You're Not Burnt Out: They are Setting You on Fire: Addressing Institutional Responses to the Duel American Pandemics

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This themed issue is a collection of novel scholarship that focuses on Black womxn academics who are navigating the pressures of the academy amidst institutional racism compounded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The issue provides cutting-edge research to assist higher education administrators and university stakeholders in understanding how to support Black womxn in their quest to continue thriving and surviving in the academy. The goal of this issue is to help our academic sisters realize that the feeling of being burned out is not their fault, but rather a result of institutional forces, and to find ways to become flame resistant.

Keywords: Black women, COVID-19, institutional racism, academia

We are Black Womxn in Academia

In this editorial, we intentionally use the term *womxn,* interchangeably with *women*, to support a counternarrative that decenters the experiences, needs, histories, and institutionalization of a white, cisgender, colonial-centered, heteronormative, and patriarchal-based academic landscape (Kunz, 2019). Black womxn's positionality and identities in academia are historically marginalized and othered (Drew-Branch et al., 2019), which leads to challenges in visibility, well-being, and professional development (Dennis & Jason, 2018; Jason, Richardson & Dennis, 2023). As Black womxn faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate students in academia, we have gendered and racialized expectations of our career performance. Such expectations are often based on the perceptions of who we are believed to be from colleagues, administrators, and collegiate board members. The burdens and double standards we are required to negotiate come at a price that may affect us personally and professionally (Hills, 2019). When we consider Black womxn in academia, we also consider how we navigate the space in which we consistently reside. Therefore, the purpose of this editorial is to provide research from Black womxn academics to assist higher education administrators and university stakeholders to understand the experiences of Black womxn and how they can support Black womxn in their quest to continue thriving and surviving in the academy.

As Black womxn scholars, when able, we use our research and time as a way for self-care and resistance. Conducting research on and with 'our population' (i.e. other Black womxn) or writing about our personal pains and triumphant experiences serve as a catalyst to confront academic challenges we are subjected to within the academic space and simultaneously provide space for spiritual catharsis (Hills, 2019). The research and writing in this thematic edition are presented as a proactive, self-defensive expression used to safeguard our identity because we face harsher judgments from academic spaces. For example, the expectations of how we should conduct ourselves in the classroom, from our colleagues, administrators, and collegiate board members can lend to that of an "academic mammy"—often being unpaid, overworked, with race-specific positions and service (Wilson, 2012). hooks (1999) describes the role of the mammy in a historical context:

> …portrayed with affection by whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood-complete submission to the will of whites. In a sense, whites created in the mammy figure a black woman who embodied solely those characteristics they as colonizers wished to exploit. They saw her as the embodiment of woman as a passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them

Historically, Black womxn's positions as domestic workers and caretakers in white homes has reinforced our positionality as "outsiders within" the academy (Collins, 1986). For Black womxn to protect our identity, we must separate from the academically-based racist and sexist perceptions that exist to put us in a box. This box of limitations and unrealistic expectations created by academia, demands that we choose dominant identities that do not represent us and is

focused on our capability as surrogate mothers/grandmothers, under the guise of 'service' to the university and its community (Townes, 2006).

In addition to serving as a mammy, we are also placed into the Strong Black Woman (SBW) archetype (Baker et al., 2014). The SBW woman is always "strong, independent, resilient, self-reliant," (Overstreet, 2019, p.19). We do not have the luxury of demonstrating moments of weakness, dependency, vulnerability, fear, or helplessness like our white colleagues. Additionally, Black womxn are stereotyped as aggressive, emasculating, and lacking femininity (Overstreet, 2019). Unfortunately, those negative stereotypes serve to fit into the racist and sexist perceptions that exist in an overwhelmingly white patriarchal space known as academia and in 2020, were further propagated.

In fall of 2020, there were a total of 1.5 million faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States. Black womxn made up 4% of these full-time faculty members. Considering the vastly lower percentage, compared to their white female counterparts (at 35%), the burden to carry a full academic load weighs heavy on many Black womxn (NCES, 2020). This load is further exasperated, and more disconcerting, when we flesh out the data to view the underrepresentation of tenure-track faculty in terms of rank (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018). Black womxn make up 5%, 3%, and 2% of assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors of tenure in US academic institutions, respectively (NCES, 2020). Thus, the burden to do work–especially that related to diversity, equity, and inclusion–in any capacity (with respect to students, faculty, or staff) at the university level, is expected to be achieved by Black womxn. Black womxn essentially become 'tokens', recruited and hired to contribute to the universities' goals to be more inclusive (Overstreet, 2019); yet there are no, or few, institutional supports to foster our success as students and professionals (Jason et al., 2023)

In this collection, we present forms of self-care, communal lament, and resistance (Hills, 2019) by Black womxn in academia. Their experiences, which need to be expressed, are done in a collective framing providing a space for greater impact. With this, we thank the *Journal Of African American Women and Girls in Education* (JAAWGE) for the space and thank the authors for their truths. It is our expectation that colleagues, administrators and collegiate board members will read this collection to learn from the Black womxn so they may further support them in whatever space they may need.

Looking Back to Form our Path Forward

2020 was full of unforeseen challenges with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the height of racist rhetoric from the Trump Administration (Madhani, 2021; McHendry, 2018) and the onslaught of state-sanctioned murders of Black and Brown people. The CDC regularly reported the disproportionate number of Black people contracting and dying from the COVID-19 infection (Garg et al., 2019). For Black womxn, their risk of mortality from the virus was greater due to pre-existing health conditions like diabetes and obesity (Chandler et al., 2021). As colleagues and sister scholars, we came together during that time to address the crisis and navigate its impact. We sought to support one another as we navigated our own responses and responsibilities as Black womxn scholars, as mothers, and as mentors. We could not help but to think about the larger picture of impact both within and outside of academia on those who were not reflected in the stories of the pandemic. Aware of our privileged position as professors, and that for us, the situation was more nuanced than was being reported, we considered how we

could get our stories out from among us, to others that may have been going through the same experiences in similar or different spaces . For example, many of us had dealt with racist systemic struggles at our children's schools and were exhausted from navigating racial aggression there. In that sense, educating at home was an extension of what we had always done to supplement our children's education. *The New York Times,* for example, was running stories from white parents like, *I Have Given Up: Parenting in Quarantine* and *I Refuse to Run a Coronavirus Home School* (Harris & Tarchak, 2020; Weiner, 2020) but the media was not representing our experiences. Our children's schools were not concerned with addressing the state of our nation and their expected learning activities reflected this. Therefore, our motherscholar group used Black-owned curriculum companies and modified the standard curriculum to our own design which centered Blackness. Discussions surrounding Black womxn and other people of color and their struggles were present, but the unique difficulties we faced as parents and professors were largely overlooked by the media and in society overall. The co-editors of this issue wrote a chapter on Black Motherschooling for the edited book *Black Women and Da' Rona* (Brown et al., 2023).

Then, on top of the pandemic, we had to witness the tragic murder of George Floyd by officer Derek Chauvin. Our sister-scholars group, which initially formed for community and research purposes, quickly became a vital support system for us all. We found strength and solace in each other's company, uplifting one another, and even organizing Zoom graduations for our children. Together, we helped each other navigate the countless painful faculty meetings performatively centered around race, the expectation from the university that we needed to help address their racism - rather than waiting for external mediation or support, we needed a "RIGHT NOW" response that dealt with the discord among colleagues, university, college, and department politics, and managed the everyday stresses of being Black womxn in the midst of a global health crisis while raising children. Our unity became a powerful tool for survival and provided opportunities for us to thrive.

We soon realized that the support system that sustained us and the scholarship we produced was welcomed in many spaces. In forums and presentations with the Faculty Women of Color in Academia (FWCA), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP), and the Women in Educational Leadership Symposium (WIELS), our voices, challenges, and experiences were filling in knowledge gaps with uplifting and untold stories in Black and Brown spaces. In some institutions, we were causing people to rethink funding models. In others, we were giving voice to the frustration that this wasn't a colorblind, "we are all in this together," experience. In taking care of each other, we realized we had a powerful example of how Black Womxn were operating and creating unique and community-based forms of survival. Our experience in interdisciplinary work that allowed us to research, present, and practice together, was just one example. Our sister colleagues at other institutions were conducting studies in best practices for mentorship, in STEM, in developing graduate pipelines, and in helping students, junior faculty, and each other, find and amplify their voices. In editing this issue, we highlight the stories of other Black Womxn at a range of institutions and with varied experiences to continue our goal for meaningful experiential change among Black Womxn faculty.

The Duel Pandemics of Institutional Racism and COVID-19 Impacts Persist

The impact of the double pandemics of racism and COVID-19 created some of the toughest challenges in our work and personal lives. We were often the primary caretakers of our families during COVID-19; we also had the expectation to emotionally support students and colleagues. Meanwhile, our administrators called on us to "figure out and help alleviate" institutional racism, and continue our teaching and research.

Nearly four years later, these challenges persist (Njoku & Evana 2022; Roberts, Bell, & Meyer 2023; Fletcher et al., 2023) and Black womxn are especially vulnerable to these challenges with new political pressures and censures. This issue, edited by five Black womxn interdisciplinary academics, representing faculty and administration, 1) presents ways in which Black womxn academics experience disparities (e.g., tenure, promotion, teaching expectations, mental health, family leaves, etc.) in relationship to the institutional response to the COVID-19 global pandemic; 2) provides strategies for community building, including teaching, mentorship, and motherschooling (i.e., the ways we raise our children in community and center joy as a form of resistance to racial oppression); 3) offers institutional-level recommendations for administrators to better respond to the unique needs of Black womxn during continuing dual pandemics; 4) identifies context for initiatives, recommendations, and solutions for individuals and communities to respond to impact from being "set on fire."

Overview of Thematic Issue

Based on experiences across institutions and perspectives as faculty in a range of institutions, manuscripts included in this issue address experiences of graduate students in STEM fields, varied methodologies in hearing Black womxn (including poetic inquiry, diary studies, intersectional analysis), critique survey methods on Black womxn, discuss experiences of motherscholars in academia, and ask readers to think about mourning as a topic of conclusion and ongoing thought. This range of lenses demonstrates the relevance of Black womxn's perspective across fields, identities, and points of examination.

In *"Diary Study on Microaggressions, Identity Shifting, and Mental Health among Black Women in STEM Graduate Programs During COVID-19: The Mediating Role of Perceived Supervisor Support,"* authors argue that Black women in STEM graduate programs may develop coping strategies, such as identity shifting, to minimize gendered racial stressors, especially in the context of COVID-19. The authors define identity shifting as "the process of altering one's speech, behavior, perspective, and appearance," noting scholarly associations between identity shifting and mental health outcomes among young Black women.

By arguing that the mental health of Black women in STEM graduate programs is limited, their study utilized a Black feminist standpoint theoretical framework to examine daily experiences of gendered racial microaggressions (GRM), identity shifting, perceived supervisor support (PSS), and mental health outcomes among 102 Black women in STEM graduate programs. Using online daily questionnaires via Qualtrics, investigators hypothesized that identity shifting and GRM would positively predict anxiety and depressive symptoms and that PSS would significantly mediate the relationship between GRMs and mental health outcomes. They found that women with higher experiences of GRM and shifting reported more depressive and anxiety symptoms, but PSS did not mediate the relationship between GRM and mental health outcomes. Readers may use the results of this study to develop "culturally tailored support programs to create inclusive environments for Black women in academia."

In *"My representation is performative": Black Women's Reflection of Academia Through Collaborative Autoethnographic Poetic Inquiry,"* the authors argue that, "Black women faculty continue to search for a sense of wholeness in academic institutions founded upon seemingly well-intentioned ideologies of justice and belonging" in the midst of COVID-19 and increased anti-Black racial violence. Using what they refer to as "endarkened feminist epistemology," this "collaborative autoethnographic poetic inquiry" written by two Black women early career scholars discusses how they navigated early years as faculty during dual pandemics, and contextualizes their experiences amongst other Black women in the academy. They use "sister talks" and "found lyric poetry", to illuminate themes within their study and offer institutional recommendations to support the retention of early-career Black women faculty in the pursuit of, "holistic, authentic academic homeplaces" that "honor our endarkened intellectual, emotional, and spiritual identities."

In *"Reimagining Academia: Lessons from Black M(other)Scholars during our duel with the dual pandemics"* four self-described Black M(other)Scholars, who "experienced, mourned, and made room for [themselves] and others to thrive during the dual pandemics." These womxn discuss the ways they center music in their storytelling and how their identity as M(other)Scholars informed experiences at home during the pandemics. Using Alexis Pauline Gumbs' definition of "mothering," they discuss the ways they/we engage in mothering, "which is a long tradition in the Black community across the Diaspora" (Gumbs, 2016b). They build on Black feminist scholarship that sees mothering as "the practice of creating, nurturing, affirming and supporting" the young people in our midst" (Gumbs, 2016a, p.9).

In "*Tired of Always Grinding: Black Womxn Faculty's Experiences During COVID-19,*" authors utilize survey data that finds that "Gender, race, and feeling a part of the community" were significant predictors of voluntarily taking on student-centered service related to identity and being asked to take on service related to identity. Authors found that "Black womxn faculty were approximately 78 times more likely than White male faculty to volunteer for identity-based service" and "approximately 473 times more likely than White male faculty to be asked to participate in identity-based service." The authors discuss the additional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic along with racism for BIPOC and Black women and recommend that "it is crucial for higher education institutions to create safe spaces where Black women can live their best and most productive lives."

In *"Set Ablaze Yet Not Consumed: Tenure Seeking Blackwomxn and Black Feminist Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching and Mentoring during COVID-19,"* authors reflect on a study designed to explore the "personhood affirming approaches" Blackwomxn faculty incorporate as they teach and mentor Students of Color, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on their efforts. Using a Black feminist perspective and intersectional methodology, they center pedagogical practices of Blackwomxn faculty in unique experiences and interactions with Students of Color and ways they challenge "Eurocentric, patriarchal and heteronormative pedagogical practices" as well as offer strategies for wellbeing.

Finally, Byrd and Porter offer *"Storying Our Mourning and Resistance Through Teaching: Black Women Surviving (and Thriving In) White Spaces,"* as a critical nkwaethnography that explores the experiences of two pre-tenured Black women faculty navigating emotions around racial violence while teaching cultural awareness-building courses at

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predominantly White institutions during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors draw upon Dillard and Bell's (2011) nkwaethnography to "share the stories of 'we' instead of the 'singular self'" and present the data as two narratives. The authors use Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1989, 1990) to make and illustrate meaning from their experiences and highlight two themes: "(1) teaching and mourning at the margins and (2) calculated resistance." They offer implications and make recommendations for Black women faculty who teach cultural awareness-building courses and higher education administration.

As many higher education institutions have tried to move past COVID-19 and ignore its relevant and latent impacts, we remind readers that Black womxn have had the hardest economic setbacks due to COVID-19, and even for those who did not lose their jobs, the sorting of Black womxn in the lowest paid positions at work (i.e., occupational segregation) exacerbated the financial, caretaking, professional development and mental health challenges for which they are more susceptible (Long et al., 2020). In this collection, we encourage Black womxn in academia to decenter whiteness and ignore the expectation that they respond to white urgency; to center ourselves and wellbeing; to create a supportive community that centers joy, and to strategize on how to negotiate service and work responsibilities without burnout.

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