**Truth be Told: Utilizing Music to (Re)define the Narrative of Black Women Educators’ Lived Experiences**

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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Truth be Told: Utilizing Music to (Re)define the Narrative of Black Women Educators’ Lived Experiences

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ABSTRACT
The experiences of Black women in the academy are unique and extremely nuanced. In this track, we utilize Black feminist thought (BFT) to explore how music can be used to [re]define Black women educators’ lived experiences. We meaningfully and symbolically explore song lyrics from notable Black women artists to uncover how racism, sexism, and other interlocking systems of oppression and privilege manifest in and create barriers for Black women to thrive and sustain in educational environments. By utilizing pop cultural analysis methodologies, we engage in storytelling as cultural productions, to not only highlight authentic counternarratives but also challenge dominant narratives that may perpetuate harmful stereotypes or overlook the unique struggles faced by Black women in academia. Produced with the principle of recognizing that Black women educators have the agency, autonomy, and power to self-define and self-affirm our lived experiences.

Introduction

Black women are magical. Societal institutions, however, have historically attempted to dim our lights in every way imaginable. We are highly scrutinized while simultaneously overlooked, if not ignored altogether (#BlackWomenAtWork). Black women are brilliant scholars who contribute to the scholarship on an array of topics, yet our work is oftentimes hijacked (#citeasista), misinterpreted, and entirely disregarded. Furthermore, Black women are often expected to do a lot with a little, all while combating white supremacist ideals, inequitable practices, institutional politics, and performative culture in the spaces we occupy. We are constantly proving our worth and intelligence in the larger academic communities. Institutions have silenced our voices (hooks, 1989), refuting or challenging our knowledge and experiences (Collins, 2000). Despite these and many other obstacles, Black women persist.

In this track, we have creatively offered lessons learned, words of wisdom, and valuable insights about our experiences as Black women educators, activists, scholars, and students. We have shared our authentic narratives, using pop culture to express aspects of our lived experiences, as pop culture’s ubiquity across various facets of society facilitates the accessibility of too often obscured narratives. Specifically, this work draws on music written and performed by Black women artists to highlight the impact of songs on Black joy, laughter, and affirmation as resistance within the apparatus of education. Emerson (2002) noted that “Black women’s performances in popular culture often generate representations that counter the dominant ideological notions of Black womanhood” (p. 117). Thus, we celebrate the artistry of these Black women performers, influencers, and storytellers.

Background

Pop Culture Meets Academia

Considering the historical relevance of artistic expression in the lives of Black people, we have foregrounded our love and appreciation for Black cultural products, specifically pop culture, in the conceptualization of lessons learned as educators, scholars, and practitioners. Pop culture allows individuals to discuss representations of race, gender, class, and culture in society (Moody-Ramirez & Scott, 2015). Music in particular is a conduit for telling Black women’s stories. Music evokes emotions, and though it is often understood as a purely auditory experience, it can become a holistic sensory experience by virtue of reading and understanding the lyrics (Wallace et al., 2020). We have explored songs from some of the most prominent Black women artists: Rapsody, Solange, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Tamela Mann, Jill Scott, and Mary J. Blige. By purposefully interrogating and reflecting on song lyrics, we have carefully addressed the assumptions and notions of what it is to be Black women in education. We argue that particular songs depict and validate representations and experiences of Black women in education. These
artists highlight the strength, power, and positive self-identity of Black women, and we have used and honored their agency to contest and resist society’s parameters of what we can do, say, be, and feel. In this way, we recognize and celebrate the fact that no one can tell a Black woman’s story like a Black woman. We have contended with the ways in which we must interact with educational institutions, specifically by engaging readers with different interpretations, reflections, and reactions surrounding their lived experiences in education.

We ground our work in Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) Black feminist thought (BFT), specifically around the assertion that Black women’s experiences are valuable forms of knowledge. Evans-Winters (2019) described Black feminism as a “critical social theory born out of the lived experiences and struggles of Black women living at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression” (p. 17). A feminist-informed perspective positions gender and gender-related concerns at the center of analysis and highlights notions of power (Moody-Ramirez & Scott, 2015). In education, these power dynamics manifest in myriad ways, including a lack of opportunities for professional growth and development (Belk, 2006), barriers to promotion and advancement (Benjamin, 1997; Walker et al., 2003), and the emotionally taxing obligation of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice work. For Black women, the double marginalization that results from our racial and gender identities only exacerbates the challenges faced in these respective roles. Even so, these struggles shape how Black women think and what we value (Henry, 2010). To that end, BFT calls for Black women to define and redefine our identities on our own terms. The work of the artists that we have highlighted is a collective nod to BFT, recognizing Black women’s desire to take up space and demand that the world acknowledge us.

Delay Nuttin’ Sista You Ain’t Got No Time to Waste. - Rapsody

You can’t what?
(Control it)

Black women artists, as well as other women of color artists, have changed the way we define and understand women’s empowerment (Layne, n.d.). Using the art of written words to celebrate and describe the essence of Black womanhood is not just a contemporary practice; it is something Black women artists have done for decades. Literary giants such as Nikki Giovanni, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde have thoughtfully and boldly told Black women’s stories from their perspectives. These and other profound writers, poets, singers, and musicians provided a foundation for today’s Black women artists to continue telling those stories. Hip-hop powerhouse Rapsody is one artist who has crafted Black women’s narratives through song in bold and creative ways. Rapsody’s own journey in the music industry is illustrative of the conditions that Black women have historically endured, most notably as she has worked to dismantle the normalized barriers to access and success for Black women within the hip-hop arena, which in its early years was a very male-dominated area.

In an interview with Essence, Rapsody acknowledged the challenges that come with entering the industry as a Black woman, but she noted the higher calling and purpose for which she expresses her art: “My purpose is women, kids, especially my nieces and nephews. The next generation, that’s my purpose. To make it easier for them. I’m a go as far as I can but I hope that I can widen the door and make it easier so they can go even farther than me. That’s the purpose for me” (Ju, 2019). She also paid homage to Black women artists who came before her, such as Queen Latifah, Foxy Brown, and MC Lyte, who laid the foundation on which she was able to build her success. The acts of looking back and expressing gratitude to those who paved the way and looking ahead while realizing that we are examples of what is possible for Black women and girls are critical for us as Black women. They have been ingrained in our demonstration of community mobilization (e.g., lift as we climb). As Black women educators, we too recognize the importance of visibility and representation, not just in the present but looking toward the future. As Black women in education, we serve as mentors, guides, and role models for many Black students. Through these formal and informal Black networks, we hold these students accountable; we expect them to excel academically, professionally, and personally because we know the impact it could have not only for themselves but for our families and communities.

In 2019, Rapsody released Eve, her third studio album. The album exudes Black girl magic, with songs named for icons like Michelle Obama, Maya Angelou, and Serena Williams: a love letter to Black women. In this artistic masterpiece, Rapsody acknowledges Black women’s struggles and celebrates their triumphs. She speaks candidly of the “burdens black women bear, citing infighting that perpetuates sexism” (Kearse, 2019). Rapsody underscores the issues of racism and sexism that Black women have had to contend with and overcome for centuries

Delay Nuttin’ Sista You Ain’t Got No Time to Waste. - Rapsody

You can’t what?
(Control it)
The challenges that stem from this marginalization have historically presented barriers for Black women in various areas of society, including education (Miller & Vaughn, 1997).

In her song *Maya*, Rapsody pays homage to Maya Angelou, who inspired her love of poetry before her rap career took off. The powerful lyrics of the song reference a very familiar piece, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Rapsody acknowledges the societal pressures that Black women face—always being told, “wait your turn” or not to do or say anything that would lead to being stereotyped as the Angry Black Woman. Rapsody challenges these norms with a spirit of liberation: “I can’t be no bird in a cage.” She ultimately affirms that Black women are entitled to the ability to move freely in the world in ways that we choose without wasting time claiming and reclaiming space. The experiences of Black educators align with Rapsody’s sentiments, as academic and professional pursuits are rife with obstacles: hostile work environments, lack of mentorships, unfair critiques, and discriminatory practices, to name a very few. And still, we affirm ourselves and each other. We keep going because, as Rapsody declares, we have “many, many moves to make.”

**Using Music To [Re]define Black Women’s Lived Experiences**

Through music, we have simultaneously interrogated and made meaning of Black women’s experiences as educators, activists, scholars, and students, reclaiming what was simply owed to us all (Ladson-Billing, 2006). We examined various lyrics to draw connections between the symbolism of the text and Black women’s educational experiences at historically white institutions (HWIs). Yip Harburg, a popular American lyricist, expressed his view on lyrics: “words make you think… music makes you feel…but a song makes you feel thoughts” (Alonso, 2012, para. 12). Using music as a gateway, we share tools for and advice on how Black women can navigate and persist at HWIs. We are three Black women educators, activists, and scholars who work at different universities within the United States. We have served as K–12 teachers, directors of cultural centers, instructors of diversity courses, and coordinators of academic success programs for historically marginalized students. As Black women, our race and gender identities are often politicized and scrutinized; however, we purposefully disrupt these oppressive practices by reorienting our standpoints of multiple consciousnesses and recognizing our intersectional identities and experiences as valuable assets in the spaces we occupy (Boss et al., 2021).

We explore the concept of Selah moments or intentional pauses that allow Black women to regroup, reflect, and re-energize themselves. Next, we share how we often guide the upcoming generation of scholars (e.g., Black and other historically minoritized students) by serving as organization advisors, informal mentors, and confidants. Black women recognize the importance of lifting as we climb and opening doors of opportunities for others. Seeing Black women in spaces typically reserved for white men and women can affect a sense of empowerment for students of color. Black role models matter. We can inspire students to reach their potential and be successful in both academic and professional endeavors. Along with mentoring, even just our presence can underscore the importance of finding one’s network to help support and sustain oneself. Black women do not accomplish our goals independently; rather we support and inspire one another in partnership and sisterhood (Emerson, 2002).

“I’m weary of the ways of the world...”

*Weary of the Ways of the World*: The Invisibility of Black Women

I’m weary of the ways of the world
Be weary of the ways of the world
I’m weary of the ways of the world...
Be leery ’bout your place in the world
You’re feeling like you’re chasing the world
You’re leaving not a trace in the world
But you’re facing the world

—Solange

I’m weary of the ways of the world. In U.S. society, feeling overworked and overtaxed has become the norm for Black women. Oftentimes, we overcommit ourselves at work, at home, and in the community (Patton et al., 2016). We wear many, many hats as mothers, spouses, and sole providers, just to name a few, and with these various roles comes tremendous pressure and responsibility. What they do not come with, however, is enough physical, mental, and emotional support, just expectations to always do more.
Be leery 'bout your place in the world. You're feeling like you're chasing the world. Black women are often rushing from one endeavor to the next with limited or no time to rest. We are so often trying to be everything for everyone in the spaces we occupy. For Black women educational professionals, college campuses and our units or departments, in particular, are permeated with pressure and the expectation of endlessly producing with limited support and resources. Serving as advisors to student diversity organizations and mentoring many students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, to say nothing of the daily tasks connected to programming and administration, can take a toll on Black women’s health and well-being. The heavy load results in us becoming overwhelmed, exhausted, and overworked (Tevis et al., 2020). Amari remembers overseeing a program for first generation students of color (authors were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality):

Initially I was a one-person shop responsible for recruiting and supporting students involved in the program. I was tasked with managing the day-to-day operations of the program—budgeting, supervising student employees, scheduling, facilitating evening programs—with minimal support from colleagues in other programs or departments. I recall being tired and stressed every day because my program was under-resourced in terms of full-time staff.

Black women’s work can go underappreciated because their knowledge, experience, or contributions are deemed inferior (Collins, 1989), however, while these things are undervalued, they are simultaneously expected to do this work and relied on often exclusively. Previous research validates this notion that Black women do not feel that their whole selves are valued, appreciated, or included at work (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

You're leaving not a trace in the world. As bell hooks (2000) acknowledged, “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (p. xvii). Black women face this duality of hyper-visibility and invisibility (Allen & Joseph, 2018; Tuitt, 2010). Our race and gender are visible “non-work” identities that greatly impact how we experience work (Harris-Perry, 2011), and these identities often inform how we are “seen and treated at work” (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019, p. 145). These two identities are inextricably tied and Black women at HWIs constantly experience racism and sexism from people, programs, and policies (Phelps-Ward et al., 2018, p. 55). Black women are tasked with navigating and negotiating being in the academy but always Othered. Research continues to show that Black women often go unnoticed and unheard, despite having made significant and substantial contributions in K–12 and higher education alike. Oftentimes, we are one of few in our departments, at our schools, and on our campuses. HWIs have Black women ever positioned as outsiders (Lorde, 1984). These experiences further support the aforementioned notions of collectivity and sisterhood that are arguably necessary for Black women to thrive in academia and other spaces we occupy. The networks we create often combat the invisibility on the outside, making the sisterhood networks vital to our success.

“Cause I Need Freedom, Too.”: Self-Advocacy and Liberation

Freedom
I can’t move
Freedom, cut me loose
Singin’, freedom
Freedom
Where are you?
Cause I need freedom too

—Beyoncé

Freedom. I can’t move. How often have Black women felt like we were at a standstill? Self-advocacy is a radical act of preserving oneself and speaking up when necessary. It calls for one to understand, feel, and recognize when things are unbalanced and acknowledge a need to step back and regroup. Self-advocacy can be as simple as letting a colleague or supervisor know that you are unavailable to take on additional responsibilities while simultaneously acknowledging anticipation of future opportunities when your schedule can accommodate it. Imani recalls a previous role at an HWI in which she did not feel empowered to use her voice:

It was daunting and problematic to serve in that role for a year while feeling voiceless; my suggestions and contributions to better serve my minoritized students were undervalued and underappreciated, despite
having relevant work experiences and a graduate-level education. The following academic year, I began advocating for myself when faced with adversity and strife in the department. When I spoke up, I was freeing myself by recognizing that my voice, presence, and knowledge mattered, not only personally, but also for the students I served.

By taking the initiative to communicate our needs and wants to others, Black women are placing our overall well-being first. Freedom, cut me loose. Black women have learned how to survive in the margins (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). Freedom can be better established by setting and enforcing boundaries. Freedom can come in the form of leaving or divesting from a job. Another time, Imani left her job because she was getting physically sick from the stress of more work responsibilities, limited staff, and responsibility for students’ mental health. They made a conscious decision to protect their peace and personal health. Protecting one’s peace is important when managing emotions and stress. Amari recalls the time they had to remove email from their phone. My white supervisor could not process how I could be effective in my role without 24-hour availability. I maintained my commitment to setting healthy boundaries, even at the expense of my supervisor’s comfort.

Black women have often served in roles where we are overworked, and boundary setting has been imperative for surviving higher education. Examples of boundary setting include responding back to work emails during business hours and removing the email app from our cell phones. Boundaries for a Black educational professional might encompass deciding not to facilitate a social justice workshop when we are already feeling culturally taxed or tokenized. Or choosing to hold space for ourselves when we need time to reflect on or decompress from the social unrest and pervasive inequities in society. These boundaries allow us to recharge and reignite our passion and commitment for ourselves, our students, and our communities.

"Cause I need freedom too. Black women have to unapologetically practice self-advocacy in the interest of self-preservation. For years, we have served as champions for their our “villages” and others, expecting nothing in return. For Black women, though, championing the community can take on the form of “othermothering.” Othermothering is the act of filling a maternal role in the absence of a mother (Collins, 2005). Nia currently acts as an othermother for multiple students:

One of my students in particular has an unstable mother, and the student checks in with me daily regarding adulting, grades, and financial management. This student is a college freshman who is mothering their mother. I try to provide support and resources to the student.

Black women faculty and staff regularly engage in othermothering in the collegiate environment. This fabricated kinship can take the form of Black women educational professionals attending not only to students’ academic development but also to their social, emotional, and psychological development (Guiffrida, 2005). We help students navigate HWHIs by helping them deal with social, political, and economic challenges.

Today, Black women are freeing ourselves from others’ unrealistic expectations to foster our own growth. Freedom for Black women is also having the ability “to define, express, and own their minds, bodies, and spirits independent of external influence and depiction” (Phelps-Ward et al., 2018, p. 51). The act of freeing oneself is the bedrock of self-advocacy and self-care. One of the most important practices in doing so is learning the art of saying “no.” Saying no can be a difficult decision for anyone, and for Black women in particular, as it makes many of us nervous about what opportunities will be missed in the interest of self-preservation. Nevertheless, there is power in a “no” that releases us from the emotional hold of others. Saying “no” can limit the number of things that we have to do, while also freeing up time for self, friends, or family. We, as Black women, should be neither afraid nor compelled to say “no.” Agency with this one word is crucial in taking back our freedom. When Black women reclaim our time, we are engaging in intentional self-care and maintaining a healthy balance between our work responsibilities and our personal lives.

"Work...Work...Work": You Can't Pour From An Empty Cup

Just get ready fi work, work, work, work, work
He said me haffi work, work, work, work, work
He see me do mi dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt, dirt
So me put in work, work, work, work, work
Na, na, na, na, na, na
When you ah gon’ learn, learn, learn, learn, learn, learn?
Before the tables turn, turn, turn, turn, turn, turn

–Rihanna

Just get ready fi work. Nobody truly has to work 24/7, yet our professional environments often perpetuate this type of culture. Higher education professionals in particular are taxed with new demands on their time, even more so during these unprecedented times (Shamrell, 2021). The narrative has been passed from profession to profession that to be the best, we must work 40+ hours a week at minimum. If we aren’t working before and after hours, then we are viewed as not effective nor invested in the department, the organization, or even our students. Nia experienced this workhorse mentality and started to change the narrative with their staff. They required their staff to unapologetically take days off and care for themselves. This is one example of someone attempting to shift the narrative; however, the higher education profession has much work to do to change this toxic aspect of the culture. A culture shift of work–life balance is more likely to occur with support from administration through policy change, communication, and addressing the campus climate.

He said me haffi work. Black women professionals are experiencing higher amounts of burnout and racial battle fatigue because of mediocre leadership and inadequate supervision (Smith, 2004), thus creating the “superwoman” complex and lens for Black women, which manifests as excessive working and unrealistic and dehumanizing job and workplace expectations (King-Taylor, 2020). Black women should not have to put in double the labor to overcompensate for other deficits, such as inexperienced supervisors. It is unbalanced to have Black women do others’ work without either the title or salary to accurately reflect the workload. Imani recalls a time when she was overworked:

I served in a senior leadership role and ultimately had to complete my work and my supervisor’s work, which included everything from attending late-night meetings to addressing the issues of diversity on campus. My supervisor took the credit for the shift in culture while allowing me to encounter preventable microaggressions and a hostile work environment. I turned that professional experience into a career-enhancing moment, but this situation was predatory and was misconduct on the part of my supervisor. This experience took a toll on me, I felt stressed, undervalued, and unrecognized, it was an unnecessary burden, when I should have received acknowledgment and accolades for my professional efforts in advancing our department’s culture.

When you ah gon’ learn. When Black women deliberately engage in Selah moments, we are taking voluntary and intentional pauses for reflection. Reflection can be good for Black women’s souls. As we intentionally engage in reflection, we are better equipped to repurpose our endeavors by reclaiming our time or positioning our needs ahead of the needs of others. Ideally, Selah moments can potentially transform our perspectives, often garnering new insight or purpose for our current and future undertakings. Reflection can allow us to recenter our focus and our energy or realign our time and priorities.

“Truth Is I’m Tired”: Options Are Definitely Few

Truth is I’m tired
Options are few
I’m trying to pray
But where are you?
I’m all churched out
Hurt and abused
I can’t fake
What’s left to do?

Truth is I’m weak
No strength to fight
No tears to cry...

–Tamela Mann
Truth is I’m tired. Black women in education have always been viewed as sites of exploited labor for institutions (Collins, 2000). We often experience racial battle fatigue, which happens when “racism or battling racism has negative health effects” (Allen & Joseph, 2018, p. 2). The combination of these factors has created untenable working environments that perpetuate negative stereotypes and contribute to exhaustion. Imani recalls working at an HWI and dealing with being the highest-ranking Black person in the department:

I was challenged by white women who were in positions below me. It was nothing short of hell. I had to create and find a community on campus to help with self-preservation while in this role.

Black women are fatigued due to having to prove our worth and legitimacy in the academy. Options are few. Cultural taxation is real. Black women are often perceived as experts on issues of diversity and expected to serve on diversity committees or educate others on the state of affairs of being Black in the academy. Amari recalls a campus service request:

I vividly remember being voluntold to serve on a new campus diversity committee, because I knew how to educate others about diversity; however, there was no mention of how this endeavor would be acknowledged or valued in the academy (i.e., course release, service recognition, annual evaluation). I experienced “problematic popularity” (Gay, 2004) because being the “only one,” or “one of the very few” in my institution caused me to be in popular demand for many service functions; I was routinely invited to make guest appearances in classes and co-curricular programs, serve on additional search committees for representation, and be a liaison for minoritized communities.

Black women often shoulder any “labor–physical, mental, or emotional–due to their membership in historically marginalized groups within their department or university” beyond that which is expected of members of any other groups in the same setting (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012, p. 214). These expectations of Black women have compounded in recent years due to a lack of resources and limited personnel, often resulting in them being overworked and underpaid. Padilla (1994, p. 26) defined cultural taxation:

The obligation to show good citizenship toward the [academic] institution by serving its needs for ethnic representation on committees, or to demonstrate knowledge and commitment to a cultural group, which may even bring accolades to the institution, but which is not usually rewarded by the institution on whose behalf the service was performed.

Truth is I’m weak. Along with cultural taxation, Black women often feel as though we are held to a higher standard: mediocrity is not acceptable. McCluney and Rabelo (2019) noted that Black women “may feel pressured to perform in ways that ‘ideal employee’ images” (p. 144). We are forever going above and beyond to meet our goals. Black women are “seen as intruders in the academic world who do not really belong” (hooks, 2010, p. 101). During the COVID-19 pandemic and racial unrest, Black women encountered a multitude of challenges connecting with students. For example, while many Black women hosted multiple events virtually, sometimes there was not as much engagement or attendance as they would have liked. We do not have the same expectations as our peers, even during a pandemic. As a result, there has been a mass exodus of not only Black women but Black professionals. The inequitable treatment, exasperation, exhaustion, and unrealistic expectations have contributed to the decision of many to leave the profession. Black women can earn higher wages in other industries and do less work. Higher education as a profession underpays, misuses, and abuses Black women. Black women’s departure from the profession can have a detrimental impact on higher education and for communities of color. This is not good in the long term for students and university communities. Campus communities need to figure out how to correct the systemic issues rooted in inequity that continue to push Black women out of the field.

No tears to cry. Society often depicts Black women as having to be strong, fierce, and resilient. Even when tears are warranted, there is an atmosphere that values white women’s tears much more highly than Black women’s tears. Imani recalls a time in their role when their colleague reported them to human resources for not being a team player and requested mediation:

My co-worker was offended when I brought an advocate to the meeting. I knew that no matter what was said in the meeting, I had to show no emotion because it would be a sign of weakness and disregard.
Black women are seldom granted opportunities to be emotional or expressive because if our behavior is considered out of character, judged, or misunderstood, we may risk being labeled as an Angry Black Woman.

Issues, Controversies, Problems

As we explored and analyzed lyrics from various music genres, we realized that there was a common thread: dismantling the oppressive practices in the academy that negatively impact Black women’s self-care and overall well-being. Through this lyrical interpretation, we saw the occurrence and recurrence of the same two challenges: racism and sexism. This dual marginalization experienced by Black women creates unnecessary, hurtful, and demeaning challenges, obstacles, and barriers as we navigate the academy (Gray-Nicolas & Nash, 2021). Within the tapestry of academia, oppressions are espoused through administrative practices, expectations, and hidden curricula.

Black women exist both within and outside the academy. Collins (1986) described this as the “outsider-within” framework. We are both seen and unseen. Contending with this juxtaposition within the institutional landscape again and again becomes detrimental to Black women’s self-efficacy and ability to simply complete our work. These constant pressures and unfair expectations also dilute the passion of Black women educational professionals.

Solutions and recommendations

Throughout this work, we centered the artistic genius of Black women to depict some of the challenges we face in academia due to racial and gender discrimination. In the same way, the Black woman’s creative genius is a powerful tool for highlighting Black women’s joy and resistance. For the purpose of this track, these artistic works serve as Black joy, laughter, and affirmations and action steps for Black women to simply continue being who we are. For example, we call on neo-soul songstress Jill Scott’s “Golden” as a constant reminder that we deserve to be free, and not only when it is convenient, comfortable, or safe for others, but all the time and in every way. She sings,

I’m taking my freedom
Pulling it off the shelf
Putting it on my chain
Wearing it ‘round my neck.

These lyrics capture in the most poetic way the importance of us as Black women taking ownership of our freedom and not compromising it for anything. For those of us in academia, that means speaking up and speaking out; not being afraid to advocate for ourselves for equitable compensation, respect for our scholarship and our intersectional identities; and saying no when necessary. Black women have made tremendous progress in education, despite the countless barriers that are placed in our way. We offer Mary J. Blige’s “Just Fine” as an affirmation that #BlackGirlMagic continues to be alive and well. Her lyrics reflect how Black women continue to be resilient; we persist, despite oppressive practices by peers, students, and institutions. She sings,

Feel free right now, go do what you want to do.
Can’t let nobody take it away, from you, from me, from we.
No time for moping around, are you kidding?
And no time for negative vibes, ’cause I’m winning
It’s been a long week, I put in my hardest
Gonna live my life, feels so good to get it right.

We have created spaces that support our well-being and contributed extensively to research and scholarship about our lived experiences in the academy. We persist. And we often do so with little to no support from our institutions. Academia and educational institutions should invest in the professional development of Black women. Support looks like creating opportunities for growth and development through leadership experiences that do not involve doing more unpaid work.
Black women continue to develop and support sister networks (Allen & Joseph, 2018), where we can authentically and transparently engage in dialogue about our lived experiences in the academy. These affinity groups allow us to thrive and heal while encouraging us to persist, resist, and redefine our truths. Sister networks validate Black women’s existence in sites that can feel exclusionary and challenging (Gray-Nicolas & Nash, 2021; Holmes et al., 2007). These intentional and meaningful connections help with feelings isolated at times on campus, but while affirming our identities, worth, and value in the academy. The sister network serves as counter spaces for Black women to receive advice and encouragement and foster a sense of belonging (Patton & Harper, 2003). In conjunction with these networks, Black women also benefit positively from mentorship and sponsorship (Allen et al., 1995). Black women continue to be underrepresented and undervalued in HWIs; thus, it is crucial to seek out mentors and sponsors who can help us navigate spaces and push through barriers.

Black women are at the forefront of conducting research, contributing meaningful scholarship, and representing on campuses, all while disrupting the dominant culture’s narrative of what it means to be a Black woman in the academy. This is another opportunity for institutions of higher education to provide space and support for Black women through release time for writing, dissemination of research at conferences, and grants to further our research.

Future research directions

The tools and advice provided are based on a series of conversations between the authors, during which we authentically and transparently shared our lived experiences within historically white spaces in education. We further have suggestions to offer for future research. Efforts should be made to explore and engage in more work that explicitly addresses self-care for Black women in education. Published research on this topic exists in other disciplines. It would be helpful to capture the current experiences of Black women in education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, research exploring the impact of systemic racism on Black women educators’ experiences would be markedly valuable. Attention should further be put toward creating opportunities for research on Black women graduate students, particularly doctoral students at HWIs. The experiences of Black women graduate students, especially those in student affairs programs, can be the determining factor in whether we pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion careers post-graduation. Thus, this area of research deserves further exploration, as it provides an opportunity to elevate Black women scholars’ voices in important ways. Finally, Black women should be supported in creating journals, books, podcasts, and other publications to disseminate research by other Black women. As reflected throughout this work, Black women are more than capable of producing and excelling. It is time that we are supported as we engage in that work for ourselves.

Conclusion

The identities of Black women educational professionals influence how we position ourselves and engage in the work we do each day. Our identities inform our why’s and how’s, specifically our rationales for doing this work and how it impacts our lived experiences. We, the authors, aim to contribute to the growing body of scholarship by Black women educational professionals that deals with the experiences and challenges of being a Black woman professional in higher education (e.g., Patton et al., 2016). Song lyrics allowed us to reflect on our educator, scholar, and activist roles by critically interrogating how our identities influenced our understanding of self and engagement with others. More specifically, the song lyrics gave meaning to our lived experiences, emotions, and thoughts. The songs served as subtle reminders of our encounters within HWIs. Being Black in academia is hard. It is challenging. It is laborious. Engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion work as a Black woman educational professional is even more difficult because of not only the oppressive practices that exist in society but also those that are found specifically within HWIs.

It is our hope that other Black women educational professionals will explore the use of popular culture to engage in creative expression in understanding themselves and others. By using artist lyrics, we were able to paint a melodic portrait of our experiences as Black women in diversity, equity, and inclusion roles. Music can afford Black women an outlet to make sense of our experiences in the collegiate setting, which can subsequently help with the advancement of women and illuminate our experiences through unconventional storytelling.

Black women are living our Black womanhood out loud, and it is time for the world to listen. Gone are the days of remaining and suffering in silence. Black women will continue to tell our stories, regardless of how others feel or what they think about it. We will continue to have the power to self-define and self-affirm our lived
experiences. Every now and then, the world needs a reminder, for which we call on Reyna’s interlude on Rapsody’s Eve:

So let me learn you a lesson
Black women, you are a threat on every point of the map
You are love, in its purest form, all unapologetic, all unconditional
Always too compassionate, sometimes too forgiving
But, never too afraid to show up
Black women, you are everything they knew you wouldn’t be
You are gorgeous, even through the suffering
You needn’t forget why
You hold the world together
Thank you for your mercy
You are the strongest form of human
Black women

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Notes on Contributors

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Gloria Howell, Ph.D. currently serves as Director of the Neal-Marshall Black Culture Center and Faculty Coordinator for an introductory research course at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB). She earned her Ph.D. in Higher Education and Student Affairs from IUB where her research focused on amplifying culture-infused pedagogy through the arts and its connection to Black student identity affirmation in postsecondary spaces. As a student affairs educator, Dr. Howell connects research to practice through the initiatives she coordinates for students, particularly those that center leadership development, social justice and activism.

Shetina Jones, Ph.D. serves as the Associate Vice President of Student Experience at the University of Windsor. She completed her Ph.D. at Indiana State University in the Educational Administration program. Her dissertation topic was on high-achieving Black women at HBCUs in STEM fields or majors. Dr. Jones has over 13 years of experience working in higher education in academic affairs, multicultural affairs, residence life, and student affairs leadership. Her research interests are historically HBCUs and Latinx and Black women in STEM. She is an active member of the American College Personnel Association Educators-International (ACPA), Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), and National Association for Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA).

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