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Faculty, yet Unrecognized: Black Women, Pedagogical Authority, and Everyday Surveillance in Higher Education

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Abstract

Black women faculty perambulate public and private white institutions that relentlessly question their legitimacy, authority, and belonging. Despite their scholarly credentials, they are often subjected to indecorous scrutiny from students, colleagues, and institutional systems. This policing extends beyond the classroom to the brick and mortar campus space—evidenced in acts such as being asked to justify their presence in faculty parking lots and decision driven meetings. It is common for Black female faculty to experience interrogation of their scholarship through student and peer evaluations that are born of racism and gendered bias resulting from being reared in communities of homogeneity. These confrontations underscore how competing systems of racism and sexism inform the daily lives of Black women in academia. Subsequently they are positioned as perpetual outsiders within the academy. Drawing on Black feminist thought perspectives pioneered by Hillary Potter and critical race theory introduced by Derrick Bell, and expounded upon by Ladson-Billings, this paper explores how such incidences of surveillance, skepticism, and constant vetting function as apparati of institutional control and authority that attenuate their pedagogical authority and preserve exclusionary academic norms. With a focus on the phenomenology of Black women faculty, this review asks for a salient shift that distinguishes their intellectual labor as a needed component of the establishment of equity, opportunity, and inclusion in higher education.

Keywords

Black Women Faculty, Racialized Surveillance, Microaggressions, Institutional Racism

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the number of Black women earning terminal degrees has quadrupled. This data make clear noticeable progress within educational access as well as improved socioeconomic status within the Black community. Despite the salient improvements, academe remains an unwelcoming space for the descendants of slaves. It has been reported that the demographic is routinely questioned regarding their right to lecture within their chosen discipline, their credentials are routinely vetted, and many report that they are questioned why they are in their very own office building.

Authority is undermined, with committees routinely formed to review their grades, and their presence, itself, is impugned. The chief function of research is to provide discourse when necessary. While Black women faculty positions increase their professional legitimacy endures ongoing investigation (Walkington, 2017). As such, it can be concluded that higher socioeconomic status does parallel belonging, acceptance, or safety.

Rodriguez (2009) argues that faculty of color are subjected to racialized and gendered ongoing vetting that mirrors the broader social hierarchy found in the states as well as globally. Rodriguez' commentary of holding a professor's post at a PWI (Private|Public White Institution) encapsulated the covert and overt methods students utilize to combat the authority of women of color—challenging their syllabi, dismissing discussions of race and power, and questioning their expertise in their chosen discipline. These occurrences not only reveal how oppression operates as the tacit norm within the academy but also dismiss the psychological labor and resilience demanded of Black and Brown women who are forced, routinely, to guard their credentials, intellectual authority, as well as their right to enjoy academic freedom.

The irony that the number of Black women that hold terminal degrees is at an all time high and yet this demographic remains targets of inquiry and policing reflects a larger systemic issue: the academy's resistance to fully embrace diversity as transformation rather than representation. As Rodriguez (2009) and others remind us, the questioning of the authority of Black female faculty—whether in the classroom, in meetings, or even in faculty parking lots—underscores how cultural systems invigorate exclusivity even as they proclaim inclusion. Indeed the contemporaries of Black women faculty, white female faculty, are often the most resistant to the inclusion they claim to embrace. This literature review queries how the professional experiences of Black women faculty highlight ongoing immobility. They hold positions at the lowest ranks of academe but have yet to obtain full acceptance, within academe, which places their stories within a broader conversation on race, gender, and the policing of their pedagogical authority and academic freedom in higher education.

2. Research Findings and Discussion

Bell et al. (2021) situate the movement of Black Lives Matter (BLM) within the

academy. They argue that although BLM is often framed as external to higher education, anti-Blackness and white supremacy also operate within universities and colleges—through "disdain, disregard, and disgust" directed at Black students and faculty. The authors draw on Black feminist theory to highlight the historical lineage of Black women scholars' activism and resistance in academe.

2.1. What It Feels Like in the Classroom

Ladson-Billings (1996) reflects on her experiences as a Black professor teaching predominantly White students, especially in discussions of race, culture, and power. She notes that student silence in her classroom cannot simply be read as agreement, disinterest, or ignorance; rather, silence frequently functions as a decisive method of umbrage towards the Black professor's scholarship. For example, when students refuse to engage or respond to questions about race, their apathy is likely discomfort, dissent, or a denial of participation in what they perceive as a politically-charged discussion that they have already made decisions about.

Ladson-Billings further argues that such silences are shaped by the racial positioning of both teacher and student. For example, white students may withhold participation because they feel threatened, unprepared, or unwilling to expose their own positionality and privilege and the Black professor carries the burden of being both facilitator, marginalized stakeholder, and, ultimately the target of analysis. The classroom vibe is altered by discussions of race. The Black professor's authority is likely questioned, disbelieved, and framed as political. However, a white professor teaching within the same discipline of race discourse is perceived as objective and scholarly.

Ladson-Billings (1996) encourages educators to utilize these pauses as valuable indicators of power, identity, and resistance. She urges instructors to actively probe and name the dynamics of silence, and to design pedagogical strategies (such as reflective journaling, small-group work, simulations) that make participatory engagement more accessible and less threatening. This work, she suggests, is crucial for making classroom spaces more inclusive and for confronting the ways race and authority operate in educational settings. These are vast opportunities to illuminate the racism hidden in double standards that inform who holds intellectual authority. While white faculty can, readily, address race and equity as abstract academic topics, Black women who teach subjects on race are seen as biased or political. "I must prepare not only my lesson but also my defenses (Ladson-Billings, 1996)." This line encapsulates the emotional and intellectual labor required of Black women in academia. The classroom becomes a site of both teaching and Cross-Fit., Where Black female faculty must prepare for resistance to their research, doubt regarding their right to be in the building, and impending policing by leadership should any one student complain, before they even begin instruction. This defensive posture reflects the larger institutional control that Black women faculty experience. They must incessantly justify their presence, authority, lived experience, as well as right to occupy space within the academy and,

indeed, the lecture hall.

Comparatively, research has demonstrated that Black women faculty at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) typically feel greater warmth and acceptance of their identity and intellectual authority than at PWIs. Nevertheless, the requirements to obtain tenure remain disproportionately high. At HBCUs, female scholars often serve as mentors, cultural anchors, and administrators of care that support students and colleagues with unrecognized labor that institutions rarely reward or indeed compensate. As mentioned above, at PWIs, Black women faculty report ongoing surveillance, professional isolation, and persistent inquiry of their expertise—experiences tethered to racialized and gendered hierarchies (Rodriguez, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Potter, 2015). While HBCUs offer a semblance of safety from overt racism, they remain organizations built upon patriarchal structures that fail to employ women in positions of leadership. Thus, whether navigating invisibility at PWIs or being overworked at HBCUs, Black women faculty exist at the crossroads of institutional dependence and disregard—attempting to build diversity, equity, and inclusion as they continue to endure disrespect and respite.

2.2. Policing Presence and Pedagogy: Intersectional Criminalization of Black Women in Academia

Potter (2015) established a framework to assist the populace in understanding how Black women are subjected to systems of power—racism, sexism, and classism—that were established to construct Black women as inherently criminal, informing how they are viewed and disciplined within social and penal institutions. Indeed, as chronicled above, Black women faculty are routinely vetted, surveilled, and questioned within the academy as in the larger society. Potter's work centers the criminal justice systems, domestic violence, and other systems that oppress women, such as the family, but the parallels to academia are noticeable.

In higher education, Black and Brown women professors experience academic criminalization. The criminalization manifests with questions like, "Are you sure you know what you are talking about?" Their authority, pedagogical practices, and even physical presence—such as occupying faculty parking or being asked, daily, for university identification to enter their academic offices (Peña, 2022). They are treated as outliers requiring the requisite double and, often, triple check. The same paradigms of surveillance and oppression that Potter, the preeminent scholar on Black feminist thought, identifies vis a vis her lens within criminology, reappear in student and peer evaluations, student complaints, as well as the institutional vetting of Black women faculty's legitimacy as researchers and instructors of white students.

Potter's intersectional lens exposes the ways academic culture enforces white normative standards of alignment, communication, and teaching. Traditional criminology centers white, male, middle-class experiences; the academy similarly privileges Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize Black women's intellectual and pedagogical contributions. The scrutiny of their syllabi, cultural tone, and ac-

ademic authority reflects what can be described as both respectability politics and epistemic policing—the disciplining of knowledge and methods that do not align with norms that engender the status quo. Such regulation functions not only to question the professional credibility of Black women scholars but also to reinforce the boundaries of Caucacity within the academic institution.

Importantly, Potter (2015)'s revolutionary call for intersectional disruption resonates with Black feminist scholars who challenge anti-Blackness in the academy (Bell et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Rodriguez, 2009). Each of these scholars' work underscores that intransigence becomes both survival and scholarship. By transforming spaces of surveillance into sites of knowledge production, Black women faculty enact what Potter describes as a necessary epistemic revolution—one that exposes how institutions criminalize difference. Black Women faculty are salvaging the power to define, teach, and lead on their own terms. Indeed Black women faculty report feeling that their very presence is a revolutionary act.

3. Performative Allyship and the Policing of Black Women Faculty

Ladson-Billings (1998, 2021)'s work on Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education provides a critical lens for understanding how allyship often fails to translate into structural change within academic institutions. In her foundational essay "Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?" (1998), Ladson-Billings argues that racism is not atypical but endemic to educational systems, embedded in the very logics that shape hiring, evaluation, and remnants of professional legitimacy. Within this context, allyship becomes a complex and often compromised practice. Meaning it is performed when it benefits the most powerful. She warns that within predominantly white educational spaces, niceness and civility are frequently mistaken for equity work, resulting in a culture of performative allyship—one that maintains institutional comfort rather than dismantling systemic inequities. Indeed, it is unusual for those that benefit to dismantle the house that they live in.

This critique aligns directly with the experiences of Black women professors, whose pedagogical authority is routinely questioned and whose professional legitimacy is constantly vetted. Faculty colleagues, administrators, and even students may publicly espouse anti-racist commitments while privately reinforcing the same racialized hierarchies Ladson-Billings identifies. For example, expressions of support for diversity may coexist with practices that marginalize Black women's scholarship as too personal, too political, or insufficiently rigorous. These contradictions expose what Ladson-Billings (1998) describes as the gap between declarative allyship and critical praxis—the sustained, uncomfortable, and self-implicating work required to transform oppressive systems.

Finally, the uncomfortable space that Ladson-Billings and other scholars discussed above is also underscored by DiAngelo (2018). Not only do white faculty and administrators seek to pretend their campuses are free of systemic racism but

when racism is uncovered they exhibit pain; not for the Black faculty member, but for themselves.

Surely authentic allyship is evident not in rhetoric but in the redistribution of institutional power and the validation of marginalized epistemologies. Within academia, this means creating conditions where Black women's intellectual labor is neither surveilled nor tokenized but recognized as central to the production of knowledge. The absence of such transformation signals not just neutrality but complicity; an acceptance of the status quo. In this sense, the vetting of Black women professors—whether through excessive scrutiny of their pedagogy, disbelief in their authority, leadership engaging with students (or other faculty) to establish a Black professor's, imagined, wrongdoing, or questioning of Black professor's presence in spaces of privilege—reveals the institutional limits of allyship itself. The Ladson-Billings's framework, thus, highlights how performative equity gestures conceal deeply entrenched anti-Blackness, perpetuating the very surveillance and exclusion that Critical Race Theory seeks to expose.

3.1. Conclusions and Implications

The intellectual and emotional policing of Black women in academia cannot be separated from its physiological and outcomes. While the previous sections of this literature review have pointed out how institutional vetting, surveillance, and performative allyship sustain anti-Blackness within the academy, the biological costs of this systemology are too often ignored. Geronimus et al. (2006) offers a sobering framework for understanding these outcomes. It was argued that the cumulative stress of navigating racialized and gendered oppression prematurely ages the body at the cellular level, leading to earlier onset of illness and mortality among Black women. When applied to academia, this framework exposes the ways professional life itself—long heralded as a marker of success—can become a site of attrition, exhaustion, and, in some tragic cases, death.

The recent deaths of Black women college presidents Dr. JoAnne A. Epps and Dr. Orinthia T. Montague (who died within days of each other) and the death by suicide of Dr. Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey, a vice president of student affairs at Lincoln University of Missouri underscore this crisis with devastating clarity. These losses are not outliers but proof of the ongoing violence Black women endure in institutions that inauthentically celebrate their presence but fail to protect their psychological and physical beings. The constant demand to prove competence, to justify authority, and to embody institutional ideals of diversity while being denied full belonging as well as feeling welcomed produces a detrimental physiological and psychological toll. Each microaggression, every questioned decision, and each instance of professional isolation compounds into the weight that Geronimus et al. (2006) argues is the slow, systemic depletion of biological well being. The lives cut short of Black women academics are thus both metaphorical and literal. Chiefly an afteraffect of laboring within systems designed to extract brilliance while denying rest, affirmation, and safety.

Moreover, the cultural ideal of resilience, often imposed on Black women as praise, becomes another form of required conformity and expectation. In the academy resilience is viewed as a strength rather than sanctioned as a survival method utilized to counteract structural inequities. Ladson-Billings (1998)'s critique of performative allyship argues that impactful declarations of support do little to nothing to circumvent weathering. To the contrary, these theatrical machinations sustain the illusion of progress while the underlying mechanisms of racialized stress persist, wholly unchecked. Speaking to faculty of color and offering kind words when the oppressor is not present is safe and inconsequential. True allyship would require institutions to redistribute power, to center wellness and belonging as indicators of academic excellence, and to confront how institutional culture itself contributes to premature loss.

Intersectionality, as Potter (2015) argues, provides the analytical tools to trace these overlapping forms of harm—how racism, sexism, and classism intersect to create a uniquely perilous professional terrain for Black women scholars. The academy functions, in this sense, as a site of structural policing akin to the carceral systems Potter critiques: one that patrols difference, disciplines deviance, and rewards proximity to whiteness. When Black women resist this order through their scholarship, pedagogy, or leadership, they risk institutional retaliation disguised as evaluation. This disciplinary loop—scrutiny, resistance, punishment—accelerates the conditions of weathering and erodes the joy and longevity that should accompany academic achievement.

If the academy is to survive as a legitimate site of knowledge production, it must reckon with the human cost of its current paradigm. The deaths and disappearances of Black women leaders must be read not as isolated tragedies but as institutional indictments. Ending this cycle requires more than mentorship programs or diversity statements; it demands a radical reimagining of academic life that prioritizes collective care over performance, accountability over optics, and liberation over inauthentic inclusion. Until such transformation occurs, the weathering of Black women in academia will continue—not as a metaphor, but as a measurable, certainty.

3.2. Implications and Call to Action

To impact the weathering of Black women in academia requires advancing beyond knowledge and toward institutional change. Universities must first agree that diversity without protection is a form of dangerous harm. Being allowed to enter the building, without other safeguards, does not provide protection for the personhood and physiology of those invited into spaces that are factually structurally aggressive to their very presence. Institutions must therefore commit to what the great Bell Hooks described as a *praxis of love*—an ethic of care that reorganizes academic excellence through a framework of humanity, belonging, and justice (Chowdhury, 2025). It is suggested that true commitment must align with systems that will better the proposed commitment and ensure Black women fac-

ulty and leaders are not relegated to marketing materials but provided equitable workloads that mirror white male colleagues, receive unbiased evaluations from both the student and peer stakeholder, and are given access to wellness infrastructures that are culturally competent in measuring racial stressors.

Tangible and effective policy changes are essential. Universities are encouraged to establish methods to track and address discriminatory patterns in retention, evaluation, and promotion through an Equity and Accountability Dashboard jointly managed by an Office of Institutional Research and an Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Such a dashboard is encouraged to make public annual, disaggregated data on faculty hiring, tenure rates, salary equity, climate survey findings, and exit interview trends. It is suggested that such a report live on the university website and be displayed prominently. Such reports should be unpacked by the Provost's Equity Council and disseminated by the Faculty Senate to engender transparency and shared governance.

To respond to bias and harm, universities should establish Restorative Equity Review Boards (RERBs)—independent panels composed of trained facilitators, ombudspersons, DEI officers, and faculty peers representing multiple ranks and disciplines. When faculty report racial or gender-based bias, the RERB can and should convene a restorative process that centers healing over punishment. Parties should be encouraged to dialogue regarding the pain experienced and discuss both why they engaged in such behavior and what it feels like to be on the receiving end of the same. After such a meeting the RERB's report can be delivered to the Office of the Provost as well as the Human Resources Equity Compliance Division (hopefully there is one) to ensure ongoing accountability.

Black women faculty report a lack of sleep, high anxiety, as well as a loss of joy for their work. As such, institutions should fund Faculty Wellness and Retention Grants administered through the Office of Faculty Affairs to provide release time, research support, or counseling services to Black women faculty experiencing racialized stress or burnout. Leadership pipelines must be strengthened by sistering DEI and Academic Affairs offices to create Protected Leadership Fellowships for women of color. These posts provide needed experience and mentorship without punitive workloads or tokenization.

Finally, allyship must shift from the current, perfunctory, individual goodwill to institution-wide responsibility. Each academic unit should be required to submit an Annual Equity Action Report—detailing steps taken to improve climate, mentorship, and workload equity for marginalized faculty—reviewed by the Chief Diversity Officer and Dean's Council.

The academy must also create and protect spaces for Black women to rest, imagine, heal, and rediscover the joy of the discipline they chose. Geronimus et al. (2006)'s weathering hypothesis argues that the results of our failure to act are not only symbolic but biological; indeed, as mentioned above, two Black women presidents died suddenly and one committed suicide last year. The combined weight of racism and sexism curtails lives, and the recent losses are the most visible ex-

amples of that truth. To honor them—and to prevent future loss (if such results are authentically sought) requires that the academy evolves to a place of equity and of restoration. By adopting these structural changes, intersectional practices, and genuine investments in the well-being of Black women in higher education we, collectively, finally move toward fulfilling the moral and intellectual promise of the academy.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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