

# “My representation is performative”: Black Women’s Reflection of Academia Through Collaborative Autoethnographic Poetic Inquiry

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*In the midst of COVID-19 and increased anti-Black racial violence, Black women faculty continue to search for a sense of wholeness in academic institutions founded upon seemingly well-intentioned ideologies of justice and belonging. Grounded in endarkened feminist epistemology, this collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry explores how two Black women early career scholars navigated their first years as faculty during dual pandemics and situate their experiences in the context of other Black women in the academy. Through sister talks and found lyric poetry, they illuminate four distinct yet interrelated themes within their conversations: (1) the difference between performance and authenticity; (2) the evasiveness of belonging; (3) exploitation and tokenization; and (4) institutional policing of their narratives. Institutional recommendations are discussed to support the retention of early-career Black women faculty pursuing holistic and authentic academic homeplaces that honor their endarkened intellectual, emotional, and spiritual identities.*

*Keywords:* collaborative autoethnography, poetic inquiry, sister talks, Black women faculty, endarkened feminist epistemology, COVID-19

The souls of Black women strive for the wholeness that comes from honoring our ancestral wisdom and ways of knowing (Dillard, 2016; Love, 2016). For Black women scholars, this place of wholeness is predicated on a sense of belonging within an environment that nurtures the intersections of our identities—not solely the parts that can be assimilated to fit white ideologies (Turner & Allen, 2022). Taliaferro-Baszile (2006) compared Black women’s navigation of academic spaces to moving through the territory of a rival gang. Instead of guns,

knives, and other physical weaponry, Black women in academia navigate racism, sexism, tokenization, differential racialization, interest convergence, and white fragility (Berry, 2018).

Institutional responses to COVID-19 and continued state-sanctioned racial violence followed similar patterns. Position statements, laden with sympathetic vows for collaboration and understanding, were quickly dismissed. These promises of change, flexibility, and empathy served as the excuse for institutions to heap mountains of additional emotional and intellectual labor onto Black women in academia. As we fought to safeguard our families from the effects of dual pandemics, Black women scholars struggled to maintain the delicate balance between dual identities: personal and professional (Wingfield, 2015). As two early career scholars, who entered academia in the midst of these pandemics, we recognize the epistemic violence we continue to face stems from the sustained legacy of institutional exploitation of Black women's labor. This paper will discuss the experiences of two Black women scholars as we search for wholeness within our first years as faculty in an institution of higher education founded on and sustained by white supremacy. The following research questions guide our inquiry: How have we as Black women faculty navigated our first years in academia through dual pandemics and how are these experiences reflective of other Black women in the academy?

### **The Experiences of Black Women Academics in the Dual Pandemic**

Generations of Black women scholars before us have excavated and illuminated the multidimensional impact of gender and race on Black women academics in institutions of higher education (Benjamin, 1997; Berry & Mizelle, 2006; Collins, 1990; Cooper, 2006; Gregory, 1995; Mabokela & Green, 2001; Turner, 2002). Their work illustrates the various ways our voices are underrepresented, misrepresented, and all together silenced as we counter normative views and dominant understandings of knowledge production within white supremacist spaces. Turner (2002) and others show how predominately white institutions actively work to perpetuate Black women's social invisibility within the walls of the academy through pressure to assimilate, isolation, limited power, less support through sponsorship, stereotyping, tokenization, and various other emotional, psychological, and spiritual stressors.

The epistemic violence sustained by Black women scholars is rooted in the intersections of our identities, which are deemed racial, gendered, and cultural deviants within academic spaces (Turner, 2002). Spivak (1988) introduces the term *epistemic violence* to describe the hermeneutic process that causes harm to those who are "othered". Taliaferro-Baszile (2004) adapted the term to discuss the way institutions profess a commitment to critical thinking, equity, inclusion, and justice, yet continually prescribe standards, policies, and knowledge systems that maintain white patriarchal hegemony. Shahid (2015) furthers the discussion by identifying how *epistemologies of ignorance* protect white individuals within academic spaces while "perceiving everything [she] said as not as valid, important, or real as their own perceptions" (p. 62). As a result of various forms of epistemic violence, Black women in the academy often show physical signs of distress (Priest, 2008) coupled with psychological and behavioral stress responses, which stem from the consistent weight of gendered racism (Essed, 1991) and racial battle fatigue (Chancellor, 2019).

Despite the conditions of our labor, Black women academics maintain a legacy of knowledge production and intellectual thought (Evans, 2007). The herstories of Fanny Jackson Coppin, Mary Church Terrell, Zora Neale Hurston, Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper and countless more demonstrate how Black women in the academy navigate the intrinsic

connectedness of human and civil rights, educational access, scholarship, pedagogy, and service to our communities—all while carrying the intersecting pressures of social and familial responsibilities (Evans, 2007; Turner & Allen, 2022).

The reality of the connectedness of civil rights, scholarship, and community service has been especially heavy since 2020 with the surge of racial tension and civil unrest. As freedom fighters around the globe rallied to protest police brutality and the murders of George Floyd (1973-2020), Breonna Taylor (1993-2020), and scores of Black community members who suffer at the hands of those who swore to protect and serve, Black women in the academy also took a stand for Black liberation from state-inflicted violence. Like generations before us, we fought to sustain ourselves, our families, and our communities through the cumulative effects of psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual trauma caused by the persistent dehumanization of Black Americans. Our responsibilities as teacher educators and mothers of Black children paired with the overwhelming whiteness of the teacher workforce (Sleeter, 2011) added to the emotional burden of educating well-meaning white women of the realities of anti-Blackness in society and the field of education (Wingfield, 2015). We understood that our work of preparing critical, culturally and linguistically responsive teacher candidates would directly affect the future educational experience of diverse children and families.

The multifaceted hardship within the Black community intersected sharply with the scourge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Black women faculty navigated changes in andragogy as we created new ways of supporting student learning communities via online platforms. Further, we balanced constantly changing health risks, various changes in institutional protocol, inadequate childcare, and back-to-office policies, all while protecting ourselves and our loved ones from threat of the virus. Research illustrates the ways in which institutional asks often cross Black women faculties' personal boundaries and prioritize organizational norms and production over our humanity (Ferguson et al., 2021; Porter et al., 2023). The result has been overwhelming mental, emotional, and spiritual stress (Doležal, 2022).

Our experiences in academia are often disembodied and fragmented as we carry the physical, emotional, and spiritual weight of our racial and gendered identities. Yet, Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011) remind us “that we must bring our whole selves—spirit, mind, and body—into the multiple contexts we occupy” (p. 73). Turner and Allen (2022) describe the fragmentation and constant compromise that happens during Black women scholars' pursuit of wholeness and belonging within academic spaces. Still, they conclude that as Black women, partners, and mothers,

we cannot exuviate our various social roles, responsibilities, and identities at the door of the institution. Instead, we carry the fullness of ourselves, our families, and our communities into our work, which influence our scholarship and are in turn influenced by our scholarship. (Turner & Allen, 2022, p.11)

Our reflections in this paper document our individual scholarly journeys as we continue the search for a sense of wholeness within institutions that “do not want us to be healed, light, and joyful” (Turner & Allen, 2022, p.9).

### **Theoretical Framework**

We ground this collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2017) in endarkened feminist epistemology (EFE) to honor our embodied fullness as Black women scholars. Dillard (2000) stated that educational researchers' very language “must be able

to do something towards transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge” (p. 662). With this goal in mind, endarkened feminist epistemology was defined as the articulation of:

How reality is known when based in the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women. (Dillard, 2000, p. 662)

Evans-Winters (2019) asserted that Black feminist researchers who exemplify the traditions of our foremothers push back against the dominant forms of discourse in our scholarship. This includes the production of research texts that reflect the multifaceted layers of the mosaic that are Black women’s lives and stories across time and space.

In this paper, we began our reflective process by stating our intentions and recognizing that our lived experiences as Black women scholars are impacted by historical and contemporary conditions. When we reflected on our first years in hegemonic institutions of higher education, we considered how we embody the multi-vocal perspectives of generations of Black women scholars (Evans-Winters & Love, 2015; Slay, 2023). We channeled the ideals of endarkened feminist epistemology in the context of the present study to engage in a process of self-definition and talking back to one-dimensional institutional narratives, that limit who we are and how we express ourselves as Black women scholars (Dillard, 2000).

Our recursive practices throughout this work embodied what Dillard (2000) described as “[giving] voice to silenced spaces as an act of resistance” (p. 673). Endarkened feminist epistemology values the connection between researchers’ individual pursuits of truth and understanding as well as our communal knowledge creation. As such, we wove our poetic offerings into larger discourses of the COVID-19 pandemic and the onslaught of anti-Black violence, which provide context for our academic journeys. Through our ontological and epistemological dialogues, we cultivated deeper insight and meaning from our lived experiences.

### **Methodology of Collaborative Autoethnographic Poetic Inquiry**

Our inquiry is grounded in the mosaic of who we are: two Black women who graduated from doctoral programs during the COVID-19 pandemic and accepted academic faculty positions soon after. While we share various identity markers—beyond race and gender—our lived experiences and spheres of being diverge at various points. These points of divergence offered the opportunity to explore our individual and collective healing work through sister talks and collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry (Howard et al., 2023; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2017).

### **Sister Talks**

Survival in such ostensibly antagonistic spaces often inspires Black women scholars to retreat into spaces where we can connect and regenerate. To partake in this reflective and healing process, we engaged in “sister talks” to process, reflect on, and make sense of our experiences within the academy. The term “sister talks” describes congenial conversations between Black women in which we share our stories, personal narratives, gossip, and life lessons (Few et al., 2003; Majors, 2001). Turner and Allen (2022) explain that “[s]ister talks between Black women

are inherently autoethnographic as we describe and analyze (graphy) our personal experiences as Black women (auto) in order to understand a larger cultural experience (ethno)” (p. 5). As part of our communal, spiritual, and cultural funds of knowledge, sister talks represent a method through which we reason and problem solve (Majors, 2004; Moll, 2000; Turner & Allen, 2022).

### **Collaborative Autoethnographic Poetic Inquiry**

Our poetry emerged through reflection on our sister talks. Collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry involves the fluid co-creation and co-analysis of poems through poetic transcription (Faulkner, 2017; Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2017). Howard et al. (2023) note that this “methodological frame is paramount because poetry, as both product and process, has often served as the only bridge between our scholarship and the lives we live” (p. 601). Black women scholars, both historically and contemporarily, have used poetry as a mode of inquiry that protects their spirits from academia’s intentional fragmentation of self (Cutts, 2019; Howard et al., 2023). For example, McAllister and Brown (2023) utilized collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry “as an act of resistance” (p. 5) to reflect on the tensions between collaboration and competition in academia. Similarly, Howard et al. (2023) discussed their experiences as mother scholars through collaborative (or collective) autoethnographic poetic inquiry as a means of “[theorizing] themselves into wholeness” (p. 600). In this paper, we used collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry to reflect on our experiences in the academy as both a collection of minoritized identities and as exquisitely whole beings.

Bridging the space between artistic expression and epistemological justice, Black women have used poetic inquiry to explore the intersections of our identities across space and time (Green, 2022). McAllister and Brown (2023) contend that collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry can be “an effective vehicle for creativity which uncovers and conveys emotional knowing, which in turn informs a model for collaboration that enables and facilitates the critical and creative contributions of marginalized individuals within academia and therefore their career development” (p. 6). As qualitative researchers, this methodology grants us the opportunity to honor the complexity of our memories, re-story the descriptive details of everyday life, and craft pieces that hold deeper meaning (Cutts, 2019; Davis, 2021; Dillard, 2012; Faulkner, 2018).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Throughout December of 2022 to February of 2023, we met to reflect on and discuss our feelings of Black womanhood, motherhood, and scholarship through sister talks. These talks were recorded and digitally transcribed through a third-party transcription service. We also collected life notes (Dillard, 2000), journal entries, and text messages we shared with each other about our experiences within academia. This narrative data, along with the transcripts from our sister talks, were then analyzed through emotion coding (Saldaña, 2013). Emotion codes “label the emotions recalled and/or experienced by the participant” within qualitative studies that “explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Saldaña, 2013, p.105).

As we conducted a line-by-line review of our narratives we asked: what emotions does this recollection elicit and what emotions are we describing in this conversation? We highlighted passages of text that evoked particularly poignant emotions. These emotions were then broken into categories such as: low-energy positive emotions (i.e., pleasure, acceptance, comfort); high-

energy positive emotions (i.e., excitement, joy); low-energy negative emotions (i.e., discontentment, apprehension, isolation, melancholy, perplexed); and high-energy negative emotions (i.e., disembodiment, overwhelmingness, frustration, anger, fear). We sought to honor the nuance and confluence of our emotions in this process through our commitment to endarkened feminist epistemologies. Audre Lorde (2007) reminds us that,

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. (p. 1)

In opposition to these demeaning and sexist notions, we used our emotion coding to honor our “nonrational knowledge” and our inherent ways of knowing, sensing, and intuiting.

As we examined the highlighted passages and coding categories, we jotted (Saldaña 2013) our thoughts, which we subsequently transformed into lyric poems (Faulkner, 2017) expressing the various emotions associated with each lived experience. Lyric poems are constructed through intentional imagery, rhythm, and sound to embody the poet’s lived experiences and to evoke powerful feelings in the reader (Faulkner, 2017). This type of poetry defies “the neat folds and contextual blanketing common to many narrative approaches” and instead centers the nuances of raw emotions (Rawlins, 2018, p. 156). These lyric poems led to our “messy spaces of knowing and being known” (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 86). Finally, we shared our poems with each other and conducted an inductive thematic analysis to collaboratively identify the recurring themes.

Throughout our data analysis, we revisited the transcripts of our sister talks and lyric poems to create a sense of rhythm and voice (Davis, 2021; Rawlins, 2018). Our cyclical process reflected the creative and intuitive energy that guided our inquiry. We honored our reflexivity and racial/cultural memories (Cutts, 2019; Howard et al., 2023) by creating an outlet for our emotional responses to the “gendered, racial, and structural violence that [we] encounter in academic institutions and the world at large” (Ndlovu, 2022, p. 924). Anchoring our experiences in the larger experiences of Black women faculty and normalizing the use of emotions and feelings as affirmative expressions of being and knowing, our sister talks and collective poetry writing sessions became sites of resistance, healing, and connection (Cutts, 2019; Evans-Winters, 2015). Our poems represent the analysis of our feelings and the reflection of our lived experiences as we move through academic spaces. As such, the intention of the lyric poems offered in this piece “is to express moments of subjective feeling and emotions in a short space” (Faulkner, 2017, p. 218).

## **Findings**

This reflective work through our collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry illuminated four distinct, yet interrelated themes within our conversations. First, in our attempts to remain true to our ontological and epistemological roots as Black women, we noticed the subtle, yet stark difference between performance and authenticity in the pursuit of equity. We often discussed the delicate balance between our internal truths and the external pressures for institutional performance.

Second, we recognized how our sense of belonging remains evasive due to various policies and norms that disregard our intersectional identities as Black women, scholars, and

mothers. We were confronted with the reality of how we are allowed to physically occupy spaces of decision-making; yet, our critical perspectives are simultaneously rendered hyper-visible or invisible depending on alignment with the institutional agenda.

Similarly, the third theme acknowledged the exploitation of our labor and likeness in furthering the institutional agenda. While we celebrated our kinship as Black women scholars, we conceded the emotional and intellectual toll extracted by the institution's fixation on our racialized and gendered experiences. Lastly, we reflected on the ways administrators police the narratives of Faculty of Color to perpetuate the guise of equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging despite the absence of sustained and meaningful systemic changes to support all individuals. We noted the impact this institutional silencing has had on our sense of agency.

### Performance vs Authenticity

*“Stuck”*

*I feel heavy.*

*I feel stuck.*

*I have no voice in subtle, yet loud ways.*

*My representation is performative.*

*I feel like my presence matters more than my participation.*

*I should feel grateful for the fact that I exist in this space.*

*This opportunity to be seen, but I can never be heard.*

*I see everything.*

*I see the future:*

*Being stuck in a place somewhere in the middle.*

As we sat with our feelings of discontentment and frustration, our thoughts around what is performance versus what is authenticity manifested in two subthemes. First, this theme reflected the tension between sentiments of our own performance and authenticity in the pursuit of equity. We often discussed the delicate balance between our internal truths and the external pressures for institutional performance—reifying our disembodiment as simultaneous insiders and outsiders within academic communities. Institutional hierarchies reinforced white-centric notions of competition, which only value collaboration that results in quantifiable institutional gains. This limited perspective of collaboration conflicted with our cultural desire for collectivism and deep, collegial relationships that center our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being.

Similarly, our conceptualization of equity is rooted in authenticity that extends beyond well-meaning position statements and into connections inspired by communal reciprocity. In line 5, *I feel like my presence matters more than my participation*, we examined the roles we play in academia as Women of Color—reflecting on the way institutional efforts to diversify the voices and perspectives represented does not mean every voice has equitable power. As such, while our presence was touted as a sign of progress and change, our participation was relegated to spaces that benefited the institution. This was evident as we provided feedback on

programmatic decisions that did not align with our epistemology and praxis; yet rather than inspiring reflection on the implications, we were placated and told that final decisions rested with entities higher up the administrative chain-of-command. Thus, our experiential knowledge and cultural wisdom was only valuable when they aligned with institutional goals; and dissent was met with defense.

The second way we saw this theme manifest on the larger, institutional level was in the disconnect between the institutional commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and justice and the barrage of top-down directives at the expense of faculty well-being. We listened to our institutional leaders proclaim their value of social justice and saw their public pledges of solidarity and admonishments of oppressive regimes in response to the dual pandemics. However, our direct experiences as Faculty of Color stood in stark contrast to these promises of equity and justice. Instead, we were subjected to institutional policies that replicated white supremacist ideals of constant production, hyper-individualism, and a lack of respect for a work/life balance. Yet, as new faculty, we had little voice to resist these changes.

### **Evasiveness of Belonging**

*“Just to exist”*

*The space that we're in has been internalized.  
I'm resisting so hard within my spirit.  
Successful, WHOLE, and happy?  
We are a fluke.*

*Be grateful to be in this space.  
I continue doing the work—  
emotional, mental, spiritual energy*

*just to exist within this space.*

*If I'm not here, then who will?*

*I feel it in my body.  
I feel it in my bones.  
I feel it in my head.  
I feel it in my chest.*

In light of our tensions of navigating performative policies and activities, our truths remain in our commitment to our communities, our families, and our whole selves. Yet, within the performance-driven institutional space, Black women are often pressed to compromise aspects of our truths in favor of a sense of belonging. As Women of Color remain sorely underrepresented within academia (NCSES, 2019), the weighty awareness of our exceptionalism creates additional pressure. We carry the weight of representing not only our own thoughts and perspectives, but those of our community members who are directly affected by decisions, policies, and philosophies of education perpetuated by our institutions.



As Black women scholars and mothers with the urgency of making real change for our children and communities, we are driven to move forward in our equity-oriented work. The pressing need to prepare critical, culturally and linguistically responsive educators is even more present within the conditions of the dual pandemic. In our work supporting teacher candidates, we feel the urgency of the national teacher shortage (Jones, 2023), high rates of teacher burnout (Bouchrika, 2023), and increased awareness of anti-Blackness in education and society. In response, we model and develop frameworks that align our teacher education curriculum to culturally relevant and affirming pedagogies toward the development of culturally responsive teacher candidates. Yet, the impact of our efforts, although applauded in the moment, are limited to our individual classrooms and scholarship because there is no larger institutional implementation, accountability, or commitment to change.

A sense of belonging will always evade us within a space that only supports liberatory and culturally sustaining practices in rhetoric but not action. Yet, we are painfully aware that our struggle is not unique. We stand on the shoulders of generations of Black women educators, mothers, and activists who have fought to sustain our children and communities throughout times of social hardship. Now, we choose to continue standing in the gap—demanding justice and equity for ourselves and our communities because *If I'm not here, then who will?*

Our feelings of being overwhelmed with the pressures of balancing the intersections of our identities all while advocating for our communities took a substantial toll on our physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Despite the professional pressures we manage throughout the workday, we both have children and families to go home to. We must be mothers, be partners, be daughters, be within our communities, and be “okay”. To show the true weight of what is carried on a daily basis would reflect negatively not only on ourselves as scholars, but as Black women and mothers.

To withstand this constant pressure coupled with feelings of isolation and disembodiment, we realized the importance of creating spaces where we could just exist and take off the various “masks” we have to wear throughout the day. We intentionally created spaces of rest and resistance where we could check in with each other and other Women of Color in the institution. Within these maroon intellectual communities (Finley, 2020), we built a space of critical resistance and support adjacent to the institutional collective. This liberatory practice allowed us to feel the acceptance and comfort of generative dialogue. Moreover, our marronage helped us regenerate and maintain our commitment to radical futurity and dreaming (Toliver, 2021).

Within these small spaces of belonging, we worked to develop a program that would align with the call for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the local schools. We were able to move and breathe easier within this small maroon collective knowing that the other women in the space aligned with our understanding of community, collaboration, and authenticity. Still, this liminal space of cultural alignment and intellectual freedom was in stark contrast with our sentiments within other institutional spaces. Further, the work created within that space was still constrained by the larger institutional agenda, which challenged our feelings of authenticity within the process and the program we created.

While we searched for other places of belonging, where everyone is “at the table”, we recognized that whether in faculty meetings or in working groups, our presence was little more than an institutional status symbol. Being deemed a “thought leader” or being assigned to a committee for task work does not foster a sense of belonging—it does not signify our status as members in the academic community. Instead, our presence was a proxy for an authentic

institutional commitment to belonging, equity, and inclusion. While we were not rendered completely invisible, our faces and perspectives were given selective visibility only when they aligned with the interest or needs of the institutional image.

### Exploitation and Tokenization

*“Placeholder”*

*A pattern of behavior:  
Institutional racism disguises individual level problems.  
Any kind of questioning leads to falling  
Through  
The  
Cracks.  
Folks who have the power say,  
“We want you here,  
But we need you to be quiet.”  
We precariously balance leadership with no power.  
Included, but not even recognized.  
You are here, but you don’t actually have power here.  
We  
Just  
Want  
Your  
Face.*

Related to the various ways we searched for belonging within the institution, we realized a lingering sense of discomfort in the simultaneous hyper-visualization and invisibility of our representation. While there have been concerted efforts to diversify the space by hiring Faculty of Color, we realize our representation is performative. We are strategically positioned as figureheads and “thought leaders” for various programs and committees—charged with the call to advocate for our communities—yet the guidance of our cultural knowledge is consistently dismissed. Thus, positions of leadership without power result in the exploitation of our labor and likeness to further the institutional commitment to white supremacy, rather than lead to institutional change toward equity and justice.

As written in the final lines of the poem above, the resonating message has been *we just want your face*. As such, our faces have been used to lure other Faculty of Color into a broken system with no real intentions of change. Moreover, our faces have been used to market programs that were created within the intellectual and cultural confines of the established institutional agenda. In these ways, our intersectional identities and Blackness have been strategically positioned as pawns, poster children, and proxies. As a result, we are left to grapple with balancing our commitment to authentically advocating for our communities while confined in a performative institutional culture that does not serve us.

### Policing of Narratives

*I’ve seen how they weave narratives.*

*I see the silencing.  
I need this job, so I don't speak up.  
Troublemaker  
Blacklisted  
You're going to know what we want you to know.*

In our recruitment and interview processes, we were offered a false sense of security based on representational diversity. The narratives of Faculty of Color who transitioned away from the institution were meticulously shaped into stories that neatly fit a prescribed mold to preserve the institutional image of equity and inclusion. Yet, we later found that this image was unaligned with the experiences of marginalization, silencing, and racial battle fatigue told by previous generations of Faculty of Color.

Despite the stories of racialized trauma and the epistemic violence enacted against those who had gone before us, we held on to the hope that our experiences would be different due to promises of change and a renewed commitment to justice. Yet, we were promptly reminded that shared identity markers do not always signal shared worldviews as higher levels of administration prioritized pristine public narratives over uncomfortable internal truths. We transitioned into academia in a time where tenure track academic appointments were few and far in between, which added a sense of pressure to establish ourselves within the academy. We also aspired to retain our positions due to the fiscal responsibility of sustaining our families. With these intersecting concerns, we held deep reservations about calling out institutional harm— *I need this job, so I don't speak up*. As Black women faculty, we were pressed to choose between our livelihoods and our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. We felt stripped of our sense of agency by the authoritarian control of institutional leaders.

While balancing our commitment to community advocacy in the tight grip of institutional performance, we witnessed the impact that the institutional policing of our narratives has had on us as early career Faculty of Color. The final line of the poem above notes how institutions have controlled our narratives through a persistent lack of transparency—*You're going to know what we want you to know*. As such, we were often left to decipher policies on our own—only finding answers by asking others in our maroon community, since responses from institutional leaders fluctuated depending on who asked the question and when. In this way, narratives always felt incomplete and disembodied. The lack of transparency, consistency, clarity, and infrastructure led to constant feelings of flux and uncertainty—especially as Faculty of Color moving through the tenure track. As we reflected on our individual and shared experiences, we realized how institutions discourage narratives of discomfort that threaten to expose the inner workings of whiteness, and instead champion narratives of adaptation and resilience. Academia praised our resilience during the dual pandemics and cited our intellectual productivity as evidence of our ability to handle even the greatest stressors, which allowed institutional leaders to dismiss our feelings of mental and emotional exhaustion.

Under the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued anti-Black physical and epistemic violence, we found ourselves navigating an academic institution that sought to define who we should be as Black women faculty. Although relational, human-centered interactions were outlined as strategic goals, institutional directives replicated white supremacist values of production and competition over well-being. Our reflections in this collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry represent our testimonies as Black women faculty operating in a well-meaning white space. The following recommendations are offered toward imagining how

academic institutions might pivot away from policies that reinforce emotional and intellectual harm. These affirmations are dedicated to the generation of Black women scholars who will follow us in the hopes of cultivating radical Black realities in academia (Russell et al., 2015).

### **Recommendations**

Over the last few years, institutions of higher education have increased efforts to recruit Faculty of Color. These efforts have included toolkits to help identify and counteract implicit bias in job searches, cluster hires, and expanded outreach to historically Black colleges and universities. Further, they have tried to diversify hiring committees and require candidates to submit diversity statements (Doležal, 2022). While these efforts have increased the total number of Faculty of Color by 28,000—between 2013 and 2020—these gains have been mostly reflected in the number of Asian and Latine faculty (up by 27 and 29 percent, respectively). Yet, Black representation only reflects an 8 percent increase (Doležal, 2022).

The underrepresentation of Black faculty reflects the persistent anti-Blackness in larger socio-historical structures. In his work on Black fugitivity in educational settings, Sojoyner (2017) asks, “...how do you negotiate, or enter into any type of fruitful relationship, with an entity that on multiple levels has proven detrimental to your humanity?” (p. 533). We extend this question to consider Black women’s experiences within academic spaces founded on and maintained by white supremacist culture. This culture manifests in the academy through the lack of reflection in decision-making, a compulsive desire for production and profit, and the extraction of labor under urgent timelines (Ferguson et al., 2021). Despite professed commitments to equity and the deleterious effects of this culture on the lives and well-being of faculty, staff, and students, many institutions continue to show they are unwilling to do the real work required to make meaningful change.

How can institutions continue to demand that Black women invest our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual energy to contribute to spaces that consistently inflict spirit murder (Love, 2016) and soul wounds (Duran & Duran, 1995) upon us? We persist in our professions in service to our communities and toward a more just future for our children. Yet, more and more Black women are leaving these inimical environments with the understanding that we can continue to serve our communities through culturally and spiritually aligned spaces made for us and by us. We are no longer willing to forfeit our mental health and spiritual well-being in service to white patriarchal capitalism (Hersey, 2022).

If institutions truly endeavor to retain Black women faculty, they must implement meaningful changes toward more humane, just, and liberatory institutional practices. These practices only ensue when decision-makers intentionally slow down and interrogate (1) how policies and practices misappropriate notions of equity to perpetuate white supremacy; (2) what systems and structures remain opaque (or nonexistent) due to lack of organizational integrity; and (3) how diverse, marginalized perspectives can be centered to dismantle white supremacy and repair harm.

### **Avoid the Misappropriation of Equity**

Black women scholars, led by endarkened feminist epistemologies, have discussed how our ontological and epistemological sensibilities do not align with hegemonic spaces of academia (Cutts, 2015; Dillard, 2000; 2019; Evans-Winters, 2015). Yet, the tenets of critical race theory

remind us that equity for People of Color will only be advanced when they converge with the interests, needs, expectations, and ideologies of white people (Bell, 1980). True equity and inclusion will remain unattainable within institutions that are unwilling to make meaningful change; and definitions of equity and inclusion cannot be enacted through a white supremacist lens. Institutional decision-makers often fail to recognize that creating systems steeped in white supremacy only encumbers a sense of belonging and replicates the invisibility-hypervisibility paradox for Black women faculty (Porter et al., 2023).

Tangible institutional moves toward equity must first begin with the acknowledgement of historical and contemporary systems of oppression that impact Faculty of Color. Espoused ideals of justice and equity must be reflected in the organizational, structural, and behavioral aspects of the academy (Ferguson et al., 2021). Secondly, institutional leaders must critically reflect on how current policies and directives demonstrate a consistent lack of accountability—ultimately pushing the responsibility for enacting equity and inclusion unduly onto Black women faculty (Vassar & Barnett, 2020). Instead of reacting to our discontentment within academia defensively, it is incumbent on institutions to proactively seek to understand and center our holistic and nuanced experiences (Porter et al., 2023).

Equity is not just representation based on marginalized identities. As Boss et al. (2021) highlighted, any institutional move towards (re)envisioning governing bodies must address notions of shared governance rooted in performances of equity as opposed to true collective leadership. This paradigm shift would involve institutional recognition of the unique ways that Black women faculty conceptualize our work and balance it within the spheres of our lives. The reclamation of our time and energy is a form of resistance allowing us to thrive in academic institutions despite overwhelming pressure (Gray-Nicolas & Nash, 2021; Hersey, 2022).

### **Organizational Integrity**

Turner (2018) discusses the importance of *organizational integrity*, which reflects an organization's commitment to a set of well-defined rules that are not subject to frequent changes. Further, these institutional rules and policies must be readily available to all who are affected by them. Palazzo (2007) connects the notion of organizational integrity to an organization's ethical integrity as reflected in the individual actors and the ethical quality of the dominating norms, activities, decision-making procedures, and results. This definition emphasizes the importance of norms within policies and decision-making processes as an ethical obligation to all who are obligated to follow said policies.

We draw upon these definitions to discuss the lack of organizational integrity within our academic institutions as leaders continually reference their commitment to justice and equity while enacting policies and practices that do not align to these espoused ideals. For example, as early-career faculty, clear policies and norms around the tenure and promotion process are highly consequential. However, these policies were unclear and inaccessible to new faculty and shifted based on the audience. Further, lack of consistency in grant-writing procedures and infrastructure around accessing funds directly impact our ability to achieve research expectations. This lack of transparency exacerbates the effects of our limited authority in academia as early career Black women faculty (Gray-Nicolas & Nash, 2021). Institutions committed to equitable support of Faculty of Color must conduct “an intersectional analysis” of these and other unjust policies and practices to achieve higher levels of organizational integrity (Boss et al., 2021, p. 90).

## **Move Forward in Discomfort to Repair Harm**

To move forward in the work of equity and inclusion, institutional administrators must be willing to move in the discomfort of interrogating institutional practices and power structures rooted in white supremacist norms. In a space driven by urgency culture—which demands tangible measurements of production to show board members, trustees, and funders—the deeper reflective work needed to make meaningful, sustainable change is often rushed or disregarded. Institutional administrators cannot expect to recruit and retain Faculty and Students of Color without first critically and reflectively analyzing the institutional climate that has proven toxic to our spirits and sense of well-being. Instead, institutions committed to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and justice must heed Audre Lorde’s admonition that “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” This is to say, we cannot move toward more equitable and humane institutions by exercising the same practices rooted in white supremacist culture.

As institutions of higher education grapple with issues of equity and the recruitment and retention of Faculty of Color, they often avoid sitting with discomfort and opt instead to center white fragility. As a result, Black women and other Faculty of Color too often shoulder the burden of aligning institutional programs with inclusive objectives. From creating frameworks for curriculum analysis to leading conversations on dismantling organizational forms of replicated oppression, Black women faculty are called upon to extend ourselves beyond reasonable limits to ensure a gentle experience for our white colleagues. We advise institutional leaders to instead center the perspectives of Faculty of Color in ways that confront white fragility and interrogate tendencies to revert to arguments of white faculty’s well-meaning intentions (Ferguson et al., 2021; Vassar & Barnett, 2020).

While acknowledgment of institutional harm may be the initial step towards building a more just and equitable environment for Black women faculty, there must be additional actions to support Faculty of Color through the persistent dual pandemics (Porter et al., 2023). While we are praised for our ability to name institutional harms, we are rarely supported through traumatic experiences. Instead, it is suggested that we wear our resilience as badges of honor (Carter Andrews, 2015). Institutions that desire to foster inclusive intellectual homeplaces for Black women faculty must provide holistic structural supports that honor our individual and collective needs. This action can only happen if predicated on an understanding of our unique voices and perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Research poetry evokes Black women scholars’ emotions and sensibilities in ways that offer more holistic counter-narratives to the narrow stories of resilience force fed to us in academic spaces. The act of (de)constructing and (re)constructing our sister talks into found lyric poems facilitated our sense-making and healing process (Howard et al., 2023; Rawlins, 2018). Our poems not only reify our value, intellectual thought, and existence in academia but provide a space to reflect, feel the fullness of our experiences, and express the associated emotions passionately and unapologetically. As such, we challenge and expand traditional notions of academic writing, language, and scholarship.

The impact of the dual pandemics offered institutions and the field of education a chance to reimagine and rebuild more humane spaces for faculty, staff, and students. However, despite these opportunities, many institutions continue to neglect the holistic, authentic, and adequate

recognition of Black women faculty’s emotional, intellectual, and spiritual labor (Boss et al., 2021; Cutts, 2015). Until there is a firm rejection of white, patriarchal capitalism, generation after generation of Black women and other Faculty of Color will continue to be exploited, marginalized, and set on fire within institutions of higher education.

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