

# Set Ablaze Yet Not Consumed: Tenure Seeking Blackwomxn and Black Feminist Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching and Mentoring during COVID-19

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*This study was designed to explore the personhood affirming approaches Blackwomxn faculty incorporate in teaching and mentoring Students of Color and the impact of COVID-19 on their efforts. Using a Black feminist perspective, we centered the pedagogical practices of Blackwomxn faculty to examine their unique experiences and interactions with Students of Color. Their narratives reflect how Blackwomxn faculty contribute worldviews that challenge Eurocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative pedagogical practices and how their approaches to teaching and mentoring demonstrate what we label as contemporary anti-slavery rebel behavior.*

**Keywords:** Blackwomxn faculty, Students of Color, COVID-19

Black students can encounter negative interactions with faculty members at historically white institutions (HWIs) who communicate (verbal and behavior) deficit-laden expectations of them, which leads to feelings of self-doubt (Solorzano et al., 2000). When Black faculty demonstrate success-oriented expectations for Black students, research suggests they are more likely to excel in academic endeavors (Duncan, 2020; Moore & Toliver, 2010). Additionally, Black faculty can influence whether Students of Color feel a sense of belonging on college campus by assisting them with navigating an unwelcoming environment. Many Black faculty provide extra support to Students of Color because they recognize that through cultural affinity, they are more likely to understand and respond to the needs of Students of Color (Griffin, 2013; Moore & Toliver, 2010). Blackwomxn educators have historically been central to change in and outside of the classroom (Farinde-Wu et al., 2023; Joseph, 1988; Perlow et al., 2014). Yet, Blackwomxn faculty remain underrepresented in tenured, full-time, and leadership positions in higher education (Gregory, 2001; Griffin, 2013; Harley, 2008; Njoku & Evans, 2022).

Scholars assert that Blackwomxn educators are “positioned to confront institutional oppression and spark transformational change as whiteness and other historical forms of inequity

are decentered, replaced by the intersectional lived and teaching experiences of [Blackwomxn]” (Ferguson et al., 2021, p. 141). Blackwomxn have unique racialized gendered experiences in education and in society at large (Patton & Haynes, 2018; Patton & Njoku, 2021). Higher education institutions were originally created by and for white men (Allen et al., 1991) and the legacy of that historical exclusion of Blackwomxn permeates higher education institutions. Therefore, gendered-race discrimination is embedded in higher education and play a historical role in the experience and professional advancement of Blackwomxn faculty (Griffin et al., 2013; Ward & Hall, 2022). We assert that the historical (mis)treatment of Blackwomxn is facilitated by controlling images of Blackwomxnhood and can be traced back to enslavement (Collins, 2000). Historical stereotypes and tropes of Blackwomxn are embedded in education institutions, and as Blackwomxn faculty navigate them, they encounter anti-Black gendered racism, marginalization, and discrimination (Ward & Hall, 2022; Ward et al., 2023). Our approach to examining the experiences of Blackwomxn faculty during COVID-19 is rooted in the belief that “for institutional change to be transformative, it must be approached intersectionally to actually advance racial equity” (Patton & Haynes, 2018, p. 12).

The global COVID-19 pandemic created major disruptions within higher education institutions, presenting new challenges for faculty and students around the world, and exacerbating existing challenges and inequities for Students of Color (Lederer et al., 2021; Molock & Parchem, 2020). The residential student learning experience transitioned to online classes and off-campus living arrangements. Additionally, there was an increased concern about student internet access and interactions with faculty in a virtual space (Speer et al., 2021). By foregrounding Black feminist epistemologies, we recognize how Blackwomxn faculty can approach teaching and mentoring during COVID-19 in ways that are supportive and affirming their ways of doing can lead to “transformative change on college campuses” (Patton & Haynes, 2018, p. 12). Our study was designed to explore the personhood affirming approaches Blackwomxn faculty incorporate in teaching and mentoring Students of Color and examine the impact of COVID-19 on their efforts. Our critical qualitative study is guided by the following research question: How did tenure-seeking Blackwomxn at research-intensive institutions describe teaching and mentoring experiences in the wake of COVID-19? We engage a Black feminist perspective to center the pedagogical practices of Blackwomxn faculty to examine their unique experiences. In the following sections we present the conceptual frameworks that guide our project and share relevant literature, data analysis and discussion.

### **Conceptual Framework(s)**

#### **Black Feminist Pedagogy**

According to hooks (1994), a critical and/or feminist pedagogy calls for educators to acknowledge everyone’s presence in the classroom. Her *engaged pedagogy* is one that “truly generates excitement in the classroom, that enables students and professors to feel the joy of learning” (p. 204). Scholars have used Black feminist pedagogy to critically examine issues of power and authority in the classroom and patriarchal standards in the academy (Omolade, 1993; Henry 2005). Black feminist pedagogy emerged from Black feminisms and a critique of Eurocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative pedagogical practices (hooks, 1994; Henry, 2005). Historically, education privileges white men and reinforces a racist and hierarchal society. Conventional pedagogical practices deny students from marginalized backgrounds access to learn about their history and culture, while the classroom practices stemming from Black feminism are “a pedagogy of liberation” (Joseph, 1988). Accordingly, Black feminist pedagogy advances “alternative interpretations of society and history through Black women’s experiences

and analysis with oppression” (Henry, 2005, p. 100). This framework is grounded in Patricia Hill Collins’ (1989) Black feminist thought, which recognizes Blackwomxn’s distinctive standpoint. Collins acknowledges that there are commonalities in Blackwomxn’s epistemologies, including the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims and the ethic of caring.

Key to Black feminist pedagogy framework is an engagement of race, gender, and class. Black feminist educators have recognized a contradiction that exists as they observe similarities in their experiences with Black students who reflect “marginality within the white-male-dominated academy” (Omolade, 1993, p. 33). Blackwomxn’s experiences with marginality facilitate a connection with their Blackwomxn students. Simultaneously, Blackwomxn faculty have some privileges and status in academe that places them in a position (precarious more than stable) of power. Black feminist pedagogy urges a transformation in the classroom as academic courses are not designed with Blackwomxn and other historically marginalized students in mind. This pedagogy is committed to critically engaging students and ensures Students of Color are not overlooked in the classroom.

### **Contemporary Anti-Slavery Rebel**

According to Ward et al. (2023), Blackwomxn’s social status was historically established through the exploitation of their bodies and labor, legally and socially justified, to benefit white capitalism. During the enslavement era, Blackwomxn served an active role in leading and participating in rebellions against slavery and attacks on white enslavers. In the modern-day context, Blackwomxn faculty have exercised agency and resistance in ways that the authors posit is similar to enslaved Blackwomxn. We apply the contemporary anti-slavery rebel framework (Ward et al., 2023) to think about Blackwomxn faculty’s teaching and mentoring approaches with Students of Color. Influenced by Angela Davis’ (1971) “Reflections on the Black Women’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” the authors identified four identities of a contemporary anti-slavery rebel in relationship to historically enslaved Blackwomxn:

***Caretaker of the household of resistance.*** Blackwomxn were deliberate leaders and participants in upheavals of slavery and encouraged other enslaved Black people to participate in slave revolts.

***Maroon Blackwomxn fighting in battle.*** Fugitive enslaved Blackwomxn actively fought, sabotaged, and counter-attacked enslavers in ongoing revolts.

***Blackwomxn as target to suffer excessive penalties.*** Enslaved Blackwomxn that participated in battle were subjected to severe and more excessive violence and punishment than Black men.

***Counter-insurgent as factual identity for her daily existence.*** As acts of counter-insurgency, enslavers used sexual domination and subjugation against enslaved Blackwomxn to “destroy her proclivities towards resistance” (Davis, 1971, p. 12).

We argue that Blackwomxn faculty act as contemporary anti-slavery rebels when they challenge hegemonic, anti-Black, and patriarchal systems of oppression normalized in education.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Blackwomxn as Mentors and Teachers**

Blackwomxn’s intersectional identities create a unique experience as they navigate misogynoir in the academy (Bailey, 2021; Patton & Njoku, 2021). Specifically, Blackwomxn are “surviving in the margins with experiences of gendered racism” in the academy (Allen & Joseph, 2018, p. 152). Blackwomxn’s experience with invisibility and hypervisibility (Roberts et al., 2022), isolation, and marginalization is influenced by the historical exclusion of Blackwomxn in education (Porter et al., 2020) and stereotypical assumptions about Blackwomxn’s capability

(Walkington, 2017). Experiences of isolation, marginalization, and underappreciation may be greater for Blackwomxn faculty who are contingent or non-tenure track (Porcher & Austin, 2021; Porter et al., 2020). Porcher and Austin (2021) argued that Blackwomxn professors of practice hold greater workloads than their colleagues but are often devalued or dismissed. Similarly, Porter and colleagues (2020) note that Blackwomxn contingent faculty deal with marginalization and devaluation and also lack power and choice.

Although Blackwomxn remain underrepresented as faculty and student affairs leadership positions (Roberts et al., 2022; West, 2020), their contribution in higher education is significant. More specifically, literature shows that Blackwomxn faculty serve as formal and informal mentors to students and colleagues, contributing to their retention, persistence, and academic and career advancement (Griffin, 2013; Holmes et al., 2007; Johnson, 2022). Literature calls attention to the importance of Black faculty serving as mentors to Black students and Students of Color (Griffin, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Mondisa & Main, 2021; Moore & Toliver, 2010). Faculty members, especially tenure-seeking faculty, may feel pressured to give more attention to research publications and teaching, as these are primary factors for tenure decisions (Griffin, 2013; Griffin et al., 2013). Nevertheless, Black faculty commit to serving as formal and informal mentors to help Black students navigate historically white campuses and cope with shared struggles (Griffin, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Mondisa & Main, 2021; Moore & Toliver, 2010). Blackwomxn faculty in particular dedicate time and energy to support students inside and outside the classroom (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Griffin et al., 2013). Scholars note that Blackwomxn take on a “greater load of mentoring responsibilities” (Griffin & Reddick, 2011, p. 1050), even though their support often goes unrecognized (Pennant, 2022; Roberts et al., 2022).

Scholars posit that Blackwomxn’s identity influences others’ expectations of them and facilitates the way students interact with them (Ferguson et al., 2021; Haynes et al., 2020). Historical stereotypes and tropes about Blackwomxn (e.g. strong Black woman/superwoman schema) present Blackwomxn as matriarchs or caretakers who take on extra responsibility to support their family and community with little to no support (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). Also explained by Porcher and Austin (2021), Blackwomxn “do the work that no one wants to do, without praise or thanks” (p. 117). In higher education, the stereotypical perception of Blackwomxn as superwoman is apparent in the way that Blackwomxn faculty are expected to maintain the same teaching, research, and service responsibilities as other faculty while also providing extra support to students (Ferguson et al., 2021; Priddie et al., 2021). While Blackwomxn face intersectional challenges, they are committed to and are an integral part to student engagement and retention (Priddie et al., 2021) and institution transformation (Patton & Haynes, 2018).

### **COVID-19**

In March, 2020, educational institutions across the United States suspended in-person learning and campus activities in response to government shut-down orders. Students were forced to return home and faculty shifted their courses to an online format. In addition to the quick adaptation to virtual instruction, faculty and educators everywhere dealt with changes to their personal routines, home obligations, and changes to child or family care (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020). Yet, faculty felt pressure to provide the same level of (or increased) academic and emotional support and research productivity (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020; Pettit, 2020). As a result, faculty experienced “Zoom fatigue,” stress, and emotional trauma (Hall & Bell, 2022).

For Blackwomxn faculty in particular, the pandemic exacerbated experiences of “exhaustion, overextension, racial fatigue, and other issues negatively affecting [their] mental

and physical health as well as [their] careers and productivity” that already existed for Black people before the pandemic (Hall & Bell, 2022, p. 10). Literature suggests that Blackwomxn faculty are often expected to do more than their colleagues, including providing more student support and other service-related commitments (Harley, 2008). Even during the height of the pandemic, Blackwomxn faculty reported an increase in commitments to account for students’ pandemic-induced needs (Pennant, 2022; Pettit, 2020; Walton et al., 2021). Thus, the physical, mental, and emotional toll on Blackwomxn faculty during the pandemic is distinctive and warrants examination.

The idea of a dual pandemic (Porter et al., 2022) or “pandemic within a pandemic” (Pennant, 2022) conveys Black people’s experience with anti-Blackness and publicized violence against Black people while also dealing with the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though often overlooked in data reports, discussions, and media coverage, Black girls and womxn are victims of anti-Black violence and experience detrimental consequences of the pandemic (Ferdinand & Ferdinand, 2022; Pennant, 2022). In fact, the COVID-19 mortality rate and long-term health effects is highest for Blackwomxn (Pirtle & Wright, 2021; Rushovich et al., 2021).

In their examination of Blackwomxn faculty and administrators’ experience during the pandemic, Njoku and Evans (2022) posit that policy brutality and social unrest has uniquely impacted Blackwomxn in academia. They note that Blackwomxn faculty are more likely to experience emotional and physical toll due to “racial fatigue, frustration, alienation, isolation, exhaustion, overextension, and undervaluation” commonly experienced even before the pandemic (p. 5). The emotional and physical tolls were exacerbated during the pandemic when taking into account the trauma of publicized anti-Black violence while also supporting their students dealing with similar struggles. Likewise, Blackwomxn administrators had to deal with the impact of COVID-19 in higher education and the subsequent challenges that impacted students and faculty. The authors found that Blackwomxn faculty and administrators alike navigated changes in their personal lives while also supporting others in their professional capacity. With Blackwomxn attending to themselves and others, it is imperative that they incorporate strategies such as self-care practices. Further, the authors call for institutions to incorporate strategies and adjust policies, practices and expectations to support Blackwomxn faculty and administrators as they respond to increased professional demands and abrupt changes to their personal lives.

Porter and colleagues (2022) also recognize an increase in labor expectations of Blackwomxn faculty during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. By centering their personal experiences, the authors aim to “disrupt dominant narratives of faculty labor” (p. 660). Their narratives reveal that COVID-19 and anti-Black racism has disproportionately increased labor for Blackwomxn, and consequently exacerbated gendered racial battle fatigue. The authors call for policy changes that consider the intersecting identities of Blackwomxn in the academy. Otherwise, “identity-neutral” policies do not consider the experiences of womxn who are more likely to have more commitments and care-taking responsibilities that may interfere with productivity. More specifically, Blackwomxns’ labor has been historically exploited in the academy and society at large (Ward et al., 2023). We acknowledge that institutions have a responsibility to support Blackwomxn faculty. At the same time, we concur with Blackwomxn scholars who urge Blackwomxn faculty to unapologetically prioritize healing and wellness as “pedagogies of renewal” and “self-care praxis,” to survive and thrive as they navigate state- and institution-sanctioned violence (Hall & Bell, 2022, p. 15).

## Methodology

### *Intersectionality Methodology (IM)*

Black feminists argue that a framework is necessary to center the experiences of Blackwomxn and address the unique challenges they face (Crenshaw, 2016). Frameworks that address racial or gender discrimination alone are not sufficient for understanding how Blackwomxn may experience both simultaneously. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) formally coined the term intersectionality to describe how Blackwomxn's social identities intersect and create overlapping marginalization (especially workplace discrimination) in ways that white womxn and Black men do not experience. While the term was formally introduced in 1989, the meaning of the word was conceptualized by Black feminists as early as the 17th century (Taylor, 2012; Harris & Patton, 2019). Frances Beal, for example, used the term "double jeopardy" to explain Black women's unique experience with oppression. Later, the Combahee River Collective (1982) used the phrase "interlocking oppressions" to articulate a more nuanced explanation of inequality. By centering the experiences and illuminating the voices of Blackwomxn faculty, we aim to disrupt the practices and institutional norms that marginalize Blackwomxn in academic spaces (Ferguson et al., 2021).

Our study design is influenced by Haynes and colleagues' (2020) articulation of intersectional methodology (IM). IM has four features: a) centralize Black women as the subjects; b) use critical lenses to uncover power relations; c) address how power shapes the research process; d) bring the complex identity markers of Black women to the fore. IM is a useful methodology to address the structural, political and representational forms of intersectionality that shape experiences of Blackwomxn faculty.

## Methods

We recruited Faculty of Color via email based on the following criteria: (1) Tenure-seeking assistant professor at a Research Intensive (R1) university as designated by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education and (2) Self-identify as Black/African American, Indigenous, Latinx and more Person of Color (BIPOC). Our purposive sampling focused on two disciplines, education, and humanities. We started recruiting faculty members in education because of an interest in our own field. We eventually expanded our recruitment to other disciplines to increase the number of BIPOC participants. Thirty-six faculty agreed to participate in the study. The second author conducted individual semi-structured interviews ranging from 60-90 minutes that were recorded and transcribed via Zoom. At the time of the interviews, education institutions in the United States had transitioned to virtual learning as the government implemented shutdowns and restrictions for in-person interactions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. While scholars (Gray et al., 2020; Oliffe, et al., 2021) have provided suggestions on how to engage using Zoom, we may have missed opportunities to make interpretations based on emotions and nonverbal exchanges during the interviews. Yet, our findings are robust and informative to contribute to scholarship about Blackwomxn's teaching and mentoring during the height of COVID-19.

Tenure seeking Blackwomxn faculty comprise 17 of the 30 Black faculty participants. The second author asked participants to share about their experiences with teaching and mentoring Students of Color before and during COVID-19. The following questions guided this project:

1. What are your approaches to teaching and mentoring Students of Color?

2. As it relates to your teaching and mentoring, what challenges and opportunities have you faced in the wake of COVID-19?

The second author conducted all the interviews because we believed participants might be more comfortable and open to discussing their experiences with another tenure-seeking faculty member who likely shared similar experiences. After interviews concluded and the first author watched all the recorded interviews, both authors conducted a multi-action coding process. First, we printed and read each transcript. Next, we pre-coded the transcripts by highlighting sentences and phrases that aligned with the scholarship on Blackwomxn faculty experiences with teaching and mentoring. We then wrote preliminary notes about any connections we identified across the participants' responses. Finally, we designed a code list based on our collective observations. The codebook included deductive codes (codes informed by literature) and inductive codes (codes informed by data). We also drafted memos throughout the process to think critically about our observations from interviews, to reflect on our coding process, and for ways to achieve researcher agreement.

### Findings

We identified three dominant themes that best articulate the way Blackwomxn participants talked about teaching, mentoring, and what we would label as contemporary anti-slavery rebel behavior: a) Blackwomxn faculty engaged in personhood affirming practices pre- and during the height of COVID-19; b) Blackwomxn faculty named strategies to support students; and c) Blackwomxn faculty recognized a need to accommodate themselves because the institutions did not.

#### **Blackwomxn faculty engaged personhood affirming practices pre- and during the height of COVID-19: "I care about you just as a human being"**

Participants described their teaching and mentoring approaches for Students of Color as personhood affirming and loving. For example, Debra discussed the importance of creating an environment that was "safe enough for students to attempt to learn." Creating that safe space meant caring about them as a holistic person, not just as a student in her classroom. As articulated by Amiyah, there was a desire to "mentor the full person" and wanting her students to feel "holistically okay." Similarly, Lauryn shared thoughts of being a safer person for students to express themselves. Lauryn's desire was for her students to know that they were cared for beyond their classroom performance. "I want to encourage them to do as human beings and not as minds or students, and so that's really where it starts." Affirming students' personhood was central to her mentoring and teaching approach. "...I think I engage in a type of humanizing practice even more intentionally than with my undergrads because I found graduate school to be incredibly dehumanizing, and so I really want to invest in graduate students in a way that reminds them that they are human. That they are not just a mind that they are not a machine, but also around this theme of self-determination." Consistent with the literature, Blackwomxn faculty serve a significant role to their students beyond the classroom space (Griffin & Reddick, 2011; Griffin et al., 2013). Even during the height of the pandemic, Lauryn maintained personhood affirming practices despite feeling as though she was being stretched to do more. "I really think the biggest frustration and challenge has been just the way that the kind of preexisting hierarchies within the university. Those of us who treat our students like human beings have to be the ones to then continue to be flexible, continue to stretch, continue to do more care work." We interpret the participants' personhood affirming strategies in alignment with the anti-slavery rebel caretaker of the household of resistance identity because of Blackwomxn faculty's deliberate support of Students of Color and challenge to Eurocentric,

patriarchal and heteronormative pedagogical practices. Further, as Lauryn acknowledged and the literature illustrates, Blackwomxn faculty have committed to supporting students' increased needs during the pandemic (Gray & Brooks, 2021; Pettit, 2020).

While many participants shared their approaches to adjust during the pandemic, not all of them talked about changes during the pandemic. Several Blackwomxn faculty maintained similar ways of being and doing. Specifically, participants articulated approaches and practices that aligned with Black feminist epistemology. Clarissa articulated that the shift to virtual learning did not stop her from moving forward with a long-term desire to get Blackwomxn together. "I already knew that Black women need these connections because of what we know about Black women's experiences and white hetero-cis patriarchal spaces. And then you add COVID which might create even more separation even more isolation and yeah they gon' need each other." Clarissa also (re)named her mentorship approach to describe a more personal, even familial, relationship she has with Blackwomxn that she mentors. "I also describe myself and think of myself as someone who is in community with Black women, like you know, in a lot of ways I see myself as a partner, a sister...just someone who is in deep, deep, deep relationship with Black women. And those relationships in a lot of ways, in those relationships, I see myself as friend-tor. I've been mentored. I'm being mentored. I am a mentor. I'm a friend-tor." We analyzed Clarissa's articulation of mentorship like early Black feminist educators' connection with their Blackwomxn students through their shared identity and experiences with gendered-race oppression (Joseph, 1988). Moreover, Clarissa's approach challenges conventional mentorship which often reinforces a perceived hierarchy in teacher-student relationships (Henry, 2005; Turner Kelly & Fries-Britt, 2022).

Similarly, Lauryn shared a "re-framing" of how she saw her mentoring work. Guided by Black feminist pedagogy, we interpreted Lauryn's re-framing as separating the anxiety around the labor of Blackwomxn faculty to center an ethic of care. "...really relying on my own kind of practice of Black feminism as fundamentally a type of care work. And that care work actually has to extend to the way that I interact with students as much as possible in order for me to truly say that I am a Black feminist and that is how I guide my work in my life." Tasha also articulated care as a central component for her teaching approaches and sense of responsibility with Students of Color. "[Black teachers are] usually pushing the envelope, we usually have higher expectations, high accountability, but then we also have a lot of support and love and, you know, ethic of care along with the work that we're doing." For Nayla, "living out Black feminist epistemologies" meant being reflective, doing critical work, and helping her students be in community with like-minded people. Having community was also important to Clarissa's praxis. She was intentional about creating a space for Blackwomxn students that centers their ways of being. "[The space] can be whatever we want it to be, but it needs to be centered around our Black woman's epistemologies, what's innate about who we are and what we bring to it. And this is our space, our space to do with what we want." We identified Nayla, Tasha, Lauryn, and Clarissa's praxis of unapologetic Black feminist pedagogy along with a contemporary anti-slavery rebel politic to intentionally provide a safe space to Blackwomxn. Further, we interpreted their praxis as a transformational pedagogical commitment to center Blackwomxn in spaces that have a history of marginalizing them.

**Blackwomxn named strategies to support students: "This is exactly what we are, a site of resistance"**

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic there were also occurrences of highly publicized racial violence against Black people, what some are calling "dual pandemics." During



this time, Blackwomxn faculty recognized the importance of connecting with their Students of Color to address institutional racism and state sanctioned violence. Joy served as “a site of resistance” for her Black students by creating a space where she could support them as they discussed issues of racial violence. “I was able to break free from this idea of the white gaze and it reprimanding me for creating counter spaces. Because I felt like oh, they will think that I'm doing something special for Black students, and what would that mean for me and then I was like hmm no, you know you shake that shit off and just move forward.” Black feminist pedagogy helped us to interpret Joy’s refusal to engage in classroom conversation devoid of racism and other oppressive systems. We interpreted her engagement with Black students as a disruption to Eurocentric conventional pedagogical practices that overlook historically marginalized students.

When thinking about her perceived impact as a mentor, Joy stated, “I want them to view me as someone who believes in them. Someone who is a site, creates a space of resistance and critical reflection. Someone who provides the opportunities or demystifies systems that we navigate.” Sherry also thought of herself as a safe space for her Students of Color. “I just want them to know that I can empathize with their experience, that my office will always be a safe place for them to talk about all things related to school, all things related to life.” Similarly, Lauryn supported students by making them feel comfortable in the classroom. “I think my mentoring work really starts in the classroom by being very intentional about creating a space where Students of Color and Black students in particular feel safe to bring themselves as they are and feel safe to say the things that are uncomfortable.” Like other Blackwomxn in our study, Joy and Lauryn’s self-identification as a literal site for students is reflective of what we consider to be contemporary anti-slavery rebel behavior. More specifically, we see our participants as deliberate leaders in a “revolt” against Eurocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative pedagogical practices that marginalize Black students and more Students of Color.

Nia described the importance of maintaining community time even in a virtual setting. “...I feel like I have incorporated more social emotional learning into my classes in my teaching because I felt like we needed it, like before we will have community time.” Like Nia, Amber recognized the importance of being in community before the COVID-19 pandemic and a need to continue that strategy despite challenges that may have occurred with a shift to virtual learning. “...there seems to be so much more give and take there, given that I really have prioritized relationship building as part of the courses I teach during the pandemic in ways that I would have told you I was doing every other semester, but have really become clear during the pandemic.” Janet appreciated being able to have virtual meetings with mentors because it allowed for more intimate and private sessions that are away from potentially problematic faculty and staff in campus spaces. Blackwomxn faculty have historically and continue to support Students of Color as they deal with systems of power and oppression in the academy. When examining the mentoring relationship between Black faculty and Black students, research shows that Black faculty offer a unique source of support to their students as they navigate similar struggles at historically white institutions (Griffin 2012; Griffin, 2013).

Many of the participants talked about strategies for Students of Color in general while others named strategies specifically for Black students. Further, some participants shared strategies specifically for Blackwomxn students. For example, Erica stated,

There have been a few things that are important for me. Number one, bringing Blackwomxn into the fold. In this field, where we are 6%, I'm into making space for them to be their whole entire selves in the context of their training, education so um you know, and that for me that's about you know, bringing you know what language they're

bringing. The connection with family and culture, the additional burdens of being in this white, still predominantly white, space and then also navigate all of these really intense programmatic requirements in their training. So that's sort of my underlying goal. To like that the professional and the personal is developing in that, you know, I don't want Blackwomxn to have me to shrink themselves to be here. Or to like mold themselves to be here.

Joan recalled a particular conversation where Blackwomxn students asked her about her approach to responding to the Angry Black Woman trope. "I spoke to them about being authentic. Like what does it mean to just. And they're like, how do you not seem like an angry Black girl. I was like, are you angry? I don't know how to stop you from not, like, I don't know how to play those games. Like, I'm mad all the time. It's like my superpower. It's like just being a little angry is a superpower. I don't know how to not seem like it. Because everything you do is perceived as angry." Blackwomxn faculty recognize the connection to Blackwomxn students through a unique and shared experience with gendered race oppression. Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality Methodology supported us in our aim to center the experiences and illuminate the voices of Blackwomxn by recognizing their distinctive standpoints and shared intersectional experiences.

**Blackwomxn faculty recognized a need to accommodate themselves because the institutions did not: "In but not of the institution."**

Blackwomxn faculty discussed institution expectations that did not always come with institution support. Nia discussed the unrealistic expectations of conducting "business as usual" by continuing regular meetings despite shifts in both the faculty and students' schedules and home obligations.

[Graduate students] feel the tension of having to keep going and going and going and not like take a breath. And so, it's like, all right, let's think about what are some ways to navigate. Ways to do whatever work that needs to be done...you need to get it done but trying to not beat yourself up...it's been really good to even talk about ideas of perfectionism because there's also that added identity. As a Black scholar, I need to feel like I'm one above and beyond...that pressure always want to make sure that we always got to do 10 times more than our peers. That is not sustainable, especially in this environment.

This unrealistic expectation that Nia described is illustrative of Blackwomxn's labor and bodies being used to benefit the white academy. As discussed in the literature, Blackwomxn's intellectual and physical contributions are demanded and exploited without regard for their well-being (Ward et al., 2023). Participants discussed strategies for responding to the expectations from the academy and students, reflecting what we identified as contemporary anti-slavery rebel behavior. Kirsten recognized the importance of maintaining her boundary-setting strategies even during the wake of COVID-19 where all communication and interactions shifted to a virtual format. She stayed true to protecting her time. Though she did not mind helping students, she kept the majority of her interactions in a set structured time, like office hours. Similarly, Maya's strategy was to have dedicated time for the students she mentors. "I start with home first, and so I have really been trying to be protective. So if anything, I've been very structured about how I bring students I mentor. And so scheduling meetings and making sure that my schedule can account for them." Tasha noticed that her Students of Color disproportionately did not have the energy or capacity to complete the previously assigned work and readings, so she shifted the course to asynchronous learning. Some of Tasha's students preferred synchronous learning and

expressed feeling unmotivated after the switch to the asynchronous format. However, Tasha benefited from an asynchronous structure because of changes to her home obligations and not having access to childcare. Additionally, Tasha noted her capacity changed in response to the publicized racial injustice and violence against Black people. Literature shows that before the COVID-19 pandemic, Blackwomxn faculty had higher expectations to support students. At the height of the pandemic, Blackwomxn were still expected to provide the same or more support, even though they too were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Black violence. As exemplars of contemporary anti-slavery rebels, Blackwomxn faculty set boundaries to resist unrealistic and personhood disaffirming expectations to teach and conduct research as normal.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Intersectionality Methodology supported our aim to center Blackwomxn faculty's identities, epistemologies, and unique experiences of teaching and mentoring during the height of COVID-19. Further, our examination illuminates the anti-Black patriarchal systems of power in U.S. higher education that facilitate the historical (mis)treatment of Blackwomxn. In our study, we sought to answer the question: How did tenure-seeking Blackwomxn at research-intensive institutions describe teaching and mentoring experiences in the wake of COVID-19? Black feminist scholars posit that Blackwomxn offer an alternative worldview that challenges Eurocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative ways of knowing and meaning making (Farinde-Wu et al., 2023; Joseph, 1988; Perlow et al., 2014). A Black feminist pedagogy in practice refuses to engage in the hierarchical nature of the relationship between teachers and students by situating students as knowers and validating lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge. Our findings show that when Blackwomxn faculty employ a Black feminist pedagogical approach, their teaching and mentoring demonstrate personhood affirming practices for Black students and more Students of Color. Blackwomxn's ways for mentoring and teaching are instructive because the impact of COVID-19 and racial injustice continues to be relevant to students' educational experiences.

Institutions of higher education were never meant to affirm Blackwomxn or center their pedagogical practices. We assert that these institutions were established and continue to function as anti-Black patriarchal spaces that only know how to metaphorically set Blackwomxn on fire. The policies, practices, and values within higher education are embedded in Eurocentric, hegemonic, capitalistic norms that have exploited and oppressed Blackwomxn. Participants in our study, like other Blackwomxn in empirical studies (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020), expressed concern with managing teaching, research, and personal expectations and changes caused by the pandemic. During the enslavement era, Blackwomxn's labor and bodies were exploited by and for capitalist gains of white people. Blackwomxn as anti-slavery rebels fought and resisted in uprisings and revolts. We identified contemporary anti-slavery rebel behavior in some Blackwomxn faculty in our study who resisted capitalistic expectations to operate in a normal capacity in the wake of COVID-19. They also accommodated themselves by setting boundaries to protect their time as they adjusted to an abrupt switch to virtual learning and changes to home obligations. Further, highly publicized racial occurrences such as police brutality and other acts of racial violence have and continue to impact the lives of Black faculty and students across the United States.

Blackwomxn faculty remain committed to supporting Students of Color as mentors and teachers. As put by Hall and Bell (2022), "a pedagogy that acknowledges and values the intersectional experiences of historically underrepresented students is warranted" (p. 12). Several of the participants in our study were intentional about creating spaces specifically for their

Blackwomxn students. Their shared identity and experiences with anti-Black gendered racism justify safe and affirming spaces to build communities, center their experiences, and support their well-being.

### **Institutional Solutions**

Our study provides insight into how Blackwomxn faculty approach teaching and mentoring in general and during the wake of COVID-19. Our work builds on and extends Black feminist pedagogy and intersectionality scholarship about ways Blackwomxn faculty improve the presence, experiences, and retention of Students of Color at HWIs. Considering what we garnered from our participants' narratives, we offer the following two "fire-extinguishing" solutions for institutional leaders to enact through policy and practice. The solutions that we present are not new. There is ample scholarship regarding ways institutions can treat Blackwomxn with dignity and respect. As Blackwomxn faculty sustain their personhood affirming approaches during the global pandemic, our findings demonstrate that Blackwomxn need well-being support which can result in their retention and thriving. One, institutional leaders should "acknowledge and affirm a slow-down" in research productivity since COVID-19. That recognition should be reflected by changes to faculty evaluation policies and practices (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020). Many of the participants engaged in mentoring practices at the same level as they did prior to the pandemic, which should be a substantial consideration in their promotion and tenure evaluation.

And two, institutions should account for emotional and invisible labor in review and career advancement evaluations. We recognize that all 17 of the Blackwomxn faculty in our study engaged in emotional and invisible labor, consistent with scholarship that Black faculty and Womxn of Color commit to mentoring and providing extra support to Students of Color (Griffin et al., 2013; Moore & Toliver, 2010). There is robust scholarship that is very informative for how institutions should account for emotional and invisible labor (Gonzales & Griffin, 2020; Porcher & Austin, 2021; Porter et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2022). For tenure seeking Black faculty at research intensive institutions, scholarship productivity is critical to advancement and mentorship is not equally valued in promotion and tenure (Ward & Hall, 2022). In considering the experiences of Blackwomxn faculty, the global pandemic and its ongoing effects have exacerbated the need to support Students of Color, family and care obligations, and overall self-care (Hall & Bell, 2022).

### **Well-being Strategies for Blackwomxn**

We also offer three well-being strategies for Blackwomxn that are interconnected. One, prioritize health and well-being. Answering the call from Ward et al. (2023), we consider the maroon logics of a contemporary anti-slavery rebel demonstrated when Black womxn faculty decide to disconnect from grind culture to intentionally rest, heal and minimize contact with white antagonism and its violence. We concur with Nap Bishop and The Nap Ministry Founder, Blackwomxn Trisha Hersey (2022) that "rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy", "rest is a healing portal to our deepest selves", "rest is care" and "rest is radical" (p. 7). The telework culture because of the pandemic exacerbated the 24-hour accessibility expectation that some students and colleagues have of Blackwomxn faculty. Blackwomxn serve themselves well when they refuse to work excessively to solve institutional dysfunctions. We must not take on the responsibility to eradicate institutional barriers to personhood affirming educational and employment campus spaces.

Two, set boundaries to protect our time, minds, and bodies from academic and emotional exploitation. Blackwomxn's relationship with the academy is a demonstration of the on-going

legacy of enslavement with Blackwomxn being used to benefit capitalism. Thus, we put forth Hall & Bell's (2022) call to "reclaim, renew, and transform our minds, bodies, and spirits to combat existing and compounded emotional, mental, and physical trauma, stress, and anxiety" (p. 9). Resting and boundary-setting are strategies that higher education institutions will not advocate for Blackwomxn across roles to do. Therefore, we must realize that keeping us "on fire" serves white supremacy and maintains intersectional oppression. Yet, Blackwomxn have demonstrated the ability to be set ablaze yet not consumed: we thrive beyond expectations by tapping into support systems such as sistah groups, spirituality, and loved ones.

Three, create your own affirming spaces. We reiterate our recognition that the foundational principles of education institutions are inherently violent to Blackwomxn. Therefore, we do not support a complete reliance on institutions to transform in ways that prioritize Blackwomxn's educational, and employment needs or support our mental and physical health. Instead, we suggest seeking support from other Blackwomxn who demonstrate through their actions a commitment to affirm Blackwomxn's experiences and support their ideas and requests (bandwidth assessment needed and mutually understood) for thriving and holistic well-being.

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