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First Things First: Black Women Situating Identity in the First-Year Faculty Experience

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Abstract

The first year in the education professoriate is an ineluctably critical time to establish a pathway for long-term professional success mirroring a scholar's commitment to positively influencing students, schools, and communities. For Black women, the distinguished dual marginalization that they endure based on race and gender creates challenges and opportunities during that important start to their career. Through Black feminist thought (Collins 2000) and portraiture's intentional blurring of art, life, and scientific boundaries (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997), two Black women tenure track faculty use their "pens as weapons" (Marshall 1994) to explicate the first-year professional experiences. They draw on their narratives and that of three other Black women education faculty. Findings include how Black women (a) navigate their first year outside of the safety of nurtured risk-taking in graduate school; (b) create peer accountability networks of support and mentoring to strategically plan for success; and (c) build self-efficacy by prioritizing self-care.

Introduction

It is not the intelligent woman v. the ignorant woman;

nor the White woman v. the Black, the brown, and the red,

it is not even the cause of woman v. man.

Nay, tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking

that the world needs to hear her voice.

Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

Insight into the integrative professional and personal experiences of Black women faculty have been explicated in scholarship centering race (hooks 1994; Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013; Croom and Patton 2011), Black feminism (Cooper 1892; hooks 2000; Lorde 1984) womanhood (Doharty 2020), sisterhood (Allen and Joseph 2018), higher education (Patton and Catching 2009), teacher education (Williams and Evans-Winters 2005), and educational leadership (Tillman 2012). In each arena, the prevailing messages about Black women faculty are that they endure uniquely-constellated challenges informed by racialized, gendered, and class-based ostracization. Likewise, overwhelmingly, Black women's individual and collective resiliencies are largely heralded as the contributory factors that undergird their success. Despite the historicity of racism and sexism prevalent in higher education, Black women have deconstructed the opposing factors influencing their existence as faculty, including lack and differentiation of socialization (Davis et al. 2011) and inequitable access to mentoring (Tillman 2001). In turn, they have inventively repurposed these forces as motivation to thrive in institutions. Throughout their professional trajectory, Black women ineluctably face and strive to overcome entities that question their knowledge, intellectual ability, and rightful occupancy of faculty ranks. In particular, the introductory years of faculty appointments are brimming with

new responsibilities that are often laborious to learn and navigate. Although research centering Black women faculty's early professional years exists in the literature (Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013; Evans and Cokley 2008), depictions of times when they are the least experienced and consequently the most vulnerable—that is, their first year—have not been fully elucidated.

Wading into the uncharted territory of the first-year faculty experience is an undertaking that is both uniquely risky and rewarding for Black women. Through this investigation focused on the professional and personal realities of the first year specifically, we endeavored to provide the level of detail missing in research on, for, and with Black women faculty. Black women education faculty in their third-to-fourth year reflect in hindsight on the hardships and the resulting resilience with which they respond. Their stories reflect their strength that deserves to be thoroughly unpacked and expounded upon in scholarship that coalesces race and educational research. To guide this study, we posed the following research questions: (a) How do the unique lived experiences of Black women in educational leadership faculty influence their ability to navigate their first year outside of the safety of nurtured risk-taking in graduate school? (b) How do first-year Black women faculty create peer accountability networks of support and mentoring?

As Black women, we contribute this scholarship in order to situate how Black women overcome the ostracization experienced as both underrepresented and early-career junior faculty. In response to this dearth of scholarship, we coalesce the multiple marginalizing dispositions by chronicling how five Black women navigated their first-year journeys as faculty of the interdisciplinary field of educational leadership. We determine that at this critical time, while Black women rank among the smallest percentages holding faculty positions, their resilience persists. As researchers and situated knowers (Collins 2000), we draw upon Black women's

lived experiences explicated through portraiture to prioritize their brilliance, move their stories from margin to center, and put first things first.

Theoretical Framework: Foundations Rooted in the Collective Experience

At the genesis of a theorized movement of critical consciousness centering women's epistemic authority, Collins (1986) articulated how Black feminist thought (BFT) was an "emerging, cross-disciplinary literature [which] consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women… [and] contain[s] observations and interpretations about Afro-American womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes" (s15-s16). Collins' (1986; 2000) articulation of BFT focused on the following themes: self-definition and self-valuation; the interlocking nature of oppression; and the importance of Black women's culture. Collins (2000) distinguishes five overlapping facets of the BFT themes: (a) resistance of oppression, (b) diverse responses to the similarity of experiences, (c) collective experience and group knowledge, (d) challenges to investigate Black women's perspective, and (e) evolution with the change of social conditions. Resistance of oppression explains how "an activist response to [Black women's] oppression will remain needed" (Collins 2000, 25) as long as they are subordinated based on their intersecting identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality). The tension between similar experiences and diverse responses addresses how Black women may react differently to their common challenges. Collective experiences and group knowledge highlight the dialogical relationship between "Black women's lived experience and the aim to better those experiences" (Collins 2000, 35). Collins likewise issues a challenge for the work of Black women intellectuals to investigate all of the dimensions of Black women's perspectives. Lastly, she calls for BFT and Black feminist practice to progress as social conditions necessitate.

Researchers have used Black feminist thought as a racialized-gendered epistemological framework through which Black women "aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice" (Collins 2000, 11). Previous research on Black women faculty in higher education (Allen and Joseph 2018; Lloyd-Jones 2014) and educational leadership (Peters 2011) has employed BFT and related epistemology to highlight how Black women produce social thought and scholarship that opposes oppression (Collins 2000). Lloyd-Jones (2014) applies BFT to explore the intersecting nature of oppression (Collins 2000), social exclusion, and scholarly marginalization of Black women in the academy. Akin to Collins' (2000) perspective of self-defining and resisting oppression, Peters (2011) utilizes endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard 2000), which has historical and theoretical roots in BFT, to tell the story of Black women whose voices have been "unrecognized and unconsidered" (153). Lloyd-Jones (2014) and Peters (2011) found that mentoring of Black women by Black women, which reflects the tenet of collective experience and group knowledge, was integral to learning the profession and overcoming barriers to socialization within the academy.

Similarly, Allen and Joseph (2018) heeded Collins' call to investigate Black women's perspective by employing BFT to understand Black collegiate women's experiences in a Sistah Network. Among their findings, Allen and Joseph observed that the Sistah Network provided a collective space that advanced Black women's identity and emboldening, which mirrors Collins' tenet focused on the collective experience and group knowledge of Black women. The authors also detailed how they identified how the Sistah Network offered social advantages, which highlighted Collins' resistance of oppression. Lastly, the Sistah Network provided emotional benefits, reflecting BFT's tenet focused on the diversity of Black women's responses to similar experiences.

Akin to previous research utilizing BFT, this paper operationalizes its tenets to chronicle participants' individual and collective first-year experiences. This approach aggregately contributes to new portraits by establishing their collaborative situated voice across academic spaces historically marked with ostracization. We focus on the BFT themes (Collins 1986; 2000), along with the five distinguishing features of BFT (Collins 2000), to explicate the lived experiences and consciousness of Black women assistant professors. Black women in the professoriate continue to face identity-based subjugation that affects their daily experiences and long-term success. Previous work sheds light on the challenges and strengths of Black women's academic journey to tenure and promotion.

Literature Review: Challenges and Strengths

Literature archiving the strategies that Black women faculty use to navigate oppositional sites is well-established across education scholarship (Alston 2012; Croom and Patton 2011; Horsford and Tillman 2012; Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013; Lloyd Jones 2014; Peters 2011; Williams and Evans-Winters 2005). As they continue to resist the heteronormative, hegemonic climates of academe, Black women use tactics, including engaging in mentoring and building sisterhood networks to traverse professional spaces. To more authentically represent the sisterhood bonds created through peer mentoring between women, we use the term *femtor* and *femtoring* (Brown 2006) to describe the "consciousness manifest[ed] through the actions of female mentors [and mentees] allowing them to see themselves in each other" (107-108).

Navigating the Terrain of Academe

Black women have to traverse the perils of gendered racism on their journeys towards their professional goals largely because of the ways their accomplishments and acumen are questioned, undermined, and relegated as subordinate to dominant groups (e.g., White men and

women). Black women are one of the smallest demographics of the academic workforce, as they hold only 2% of full professor, 3% of associate professor, and 4% of assistant professor positions across degree-granting postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education 2020). This scant percentage of Black women in academia can lead to their social and scholarly exclusion, which affects their access to opportunities, resources, and support. Furthermore, these challenges have included the costs and benefits of identity shifting, navigating interpersonal rejection, resisting dominant culture and inauthenticity, dismantling stereotypes, and confronting the *model Black citizen* trope (Dickens and Chavez 2018).

The academy has subjugating effects on women of color, as the culture creates university settings in which "faculty typically experience unique diminishing settler colonial verbal and nonverbal messages from their students, colleagues, and administrators" (Walters et al. 2019, 2). This demeaning or ambiguous empowerment (Turner 2002) situates women of color in spaces where their authority is limited, although they have achieved academic faculty positions. These lived contradictions (Turner 2002) force women of color to navigate and negotiate being in the academy while being othered, particularly at the beginning of their career trajectory. To mitigate these challenging experiences, Black women often stand on the shoulders of their foremothers and the scholars who came before them by being femtored and othermothered by them and following their examples (Alston and McClellan 2011).

Difficulties Black Women Face

In academia, Black women experience race-based discrimination difficulties through marginalization, social exclusion, tokenism, and exploitation. As bell hooks states, "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks 2000, xvii). This marginalization is evident in the small percentage of Black women in the ranks of tenure-track

faculty and in scholarly marginalization (Lloyd-Jones 2014). Black women experience scholarly marginalization because their race-based research agenda is relegated to a subordinate position in the academy. The marginalization in numbers leads to a social exclusion where Black women feel invisible, isolated, and alienated (Lloyd-Jones 2014; Thomas and Hollenshead 2001). Due to their scholarly marginalization and social exclusion, Black women are less likely to attain tenure-track positions, retain their position, and receive tenure and promotion (Lloyd-Jones 2014; Peters 2011). Black women also discussed experience tokenism and exploitation (Dancy and Jean-Marie 2014; Thomas and Hollenshead 2001). There is often a higher service and advising load. Despite these difficulties, Black women are able to succeed and persist with support.

It is important to note that Black women's dispositions in the margins of the academy's sacred space mirror Collins' (1986, 2000) description of the outsider-within; while they are obviously on the edge, they occupy the perimeter of a space that is deemed elite. Strikingly, the outsider-within juxtaposition exposes the social location of Black women faculty who exist in the privileged halls of the academy in a way that other minoritized people are not. Black women are outsiders (Lorde 1984) within institutions where they continue to endure racism and sexism. They are consistently tasked with reconciling their privilege while simultaneously being oppressed in the academy's patriarchal, historically white ethos. Among these realities, there exist examples of strategies that bolster Black women faculty and secure their success.

Successfully Supporting Black Women

The support of Black women in the academy takes on many forms that result in varying levels of success. It is important to note that reinforcement is made available in different facets of the academy, including personnel support, encouraging mentoring, and financial resources for

research, which individually and collectively buttress Black women faculty's professional experiences in strengthening ways.

In *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, and Harris 2012) and *Presumed Incompetent II: Race, Class, Power, and Resistance of Women in Academia* (Niemann, Gutiérrez y Muhs, and González 2020)*, Black women authors offer narratives that mirror the challenges they face and the triumph they secure in spaces across higher education. In particular, the volumes explain how Black women achieve their goals because of their resilience and fortitude. In addition, the books simultaneously point to how institutions can continue to support women of color in their work by expanding upon and institutionalizing strategies that have proven to be helpful and effective for minoritized faculty groups.

The recommendations proffered in the volumes provide meaningful direction for people who can enact their power, leverage financial resources, and equitably offer access to professional resources. Across chapters, authors offer recommendations related to (a) setting a healthy climate and culture of campuses; (b) maintaining supportive relations between faculty members and students; (c) acknowledging the roles of social class, tokenism, and the faculty search process; (d) superintending fair tenure and promotion processes; and (e) sustaining networks of willing allies and mentors.

Taken together, these compelling calls for solution-driven efforts provide a road map for individuals, institutions, and entities aiming to support Black women as they strive to succeed despite all odds in the academy. Noted across literature, one of the most effective methods of supporting Black women is mentoring.

The Strength of Femtoring: Pulling the Outsider-Within Back from the Fray

Professional mentoring has been espoused as a valuable process of socialization across higher education, particularly for Black faculty and other faculty of color (Gregory 2001). More specifically, mirroring their propensity to demonstrate resilience and offer encouragement, Black women have engaged in femtoring relationships that have bolstered each other's sense of belonging and validated their existence in sites that can feel exclusionary and violent (Croom 2017; Holmes et al. 2007). Peer and intergenerational femtoring are influential in socializing scholars into the nuanced spaces they navigate in academe.

The strength of peer mentoring is noted throughout higher education literature (Agosto et al. 2016; Baldwin and Johnson 2018; Morton and Gil 2019). As an exemplary component of what Collins (2000) refers to as self-definition, Black women collectively unite in groups that become a source of fortifying encouragement. One model, which Baldwin and Johnson (2018) articulated as "co-mentoring," is valuable as it helps Black women lead in the development of empowering counterspaces. When compeers co-construct strategies for themselves, they are able to sustain robust plans that support their independent and collective success. The process of peer femtoring, when operationalized in this manner, assists in pulling in Black women who are typically relegated to the outside frays of the academy.

Institutional Support

Many compelling and effective forms of support for Black women can come from institutions of higher learning. For example, a campus that welcomes Black women, their scholarship, and scholarship focused on Black women can help Black women feel like they are part of the community (Haynes, Joseph, Patton, Stewart, and Allen 2020). Likewise, fostering engaging and reciprocal interactions between Black women and their students can support their sense of self-efficacy and offer unbiased opportunities for them to succeed in classroom settings

(Porter, Moore, Boss, Davis, and Louis 2020). Additionally, when institutions counter the traditionally negative impacts of racism, classism, and tokenism, Black women feel better equipped to focus on their jobs (Overstreet 2019). Finally, marshaling impartial procedures for tenure and promotion gives Black women a fighting chance to achieve what is rightfully theirs to pursue (Esnard and Cobb-Roberts 2018).

Methodology: Presenting a Complex Reality through Portraiture

We employ portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997), a qualitative research methodology similar to ethnography and case study (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). However, unlike traditional ethnographies and case studies, portraiture aims "to combine empirical and aesthetic description" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 13-14). This blurring of boundaries between science and art allows for a "life drawing" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) of the participants while giving space and place for the inclusion of the researchers' voices. This boundary blurring aims to capture the essence of the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983) or as Lawrence-Lightfoot further elaborates, the "qualities of character and history some of which I was unaware of, some of which I resisted mightily, some of which felt deeply familiar" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 4).

Given the nature of the topic and our identities—Black women in academia—the use of portraiture privileges our voices as standalone cases and as facets interwoven into participants' narratives. We situate ourselves as researchers-participants. As such, we engage in exploring "the complexities of participants' lives through conducting lived research that seeks to forefront the perspectives, voices, and experiences of researcher and the participant, the portraitist and the subject" (Dixon, Chapman, and Hill 2005, 18). As researchers-participants, our perspectives, experiences, identities, and stories inform and shape the portrait. Furthermore, as with Black

feminist thought (BFT), portraiture aims to re-center the voices of those traditionally marginalized or silenced through counternarratives. The use of portraiture highlights the themes in BFT by investigating Black women's perspectives to resist oppression and move Black women's experiences from the margins to the center.

In the field of education, the portraiture method has been relatively rarely used (Hackmann 2002). Lawrence-Light (1983) developed the methodology while doing school-based research, so it follows that this methodology is appropriate for conducting research in higher educational settings (Hackmann 2002). In researching educational settings, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) highlighted the goodness inherent in these organizations. Furthermore, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) were concerned with recording "complex evidence of goodness" (9) and expanding the readership of Lawrence-Lightfoot's work beyond academia. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explicated that the "search for goodness" (9) was in resistance to the "dominant canons and preoccupations of social science," (9), and was focused particularly on the investigation of pathology and failure rather than success. Portraiture as a methodology focuses on bringing to light the inherent goodness of social systems and highlighting successes while acknowledging the imperfections and pitfalls that are present (Hackmann 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997).

Data Collection

As a qualitative research methodology, portraiture "creates a narrative that is at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 11). Particular to this study, portraiture is utilized to collect and embolden narratives that authentically frame the personal and professional identities of Black women assistant professors

navigating work politics and inclusion in a space—academia—that has historically excluded them. This critical and social examination of Black women faculty sets forth the complex ways they resiliently persist in, navigate, and negotiate space and place in academia.

Simply presenting these "life drawings" as a case study would only capture the portrait in a moment instead of the many moments encapsulated in portraiture. Instead, we—the researchers—employ the cross-case analysis of the portraiture method by relying on the context to collect the data and shape the final portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), attention to context (i.e., physical, personal, and historical) is necessary to engage in the process of constructing a product. We used our positionality in educational professional organizations and scholarly networks to generate a potential sample to recruit participants. We then did purposeful sampling to select untenured assistant professors from the larger pool of participants. To establish context, we relied on participants' curricula vitae, institutional profiles, scholarship, and involvement in professional organizations. This information, along with interview data, provides a triangulation of the data used to construct a complex and rich "life drawing" of each participant. The traditional academic data points (CV, scholarship, and service) situate the portrait broadly in the academy and specifically in the educational leadership field. The personal narratives in the construction of the portrait provide thick data used to assert belonging and subvert oppression.

Curricula Vitae and Institutional Profiles

To establish the contextual background of each participant, their public, professional history was vitally important. The information found on their curricula vitae and institutional profiles provided information about their educational and professional experiences. These components framed each participant's professional trajectory and their portraiture. It is important

to note that these documents were created by the participants for public consumption based on industry standards. This filtering speaks to how academia and institutions work to shape individual narratives. We explored the institutional profile of each participant (e.g., doctoral school, current workplace, scholarship) to determine the context of their personal and professional experience.

Scholarship and Service

We explored the type of scholarship and service in which each participant chose to engage to establish their professional and personal context further. The scholarly and service work in which each Black woman participated spoke to the initiatives and causes that they chose to champion. The resulting data highlighted each woman's values and how they acquiesced or resisted against the industry norms in academia.

Interviews

Each of the five participants were interviewed once for approximately 60-120 minutes. These interviews took place via the teleconferencing platform Zoom due to the physical distance between participants and researchers. Interview questions focused on four primary areas: (a) the first-year assistant professor experience; (b) personal experience; (c) professional experience; and (d) experiencing othering and revolutionary acts. The purpose of the study and questioning was to further "draw out" the portraiture by garnering an authentic narrative of Black woman early-career faculty members. All interviews were audio recorded, digitally transcribed, and double checked for accuracy by both researchers.

Participants

We selected purposeful sampling for this study by engaging participants who identified as Black or African descent and women. Additionally, they had to be pre-tenured in a tenure

track position in educational leadership. We chose participants from educational leadership for several reasons: (a) the interdisciplinary nature of educational leadership; (b) the unique intersection of PK-12 and higher education; and (c) the function of preparing educational leaders. As an interdisciplinary social science, educational leadership allows for a wide range of research topics that Black women can explore. Educational leadership scholars are posed to affect change at both the secondary and postsecondary education levels. Finally, as faculty preparing educational leaders, educational leadership scholars are able to help disrupt the silencing, marginalization, and othering that Black girls and women may endure. Study participants included the researchers and three additional Black women tenure track assistant professors. Information regarding their teaching loads, mentoring access, and accountability groups were determined to aid in analyzing their first-year experiences (See Table 1). The participants were in their second, third, or fourth year in their faculty roles. While the focus of this study is on the first-year experience, participants were beyond their first year, yet all pre-tenure, so that they could speak to the totality of their first-year experience.

The age of participants ranged from the mid-30s to mid-50s. Participants worked at four-year public or private colleges or universities in different regions of the United States. The colleges and universities ranged in size and included teaching institutions, master's granting colleges, and doctorate-granting universities. All five institutions are predominantly white institutions (PWIs), and three are also Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs). In addition to their years as assistant professors, participants had professional experiences in one or several of the following fields: PK-12 education, higher education, non-profit organizations, and educational research. In addition to their professional experiences, each participant had familial responsibilities, including, but not limited to, significant others, children, and grandchildren.

Motivated by the lyrical assertions of Lauryn Hill (Hill 1998), "You know I only say it 'cause I'm truly genuine. Don't be a hard rock when you really are a gem," we ascribed precious stone pseudonyms to all participants. Further, given the lived experiences of the participants, this naming scheme acknowledged that they did not become jaded nor hardened by the challenging circumstances of the academy. Instead, they shine brightly despite their surroundings.

(Table 1 here)

Data Analysis

We transcribed interviews and analyzed additional data (i.e., curricula vitae, institutional profiles, scholarship, and service) via creating notes and memos (Saldaña 2015). After the interviews were transcribed, both researchers checked completed transcriptions for accuracy. The interview transcripts were read and coded in two rounds of coding, including inductive and deductive coding based on the theoretical framework (Saldaña 2015). We then did a preliminary analysis of all of the interviews that we conducted. We relied on our research questions, the theoretical framework, and portraiture to do the coding to ensure that the process (data) and product (portrait) of the study (Collins 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot 1997; Saldaña 2015) accurately represented the voices and essence of participants. As themes emerged, they were organized in overarching thematic categories (Creswell 2009; Creswell and Poth 2018).

As researchers and participants, our voices permeate throughout this study "in the assumptions, preoccupations, and framework [we bring] to the inquiry" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997, 85). Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call for researchers to acknowledge and interrogate the extent to which their perspectives inform the construction of the portrait (Dixson et al. 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). While our positionality as researchers and participants guided the data collection, data analysis, and presentation of the portrait, we also

rigorously examined bias and question generalization of experiences through the lens of our perspective. In qualitative research, the purpose is not to achieve generalizability (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) but to "enhance the possibility of the results of a qualitative study 'transferring' to another setting" (256). Similar to other qualitative research, portraiture is not concerned with generalizations, but with presenting the essence of the participants. In studying Black women assistant professors, similarities in characteristics emerged as themes. These similarities filled out the nuances of the portrait of each participant. The portrait's three themes were (a) Nevertheless, She Persisted, (b) I've Got All My Sisters with Me, and (c) Reclaiming My Time.

Findings

She thinks, she knows, she wants, she needs, she can be, she is

She is my friend She is my inspiration

She is my sister

She is my niece She is my mentor

She is my aunt

She is my grandmother

She is my mother

She is my daughter

She is you

She is me

She is me

She is you She is us

She is Enough

The featured poem, we penned, highlights portraiture's intentional blurring of boundaries, including those of researchers and participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). It likewise reflects Collins' (2000) notion of self-definition and self-valuation, as well as the importance of Black women's culture, by invoking the essence of Ubuntu, an African expression of the collective state of humanity. The findings highlight how Black women faculty persist, participate in affirming femtoring, establish and maintain peer and

affinity networks, and prioritize self-care. These research findings add valuable insight to the canon of scholarship centering Black women faculty in academe by emphasizing the importance of understanding what they experience during the pivotal first year of their appointments.

Themes identified across the study's findings mirrored a sisterhood that is echoed in the call and response meaning of Ubuntu—*I am because we are.* Despite the routinely isolating experiences that Black women have in academia, they continue to persist. However, the question remains—'But, at what cost?' The marginalizing situations, undermining messages, and lack of institutional and institutionalized support make navigating the tenure track terrain difficult and enervating. For many Black women aspiring to succeed in the professoriate the process is burdensome. Still Black women first-year faculty members strive to counter the forces working against them as they endeavor towards tenure.

Nevertheless, She Persisted

Black women assistant professors only represent 4% of assistant professors in academia (U. S Department of Education 2020). This minute percentage can render Black women assistant professors both invisible and hypervisible in their institutions. The participants spoke about feelings of isolation, ensuring that they made their presence known, and scholarly marginalization (Lloyd-Jones 2014).

Some of the participants, particularly those who were in a new geographical location, faced isolation. For Pearl, the isolation was daunting, as she recounted realizing, "Oh my God! There's no one around, and when I say no one, I mean one or two, but I didn't realize how much that would affect me.... It takes a different sort of emotional lifting to do every day." The toll that invisibility took weighed heavily on her, and it also made her, like other Black women, feel hypervisible. Pearl faced this duality and explained it as follows: "On one hand, it's just

hypervisible because I was one of so few, but at the same time [I was] under the radar because nobody knew who I was outside of my department." This invisibility and hypervisibility resulted in participants being mistaken for students or visitors in their institutional spaces.

To intentionally make space for themselves, the participants made their presence known through their visibility on their individual campuses and in their field of education. Emerald attended programming for junior faculty to ensure that she was gathering vital information and meeting senior faculty and staff at her institution: "[There were] about five different programs last year, and I went to every last one of them. I introduced myself to the Assistant Provost and Associate Provost every time I went, and I made sure that they knew my name and my program, which isn't to say that they'll remember my name and my program, but I made sure to do that." While taking on the onus of ensuring their visibility on campus and in their professional field, the participants worked to complete and balance their research, teaching, and service requirements. In learning to navigate these responsibilities, participants recognized the importance of mentoring relationships. They relied on the bond they had with other Black women junior faculty to affirm each other through support and accountability.

I Got All My Sisters with Me

Participants expressed the importance of affinity and the influence of camaraderie in sustaining their persistence towards productivity and tenure. They described how they depended on support networks and accountability networks that they developed or joined in the academy as mechanisms for striving towards success.

Support Networks

Support networks positively influenced Black women's ability to persist during their first year as faculty. Notably, participants valued knowing that other Black women were working to

accomplish similar goals, even if they were in different departments or institutions. Reflecting on her first year, Ruby described how she connected with other Black women faculty by sharing parallel experiences. She also alluded to the consequences Black women faced when they did not have others with whom they could connect:

> Most of the other support I receive is peer mentoring from colleagues that either started the first year I started and we met at the new faculty orientation and we've kept in touch, but we're not necessarily collaborating on research projects or anything like that. We are basically talking about some of our professional experiences and how that impacts us personally. That was the conversation I was saying earlier—one of my colleagues is seeing a therapist and that's because some of the experiences that she's having as a Black woman in her department where she's the only Black [faculty member].

Black women who are the only one or one of a few Black professors in their department often experience feelings of isolation that, in turn, affect their psychological well-being. Like Ruby's colleague, Emerald sought out a therapist to mitigate the effects of being a Black woman in academia.

Pearl explained a comparable approach she took to connecting with others who offered encouragement. As a result of her location-based isolation, she reached out in the academy to provide and seek support to and from colleagues who experienced similar issues based on their junior faculty status. She explained the need to develop a network across professional spaces:

> I also rely on people outside of here, right, like friends and people who are going through everything and at the same time, but in different places. You know, you just got to build your crew, your community, wherever you find it.

The support networks that the participants formed ranged from professional engagement to collegial and familial reassurance. These networks demonstrated the varied needs of Black women faculty, as each type filled a different void that the participants faced. In addition to the solace they provided each other in their support networks, Black women established sites of accountability in these spaces. This engagement sustained them in their efforts to conduct

research and produce the scholarship that was important for them to develop at the onset of their careers.

Accountability Networks

Participants also used networks to set and accomplish their professional goals by forming and maintaining groups of Black women peers who held them responsible for achieving their research, teaching, and service objectives. They described how they connected with other Black women who were in different stages of their professional journeys to develop systems of check-ins, celebrations, and output. Opal detailed:

> For accountability and for productivity sake, I had a friend from grad school, another Black woman, who was my closest friend in grad school. She is a postdoc so we have similar writing, productivity, publication, and presentation expectations. So, she and I had weekly conference calls on Sundays to try to keep each other encouraged and to hold each other accountable. And then I had two other Black women friends who were in their final year at our graduate school, so we stayed in close contact while they were going through their dissertation process one year after I had just finished mine. It was still like a writing productivity expectation. So, we would stay in contact and anything I had learned through the process, I told them about it, any resources they came across while they were on the market, they told me about, and I would tell them about being on the market and resources of things that helped me. So, we held each other accountable. We presented together about our common theme, or a common research interest. So collectively the four of us came together with one other colleague from another institution and we all presented at a research conference about how our research aligned and soon after we turned it into a publication.

Opal's recollection of the various ways that she and other Black women supported each other during a critical time in their respective professional journeys suggested the importance of being intentional by producing the outcomes that matter (e.g., scholarly productivity and dissemination) during different stages (e.g., final year of doctoral program, job search, postgraduate, first year). Likewise, it demonstrated the usefulness of providing the support and resources that Black women needed in ways that restored and sustained them across different spaces.

Ruby reflected on the occurrences that led to her accountability network. She found great solace in uniting with other Black women who also needed to fulfill a crucial professional expectation: publishing from their dissertations. The marginalizing effects of the absence of directional support can lead Black women to form their own structures of accountability. Ruby's detailed description of her experiences joining other Black women, was a revealing portrayal of the ways Black women uplift each other through the process of accountability.

> It wasn't until I started working with a group of Sister Scholars that I scheduled a retreat. We did a dissertation writing retreat and part of that was to dissect our dissertations—all of us were in the same situation! That was interesting, all of us had about the same amount of time in the academy and neither one of us had done anything with our dissertation…. Our little group is Sister Scholars, and what we're doing is we're peer mentoring and I think that that's important…. If you're actually going through the process with a colleague in a similar situation, it has a different impact on you.

Participants were compelled to bolster other Black women faculty during a vulnerable period of their early careers. The lack of guidance regarding publishing resulted in their loss of valuable time during their transition from graduate school to their faculty positions. They recouped some of the productivity they missed out on by collectivizing to progress along their professional and personal journeys.

Reclaiming Our Time: Prioritizing Care

The participants reflected on the magnitude of self-care practices that helped them maintain healthy balances between their work responsibilities, personal lives, and the aspirations that aligned with both entities. Black women illustrated how prioritizing care helped them remain centered in the midst of their first year, despite challenges and tough lessons that the early-career time included (Agosto and Karanxha 2011; Lindholm and Astin 2011).

Participants' prioritization of care exemplified their focused efforts towards survival and sustainability. Their ability to take responsibility for their well-being buoyed them both

physically and psychologically. The way that the participants navigated the terrain of academia offers an exemplar for other Black women. When asked to reflect on her first year and offer advice for future Black women faculty, Emerald emphasized the importance of self-care. She explained:

> It's important to prioritize, as much as you can, taking care of yourself because stress and burnout is a very real thing, and our mental health is important. So, therapy is good, whether it be a formal therapist or whether it be seeking out or creating a group of support and accountability for talking through these issues and putting voice to them.

Similarly, Amethyst described how she intentionally worked on prioritizing life over work as a form of care. Her persistence to create a healthy approach, what she referred to as *integration*, was rooted in her tenacity to be a witness to others regarding reasonably undertaking work and life. Amethyst acknowledged:

> There's never a balance. It seems like work always takes precedence in this—has to be prioritized over, you know, life issues. And so what I've begun to [do], and how I conceptualize it, is I call it life-work integration where I'm prioritizing life.

Amethyst's prioritization of her well-being was an essential component of her milieu. The process she went through to care for herself was her way of ensuring that she could be healthily present and engaged in her responsibilities to her family and her institution. The intentional interweaving of the personal and professional aspects of life that Amethyst practiced was a strategy that Black women early-career faculty employed to encourage themselves and their peers. Within the care networks that they developed, they supported each other by offering spaces of levity, vulnerability, and safety. Pearl described her care network:

> I have a small group of people, but we don't—sometimes, I don't want to talk work, I don't want to talk about what the article is, or what happened in class. It's like, let me just—can't I just have a moment where we, you know, shoot the crap for a second? And so for me, I think that's more of what I need than perhaps the like 'Did you write today?' Because that's going to happen anyway, because that's how I keep my job so I know I need to do it…. Sometimes I just need a socializing piece more because that helps me be able to do the writing every day.

Pearl's nuanced explanation of the type of support she secured from her peers was a telling reflection on the range of connections Black women sought and found amongst each other. The solace they accessed through their engagement was an indication of the value of the group. The camaraderie within these groups helped its members restore by serving as sources of rejuvenation.

Discussion

The findings revealed that Black women first-year assistant professors (a) persisted despite and to an extent because of the challenges they face; (b) developed and formed unique support and accountability networks with other Black women in academia; and (c) prioritized self-care to maintain healthy boundaries between their work and personal life. The following section discusses the three themes as they relate to the tenets of Black feminist thought, the theoretical framework of this study, and portraiture, the methodological approach of this study. Collectively the emergent themes develop the comprehensive portrait of Black women academics in their first years as faculty and establish an important new scholarship depicting their truths at a vulnerable time in their lives.

We teach, we write, we serve, we guide, we can be, we are

We are our friends   We are our motivation
                          We are our sisters
          We are our confidants   We are our
mentors
                                        We are aunts
                                                  We are grandmothers
                          We are mothers
                                                We are daughters
                We are you
                                    We are us
We are strength
                          We are resistance   We are successful
                                    We are Enough

Through Black feminist thought, Collins (2000) crystalizes Black women's experiences in a frame that magnifies their intellectual brilliance and values their contributions to society writ large. BFT offers a lens through which Black women's lives are uplifted beyond the hegemonic boundaries of White men-centered social constructs, and the nuanced exclusions of White women-centered feminism. Rooted in this tradition, we offer perspectives mirroring and privileging the Black women participants we hold in high esteem, and work alongside, as a way of producing new knowledge. As Black women faculty, we have penned this collective "life-drawing" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) to encourage others and to become a form of the intellectual activism that Collins calls for in BFT.

The work that Black women first-year assistant professors complete to persist extends beyond the challenges of transitioning into a tenure track position, and encompasses an active response and resistance to racial, class, and gender oppression (Collins 2000). In BFT, Collins explicates how the experiences of Black women in the United States are uniquely situated in their multiple marginalization and oppression: "U.S. Black women encounter a distinctive set of social practices that accompany our particular history within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions" (Collins 2000, 26). By claiming space, pushing through work responsibilities to establish successful teaching, service, and research strategies, and cultivating positive femtoring relationships, Black women assistant professors are resisting their racial, gendered, and scholarly marginalization (Collins 2000; Lloyd-Jones 2014).

The portrait developed by participants' responses illuminates the commonality that they encountered and spoke to the collective experiences and group knowledge highlighted in BFT. Participants persisted by establishing their presence in the field of education and at their respective institutions in order to counter the historicized challenges faced by Black women in

the academy. By creating space for themselves through their research, teaching, and service, the participants also carved out space for other Black women. The cultivation of positive femtoring relationships reflected the power of developing networks aimed at creating social change.

Black women draw on the rich legacy and examples of achievement of those who have come before them as they form peer femtoring networks and actualize their unique strength as an irrepressible group. Resulting from their distinctive dispositions and experiences rooted in multiple racism, sexism, and classism (Cooper 1892; Lorde 1984), Black women produce valuable knowledge for each other in the supportive structures that they form. Black women faculty become *othersisters* (Austin 2012) to each other, as they develop kinship circles in which they engage as sites of informing, strategizing, collectivizing, and encouraging. While these networks are spaces where women can find comfort in their similarities and alignments, there is also strength offered in the diverse outlooks they have on the academy. The variance amidst Black women's interpretations of their lived experiences are also sources of profundity, as they offer differentiated perspectives on their mechanisms of coping and thriving in academic environments that feature comparable exclusions and barriers to participation and success. The portrait of both (other)sistering bonds and diversity of thought, offer a snapshot of the complex aspects of Black women's propensity to work, live, and thrive in solidarity. The inherent goodness of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997) allows for the coexistence of sisterly support and divergent experiences. The groups they form also serve as a collective whole that represents the well-roundedness of Black women and counters one-sided and narrow depictions of their depth of knowledge and being.

Implications and Limitations: Prioritizing the First Year

The research findings explicating the first-year experiences of Black women academicians offer implications for higher education institutions, administrators, senior scholars, junior faculty, and Black women academic aspirants. The ways these stakeholders embolden Black women are dependent on the resources and capital that they have at their disposal.

The Responsibilities of Institutions

As Black women's first years as faculty are overflowing with opportunities and obstacles alike, higher education institutions must provide support for their development. These opportunities should include mentoring programs during their first year, throughout their process leading up to tenure review, and after tenure, which should all offer regular in-depth monitoring of their goals. As implicated in participants' portraits, first-year faculty will benefit from colleges and universities taking the initiative to assign and connect them with their on-campus mentors as soon as they are hired.

Institutions should consistently offer financial support in an equitable manner. The formal establishment of funding for professional development that is available on and off campus, such as funds to attend professional conferences, research boot camps, and writing retreats that specifically support Black women's research productivity, can help Black women develop, monitor, and accomplish their professional goals (Jones and Osborne-Lampkin 2013).

Holding Up the Mirror: The Reflection for Black Women

The support networks that participants described are exemplars of how Black women affirm each other. Throughout this research, their peer and intergenerational mentoring demonstrates how they help each other succeed through the genuine guidance they willingly offer each other. As Black women have the propensity to offer support to each other in (other)mothering and (other)sistering ways, we echo the value of this approach to support by

encouraging Black women to seek or establish this type of camaraderie in their first year and beyond (Allen and Joseph 2018; Peters 2011). Likewise, we urge Black women to learn from other networks, whether they are formal organizations or informal collectives, to sustain themselves.

Finally, there is a need for tangible examples that Black women can follow and adapt when they go through their first year as faculty. For this reason, we encourage Black women to record what works well for them and share it widely amongst their professional circle of sisters. Further, we impress upon Black women the urgent need to create new scholarship that explicates their striving in the academy. Detailed accounts of how their strategies fueled their success will offer aspiring and early career scholars tools for their professional success.

The Call to Arms: Research as a Weapon and a Shield

Undoubtedly, there is a need for research to fill the lacuna that exists in scholarship that chronicles the lives of Black women. Therefore, we urge sister scholars to fortify those who will come after them by developing more research and literature in the area of first-year and early-career experiences and strategies of Black women faculty. This form of intellectual activism (Collins 2000) emboldens women to define themselves in their authentic ways. An increase in research that intentionally bolsters Black women faculty may influence higher education entities' support of other underrepresented faculty members. Their stories also need to be uplifted and disseminated to equitably highlight their brilliance, strength, resilience, identity, and work—that is, the *things* that should be centered about them *first*.

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