

# Pushing Back Against the Mammy: Reflections on Teaching Equity Online at a PWI

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*This study focuses on two Black women professors processing their experiences teaching an online equity in education course, to in-service education professionals, in a masters program. Using Narratives of Experience, Critical Race Theory, and Critical Black Feminism as our theoretical frames, we push back against the pressure for us to perform as caricature mammies to our students. Examining the experiences of Black women educator counternarratives as a self-study, the themes that emerged were: historic (re)memory; preparation, competency, and motivations; aggressions; coping mechanisms; and awareness. As endeavors to make the academy more diverse, accessible, and equitable, are pursued, the higher education community must be able to ascertain the costs (to health, safety, and overall well-being) when asking or assigning social justice/equity courses, even if the content is well within the instructors' professional purview. As online courses make education more accessible and convenient for both students and universities, attention should be paid to this unique learning environment for Black faculty which continues to be a space where invisibility and erasure remain unchecked. To push back against the mammy, there must be systematic action to incorporate all the nuance that Black womanhood embodies, especially in spaces where we have been positioned to identify or perform only as a caricature. To dismantle this insidious trope, future research must incorporate women scholars of color as principal investigators and research partners, prioritizing their voices to be incorporated in the telling of their stories.*

*Keywords:* Black women scholars, Racial experiences in academia, social justice in higher education, adult online learning, racial counterstorytelling, critical black feminism

## Introduction

“Go above and Beyoncé,” read a recent social media meme. Though light-hearted, its sentimentality is familiar to Black women in all strati of American life. The meme harkens to an old adage that to be Black in this society, one must perform beyond the standard, make it look

effortless, and then some. The value women of African descent bring to all spaces has been and continues to be incredible – their magic is, however, peripherally noted or completely unrecognized.

The superheroification of Black womanhood is a double-edged stereotype that continues to persist in all American institutional paradigms and is palpable in academia. And these demands for what often manifests in subservient exceptionality are especially evident in predominantly White colleges and universities. Often, Black women professors are tapped to engage in anti-racism, equity, diversity, and inclusion work, while they make up miniscule percentages of larger teaching faculties. These initiatives however well-intentioned and/or effective, often come with an unmediated expense, the encumberment of Black and brown faculty.

This study focuses on two Black women professors, as they process their experiences teaching an online equity in education course to in-service education professionals in a master's program. This work adds to the growing academic discourse that explores the gendered, racial, and sociocultural nuances women educators of color encounter at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Moreover, this study not only underscores literature in the field that substantiates the often underrated, undervalued, and stereotyped assessments made of Black, female academics (Harley, 2003; Gutierrez y Muhs et al., 2012), but provides new insight into how these tropes may extend into online spaces.

This project embodies a counternarrative storying process (Collins, 2000; Woodley et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2018;) purposed to fortify our place in academia and confront seemingly skewed students' perception of our contributions in the aforementioned course. Through it, we found ourselves revisiting the trope that Black women need to embody the personas of nurturer, coddler, and bearer of burdens with a smile. The mammy, who was responsible for maintaining the household and raising White children, often at her breast, seemed to symbolize the conflation of our students' perceptions and expectations. This clichéd trope is well-documented in some of the United States' most beloved forms of entertainment, such as *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and even *The Help*. This metaphor is consistent with the expectations of students at the PWI where we (as authors and researchers) taught together. Our students' demands of time, energy, and attention all played a role and were at odds with the goals of The Course. How could we, marked as we were, still foster Freire's conscientization (Pratt-Clark, 2012) in this online and predominantly White space, but also embody the feminist epistemological stance of saying no and enforcing boundaries. We pushed back against the pressure for us to perform as mummies, but found ourselves there anyway.

### **Literature Review**

#### *The Online Context*

Online courses and virtual learning have become an essential schooling option for students and a cost-effective mode to offer courses as the COVID-19 pandemic persists. Online learning makes it possible for students to virtually access course content from anywhere, but also comes with issues such as: learner expectations, learner readiness, learner identity, and

learner participation (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Teaching online via non-Western or ‘traditional’ epistemologies is a burgeoning field of study that has surged in recent years. Researchers have attempted to transfer a variety of these ideologies into online spaces to enrich knowledge production, critique, and creation. Often this research suggests faculty employ culturally responsive (Gay, 2018) and/or sustaining pedagogical practices (Parris, 2012) characterized by ongoing critical reflection, multiple perspectives, and deep interrogation of the inherent value of knowledge through experience (Woodley et al., 2017; Gruber, 2015; Meyers, 2008). One way researchers suggest to foster these aims is through the implementation of an authentic online presence (Young & Bruce, 2001).

Tharp (2017) asserts ‘breaking the screen’ through frequent communication, opportunities for collaborative sharing, and leaning into the void can allow for connection where there would otherwise be a void. These methodologies prove worthwhile, but little research addresses the implications of enacting these measures when one’s online identity is ‘marked’ either by name, picture, or other sociocultural reference. Further, though there are suggestions for how to use transformative pedagogy when teaching social justice issues online (Meyers, 2008), there is little research that explores the experiences of women faculty of color have with leading these courses. This study underscores literature in the field that substantiates the often underrated, undervalued, and stereotyped assessments made of Black, female academics (Buchanan, 2020; Harley, 2008; Gutierrez y Muhs et. al, 2012), and provide new insight into how these tropes may extend into online spaces. Recently, researchers have chronicled what appears to be gendered and/or racial bias when referencing online instructors’ response rate and message tone to their students (Baker et al., 2018; Conway & Bethune, 2015). Yet, little research has been done to explore the reverse, especially in online spaces. What role, if any, does the perceived racial and/or gendered identity of online instructors play in student engagement?

### **Theoretical Framework**

In undertaking this work, we thought it essential to situate our reflections and the experiences that undergird them in a theoretical framework that would best exemplify the necessity and challenges in telling our stories: Critical Race Theory is that framework. Further, narrative theory organizes our insights, and Critical Black Feminist scholarship amplifies the unique intersections of race, gender, and theories of knowing we experienced.

#### *Critical Race Theory*

Like the Critical Law Studies from which Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged and self-actualized (Crenshaw, 2011), CRTs place in education is vital. According to Delgado (1995), CRT begins with the notion that racism is “normal, not aberrant in American society” (Ladson-Billings, 1999) and as such, clearer understandings of its nuances, manifestations, and synonyms is necessary to alter its continued impact and influence. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) first implored scholars to see the viability of CRT in education. Spaces of teaching and learning had not readily interrogated its racist foundation and leanings, even in the face of calls for

multiculturalism during the mid to late 20th century (Banks, 2008). Often, these instructional approaches and professional dispositions had a deficit perspective and/or conflated social fluency with conformity to White/Eurocentric ‘norms’ of culture (Goldman, 1993). For these scholars, and others, CRT could be essential to calls for preparing White educators tasked with teaching and learning amongst students of color (p. 211, Ladson-Billings, 1999). CRT names race and exposes the ways in which whiteness becomes the central and often loudest character in these spaces. CRT in education is vital because it:

“[...] challenges the universality of white experience/judgement as the authoritative standard that binds people of color and normatively *measures, directs, controls, and regulates the terms of proper thought, expression, presentation, and behavior.*”

(emphasis added; Tate, 1997, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 215.)

For us, this fundamental ‘work’ of CRT aligned well with our experiences where the form and seeming freedom online teaching provided made us particularly susceptible to the lure of Whiteness functioning in the aforementioned ways. In using CRT to frame our collective experiences, we have been able to interrupt the dominant narrative. Through this CRT allows such an interjection with full acknowledgement of the legitimacy of our stories.

#### *Narratives of Experience, CRT & Critical Black Feminism*

Narratives of experience provide an invaluable method for underscoring epistemological leanings and theoretical underpinnings for academics (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a mode of qualitative research, narrative researchers study phenomena through living stories because “story is one, if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 4). For Black academics, more specifically, the expression of such stories can validate experiences otherwise dismissed or unaccounted. As counternarratives they provide insight into the racialized hidden curricula and methods of hegemonic oppression that exist in higher education (Moore, 2017; Parker, 2017) and impact the efficacy of their work. Further, the narratives of Black women undergird the Black feminist tradition (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 2018) that empowers women to construct (or in our case, co-construct) theories of epistemology that substantiate our experiences and make clear the notion to “go above and Beyoncé,” which resulted in an exploitative caricature of exceptionalism.

Our retellings are “[...] expressions of authority, preemption, and sanction” (Ladson-Billings, 1999) that not only center our experiences first and foremost, but also exists as more than data. Our reflections have benefit beyond us; they affirm the diversity of experiences found in the larger community of Black women academics (Kohli, 2009). In using CRT to story the “extraordinary scrutiny” (Evans, 2007, p. 134) we faced, we critique and shed light on how “individual acts ... maintain the privilege and authority of [Whiteness],” (Carroll, 2017, p. 213) even when such acts are antithetical to educational objectives of equity and social justice. To guide our investigation and analysis of our joint work, we also looked to Stevenson’s (2014) racial literacy framework to process our experiences. Stevenson (2014) highlights the need to systematically explore racial stress to productively move through racialized encounters. Through

racial storytelling, we cope with the experience and can recast them in order to resolve racial fears and take back the agency we hold.

Moreover, these complementary frameworks provide with more acuity a way to explore how the experiences of Black academics and women converge (Uvanney, 2009; Rollock, 2012). Education scholarship that explores the Black experience is multifaceted, yet the voices of women are often quieted, and the diversity of their unique realities become a forced monolith (Evans, 2007; Turner, 2002). However, pairing Critical Black Feminism (CBF) and CRT redistributes the diversity of our work in higher education without limiting the volume of those realities, or creating a hierarchy. CRT empowers us to tell our story, while CBF provides agency and amplifies the ways the Black woman is the *other* other. As bell hooks (1984) asserts, CBF shifts the vantage point of storyteller and forces others to listen when Black women speak. *Pushing Back Against the Mammy*

Beyond scholarship that minimizes the voice of Black women academics, the trope of the mammy still exists in White student-Black women faculty interactions. Women faculty are expected to be more nurturing than their male counterparts, which increases the labor they must expend to satisfy student expectations (El-Alayli et al., 2018). For Black women faculty, this standard is doubly impacted by racial identity (Gregory, 2001). There is a reliance on Black women faculty to exceed student expectations in academic content, delivery, and student emotion management, while many remain skeptical she can achieve the bare minimum (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Though mammies essentially oversaw all household operations, there was the perception that she needed supervision and was under constant surveillance. The Black woman academic, ever conscious of how this trope can manifest in her professional spheres must also maintain vigilance as she anticipates gendered and racial stereotypes that antagonize her competency (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). The devaluing of Black faculty is not new, but the racialized experiences of Black women faculty leading equity-oriented coursework in graduate programs is understudied (Harlow, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006).

### ***Claiming Our Positionality***

Our reflections and collected data show an awareness of our positionality in this course. Our awareness impacts this qualitative work. We claim space, at the onset, (Pathak, 2010) to disrupt the dominant discourse. More importantly, we refer to ourselves as authors because of the personal (and professional) unchecked student expectations and the stories they produced had on us. We have chosen to center ourselves and not the context.

#### *Author 1:*

I identify as an African-American cisgender woman, with a strong respect for my diasporic ancestry. Being a former K-12 practitioner fuels my involvement in teacher education, and I am a critical teacher scholar. I am invested in developing the skills necessary for my students to rethink systems to create revolutionary ways to imagine and actualize the future.

Author 2:

I am my ancestors’ wildest dream. I am a cisgender, Black woman scholar (momma, sisterteacherfriend) dedicated to creating and re-imagining academic spaces that tangibly foster and generate equity. I believe doing so keeps us all accountable to the vision American society so often purports to hold.

***Situating “The Course”***

“The Course” was designed by a self-identified White-Ashkenazi-American, cisgender straight woman who focuses on the impact of systemic racism and white supremacy in schools. “The Course” was based on Paul Gorski’s (2017) “Equity Literacy” Framework (see figure 1 below) with the goal of guiding in-service education professionals toward more equitable schools through the facilitated development of action-oriented plans. “The Course” was offered solely online in an accelerated seven-week module format. Course assignments included weekly readings, discussion board posts, group collaboration, and multimodal engagement activities purposed to stretch students’ capacity to apply content to their instructional or educational practice.

Author 1 served as the instructor of record, while Author 2 was listed as the preceptor. These titles did not affect the structure of The Course or delegation of duties. The instructor and preceptor facilitated The Course’s implementation by answering student questions, monitoring correspondence, assessing learning activities, and guiding students through materials. This course was consistent with the structure of other online courses offered through the graduate program. The Course had over 50 students enrolled.

Abilities	Examples of Associated Knowledge and Skills
1. Ability to <b>Recognize</b> even the subtlest biases and inequities	<p><b>Equity literate educators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>notice subtle bias in learning materials and classroom interactions;</li> <li>show curiosity about ways school policy and practice might disadvantage some students in unintentional (or intentional) ways; and</li> <li>reject deficit views that outcome inequalities (like test score disparities) are the result of the cultures or mindsets of students of color, students experiencing poverty, or other marginalized-identity students.</li> </ul>
2. Ability to <b>Respond</b> to biases and inequities in the immediate term	<p><b>Equity literate educators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develop the facilitation skills and content knowledge necessary to intervene effectively when biases or inequities arise in a classroom or school;</li> <li>cultivate in students the ability to analyze bias and inequity in classroom materials, classroom interactions, and school policies; and</li> <li>foster conversations with colleagues about equity concerns in their schools.</li> </ul>
3. Ability to <b>Redress</b> biases and inequities in the long term	<p><b>Equity literate educators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>advocate against inequitable school practices like racially or economically biased tracking and advocate for equitable practices;</li> <li>never confuse <i>celebrating diversity</i> with <i>equity</i>, such as by responding to racial conflict with cultural celebrations; and</li> <li>teach about sexism, poverty, racism, ableism, transphobia, and heterosexism.</li> </ul>
4. Ability to <b>Create and Sustain</b> bias-free and equitable classrooms, schools, and institutional cultures	<p><b>Equity literate educators:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>express high expectations for through higher-order pedagogies;</li> <li>consider how they assign homework and communicate with families, understanding that students have different levels of access to resources like computers and the Internet; and</li> <li>prioritize consideration of the needs, challenges, and barriers experienced by students who are from marginalized groups in each discussion and each decision about classroom, school, or district policy and practice.</li> </ul>

Figure 1. Gorski (2017) “Equity Literacy Framework for Educators”

***Research Foci:***

As we began to create this reflective piece, it was necessary to investigate what it meant as Black female educators to foster critical conversations about social justice online. We began our exploration with the following questions: What happens when Black women

professors facilitate social justice courses online? How could students' inability to transfer equity-based skills negatively impact Black women instructors who are invested in course concepts?

***Research Design:***

Narrative inquiry as a method of self-study (Goodson, 1995) provided the process and data source for our reflections and their subsequent analyses. Narrative inquiry uses collaborative data collection and analysis through the sharing of storied reflections (and in our case between co-authors) within a particular context and time (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Narrative inquiry provides the space to value the experiences of educators, how their knowledge base expands due to these experiences, and how such data offers a vehicle for analyzing authorship (Olson, 2000). These accounts, particularly when grounded in accepted modes of research and authored by marginalized groups, tap into “the reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we have chosen” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, as cited in Olson, 2000, p. 171). Moreover, “critical race scholars view experiential knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color to counter the dominant educational discourse about people of color” (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 172). In this way, narrative inquiry meshes well with the CRT tenet of counter storytelling.

**Methods**

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative-based self-study (LaBoskey, 2004) was to explore how two Black women scholars reflected on their shared experience of teaching an online, masters level, equity-based course at a predominantly White university in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The study explored those autobiographical, instructional, and other factors that coalesced to characterize our collective and individual experiences teaching this course. This study relies heavily on narrative inquiry methodology to elicit the stories of the co-authors. In this section, we provide a detailed overview of the research design, site information, procedures, data collection, and data analysis methods.

***Procedures:***

*Step One: Brainstorming & Collective (Re)Memory*

To initiate an unfolding event (Cupchik, 1995) ripe for reflection and (re)memory (Morrison, 1992; Parker, 2001; Clough, 1998), the authors met in person to discuss their experiences. Neither had reviewed or consulted course related documents, data, or other artifacts in the previous 10 months. During this meeting, the authors used a collaborative, online word processor, Google Docs, to transcribe notes (see figure 2 below).

Creating data and looking at email exchanges, conversation notes,  
The technology medium may have offered a buffer  
“Internet thuggerish” - may have lessened the amount of hostility because we could see feel the atmosphere  
Learning online management systems as  
What are the implications of  
What happens when you try to empower social justice online  
What happens when the facilitators or curators have a personal historical investment in that and the receivers of that are deficit, un-aware  
  
How do you teach “wokeness” online?  
Can you teach wokeness online?

*Figure 2. Screenshot A: Initial Brainstorm & Collective Reflections*

From this initial meeting the authors used questions/storied prompts to discuss our overall impressions, takeaways, and feelings related to teaching The Course. As we continued to brainstorm and dialogue, we agreed individual narrative reflections would serve as the next set of data.

*Step Two: Initial Narrative Reflections*

After setting a date and time for our next in-person meeting, we began writing our initial reflections. Each narrative used the protocol below:

1. Overall experience teaching social justice, race, etc.
2. What resonates or stands out the most from the semester teaching together? What informed those things?
3. What are the teaching and scholarly implications of this experience?

*Step Three: Initial Coding, Data-Driven Interviews & Expanded Reflective Narratives*

Once each initial reflection was written, we reviewed each other’s narrative and used open coding to track emerging themes and highlight any areas of further inquiry. Codes, questions, and reader-responses were embedded within the initial narratives using the “Comment” feature on Google Docs. We then discussed (via one two-hour long phone conversation) our thoughts on emerging themes. We also crosschecked data and codes to condense them based on new codes.

After this initial review, we re-read each other’s narratives and developed questions to encourage one another to reflect deeper. Once embedded within the initial narrative reflections, each co-author acted as transcriber and interviewer during a phone conversation to develop expanded reflections. This phone conversation was also recorded and transcribed. We, then, categorized our expanded reflections into existing thematic codes and developed new codes, where necessary. These themes were organized in code mapping tables (Anfara et al., 2002) to increase trustworthiness. See Table 1.

**Table 1.**

Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Analysis  
(to be read from the bottom up)

1. What happens when you try to empower social justice online?	2. What happens when the facilitators or curators have a personal historical investment in that and the receivers of that are unaware?
(THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO DATA SET)	
1. Preparation & Competency & Motivations	3. Aggressions
2. Historic (Re)Memory	4. Coping Mechanisms
	5. Awareness
(SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES)	
1A. Aggressions	2A. Preparation
1B. Coping Mechanisms (teaching responses)	2B. Competency
1C. Coping Mechanisms (personal response)	2C. Motivations
1D. Awareness	2D. Historic (Re)Memory
(FIRST ITERATION: Initial Emerging Codes/Surface Content Analysis)	
1A. Aggression (macro/micro)	2A. Commitment
1A. Social violence	2A. Course content – professional goal alignment
1A. Trauma	2A. Course structure
1A. Stress	2A. Undergraduate alignment to course goals
1B. Coping mechanisms	2A. ELA Background
1B. Boundaries	
1B. Communication	2B. Push/Pull factor
	2B. Professional Preparation
1C. Coping mechanisms	2B. Preparedness/Competency
1C. Sanity check	2B. Facilitation style
1C. Validate experiences	
1C. Performative allyship	2C. Impact change
1C. Professional support	2C. Fearless
	2C. Diversity/Equity/Inclusion
1D. New awareness	2C. Social Justice aim
1D. Future research	
	2D. Historic memory of expectations
	2D. Historical consciousness
	2D. Perception of being other
	2D. Professional dissonance

## Findings & Analysis

To guide the discussion of findings and share our story, we use the following themes, which emerged from data analysis: historic (re)memory; preparation, competency, and motivations; aggressions; coping mechanisms; and awareness. The data examined from each individual author carried codes under all themes. These themes, defined below, shed light on the processing that we undertook to analyze, understand, and share our experience.

### *Historic (Re)memory*

The data suggest both women approached the teaching of *The Course* incorporating historic (re)memory as an element of their perspective of the experience. Toni Morrison calls (re)memory “the continued presence of that which has disappeared or been forgotten” (Parker, 2001, p. 2). In their individual narratives, the instructors refer to emotional responses of how their Blackness impacted their teaching experiences.

*Yet, even with my “academia approved” stamp, there’s something consistently unsettling, frustrating, and survival-response inducing about teaching a new section of **anything** [emphasis original] related to sociocultural issues in America, hell let alone in schools. I came to [“The Course”] knowing I’d need to ... toe the line balancing my Blackness and expertise all at once.*  
-Author 2

*As I was editing *The Course* shell and preparing the online learning management system for the semester, I had some hesitancy. I had to add pictures and biographies for myself and my preceptor, and I wondered how that would impact my experience in *The Course*. I recognized that the previous facilitators were both White, and in this iteration, we were both Black women. Though credentialed and capable, I had a feeling that there would be some issue in leading a course [about social justice] in a predominantly white institution.* -Author 1

From a historic (re)memory standpoint, neither instructor had yet taught within *The Course*, but both expressed some prior dread or hesitancy for what it would mean to teach about social justice, as Black educators. (Re)memory allows the understanding that, in the past, our Blackness played a role in a negative experience for us, with students. Consistent with both, also, was the concept that their Blackness was a problem, and having to anticipate this displays double consciousness (DuBois, 2015). Teaching for social justice in the United States, though noble, meant that institutional racism was bound to be present, and it would likely impact their instructional experience (Stanley, 2006).

Both authors discussed their inclination for using education to investigate and uncover socio-historical inequities, within the education system. They each completed undergraduate research capstone projects that began this purpose. Author 2 “examine[d] the New York State History Regents exam and its reification of a particular type of Black history,” remembering that “this research project set me on a trajectory to figure out why the American public education system ‘did this’ and how such a ‘choice?’ seemed to be an ongoing one.” Author 1 created an intervention project using “multicultural children’s literature to improve [White] high school

students' cultural literacy." These (re)memories, particularly related to Black representation in education, impacted the authors' desire to teach "The Course."

The enacted White privilege of former student-faculty interactions colored the lens with which the instructors became ready to serve. Author 1 writes that she had "taught a number of courses at the university that focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion in education." While Author 2 recalls that much of her university instructional time "was spent helping students unpack, engage with, and strip themselves bare in front of issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability all in the context of schools." Both educators' teaching service were in historically and predominantly White institutions and may have provided additional 'triggering' and/or anticipation of the expectation to perform.

### ***Preparation, Competency, and Motivations***

The educators spent considerable effort documenting their preparedness, competency, and motivation for serving as instructional leaders of "The Course." Both had experience facilitating online courses and this bolstered their confidence for competency in leading the offering. Author 1 asserts, "I had also taught several courses online, so I went into this experience feeling confident that I was capable to facilitate well." Author 2 notes a precaution employed by recalling, "I definitely make sure I have some face-to-face meetings in any blended or online class." The professional and skilled preparation for leading online courses could have benefited their experiences.

Both instructors came from secondary English Language Arts backgrounds. Author 2 notes, "initially, my heart was drawn to the secondary English classroom, and it was here where I pushed the boundaries of content knowledge and epistemology, even as a novice teacher." Where Author 1 recalls, "I began my educational career as an English teacher, and I loved the opportunity to teach my students critical reading, writing, and thinking skills." In both mentions, the instructors see, or use, the chosen subject area as a medium to push beyond traditionalized curriculum. The motivation for using education, as a tool to counter the status quo, is evident and drives their reasoning for engaging in this work.

The explicit naming of choosing to engage in social justice education was a shared element of their educational motivation. The commitment to diversity and equity began before their professorial experiences and continued into their research agendas and teaching foci. Educators of color often have deeply personal connections to their research and teaching focus, which provides a unique alignment with their lived experience (Burke et al., 2000). This connection can benefit their passion for engaging in the academic work, but it may also do more damage because it is also personally secured to their reality (Moule, 2005).

The ideology of education as emancipatory was a common thread in the data. This theme displayed as motivation for facilitating this course that focused on promoting equitable schools. Author 1 shares, "from the genesis, my passion stems from using education as a vehicle to enact social change." This repurposing of education as a tool for positive impact is one that marginalized people of color have adopted for generations (Cole, & Omari, 2003; Gregory, 2001). Author 2 states that her "overall goal [is] to help educators explore

how notions of curriculum (however defined, measured, or implemented) impact equity and access in PK-university educational contexts.” Each instructor accepted the invitation from The Course designer to facilitate the online course, because it was directly aligned with their interests, passion, and expertise.

### ***Aggressions***

The aggressions faced by the educators were detailed in the reflective narratives. Author 2 felt better prepared to manage student aggression, based on her prior teaching experience: *The previous four years had, in many ways, made me battle tested. I wasn't a novice and many of the microaggressions (and sometimes even macroaggressions) newer scholars of color faced, I anticipated. I knew how to (or perhaps I became numb to) navigate students questioning my competency, demanding my time (particularly beyond the confines of “business hours”), and repeatedly questioning my capacity to evaluate their progress and understanding.*

Author 1, however, seemed to be caught off guard by the student aggression. *Within the first two weeks of the accelerated online offering, there were over 20 questions on the “Ask the Instructor” board, and about 30 comments with students replying to each other. I received several emails that questioned grading practices, disputed course organization, that offered suggestions on how The Course should be structured, and that questioned assignments. I was overwhelmed with trying to respond in a professional manner to each student, especially being inundated with messages day after day.*

As instructional leaders, the interactions with students are a necessary component of online learning, but the tone, persistence, and even volume of correspondence signaled a burden. These examples are not hard to find in literature that focuses on the experiences of Black faculty (Griffin, 2016; Louis et al., 2016). In this situation, students placed demands on faculty time by sending numerous emails, expecting nearly immediate responses, requesting multiple explanations of existing detailed assignments, and even complaining about the grading of one instructor to the other, with the expectation of a grade change.

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

Coping mechanisms were described in the educators’ narratives as strategies for enduring hostile educational environments and arduous student-faculty interactions. Author 2 overtly used the strategy of overcommunicating with students, anticipating concerns, struggles, and issues, and trying to get ahead of any potential negative situations.

*I tried to “kill the noise” before it could amplify by overcommunicating everything. If one student had a concern, I made sure to make an announcement or send an email to the whole class letting them know the outcome. If I noticed a pattern of incomplete thoughts and/or shallow assessments, I made sure not to single any one person out but provide blanket feedback to my section of The Course (we split assignments and grading weekly).*

Both instructors describe using excessive pleasantries in written communication with students as another approach to responding to student bias. Author 1 describes this as “respond[ing] in a professional manner,” while Author 2 recalls:

*I relied heavily on speaking to positive problem solving and giving “one another grace,” so to speak. I recall starting messages by saying, “I hope this email...” These extra steps and extra pleasantries seem to have redirected (or maybe even) stopped potential negative communication.*

Author 1 practiced another strategy after implementing the niceties: she deleted negative student messages as a way of handling the stress of communicating with particularly demanding students.

*Their [the students] actions communicated bias, mistrust, were condescending, and in some ways, an undermining of our authority. Unfortunately, when thinking about writing a reflection on this experience, I went back to find emails to study, and most were gone because I was so angry or frustrated upon responding, that I would delete them.*

Author 1 reflects on calling The Course designer, “close to tears,” to inquire if her experience was normal. She reports, “Honestly, I was ready to drop The Course as the facilitator and have the university find someone else.” The Course designer provided strategies for dealing with students’ communications, “encouraged me to stay in my position as facilitator and provided mental support throughout the remainder of the accelerated course to keep me motivated to engage with the class.” The necessity of support seemed to be a saving grace for Author 2 in finding the will to persist to the conclusion of the negative experience. Literature (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2015; Duran, 2016) also calls for Black faculty of color to be provided necessary aid and mentorship when tasked with instructing social justice courses that many students at PWIs deem extraneous.

When probed further about her ability to report that The Course was a positive experience, Author 2 discusses the change that had taken place in her practice over her years teaching:

*At the beginning, I took a lot of stuff personally. Looking for other jobs was a coping mechanism and avoidance, but I had good support, and I’m stubborn. My mother used to have a poem on the fridge, it read, “don’t quit - the road ahead will seem really hard, but don’t you quit.” This place was not meant for me, but I will not give people the satisfaction of running me out.*

The fortitude described above was inspired by family encouragement, personal tenacity, but also professional assistance. Black women faculty are often expected to shoulder all the trying circumstances they encounter with students and even colleagues, with grace and poise. So too, was the reality of the mammy. However, these narratives beg the question of whether a person should be subjected to traumatic encounters with no outlet for relief. Based on our experiences, the expectation was to maintain the status quo. Nonetheless, our ability to endure should not foster, or perpetuate, environments where trauma resilience is a requirement.

### ***Awareness***

Both instructors reported a new awareness gained from the experience that interestingly, considered systematic exploration and understanding of what it means to teach for social justice as faculty of color. Author 2 recalls, “I think teaching this particular course, co-taught with another woman of color, helped me see new dimensions of equity and access in academia

that I wasn't privy to before." When probed, she code switches and emphatically states, "we not safe anywhere."

Author 1 expresses a similar sentiment that, "no matter how credentialed the instructional team was, the students still found a way to undermine our authority." She continues:

*This experience has taught me that it is necessary to study the experiences of Black professionals in environments where they serve predominantly white student populations. The literature proves that the experiences of professors of color can be negatively impacted by students' biases against them, but what solutions are offered other than considering our own self-care?*

And this question is one that we still wrestle with.

### ***Difference in Experiences***

Though both reflective narratives included all themes presented above, the experiences that were described varied for each instructor. To investigate the differences, a code frequency count was conducted to determine what attention was given to each theme by each author. Percentages are used to account for potential difference in length of narratives and to clearly detail the focus on one theme in relation to another within the entire narrative. The results are present in Table 2 below.

Theme	Author 1	Author 2
Historic (Re)Memory	16%	19%
Preparation, Competency & Motivations	27%	53%
Aggressions	35%	6%
Coping Mechanisms	13%	19%
Awareness	9%	3%

Regarding the similar attention given to historic (re)memory, the authors make sense of this in a new way than was explicitly stated in their narratives. Being marked women of color (WOC), whose skin is a dark brown, there are certain lessons that we learned early. And even if we are not cognizant, there are certain ways we learn to cope early with treatment based on our skin color. The only difference between our course offering and the sole previous offering were our names, pictures, and biographies. Our ways of presenting are not just as Black women, we are *Black Black*. Historic (re)memory leads us to acknowledge that this often-denigrated feature, though celebrated by us, is not always palatable.

We observed high salience within the narratives of occurrences related to preparation, competency, and motivations, which is often characteristic of how WOC academics are positioned in higher education (Lomax, 2015; Griffin, 2016). There are constant reminders of over qualification to "do this work." Both authors met and exceeded preparatory expectations

for The Course, though students did not, could not, or refused to see or acknowledge this. Author 2's codes most highly reflected this theme, where historic (re)memory was only second highest for Author 1. Though they have similar years of university level teaching experience, Author 2 noted the ways her instructional experience impacted change to her current teaching practice. Author 1 only noted how her experience has continued to fuel her motivation for the work.

Author 1 had many more references to aggressions, than Author 2. Perhaps Author 2 enjoyed a privilege of not being listed as the instructor of record. Her title as a preceptor may have created more distance, while Author 1's primary status made her a direct target of student aggression. Both instructors discussed similar attention regarding coping mechanisms. Author 2 came in prepared to cope, and Author 1 wasn't as prepared. Even reflecting on more aggressions, Author 1 still discussed coping mechanisms less, which may be aligned to her ill-preparedness to cope.

Awareness presented the least percentage of attention. The data suggests that the authors did not expect to be surprised by student behavior. Considering their historic (re)memory, they anticipated what behaviors students would display, but there was a difference in how deeply it impacted their perspective on the experience.

### **Implications**

#### *Shifting the Narrative*

Those with agency often get to make and retell history (Stevenson, 2014). We decided telling our story—claiming this narrative—would be an act of resistance to the dominant discourse that is hostile to the presence, positionality, and presumed competence (Niemann et al., 2012) of Black women academics. This was the primary aim of this project. As Connelly & Clandinin (1990) note, “life’s narratives are the context for making meaning of school situations” (p. 3) and through telling, we name and push back against those contextual factors that continue to go unchecked.

#### *For Consideration in Higher Education*

Through our counternarrative, online spaces can corrode the vitality of Black women academics. This work emphasizes the need for not only the processing of such experiences, but an extension of and research on mediated or proactive measures to them. While the literature for online teaching stresses critical engagement and instructors' ability to establish an authentic presence (Young & Bruce, 2011), these recommendations become problematic when marked.

For Black women academics, doing so can result in deficiency-laden expectations, negative communication, and academic scrutiny. These, as chronicled by researchers studying Black women faculty in face-to-face teaching environments, can lead to identity crises, stress, and other health-related challenges (Lomax, 2015; Griffin, 2016). Ourstory, a collective, but also uniquely individual, makes legitimate the experiential and epistemological understandings inherent to our teaching online at a PWI.

Interestingly, ourstory also provides invaluable insight into the ways hegemonic aggression can take shape and negatively impact Black women academics online. We often wondered, had we not uploaded our pictures (visibly marked as Black women) or perhaps used

pseudonyms (instead of our more culturally nuanced names) would our reflections about The Course be different? Ourstory taps into the question of safety in higher education, even when the learning environment is asynchronous. It implores administrators, course designers, and others to consider how the distance such online spaces provide can also empower some of the vilest versions of racist aggression, even within a course purposed to combat such paradigms in education. And while we would not necessarily advocate for disconnected professional development workshops or initiatives, department chairs (as they often make decisions about online teaching), among others, need to be aware and discuss this potentiality with **all faculty**. The research has been very clear in showcasing the negative trends in evaluations Black faculty incur (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009).

As we endeavor to make the academy more diverse, accessible, and equitable, we must be able to ascertain the costs (to health, safety, and overall well-being) when asking or assigning such courses, even if the content is well within the instructors' professional purview. What are we really asking? If supports are not in place so that entitlement and white privilege do not continue as the norm, we have perpetuated oppression in spaces where the voices of the marginalized need to be more centered; and social justice-oriented courses become shells of what they could be. In our case, "The Course" needed authenticity and thorough engagement of the facilitators, particularly because our experiences, racial/gender identities, and commitment to social justice aligned with the aims of The Course. We were, perhaps, best suited to lead it. Unfortunately, as aggression increased, engagement (at least for us) decreased; we needed to self-protect. How can all students, but especially predominantly White students, encounter these (read: our) narratives to learn from them?

#### *Narrative Processing Methodology & Future Research*

Most importantly, we found that ourstory might provide a method for other women of color academics to process their experiences in academia. As an attempt to attend to the highly nuanced context within which ourstory was born, this study provides another way to enact Critical Black Feminism online. Moreover, the collaborative nature of this study provided vital mirroring. In using reflection as a collective support strategy, we have found community, validation, and practical tools to support our ongoing endeavors in social justice/equity work. These types of partnerships (or village experiences) would be ripe spaces for future research, particularly as teaching online increases.

#### **Conclusion**

As online courses make education more accessible and convenient for both students and universities, attention should be paid to this unique learning environment for Black women faculty. As CRT infers, race and its manifestations are everywhere, including online learning environments. These spaces, particularly as they continue to necessitate education, are also spaces where invisibility and erasure remain unchecked. Further research that amplifies the experiences of women of color faculty, and those of African descent is paramount. Positioning Black women in academia as a mammy figure, whether as a tool of overt oppression or default generational expectation, renders her...us... all mute. To dismantle

this insidious trope, future research must incorporate women scholars of color as principal investigators and research partners, prioritizing their voice to be incorporated in the telling of their stories. To push back against the mammy there must be a systematic action to incorporating all the nuance of all the Beyoncé, all the ‘round the way girls, and everything that Black womanhood embodies; especially in these spaces where we have been positioned to identify or perform only as this caricature. Black woman scholars are fully human, fully dimensional, and fully entitled to telling her whole story. Why not? We run the world anyway.

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