Black Women Acting Against the Extremes of Visibility in the Academy

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Abstract

Black women faculty building their academic lives can be treated as or made to feel invisible (i.e., ignored) or hypervisible (i.e., overly scrutinized). Subsequent harms can follow, such as stress, insecurity, power/voicelessness, and job attrition. Through the fusing of sister circle focus groups with the Theatre of the Oppressed and Forum Theatre, we explored how five Black women faculty confronted issues related to visibility utilizing this culturally informed critical arts-based methodology. Through introspection and performance, they brought in elder wisdom, and through rehearsal and performance, they left with shared knowledge on how to mediate at the extremes of visibility to improve their academic lives. We discuss the findings and their implications for academic healing via culturally responsive arts-based interventions and methodologies.

Keywords: Black women faculty, hyper/invisibility, sister circles, healing arts methodologies, culturally informed interventions, Forum Theatre

Introduction

The narratives of Black women faculty with flourishing academic careers are not typically represented in the literature; neither is their history of overcoming the challenges of the

academy. Research does not fully capture the price of their success to the same degree it does for Black men facing racial oppression and White women facing gendered oppression (Ford et al., 2018). The cultures and climates of higher education institutions, which are often described as being centered on White, cisgender, and heterosexual patriarchy (Wright et al., 2007), tend to produce in Black women faculty some suffering at the crossroads of institutional racism and sexism. On one hand, their minoritized group status entailing historical exclusion often translates into them being seen as unique. As such, they are often wrongly perceived by the dominant ethno/racial group or groups as tokens, hired to bring only symbolic value to the institution (Settles et al., 2018), and overly scrutinized to the degree they become hypervisible (Alexander-Floyd, 2015). On the other hand, Black women faculty have reported being treated or made to feel invisible (i.e., their accomplishments are ignored or implied to be unimportant). These extreme forms of visibility can lead to their social isolation and subsequently promote in them stress, insecurity, and feelings of voicelessness (Hughes & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Ultimately, attrition from school or the workplace can result for some Black women, while others persevere despite the troubles they encounter (Kelly & McCann, 2013).

As of 2019, 13.4% of the U.S. population identified as Black, with Black women comprising roughly half, or 6.7% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). However, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) showed that Black women holding a faculty position in academia remained underrepresented, with only 3.24% of higher education faculty identifying as Black women, 2.96% of the faculty holding tenure-track positions. Black women represented 4.13% of all assistant professors, 3.19% of all associate professors, and only 1.63% of all full professors. This underrepresentation raises questions about the recruitment and retention of Black women in academia, such as what contributes to it and how their sense of identity is shaped and evaluated in academia (Howard-Baptiste & Harris, 2014; Pittman, 2012; Porter et al., 2020; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Some researchers have explored the coping strategies Black women faculty use at various career stages where they have experienced absences (e.g., absence of mentoring, absence of a critical mass of faculty of color), high demands (e.g., excessive service, diversity-related teaching and/or service), and weak socialization/networking (Croom & Patton, 2012; Gregory, 2001; Harley, 2008; Kelly & McCann, 2013; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Perlow et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2020).

Rather than dichotomize Black women (e.g., those who survive and those who do not), academic institutions (e.g., good or rotten), and academic success in either/or terms (e.g., continuous or intermittent, static or dynamic), we attempted to dwell in the complexity of Black women's lives as they encounter and mediate the social-psychological phenomena of academic life. We centered the stories and individual voices of Black women faculty to avoid what Love et al. (2021) acknowledged as the recent academizing and co-opting of their stories, which often further marginalize them. To that end, we used methods that combined Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques and a sister circle focus group process for data generation (Finley, 2011). This culturally informed, critical arts-based methodology allowed us to explore how five

African American women interpreted and responded to visibility in academia. The guiding research questions were interconnected:

1. How do Black women in academia mediate visibility?
2. How do Black women in academia respond to the methodological features of the study, namely the fusion of TO and culturally informed practices (e.g., sister circle, choral reading, call and response)?
3. In what ways do the methodological features of the study allow for reflection and healing?

Literature on Stereotypes and Syndromes Affecting the Visibility of Black Women Faculty

Black women have been characterized by stereotypes and medicalized as being at risk of internalizing those stereotypes, that is, suffering from syndromes. For example, there is the *strong Black woman* stereotype described by Donovan and West (2015) as "the belief that Black women must be—and innately are—strong, self-sacrificing, ambitious, independent, and emotionally contained" (p. 384). The superwoman construct, now often referred to as the superwoman syndrome, was first offered as a way to describe the desire of women to work outside the home while continuing to carry home care responsibilities (Steiner-Adair, 1986), as if doing both (a double burden) were too much to desire and accomplish at once. Today it typically refers to women not wanting to but feeling as if they have to *do it all* as a result of increasing demands at work, home, or both, which can increase their stress, distress, and take an emotional and physical toll on their bodies (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015).

Woods-Giscombé (2010) identified elements of what she called a superwoman schema from her study of stress among Black (African American) women, which included obligations to manifest strength, suppress emotions, and help others. A major finding by Woods-Giscombé was the association Black women made between the superwoman identity/ideology benefits (preservation of self and family or community) and liabilities (relationship strain, emotional eating, poor sleep, and embodiment of stress resulting in anxiety, depression, and poor mental health). She considered how their superwoman schema was informed by contextual factors (e.g., a history of racial stereotyping, lessons from mothers, and spiritual values).

Black women faculty consistently manifest the characteristics of the superwoman, meaning they are strong, and often utilize that strength to suppress their emotions. In addition to past experiences, Black women faculty often relive trauma imposed on them by structural and systemic oppression in and outside of academia (McNeely-Cobham & Patton, 2015). Black women faculty are self-sacrificing; they may exert and deplete their energy trying to please others, especially those who play a role in their success, job security, and economic gain (Huddleston-Mattai, 1995). Black women faculty have been described as ambitious and independent, with some becoming more skilled at managing multiple roles than others (Sumra & Schillaci, 2015). However, even successful Black women faculty have acknowledged their success came "at the price of their health, well-being, relationships, motivation, and connection to the institution" (Benjamin-Green et al., 2016, p. 84). Once their experiences in the academy are centered, how their retention in academia is jeopardized despite their efforts to remain

becomes more apparent. Their daily encounters in their immediate contexts, at the micro-level (interpersonal interactions), can provide a social-psychological view of their visibility at the extremes: hypervisibility and invisibility.

Gendered Racial Microaggressions with Macro-Level Consequences

Gendered racial microaggressions can result in alternating feelings of hypervisibility and invisibility (Constantine et al., 2008). The hypervisibility of Black women faculty is often apparent in cases of tokenization, which is evident when their expertise or representation is needed as a symbol of an institution of higher education's commitment to racial or ethnic commitment. Examples of tokenization include serving on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committees, securing DEI funds, and being positioned as the spokesperson in charge of recruiting students and faculty of color. These are also examples of the overuse of their labor and their overexposure. *Invisibility syndrome* (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000), or sociocultural invisibility, can occur when Black women faculty are overlooked, forgotten, dismissed, unheard, or unseen by colleagues who, in academia, tend to be White. While the term "microaggressions" originated with Chester M. Pierce (Pierce et al., 1978), others have expanded it to describe how marginalized groups suffer daily indignities from those whose behaviors are felt as invalidating or even hostile (Sue, 2010). Sue (2010) sorted microaggressions into two categories: microinsults and microinvalidations. Microinsults usually target a person's intelligence, competence, capabilities, or worth. Microinvalidations often exclude, negate, or nullify a person's thoughts, feelings, or reality, denying their race and/or gender. Both can work in tandem to lower perseverance and increase attrition, resulting in macro-level outcomes, such as the limited retention of Black women in academia. Consider the common scenario of White colleagues highlighting the ethnic-focused scholarship of a Black woman faculty, making her hypervisible in one moment, only to devalue her work in the next moment, cloaking her accomplishments.

Berk (2017) documented 10 consequences of microaggressions that Black women experience in the academic workplace. These 10 consequences impact work performance as well as social/emotional health (see Appendix). Similarly, Smith (2004) documented the challenges of Black faculty in the post-civil-rights era in his theoretical framework, racial battle fatigue, pinpointing the link between epistemological racism experienced by faculty of color and chronic stress responses that impact psychology, physiology, and behavior. Chancellor (2019) noted the specific impact on Black women faculty, and how the intersection of race and gender intensifies the manifestations of racial battle fatigue. Essentially, what we experience externally impacts the psyche and the soma. For Black women faculty, microaggressions trigger mental and physical stress that can limit their well-being and productivity, both greatly impacting their tenure trajectory.

Figure 1

Racial Battle Fatigue: The Unspoken Burden of Black Women Faculty in LIS
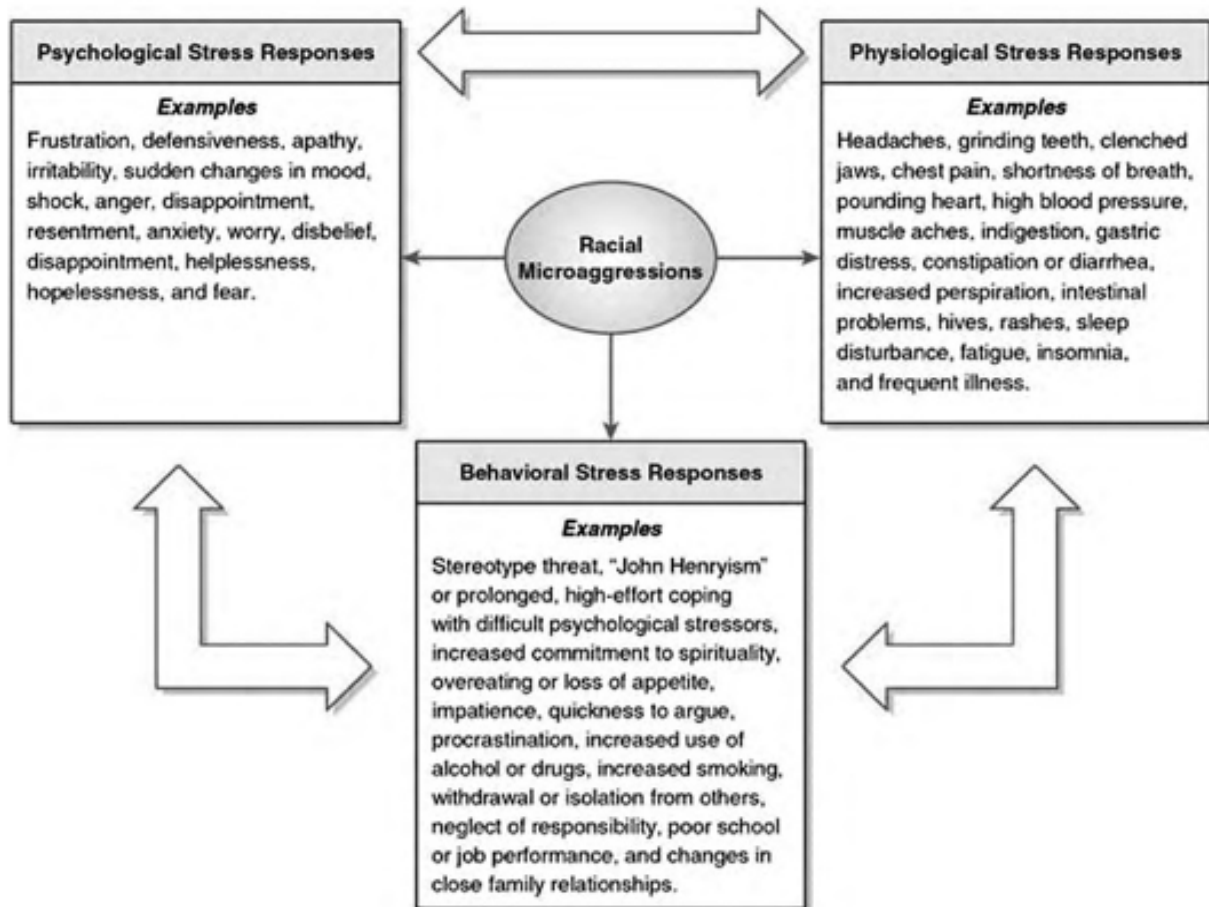
Microaggressions result from the actions or inactions of individuals or groups, and are often in contradiction to the values expressed in academic policies or procedures. As such, microaggressions are like the hidden curriculum in that they are part of the socialization process that communicates that some groups of people are more or less desirable (Sue, 2003; Sue & Constantine, 2007). Whether performed overtly, covertly, intentionally, or unintentionally, microaggressions stem from microaggressive behaviors. Thus, people have some agentic power in manifesting and mediating the conditions for their and others' retention in academia.

Overcoming for the Moment: Coping Strategies

Despite experiencing gendered racial microaggressions, Black women can also persevere. Constantine et al. (2008) identified coping strategies their participants practiced that involved others: seeking support from colleagues, friends, partners, and family members. They also chose

their battles carefully. For instance, they made deliberate decisions about when and how to confront racial microaggressions, prayed or used other spiritual forms of coping with difficult situations, withdrew interpersonally or emotionally from faculty members they perceived to be exhibiting racial microaggressions, and accepted the view that subtle racist treatment will always exist to some degree in academia. Other studies have confirmed and added to this list of coping strategies: maintaining high visibility in their communities (Gregory, 2001); utilizing protective policies and procedures with and without union assistance; seeking additional projects or other employment that is energizing and protective; and resisting or fighting to secure a place in academia for other Black women or legitimizing their work as scholars (Wright et al., 2007).

Filling the Void: What's Missing in the Literature

In reviewing the existing literature on BWF, great attention has been paid to the challenges and some attention to the coping strategies. However, many of the coping strategies considered have been focused on peer/family supports that allow BWF to vent or escape, but not always reflect and plan. Additionally, these studies have not always captured how the research of BWF can create spaces to foster well-being. The use of qualitative methods, extending the sister circle by pairing it with Forum Theatre, allows research on the self for the self and provides a space of healing.

Ohito (2021) theorized memory work through the lens of Black feminist thought and paired improvisation with the study of family histories through photographic images as part of her healing process. Her interest in how spaces of healing are created by Black women as embodied memory work shares theoretical space with our pairing of Boal's TO with sister circles to create a critical arts-based methodology that was culturally responsive to our participants. Like Ohito (2021), we drew on kinship ties (i.e., sister circles), improvisation, and images (e.g., image theatre) to stage space for our participants to practice reflection, action, and self-defense.

Methodology

We began the study from the lived experiences, academic knowledge base, and resulting assumptions about the significance of visibility in academia. Dr. Roberts is a former teacher, educator, and district and university consultant. Her research agenda focuses on leader preparation and retention, specifically a leader's ability to create environments that foster learning and well-being for educators and students, emphasizing equity and inclusion practices that are essential to learning and well-being in PK-20 settings. Dr. Nkrumah is an African American woman, science/STEM educator. She explores equitable teaching practices in STEM education through cultural and critical arts-based methodology. African American girls and women access in STEM education and the workforce underscores her research interests. Dr. Agosto studies educational systems, works to become multilingual and culturally attuned to foundational principles that resonate across cultures, and avoids creating positionality statements comprised of decontextualized identity markers that invite assumptions and stereotypes. María is a language and curriculum scholar. She explores the intersection of language and culture within curricula.

Some assumptions were brought by women with different ethnic identities (African American, Jamaican/African American, Spanish/Basque, Mexican/African American), including the following:

- Being (made) visible is a positive attribute of academic life that is coded into norms and processes, for instance, through awards processes (e.g., being nominated, being granted).
- Awards and accolades can bring visibility (i.e., positive recognition) in terms of celebrity through media communications after the announcement of an award.
- Awards and contractual statuses or rank (i.e., tenure and promotion) reflect positive visibility and have exponential power to further reproduce it (e.g., national or international presence).

We centered visibility as a cultural norm, a center that is not distinct from the periphery or its extremities of invisibility and hypervisibility. Along the continuum of visibility are rewards and punishments for academics (Settles et al., 2018) that can enliven or quash an academic career.

Sister Circle as Focus Group Methodology

African American sister circles originated as organized gatherings for Black women to share stories about their life experiences. The coming together of African American women functioned as a support group composed of family members and old and/or new friends (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Sister circles, first documented 150 years ago in the Black club movement and considered a cultural norm in communities and organizations, directly influenced African American women's well-being (Giddings, 1984). The networking of sisters included forming organizations that provided knowledge, help, encouragement, and support to Black women. Organizations that have adopted sister circles include churches, service clubs, and workplace environments. Although sister circles are made up of diverse Black women, typically they identify with a similar theme, such as healthy eating, spirituality, parenting, or education (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

In qualitative research, the sister circle has been adopted as a data generation methodology to explore the unique experiences of African American women in educational settings. Recognized as a culturally responsive technique, Black women gain testimonial authority to retell the critical incidents, such as those associated with inequities (e.g., racism, sexism, classism). Researchers have relied on sister (also spelled sista) circles to investigate Black women's experiences in higher education. For example, Collier (2017) designed a sista circle to call forth feelings of belongingness for 15 Black women doctoral students by encouraging affirmation, reflexivity, and feedback. Lacy (2017) used sista circles to explore Black women's interpretations of media representations and their influence on how they defined themselves. Through the sista circle, the Black women accessed resources (e.g., messages from family members or mother figures, Black women television icons, and Christian socialization messages) to define themselves. As such, sister circles as a methodological contribution provide a culturally informed approach based on African cultural values emphasizing belonging and

ethics in connection to knowledge/power and being. In research, it has been used to raise awareness of Black women's strategies to resist and disrupt forms of oppression.

Sister Circle Recruitment and Retreat

Once we received institutional review board approval, we emailed invitations to our Listserv of women who had attended our past TO-based events asking for volunteers to take part in the sister circle retreat. We set inclusion criteria for this retreat, which included women of African descent (i.e., Black) who had earned a doctoral degree and who either served as professionals in the field of education or were community members engaged in conversations on issues affecting social justice, education, or leadership in schools or communities. An email with an attached Sister Circle flyer was sent to participants, inviting them to attend a session using TO techniques to discuss the topic of visibility for Black women in academia. Eleven faculty members, all of whom identified as Black women, attended and they were guided by four "jokers" (the authors) and a guest joker (a Chicano man). Five went on to participate in the post-session interviews.

We met twice with participants virtually for separate events (sister circle retreat and sister circle focus group sessions) over a 2-week period. Each event lasted 2 hours. To convene the retreat, we (the jokers) welcomed the guests by showing or sharing an object, saying, or memory that would help us feel good and ready. We provided background on the history of sister circles and the TO, which was created by Brazilian theatrical scholar–practitioner Augusto Boal in the 1960s. We then facilitated gaming activities similar to icebreakers to de-mechanize the body and build a culture of trust.

Games/Exercises/Activities

Quotes by Black Women

We offered a series of quotes by Black women as a prompt that directed the participants to type reactions into the virtual chat from three choices: "I celebrate it," "I'm challenged by it," "I want to chat about it."

Newspaper Headlines

For this activity, participants were placed into breakout rooms of three to four with a joker/facilitator. They were instructed to select one of three article headlines from which to create an on-screen image using their bodies, and then later discuss the headline with the whole group.

Visibility Activity

This activity shifted the focus toward storytelling with participants recalling a time when they experienced being "invisible, visible, or hypervisible" in the academy.

Headline Construction

In the final exercise, we asked participants to write their dream headline and introduce it both verbally and physically with an image. We used an adaption of the African American cultural tradition *call and response* along with chanting to echo their dream headlines as we closed the session. Vocal chanting has been found to contribute to connectedness and psychosocial well-being by reducing stress and increasing positive affect in online/virtual environments (Simpson et al., 2021), as well as aiding Black women in their insurgency resistance work (Lindsey, 2017).

Data Generation

The two sister circle focus groups and follow-up activities with the researchers and participants resulted in audio, visual, and textual data (e.g., email exchanges, chatbox entries, transcribed recordings). The bulk of data were generated through the two sister circle focus groups, which were recorded via the virtual platform, and through the joker/researcher debriefings we held after each session.

We conducted two sister circle focus groups over two consecutive days using the same protocol with each. We incorporated image theatre into the sister circles to prompt discussion. We paired open-ended questions to encourage recollection of their experiences with visibility in academia with the following exercises.

Visibility

As jokers, we guided the participants through a show-and-tell style activity, where they spoke their name and words of wisdom, and then created an image on-screen with their bodies using the prompt: "Words of wisdom related to your professional identity." We also provided instructions to add the words of wisdom in the virtual chat area and to use their bodies to construct images of what they shared.

"Yes, But …" (Accuser and Accused)

As jokers, we invited participants to share a time in academia when they were accused of something. The stories they contributed were used to set up a role-playing scenario between two people where an accuser used the example to accuse the person designated as the accused. The accused person had to begin their response with "Yes, but" before elaborating on the reason.

Forum Theatre

To construct a performance related to the themes of invisibility and hypervisibility in academia, we divided the participants into two virtual breakout rooms to share accusation stories that became the dramatic scene for the forum. After 15–20 minutes of sharing and creating, we convened in the main virtual room to act out and intervene in the scenarios.

Forum Theatre is a problem-posing methodology through which audience members become "spect-actors" who take on the role of the protagonist to consider and act out different options. Their "taking over the stage equates with taking over life, in general" (Emert &

Friedland, 2011, p. 180), as they try "to bring the play to a different end (in which the cycle of oppression is broken)" (Boal, 2002, p. XXIV). The jokers operated as the facilitators (Agosto et al., 2022), working with the participants to create scenes from their own lives that showcased an unjust situation that did not turn out well for them. Forum Theatre offers spect-actors a collective intellectual and emotional examination of an issue (Fritz, 2012). It is often a single or series of short performance(s), dialogical scene(s), representing a particular situation of oppression(s). Audience members deconstruct it/them to connect the particular (microcosms) with society at large (macrocosms), which can suggest other paths to show a world "as it could be" (Boal, 2002, p. 243).

These exercises laid the foundation for the second hour, the sister circle focus group interview that occurred during the last hour of each day to facilitate discussion (generate data). The data generation resulted in visual and auditory data from the sister circle focus group interview protocol (see protocol in Appendix X) and a reflection prompt sent to the participants via email a week after the final event: "Looking back over the last week since our event, I found myself recalling, reflecting on, or thinking about …"

Data Analysis: Debriefing, Determining Themes, and Interpretive Co-Writing

A research team member stored and uploaded the audio and visual recordings after the session to a secure server that required dual-authentication via Duo Push to access. We stored this anonymized data on a secure Google Drive accessible to those jokers who were identified in the institutional review board study protocol. Debriefing highlights from the events informed our continued analysis through close listening/viewing and reading of data. By debriefing after each session, we were able to highlight what seemed to be the most meaningful or generative moments that transpired as we observed and participated in them. We sought to benefit from group processing as we aimed to refine our work as jokers/facilitators and researchers, and understand what it instigated in others.

Video chat conferencing supported our collaborative analytic writing process. We made reference to literature, codified data into themes and sub-themes, and supported one another as we searched for the words to communicate our sense-making as ideas and relationships (e.g., character assassination as invisibility *and* hypervisibility). Through conversation and comments added through the collaborative writing tools, we reviewed the interrelated questions (role of the methodology supporting Black women's engagement with the topic, experiences of visibility in academia) in an interactive process of verbalizing and writing shared interpretations through consensus, recollection, and revisitation of the recordings and transcripts.

Participants

A total of five African American women participated in the sister circle focus group (each day 2, 3). The participants were from diverse professional backgrounds with some entering academia as a second career. Some were early in their academic careers, and some were tenured. In Table 1, we briefly describe the participants' status, using pseudonyms and vague terms to

describe their institutional affiliations and regional situatedness in the United States at the time of the sister circle forums in 2021.

Table 1

Participants

Participant	Position	Institution	U.S. Region	Time in Current Position (Years)	Other Notes
Tia	Postdoctoral scholar	Predominantly White institution	Northeast	2.5	
Niya	Assistant professor	Predominantly White institution	Midwest	3	
Esther	Department chair	Predominantly White institution	Midwest	9	20+ years in academia
Eve	Administrator	Ethnically diverse institution	West		Cross-disciplinary professional background in education
Lori	Associate professor and department chair	Predominately White institution	Southeast		

Findings

When asked to reflect on their TO sessions, all participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity. A few commented on how they were not sure what to expect, being new to the practice, but acknowledged enjoying the experience. We captured four themes related to visibility: exhaling, the power of story, sitting in my feelings, and rehearsal for life.

Exhaling: Dropping the Game Face

All participants spoke to experiences of hypervisibility that caused them to feel as if their words and actions, especially their facial expressions, were being constantly surveilled by those around them. Eve compared being examined and scrutinized to being treated like a slave on the auction block: "It's like the women on the slave block … examining of us. They want you, but they want to expose you, and it's a violent exposure … expose you to the bare essence." As a result of having to constantly don a protective game face, many saw the reflective theatre practices as dropping their masks. Wright et al. (2007) referenced the practice of "don[ning] a white mask on their black skins" (p. 149) in order to align with centered Whiteness in academic spaces.

Our theatrical exercises required the participants to step into their inner self of self in connection and give words and expressions to the feelings that many of them had not openly expressed in moments of challenge. Lori noted:

> It does feel good to let some of that loose, but, yes, it does feel weird. You've practiced the game face … why does it feel so wrong and forced? I've spent a lot of my life keeping the game face … keeping composure … because you want to make sure that they still hear you.

While Lori spoke of wanting her academic peers to hear the knowledge and experience that she brought to the table, what could not be voiced there was the prejudice they created towards her in that space. However, in the forum, she could breathe and speak freely the words that were unspoken, counter to the "consequences of exhaling" that participants associated with their university space. Perceived oversharing or overreacting in the workplace might result in them being labeled as angry, abrasive, aggressive, or unprofessional (Doharty, 2020). While on our virtual stage, they were able to express the range of their emotions that they might otherwise calibrate at work to avoid risk on a daily basis.

Through the activities and generative dialogue, we gathered that their accomplishments have come at a price and, for many, the price has been high. Eve reflected on the toll of sacrificing:

> It feels as though, you know, we already sacrificed so much as just Black women in general. And a lot of that sacrifice are things that we've chosen to sacrifice, you know, just to get to where we are in our academic careers, right, like getting our doctorates, and things. We sacrificed some things because we wanted this trajectory. But in our careers, it's almost like we're being, I'm gonna use this really harsh term, we're being raped of other things. Against our will, you know, things are being taken from us, and there is no recourse. We don't have an advocate, there is no #metoo movement for us.

As she noted, the current culture of higher education is not often supportive of proper self-care that promotes well-being (Buchanan, 2020; Hills, 2019; Holder et al., 2015).

The Power of Performance: Re-telling versus Deconstructing and Reconstructing

While many participants acknowledged having shared their stories with people in the past, they saw a difference between simply retelling the story and being able to add to the telling a deconstruction of meaning and a reconstruction of an alternative reality or ending, similar to countering the master narrative (Jones et al., 2020; Stanley, 2007). In the moments of forum creation, participants were asked not only to retell, but to isolate and articulate specific moments of stress, words, and actions that challenged them, as well as their desired outcomes. They then watched their story be recast and reconstructed by their sisters in the circle. In the playback, participants acknowledged the power in shifting vantage points. They could relive the pain of their story and live vicariously through the person who had taken on their identity as the spect-actor.

Some of the loudest laughter occurred in a virtual breakout room when a participant watched her stand-in say and do what she wanted to do in the captured scene. Spect-actors were able to take control of the situation and make important decisions as opposed to having decisions made for them (Boal, 2002). The participant who offered the story surmised that observing the scene from the outside helped her to calm down and see a solution. Niya stated:

> Initially when I started talking about it, I felt like I was getting riled up, but then, as you were playing it out, I felt like, "Okay, I take responsibility and am not allowing anybody, including her, to hinder my success."

In that moment of introspection, while watching her scene play out, the participant came to realize she had given up her power and needed to reclaim it. She left seemingly more certain she had the knowledge and resources to do so.

Sitting in My Feelings: Time for Introspection

The participants were quick to acknowledge the power of feeling their feelings. As Eve expressed:

> I think the theatre aspect gives you an opportunity to see how it sits with you and how it resonates with you … most of our experiences, you know, we're in our professional settings, we have to keep that game face on, right, because you can never let them see you sweat. … We all have that kind of mantra where you have to keep it together. But in this setting, in the theatrical setting, we're able to really feel it, and sit with it, and be okay in that space versus in our office spaces, where we have to just kind of put the brave face on and keep it moving. … You have to kind of just keep it just real confined and the theatre space allows you to be unconfined, to unpack it.

Now that our participants had another opportunity to reflect on their experiences and reassess their meaning and relevance, they were able to process what many expressed as hurt,

exhaustion, and moments of hopelessness and frustration similar to those conveyed in other studies (Berk, 2017; Constantine, et al., 2008; Holder et al., 2015; Wells, 2013). Esther added,

> Yeah, that definitely resonates for me. I think sometimes, um, I don't take the time to really think about how hurtful it is to be in this position, and so we have moments like this to sit with it and really deconstruct it and, yeah, yeah, I feel it, I feel it.

These realizations of hurt and exhaustion were not stumbling blocks, but red flags (alerts) to self-care they desired to respond to. They did not want to "explode internally," but because they "have to constantly hold it in, even at home …" it seemed to be important for them to have a space and peer group where they could let go, where their strength did not equate to an absence or dismissal of their feelings, where they could find comfort when confronting their pain. In the sister circle focus group, they were vulnerable without having someone trying to take advantage of them. The theatrical stage provided a space for reflecting, healing, and addressing what one participant referred to as the challenge of "staying whole" (Hills, 2019; Holder et al., 2015).

Processing Emotions in Professional Spaces

What was evident for all our participants was the policing of emotions in the workplace, whether microaggressions (Constantine, et al., 2008) or monitoring the cultural self (Blackshear & Hollis, 2021). They were asked to take what was dished out, to give more than they had in their reserve, but never to feel the full range of emotions that came with the daily strain. Esther recalled:

> People are always trying to police how I do things, and I know that, so I tried to be preventative because I don't want to have those conflicts, but it comes at a price. … I'm holding a lot of my emotions in, and this is not healthy … I should be able to display the full range of emotions like anybody else. … You shouldn't get to the point where you hold them in [and] they explode at inopportune times because it's really about all the buildup.

Similarly, Lori added:

We're always tap dancing, shucking and jiving, like we're always just, like, putting on this show … the black minstrel show, that's exactly what we're doing even though we're well educated with PhDs. … We have to put on that face, but we're holding it in … we can't reveal how we really feel in our workplace … even when we want to let it out once we get home, we have to still take care of other people, and so we still can't really fully let it out. So, it's just like, when do we really get a chance to just let it go, to breathe? It's still the whole waiting to exhale.

The restricted range of motion and emotion they described has been identified as a way to harness Black women's intellect (Doharty, 2020). This physical bondage can be accompanied, as Eve noted, with some examination. As participants highlighted, their inability to process and to decompress their emotions in the workspace had effects on health and home life.

Rehearsal for Life: Planning for Future Action

A major desired outcome driving Boal to create Forum Theatre was the potential for spect-actors to leave feeling more prepared for what is to come (Boal, 2002). Such activities as accuser/accused and Forum Theatre allowed participants to reassess past moments and consider alternative endings, while also rehearsing for more favorable outcomes in the future. While some participants were able to express in the moment that these activities gave them additional words and alternative approaches for the future, other participants shared (post-forum) how their time with us impacted their goal-oriented thinking and acting. Tia shared:

> Looking back over the last week since our event, I found myself reflecting on how I position my work in an academic space that pushes back against social change. As I'm working on job applications, I'm thinking about how to be true to the social justice part of my work, while showing it has value to academia.

Much of our time with participants was spent collecting metaphors and words of wisdom that showcased the people from whom they drew knowledge. The collective and creative approach we instigated provided an opportunity for them to invoke these people and words, and create a communal pool of knowledge. Tia noted the metaphors were like medicine that she could carry with her. Similarly, Esther used her words of wisdom to contextualize a post-forum success:

> "When the student is ready the teacher appears." Being able to process my feelings about [my colleague] in the sister circle gave me the tools I needed to show up for this meeting in a way that allowed this issue to be resolved. Synchronicity plays a big role in my life. I don't think the events that happened this week after participating in the sister circle were a coincidence … it was divine timing, and I was ready. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!

The critical arts-based and culturally informed methodology allowed Esther a chance to revisit an incident with a colleague. She viewed the experience as helpful to how she proceeded to work through the tension with a colleague and improve their relational dynamic.

Critical arts-based approaches have the potential to create spaces of reflection and healing for Black women in academia. As a healing space, re-creation offers Black women a space to shed their masks and be seen as valued and supported in their quest to not simply serve others as if they are the "maids of academe" (Harley, 2008), or, as one of our participants added, "academmammies" (see also Parham-Payne, 2016).

Limitations

These events occurred in 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–present). This was a time when many colleges and universities shifted more activities to an online or virtual format allowing faculty to work remotely from home. The circumstances around the wide-scale global event were not included in our discussion prompts or recruitment materials. We were unable to make any distinctions between how visibility was understood, experienced, and mediated in relation to the pandemic. In logistical terms, we only provided one option for attendance within a 2-day period (Friday, Saturday). As such, our participants were those who were available. Additionally, they may have been more partial to us or the arts than those who did not attend.

Discussion and Recommendations

As we reflect on the wisdom and experiences that our participants brought to the circle, and the benefits that they gained from attendance, we aim to better understand the experiences of Black women in academia who resist the social norms that suppress and hinder their progress in higher education. This study illuminates the strategic ways five Black women confronted inequities and provides new insights. However, the immediate and further study of Black women faculty should be conducted. When reflecting with our participants about what more is needed in research and academia to support them and other Black women in academia, the following themes surfaced as next steps and recommendations for further research: expanding the sister circle, protecting and healing from character assassinations, and growing the movement through resistance as self-care.

Expanding the Sister Circle

When assessing our performance, we considered what our participants needed from and valued in us and academia. We determined it was more time and more space(s) where they could be reflective and heal. Many likened our sister circle invitation as a beckoning, calling them out of the stronghold of academia. We were welcomed in each session with smiles and declarations that they were ready, eager, and in need of a sister circle. Other scholars have begun sister circle and sisters of the academy research (Claybrook, 2021; Davis et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2020; Overstreet et al., 2021). How then do we continue to provide these opportunities for our sisters in academia, maximizing the potential of our limited numbers? How do we further networking efforts and reach out to our most isolated members, who often have the greatest need for support? It is important moving forward to study the active sister organizations, outreach and inclusion, the scope of participants, and who is missing.

It was apparent that the working norms and double standards that prevented them from having an equal opportunity to show up in their space, physically and emotionally, required more of their time and consideration to fully understand the myriad challenges and successfully identify additional strategies and resources. Thus, further study is needed on the processing of emotions in professional spaces and mediating power dynamics for successful navigation.

Protecting and Healing from Character Assassinations

They can't kill your dreams, so they assassinate your character. (Nitya Prakash)

Character assassination refers to the malicious and unjustified harming of a person's good reputation. Whether through microaggressions or blatant accusations, our participants had experienced repeated attempts by others to assassinate their character. Whether through questioning the quality of their credentials, invalidating their qualifications, challenging their leadership, misinterpreting their words or actions, or simply manufacturing lies about them, their reputations were constantly under attack. These types of harmful acts promoted their hypervisibility as the accused, while it increased their invisibility, as such attacks killed off parts of their personal and professional identity. Their invisibility was multiplied when their ethical mistreatment was ignored and their identity silenced and forgotten. People often remember the accusation, not the defense. We more fully realized the need to explore how Black women protect themselves against constant character assassinations and better understand the internal supports for personal well-being and the external supports for professional success.

The Movement: Resistance as Self-care

While all the participants were successful in that they entered academia and had advanced beyond the initial stage in their career, their self-care in the academy was still a work in progress. Self-care in the academy usually requires one to buck up or grin and bear the hardships within the system. Yet, according to Hills (2019), the greatest form of resistance is self-care:

self-care is literally self-defense; it is a proactive and unrelenting insistence upon the safeguarding of one's identity and well-being in the face of any stimuli that pose a threat—giving credence to the womanist proclamation of self-love. (p. 25)

On a larger scale, collective self-care can spur a movement that promotes and benefits from individual and collective resistance. Accepting self-love can be multiplied into collective care may require a paradigm shift for those of us who have been taught to persevere in the status quo alone and at all costs. Doharty (2020) noted the need for Black women to be "strategically emotional" and weigh the risks for rewards and punishments.

Black women seeking power in controlling their images and their visibility might reconceptualize strength in academia as having the courage and will to resist those things that jeopardize personal well-being. Thus, further work will be needed on how to gather small numbers across educational sites to form the critical mass needed to create a movement for the prioritization of self-love and self-care. In spaces where these selves are hardly visible as whole selves, holistic practices of healing are needed in the work of gathering.

Conclusion

Studying the complexity of Black women's lives as they mediate the social-psychological phenomena of academic life has revealed a kaleidoscope of experiences. Previous literature has often focused on the coping strategies of peer/family supports (i.e., serving as venting boards and escapes). Boal's TO techniques added to the limited research methodologies used in studying the lives of Black women. Using embodied memory work supported them in the process of inquiring while reflecting on and planning for the challenges of academia. The theatrical stage provided a space to release previously policed emotions, and deconstruct, reconstruct, and heal the whole self. Similarly, Black women scholars may use Boal's techniques as a frame for healing through research on the self for the self as they practice Forum Theatre with one another.

When hooks (1989) referenced the politics of location, she encouraged readers to identify the spaces where the vision and narrative need to be revised. She described, "I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility" (p. 153). As Black women faculty continue to navigate and explore their visibility in academia, they are often confronting and revising the visible and invisible boundaries of designated spaces structured by racism, sexism, and gendered racism. They may choose to embrace the power of their marginality, creating spaces of like voices, solidarity, creativity, and recovery. hooks (1989) acknowledged the power of the arts, which we echo and extend to include the power of critical arts-based research to create spaces of reflection and healing for Black women faculty.

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