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solorzano and Yosso, 2002; Milner, 2008). Drawing from a CRT framework, this work asserts racism is a normalized, an integral foundation of all educational institutions, and especially, institutions of higher education. Racism influences relationships, choices, and practices within the academy (Goldberg, 1993).

CRT in education exposes racism and delineates its manifestation in schools' policies and practices. We argue institutions of higher education are not exempt from this manifestation, and instead, serve to reproduce inequities that adversely affect women, women of color, and specifically, Black women faculty.

Employing CRT as a framework to challenge and dismantle prevailing notions of fairness, meritocracy, colorblindness, post-racial narratives and neutrality in relation to education and minoritized groups (Dixon, Donnor, & Reynolds, 2015; Solorzano, 1998; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999), we examine the narratives of Black women faculty in this qualitative case study. Data comes from the voices of seven tenure-track Black women faculty serving in Midwestern institutions of higher education. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) posits Black women possess unique and communal perspectives and experiences. Though there are shared understandings, a diversity of life experiences also exists, influencing each woman's individual interpretation of those common experiences. Sharing one's story and drawing a connection to other Black women can be powerfully useful. The connections, or themes in this case, facilitate exploration of systemic challenges Black women face in academia.

Thus, for this study, phenomenological interviews provide data to explore three aforementioned tenets of critical race theory. We employed a qualitative design using a critical race lens to analyze phenomenological interview data due to the situated context in which we investigate race, racism, anti-Blackness, and sexism as reported by the seven Black women in this study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 9) and because qualitative methods allow us to capture detailed, rich information representing their diverse perspectives. Ryba (2007) says, "[t]he phenomenological interview is perhaps the most powerful technique for attaining a rigorous and thick description of another person's being-in-the-world and is often viewed as the form of a dialogue" (p. 60). Based on Creswell and Creswell's (2018) recommendation for a phenomenological study, the sample is limited to seven participants (p. 186).

The participants are tenure-track faculty within four Midwest institutions. They all self-identify as Black women, and, at the time of this study, four were tenured, and two were junior faculty at the time of the study. One of the four tenured faculty is a full professor. The four institutions, all located in one Midwest state, are R1 and R2 universities with scholarship required for tenure. The women, named here as Shirley, Ruby, Nikki, Ida, Mary, June, and Harriett, interviewed at their own campuses. All offered advice to prospective faculty, some of which is represented here, and some to be shared later through a widely-distributed, informal publication.

Potential Bias of One Author

Though I am not a participant, the experiences these women shared resonated with me and I relate to many of their experiences. With that said, later in the findings, I interject my experience to further elucidate a point around trust. Because the voices of these seven women ring true for me, I took precautions to control for bias.

Collaborative methods helped me guard against subjectivity and increase the validity of findings: triangulating data, member checking, peer debriefing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 200-201), and bracketing (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, pp. 47-49). After composing the preliminary findings, we met with each participant for a follow-up interview to engage in member checking. Peer debriefing involved the help of “critical friends” (Miles & Huberman, 1994), researcher colleagues who critiqued my assumptions and offered contrasting or nuanced explanations and analyses of the data the women offered. Ryba (2007) uses bracketing and a method akin to member checking to establish validity in her 2007 phenomenological study. During the member check for this study, each woman was allowed to review and comment on a draft narrative of findings specific to her interview. Participants’ comments during the member check informed the revising and editing process. During theme identification, bracketing is, “...a (subtractive) process of removing conceptual biases that may serve to distort one’s [my] interpretive vision” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 47). Debriefing served to bolster validity, ensuring that the findings resonate with a broader audience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 201). From a constructivist approach, the participants’ views of the situation(s) being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8), while not wholly generalizable, can

provide insight into institutional conditions that allow Black women to merely survive, thrive, or perish in Academia.

Findings

Phenomenology allows one to make sense of participants' experiences and facilitate understandings of the ways in which socially constructed epistemologies and personal ways of knowing intersect (Glesne, 2011). Using phenomenology as an analytical tool, we identified the need for open, honest dialogue with Black women concerning their experiences, and the need for more research into the dynamics that can serve to both thwart and facilitate healthy professional, personal, and advocacy work for them. Findings indicated five themes; race trumps gender and class, "women" means white women, trust no one, all stress ain't equal, and intersectionality matters.

Race Trumps Gender and Class

Obstructionists {in terms of my career progress} are often completely blind, unaware of the white air that they breathe. — Shirley

More than gender and class, race influences the experiences of the Black women in this study and serves as the primary factor mediating their acclimation into the academy (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and their presentations of self (Goffman, 1959) which is modulated by respectability politics (Harvard, 1986). Anti-Blackness distorts and mediates expectations of behavior that work against Black women and hinder collegiality with non-Black peers. Further, Black women in the academy are often aware of the stereotypes white women espouse regarding them and their behavior (Berry, 2009) and experience unique stressors in their efforts to deny those stereotypes (Smith, 2004). One participant who is junior faculty and one year from applying for tenure, offered her thoughts regarding the stress she has experienced in her faculty role: "The academy will fuck you up." This woman admits that she often misses microaggressions in real time. Upon reflection, after discussing her exchanges and experiences with peers, she often realizes racism and sexism after the fact.

When asked about her professional relationships, one participant stated, “I appreciate colleagues who understand that the academy is layered and that it’s layered differently for women of color.” This understanding was not widely reported by any of the participants. Instead, the Black women faculty in this study lamented a gross lack of awareness, understanding, or even acknowledgement of color. Colorblindness (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), a common articulation of denial, forecloses interrogations of biases necessary to facilitate understanding that could lead to authentic alliances with non-Black colleagues. Colorblindness is grounded in whiteness (Leonardo, 2004) and anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016). The denial of race and racism precludes an analysis of systemic barriers and institutional obstacles that Black women uniquely experience, and solidarity as an aim cannot be realized (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2006). Thus, alliances with other women experiencing similar forms of marginalization are difficult to establish.

While this participant occasionally missed microaggressions in real time, another experienced blatant erasure from colleagues that was immediately noticeable to her and peers.

We were at some event here and one of the white males and I walked over to the dean... or the dean walked over to us... me and the other white male were talking and the dean walked up and shook his hand and never said a word to me, like I was invisible. So I spoke to the department chair and said, you know, I think I’m going to talk to the dean about it, and [the chair] said ‘Well, no don’t do that I’ll talk to [the dean] about it for you. So, I said well what are you gonna say?’ [The chair] said well this is not the first time that has happened. At the time, I wasn’t tenured... so it could have been “I’m protecting you” kinda thing. – June

Livingston, Rosette, and Washington explored the impact of race and dominance among Black women in a 2012 study. Authors note an inability among female leaders to behave or express themselves in ways that will not lead to consequences. This is consistent with June’s experiences as her colleague stepped in to address these concerns with the dean of the college. She felt that she was protecting her from adverse action by speaking up about this negative interaction. Given the

intersection of race and gender, being a Black female and a faculty member challenges dominant narratives related to gender roles which, if not upheld, can lead to backlash (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 1999).

“Women” means white women. Black women were also erased from conversations, initiatives, and services expressly targeting women. Relationships with white women colleagues were painful reminders of mediating effects intersectionality has on Black women.

I have some very nice, highly active in their scholarship and mentoring white colleagues that I definitely respect. One of my colleagues at another institution—she’s a white woman—we write and publish together. Without her, I would probably be in a different space. We have conversations about what happens in our institutions. But she’s still a white woman. She doesn’t understand what it’s like day-to-day, walking in as a Black woman in a space that we are not supposed to be in, and trying to figure out how to strive without political savvy or allies.—
Harriett

White women have been beneficiaries of white supremacy and restrictive patriarchal characterizations of femininity. The latter even establishes aesthetic norms for Black women that would have them question how to style their hair in academic spaces. Resentment of ignorance (feigned or legitimate) white women seemingly have around their own privilege and the ways in which their privilege serves to marginalize Black women and problematize mentorship relationships between these two groups.

Scholars like Tillman (2001) stress the importance of mentorship for Black women in the academy. Due to the shallow pool of available mentors and other factors discussed later, Black women often are not privy to advice and guidance, support and socialization other faculty may have at their disposal. Considering access barriers, Rollock (2019) examines the experiences of Black women faculty in the United Kingdom, citing similar challenges among the study’s respondents. Findings included participants speaking to the various forms of elusive capital which exists within academia and can serve to limit advancement for those without access. Several respondents in Rollock’s work noted the allyhood of white colleagues who introduced them to advancement

opportunities, leading to mentor relationships. Harriett, above, spoke highly of a white woman colleague who helped advance her career. She was an exception in this study and was careful to distinguish the limitations of that relationship due to divergent racialized experiences. When discussing tenure preparation, one woman noted receiving help from a white female colleague who provided advice and periodically checked in with her for encouragement and advice navigating the academy.

She came [to my office] and said ‘Has anybody talked to you about what you need to do to prepare for when you’re ready to do tenure? I was like No, not really... and that’s when she gave me her spiel. And periodically she would say, you know, “Are you keeping your stuff up?” to remind me to keep doing some things.’ – June

The pressures tenure-track positions bring are exacerbated by the stress of micro-aggressions, implicit bias, and overt sexism and racism. Participants reported negative interactions with students, colleagues, and administration that were wrought with overtones of racism and sexism. With each incident, the dissonance created as participants tried to make sense of their experiences, categorize the root of the oppression they were feeling, and determine the best course of action—fight or flight—to respond to perceived mistreatment caused headaches, sleepless nights, listlessness, and sometimes hopelessness that led to depression. Close to 75% of the participants reported regular sessions with mental health professionals to specifically address trauma caused by marginalizing encounters with colleagues, students, and administrators.

We also have to be vigilant. We have to be protective of thoughts, ideas, intellectual contributions. We can say something in a meeting and it goes seemingly unrecognized, unacknowledged. Someone will come behind me and say the exact same thing and it’s a great idea. No one says, “Hey Nikki just said that ten minutes ago.” You have to be your own advocate.—Nikki

We have to watch for disrespect in ways that others don’t. It’s so funny. One of my colleagues was telling me a story about how he was at a meeting and he called a Black woman by her first

name. And then he thought, “Oh I probably need to be more formal.” Then he went around and deliberately called others by their titles and last names. Doctor so-n-so. “And then they accused me of being racist, but I wasn’t being racist. I just thought in that moment that I really need to be more formal.” *sigh* I didn’t even have the energy to say, ‘But why did you think about being more formal *after* you called her by her first name?’” Or he could’ve gone back and said why he was making the change, said something to her. These kinds of microaggressions that we experience everyday...Being in an office where there are three new Black women colleagues and we get called one another’s names consistently. We look nothing alike. Act completely different in every way. Even across campus I get called the wrong name. These are all things we have to deal with. It’s the Black tax, right? This extra thing, this extra burden.

—Ida

Here, Ida brings to life Rockquemore and Lasloffy’s discussion around “...the payment of a ‘race tax,’ special attention to issues of representation and the careful negotiation of diplomatic relations” (2008, p.14). Though Ruby wanted to, in her words, “...give them a piece...” of her mind, she opted to gently correct colleagues if she did at all. For example, with her male colleague, she expressed fatigue in thinking of explaining to him why calling the lone Black woman in the room by her first name was problematic as he addressed everyone else by their title. Though explained within the construct of real, unimagined fatigue due to racism (Smith, 2004), these articulated silences are often expressed through internalized racism which can cause physical and emotional illness (Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2011).

Patricia Hill Collins (1989) discusses epistemology construction and whose ontological understandings are counted as real knowledge: “Because elite White men control Western structures of knowledge validation, their interests pervade the themes, paradigms, and epistemologies of traditional scholarship” (p. 67) As a result, “U.S. Black women’s experiences as well as those of African descent transnationally have been routinely distorted within or excluded from what counts as knowledge” (p. 67). Mary spoke directly to marginalizations of her scholarship:

You know we write, and we want to be published in one of the top-tiered journals. How critical can you be and still get accepted? These types of things others don't have to worry about. —Mary

Shirley also lamented how her work around Black students is casted differently than scholarship that does not address race.

I remember submitting a journal article addressing Black students. The editor said that I needed to put Black in the title because I was talking about Black students. But the articles about white students never have white in the title, so why do we have to make these distinctions? —Shirley

Hill-Collins (1989) reminds us knowledge validation reflects the interests of elite white men and Scholarly communities that challenge basic beliefs held in mainstream U.S. culture will be deemed less credible than those that support white supremacy. We most often must justify our knowledge claims to cisgender, heterosexual elite white men and women. Wheeler and Freeman (2018) examine first-year experiences for junior tenure-track faculty. Both scholars detail real choices they had to make regarding their scholarship and centering race in their academic work. Initially, both avoided examining issues of race as they were aware of hegemonic discourses around the kinds of scholarship that is valued and respected in the academy. Freeman's work still does not invoke race or gender; a conscious choice stemming from a fear of his scholarship being "ghettoized and underappreciated" (p.73). Both faculty members wanted to avoid their scholarly work being "disregarded or relegated to a secondary position" (p.73). These fears Wheeler, Freeman, Mary, and Shirley expressed are not baseless paranoia (Williams & Williams, 2006). Black women have to make hard choices to stay true to their personal research interests despite knowing their professional clout could be diminished should they choose to study minoritized populations.

Similar to insights Rollock offered in her study, exhaustion and stress that stem from additional labor were noted by participants within this study. While Black women faculty are contending with hostile environments, participants also lamented a need to work harder than their peers in order to appear credible and to be taken seriously.

I know you've heard the saying, "We have to work harder. We have to be better." And I really feel like that's true, even in 2019.
– June

Critical race theory urges us to examine and challenge dominant ideologies and claims of race neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness and equal opportunity. Certainly, knowledge construction and dissemination are closely monitored and meted out by those who espouse particular ways of knowing and premium specific research topics over others, give more heft to certain methodologies. Because we know that racism is central to institutional practices and the academy is not exempt, Black women faculty are susceptible to discrediting critiques that challenge their legitimacy, credentials, and academic acumen (Turner, Gonzalez, & Wood, 2008; Griffin, et. al., 2011). In thinking about ways Black women faculty may contend with stress deriving from exhausting environments, looking to Rollock's (2019) work can provide some insights. Black women faculty within this study shared stories of developing responses to navigate these triggering spaces to avoid negative and oppressive interactions within the workplace. The flexibility and autonomy academy life affords can also be cited as a coping mechanism; however, the demanding nature of the work and the persistent aggression Black women confront in these spaces can overshadow perceived freedoms faculty may enjoy.

Trust Black Women? Believe Black Women

When asked to comment on their relationships with Black women faculty, the responses ran the gamut between "Trust Black women," and "Every woman for herself." The transactional nature of academia fosters competition. Capitalism, rugged individualism, and white supremacy propagate the myth of meritocracy and compels suspicion that undergirds competition. In this way, Black women, who should be the strongest allies for other Black women, are often positioned as adversaries and opponents. Indeed, one participant advised other Black women to find white male allies because "You can't trust some Black women." This narrative, this notion around Black women's nefarious nature, the belief they cannot be trusted, is a stereotypical trope that often disrupts or precludes alliances between people with common struggles, interests, and goals. Socialization and effective mentoring are necessary for success in the academy (Tillman, 2001). Black women,

weighted by this deficit belief, can feel isolated from their white and Black peers alike, forced to traverse and navigate the academy alone, without camaraderie or guidance.

Only two participants offered positive experiences working with Black women.

I appreciate my experiences with Black women in the academy. Black women faculty and some administrators have looked out for me and others in a genuine way. ‘Hey, I’m not doing this. Do you want to do this? This is coming up. This grant. Let’s talk about this publication. Let’s meet. How you doin? Checkin in...’ on a personal and professional level. —Ruby

While Ruby was directly assisted by Black women intent on inclusion and cooperation to ensure her success, she still stated that she could not trust anyone, including them, throughout her interview. Negative interactions with faculty clouded or fully eclipsed rare instances of collegiality. Conversely, despite Ida’s reticence, she joined four other Black women to form a support group. After “almost breaking down right in the middle of a faculty meeting,” another Black woman who was staff at the university saw her shaking in the hallway. The two went into the restroom so that Ida could pull herself together. There, Ida learned of off-campus meetings she could attend to commiserate with Black women who could relate to institutional, personal, and professional challenges she experienced.

We would get together, trade stories of what these crazy people did since the last time we got together. It was therapeutic having someone who knew all the people I was talking about, knew that what I was saying was true, knew how to handle delicate situations. We laughed together. Strategized. It was an important group for me.

The informal fellowship Ida experienced helped her cope with hostile department meetings where colleagues “yelled at one another and talked over each other and insulted one another.” The group met routinely until the obvious leader of the support group retired, “then it was more sporadic.” Though they do not get together with regularity now, occasionally the quasi leader will convene them for lunch. Unlike the

other participants, Ida felt supported by Black women throughout her career.

Another felt betrayed.

In a full faculty meeting, everyone in the department there, I spoke up about how I was being silenced in meetings by one white woman. She cut me off and spit, “It’s not always about race.” She’s white. She’s defending herself. She couldn’t see the privilege and the silencing in her statement. Everyone was watching us go back and forth. No one seemed bothered by her statement or the fact that here she was cutting me off yet again. They actually seemed amused. A few looked dismayed. I expected their reactions. It was the other four women of color in that meeting—three of whom were Black. They watched like spectators too, as if she wasn’t marginalizing them too with her conduct and denying their experiences with racism. They said nothing. Even if they didn’t want to support me, didn’t they want to defend themselves? —Nikki

Speaking up and out regarding discrimination is risky and could prove perilous. Systems will not tolerate challenges. Those working in oppressive systems either have to work to maintain and reproduce them, or leave them. Rarely will individuals enjoy security if they persist in working to dismantle the very systems that employ them. In this way, Black women are not unlike all others who propagate and perpetuate white supremacy in its myriad forms. Precariously, Black women are both victims of and producers of the inequities found within higher education spaces. And because any semblance of security is elusive, a Black woman who decides to challenge and critique the system on her own behalf may very well find herself standing alone while flanked by other Black women colleagues who choose safety and silence.

All Stress Ain’t Equal

Nikki did not seem bitter, rather sad and a little confused. The words of a mentor, a veritable giant in the academy, reverberated for me as I listened to this Black woman recount her story. This particular mentor once told me that the academy would allow a critical mass of Black women. Describing a quota, this senior scholar would count the

number of Black women at an institution I considered applying to and encourage or dissuade me accordingly. Even while evoking a fear of exclusion, she was concurrently inspiring me. Stridently countering a prevailing discourse that Black faculty do not meet the same standards of “quality” as their white counterparts (Gasman, 2016), my mentor spoke of Black women with pride: “They know we’re smarter, badder, and bigger than them. They can’t have too many of us in one place exposing just how dumb and mediocre they are.” I knew intuitively who the “they” were, and I believed her. I trusted her when she noted that even if we were more skilled at our craft, deeper thinkers, superior teachers, “they” were the gatekeepers, and only a few of us would be let in—we all could not come together. According to $\frac{3}{4}$ of the participants in this study, this latent competition, though often unspoken, envelopes interactions between Black women. Again, not only does this competition disallow solidarity, organized collective struggle, or camaraderie, the competition can suppress Black women’s efficacy and courage to demand better for their individual or collective selves. Again, systems will not tolerate challenge and disruptors get summarily dismissed. In the back of my mentor’s mind, there is always another Black woman poised and ready to take her place should she be ejected from the academy. The Black women faculty in this study kept that same thought as they navigated the academy isolated, alienated, (Jones, Hwang, & Bustamante, 2015) and alone.

I often feel alone. I don’t have any real friends at work. I keep my private life separate. I don’t want these people in my business.

Interviewer: Even the other Black women faculty?

Yes, them too. I don’t have relationships with them outside of work and even when I’m here, I don’t see them often. We’re all busy working. We have more advisees, sit on more committees than everybody else. We really don’t have time to get together and chat. It’s probably best anyway. You can’t trust them either. You really can’t trust no one. —Ruby

We know that Black faculty have more teaching and service responsibilities (Harley, 2008) and informal mentorship duties (Griffin, Bennett, & Harris 2011) that do not count toward tenure (Dever &

Morrison, 2009). Harley notes that “individually and collectively African American women at PWIs suffer from a form of race fatigue as a result of being over extended, undervalued...and [required to] assume [additional] service, teaching, and research...” (p. 19). As one participant frankly put it, and as aforementioned, “All stress ain’t equal.” Black women in academic spaces have much more to consider and contend with than their colleagues with whom they often cannot even commiserate.

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Intersectionality Matters

The words of the participant above who could not find authentic relationships with Black women within her institution were offered by a self-identified lesbian participant. Black women are no monolith. Queer Black women are having different experiences in academia than heterosexual Black women. Though there has been a gradual positive shift in their positionality as noticeable legislative gains have recently been made (Human Rights Campaign Legislative Report, 2014), sexuality is still a precarious, evolving issue within Black communities. Cultivating relationships with straight Black allies, identifying common aims, and working together to realize communal goals brings to bear issues of heteronormativity, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995) and interest convergence (Bell, 1980; 1992). Alicia Garza, who, with two other queer women, created #BlackLivesMatter wrote in 2014 about her frustration with hetero-patriarchy. Straight Black men and women,

unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased their contributions.

We completely expect those who benefit directly and improperly from White supremacy to try and erase our existence. We fight that every day. But when it happens amongst our allies, we are baffled, we are saddened, and we are enraged. And it's time to have the political conversation about why that's not okay.—
Nikki

According to Garza, being a Black queer woman tends to render one invisible and irrelevant. Hegemony then presents differently when we account for race, gender, sexuality, and intersectionality, problematizing prevailing notions of a single story for Black women in the academy.

Implications

An implication that arises directly from these findings is the need for understanding theories of race and racism and inequities that recognize the historical legacy of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). Considering the conflicts the participants of this study reported involving white women specifically, this legacy which allows for the accrual of intangible benefits that white women may enjoy to the detriment of other women, especially Black women, bears further examination. Trust is difficult when biases go unacknowledged; and any alliance is impossible. If we cannot ferret a safe space for honesty within the academy, illusory and false alliances will continue (Steele & Aronson, 2005). White fragility, strategically expressed by white women through distress and even tears when confronted with racism by the participants in this study, impedes solidarity feminism requires.

More work centering the voices of Black women in academe is also necessary. Individual perspectives and shared experiences should be taken seriously as colleges and universities aspire to create more equitable and inclusive spaces (Prince, 2015). This study's limitations derive from regional and institutional location. These seven women in this study were having place-bound experience germane to the demographics and conditions found in midwestern United States. Studies examining these same questions for Black women in various diasporic institutions are necessary if we want a fuller understanding of global

systemic practices institutions engage in or should consider for the recruitment, persistence, and professional success of Black women academicians.

Finally, central to conversations around Black women faculty is the need to understand that they are not monolithic. Meeting the needs of this group requires unique and thoughtful approaches on behalf of institutions (Christian, 2012; Gordon, 2004). Unique attention to and awareness of the intersectional identities of Black women faculty and an understanding of their experiences within these oppressive spaces, are critical if we wish to disrupt inequity, racism, sexism, and, misogyny in their experience. If we would like to reimagine institutional climates to not only value diversity, but seek authentic inclusion as well (examination of practices that may preclude success, necessary accommodation and change according to identified needs), further research dedicated to Black women is required.

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