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The poetic identity work and sisterhood of Black women becoming academics

Abstract

Studies highlight institutional structures that hamper the recruitment, retention, and progression of Black university students and scholars in Britain. Yet, scarce research explores the nuanced encounters of Black women who are early career (Ph.D.) researchers (ECRs), facing entangled oppressions. Located in a Black feminist tradition and by drawing on two Black women's (our) accounts of co-reflexive identity work in academia, this article addresses calls for more sociological analysis of how intersecting antiblackness and sexism impacts academic experiences. By analyzing the identity work and spirit of Black sisterhood embedded in a longitudinal postal poetic exchange that we began as doctoral students, this research examines components of collaborative, co-reflexive, and counter-narrative coping mechanisms between Black women in Britain in predominantly white institutions (PWIs). We conceptualize dimensions of poetic co-reflexivity and identity work at the nexus of studentship and scholarship as Black women; through a praxis-based framework – Black women 'becoming' academics (BWBA).

Keywords

Academia, Black women, intersectionality, poetry, race

Introduction

The experiences of Black women in higher education are at the centre of crucial research, including accounts of Black women's resistance from the margins in the US (hooks, 1989; Daufin, 2017; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001), as well as Stockfelt's (2018, p. 3) research on Black women's encounters as the 'minority of minorities' in Britain. Related work foregrounds Black women's British academic career trajectory challenges at leadership levels (Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Rollock, 2019). The vital website *Black Girl Does Grad School*, founded by Ravynn K. Stringfield (2016), archives the postgraduate experiences of Black women at university, particularly in the US. Additionally, essential work by Bailey & Miller (2017) illuminates how interdependent racism, sexism, and heteronormativity are entrenched in higher education.

Overall, extant writing emphasizes how, due to the intersections of anti-Black racism and sexism, Black women are often 'presumed incompetent' (Cottom, 2019; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Perlow et al., 2018), resulting in some being compelled to compartmentalize their identities when working in predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Boylorn, 2014; Carbado & Gulati, 2012). However, there is a dearth of contemporary studies of academic work that specifically focus on the early career researcher (ECR) experiences of Black women in Britain, with exceptions including the research of Pennant (2021, p. 245) on 'The dire implications of navigating the overwhelming whiteness of the education system for Black women', and the work of Johnson (2020, p. 89) on 'Throwing our bodies against the white background of academia'.

There is much to be gained from more empirical research about being in pursuit of 'academic arrival' (Breeze & Taylor, 2020, p. 412), as Black women, who often face some of

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the bluntest edges of precarious labor markets and structural oppression (Cutts et al., 2012). This article reflects on Black (academic) sisterhood between early career (Ph.D.) researchers and conceptualizes dimensions of Black women's poetic co-reflexivity and identity work at the nexus of studentship and scholarship; through a praxis-based framework – Black women 'becoming' academics (BWBA). We position this research within a review of writing regarding gender, race, and identity (work) at work; the university as workplace; and Black identity and intersectionality. More precisely, this article is located within a creative Black feminist tradition that affirms the generative potential for working and resisting from the margins (hooks, 1989), without romanticizing or fetishizing the lives of people who are structurally marginalized, and while acknowledging the context-dependent nature of experiences of marginalization and power.

Our methodology is framed in relation to our creative, co-reflexive poetry exchange project, which pushes against individualistic early career discourse and normative notions of academic knowledge-production (Dotson, 2015; Kilomba, 2008). Lastly, we present our analysis, discussion, and concluding insights, which highlight the value of co-reflexive identity work and Black sisterhood as Black women ECRs (Cutts et al., 2012; Lampkin, 2018) through reciprocal support, creative storytelling, and the archiving of (inter)personal experience and Black feminist knowledge production. Our discussion widens understandings of how Black women navigate doctoral processes and early academic career stages in PWIs in Britain. We do so by theorizing our experiences as Black women 'becoming' academics (BWBA) and outlining how imaginative and inter-subjective methodologies can contribute to a related praxis-based framework.

Gender, race, and identity (work) at work

Gender, feminist, and workplace studies reveal how sexism operates in organizational settings, including women's strategies when addressing misogyny and male-dominated labor markets (Thwaites & Pressland, 2016). Some such research explores how women's anticipation of a hegemonic, heteronormative, and patriarchal gaze, can influence how they construct, present, conceal, and reveal themselves in society. Studies of Black women's workplace experiences unpack how they are subject to the intersectional effects of both anti-Black racism and sexism, in addition to other forms of interlocking oppression such as ableism, classism, and colorism which involves the severe societal oppression of dark-skinned people and the contrasting favourable treatment of light-skinned individuals (Perlow et al., 2018). As such, Black women's self-presentation and perceived 'employability' at PWIs are often scrutinized with reference to notions of professional appearance and performance, which are underpinned by paternalistic perspectives of productivity and the normativeness of whiteness (Carbado & Gulati, 2012; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Smith et al., 2018).

Stockfelt's (2018) vivid account of the narratives of Black women in British higher education who are employed full-time on permanent contracts provides a crucial analysis of challenges at different stages of Black women's academic careers. Where our work differs from Stockfelt's (2018) is our focus on the experiences of Black women who are at the juncture between being a student and a fledgling scholar. Influenced by Black feminist approaches, we use an analytic lens suited to exploring the everyday emotional labor and institutional oppression often involved in 'becoming' an academic, as a Black woman in a PWI. Our understanding of the ongoing nature of 'becoming' is one that is informed by an

ontological understanding of identity as continuously constructed through identity work (never-ending, never completed).

Theorizing our identity work in academia involves acknowledging that ‘For many, just being present in academia is seen as challenging because it is a space that was not made by, or for, people “like you”’ (Murray, 2018, p. 163). In examining related anxieties in these contexts, we assert that despite such feelings of unease being experienced on a micro-level, they are the by-product of power relations implicated in the sustained and structural oppression of Black women at work and in society (Johnson 2019, 2020).

Shaped by the work of Breeze and Taylor (2020), which analyzes feminist collaboration across academic career stages, our article focuses on horizontal and cross-institutional Black feminist collaboration within the contestable ‘early career’ category. Following prior research on ‘self-questioning identity work’ (Beech et al., 2016, p. 506), we reflect on our ongoing and ‘unresolved’ identity work which relates to the context-specific vulnerabilities (Gilson, 2014) and pressures involved in being Black women early career (Ph.D.) researchers in PWIs—including how such experiences can entail drawing on various resources which are unevenly distributed due to intersecting racist and sexist processes, to negotiate one’s position and relation to others in academia.

Black identity work and intersectionality

Existing studies of Black identity work include the research of Carbado & Gulati (2012) on the self-management and negotiation of Black people’s ‘Working Identity’ in PWIs, where they may alter their appearance, accent, and mannerisms, to ‘perform’ their identity in ‘racially palatable’ ways. However, research at the juncture of gender, race, and identity work

studies continues to be in the minority, as do intersectional analyses of work and organization issues (McBride et al., 2015), particularly those that focus on Black women's experiences.

Our work stems from a Black feminist perspective that scrutinizes the interdependency of anti-Black racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Hence, we recognize innovative ways that Black women use creative forms of communication as part of community-building, liberatory, and resistant strategies (Gray, 2015; Kilomba, 2008; Perlow et al., 2018; Sobande, 2020). Drawing on Johnson's (2019, p. 1) fruitful approach which 'moves away from simply describing (and fixing) racialized bodies to a particular performance/experience, and instead explores how performances shift as we negotiate different bodies, objects, and spaces', we reflect on forms of self-questioning and sources of sisterhood involved in Black women's early career academic encounters in PWIs.

The university as workplace

The university is a prime source of workplace research, including feminist and gender studies that document how women are structurally disadvantaged throughout their careers (Taylor & Lahad, 2018; Thwaites & Pressland, 2016). Significant work tackles issues to do with race, gender, academia, and the reproduction of inequalities via the accounts of Black academics (Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Johnson et al., 2018; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Pennant, 2021; Rollock, 2019). Thus, our article emphasizes the perspectives of two Black women (us) at early stages of their academic careers in Britain, where, like Johnson (2019, p. 1), we often find ourselves in 'conferences and seminars with more pictures of Black and Brown people on the presentation slides than Black and Brown scholars present in the room'.

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Coping mechanisms in academia include collective-forming, the refusal to pursue individualistic credit for knowledge-production, and critical creative interventions that contribute to counter-narratives and storytelling. Other means of academic resistance that influence our research include embracing ‘slow work’ and a collaborative Black feminist ethics of care, despite neoliberal expectations of maximum productivity and competition. This article reflects on Black sisterhood-building against the competitive backdrop of higher education and intersectional forms of oppression, while extending understandings of the racialized and gendered nature of identity work in academia. In turn, our research contributes to conversations regarding ‘radically different forms of knowledge, and modes of knowledge generation’ (Lambert, 2018, p. 2); especially those which draw on Black feminist epistemologies and affirm that academic knowledge and lived experience need not be perceived as mutually exclusive (Boylorn, 2006; Osei, 2019; Sobande and Osei, 2020).

Academic career trajectories are shaped by both boundaries and boundarylessness, including tensions between structural forces and expressions of agency (Dar & Ibrahim, 2019). Reflecting on individuals’ accounts of their university careers, including Ph.D. processes that are often regarded as a ‘rite of passage’, aids imperative understanding of the university as workplace and subsequent coping mechanisms sought out by marginalized groups. Therefore, this article emphasizes our own ECR experience narratives from our time as Ph.D. researchers in Scotland, while recognizing ‘the complexity of the simultaneity of multiple identifications and racial perspectives among Black women’ (Cutts et al., 2012, p. 476).

Becoming an (early career) academic as a Black woman

The process of becoming is the ongoing transformation of something or someone that previously existed in a different state. However, the adjective, ‘becoming’, is typically used to signal that something or someone is pleasing and appealing. In our article, we play with the duality of the meaning of ‘becoming’ as part of our discussion of both the processual nature of the academic arrival of Black women and how they anticipate and navigate expectations of their efforts to conform. Thus, we tarry with these different definitions of becoming in relation to how Black women ECRs encounter overlapping racialized and gendered inequalities in academia while in pursuit of a career as an academic.

Due to the intersectional nature of structural oppression, including the interdependency of anti-Black racism and sexism (Crenshaw, 1989), Black women in academia in Britain are often treated as though they are in a particularly precarious and perpetual state of becoming; to such an extent that their scholarly journey frequently involves a prolonged sense of academic arrival which contrasts with that of many of their non-Black peers (Leading Routes, 2019; Rollock, 2019). Such individuals (in our case, at one point, – Black women in Scottish business schools) rarely find that they are part of a critical mass and must navigate academic labour market contexts that are increasingly reliant on precarious workers and lack the potential security that a tenure system provides a select few with in the US. Additionally, Black people’s experiences in academia are infrequently reflected in data regarding “Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic” (BAME) identities, which does not acknowledge the anti-Blackness and specific realities faced by Black people of African descent.

An intersectional lens ‘stands in contrast to the additive approach to understanding the effect of multiple identities’ (Cutts et al., 2012, p. 477) which has often obscured the co-

constitutive nature of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of structural oppression. There are countless examples of the hostility and systemic oppression that Black women academics face; such as when being discouraged from bringing up issues concerning racism and material conditions, including in feminist spaces which immobilize an impetus to address the entwined effects of anti-Black racism *and* sexism (Bilge, 2013; Carby, 1982).

The landmark Leading Routes (2019) report shows evidence of barriers that considerably constrain Black Ph.D. students' access to research council funding and stresses that despite gains at the undergraduate level, Black students in Britain remain markedly scarce at postgraduate research stages. Key points highlighted in the report include the fact that of 19,868 studentships awarded by all UKRI research councils only 1.2% of them went to 'Black' or 'Black Mixed' students, and just 30 of those individuals were from a Black Caribbean background (Leading Routes, 2019). Relatedly, out of 19,000 professors in Britain, 14,000 of them are white men, and only 60 of them are Black (at the time of writing this, 25 of which are Black women) (Rollock, 2019). Thus, white ECRs in Britain are notably more likely than Black women to have access to supervisors, mentors, and supporting senior figures with similar lived experiences to them.

Literature intended to help Ph.D. researchers navigate the doctoral process includes content that encourages Black individuals to contribute to or establish peer support groups (Phillips & Pugh, 2010). At times, such students are advised to be assertive when noticing they are not receiving the same treatment as white peers. Much of such guidance does not meaningfully reckon with complex structural barriers and interactions that Black Ph.D. researchers face, as well as the intricacies and extensive work that may be involved in them establishing informal peer-to-peer support systems. Thus, our article is intended to provide Black women ECRs with insight into different experiences of collaborative coping

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mechanisms, while recognizing limitations of these, given the systemic nature of intersecting inequalities (Johnson et al., 2018). Put briefly, we do not suggest that peer-to-peer support is any solution to structural oppression, but we reflect on the importance of such support in our own academic experiences and evolving friendship.

In focusing on such issues, we particularly draw on the scholarship of Cutts et al. (2012), which through considering the experiences of Black women during their doctoral studies in the US, affirms that their counter-narratives aid critical understandings of academic and institutional power relations. The germinal articulation of intersectionality offered by Black feminists such as Crenshaw (1989) and The Combahee River Collective (1986) asserts the need to ensure that the lives of Black women are not relegated to the margins, including amid work labeled as being intersectional. Accordingly, in centering our experiences as Black women in academia, while also acknowledging the limitations of them, we seek to contribute to efforts to uphold the Black feminist foundations of much intersectional praxis

Methodology: Constructing our co-reflexive research design

This research focuses on our use of creative and co-reflexive writing when navigating and documenting our Ph.D. processes. Specifically, it explores our experiences as Black women and critical business school doctoral researchers (2015–2018 and 2015–2019), through our longitudinal sharing and exchange of poetry (since October 2016). Our methodology is based on the premise that ‘Fragments, emails, transcriptions of conversations, notes, constitute intellectual production; are all practices for our lives’ (Sharpe, 2016, p. xvi).

Our poetic exchange provided us with a more self-expressive and generative writing outlet than those that are commonly a core part of business school doctoral experiences (e.g. doctoral theses and positivist-oriented academic journals). Thus, our methodology is

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buttressed by an interpretivist perspective, with the aim of unpacking our understanding of ourselves and our Ph.D. experiences. Where reflexivity as methodology is commonly concerned with ‘constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher’s own contribution/influence/shaping of intersubjective research and the consequent research findings’ (Salzman, 2002, p. 806), our interpretation of co-reflexivity involves a shared duality between our individual reflexive and creative approaches.

Analytically, reflexivity also serves as a way to engage in a methodological ‘self-consciousness’ (Finlay, 2002a, p. 210) that allows for a ‘thoughtful, conscious self-awareness, [where] reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself (2002b, p. 532)’. Our co-reflexivity served as a way for us to engage in the iterative and improvisational dance of co-constructing our shared knowledge of institutional embeddedness. In the words of Johnson (2019, p. 3), we affirm ‘the importance of developing methodologies which can expose the white background of academia that I and participants have to negotiate in different ways’; including by drawing on creative and reflexive approaches.

Co-reflexive knowing as creative method

Co-reflexive feminist methodologies offer the chance for individuals to relationally reflect on their positionality, while inter-subjectively enabling another to do so (Breeze & Taylor, 2020). Literature on the notion of friendship as method outlines how friendships can present ‘a kind of fieldwork’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 729), through which scholars may conduct research. Friendship is only part of the subject of our article, but it is a significant component of its methodological base. Aligned with ‘the lens of Black feminist autoethnography and

(auto)biographical narrative' (Osei, 2019, p. 1), we oscillate between consideration of the personal, the political, and the power(ful); all of which are knotted in various ways.

Friendship as part of a co-reflexive creative methodology encompasses an inevitable interrelationship between researchers and their research subjects (ourselves), through which they can proactively and collaboratively engage in reflection. Furthermore, 'friendship' as a creative method encourages a reflexive praxis between researchers, filled with informal and one-on-one social exchanges that set the foundation for a grounded and mutually created space for both an intimate vulnerability and creative solidarity.

We have written and sent each other over 30 poems and are continuing to do so. Moreover, what brought us together when we first met was poetry (mine, yours, ours) (Boylorn, 2006). For one of us (Jaleesa), our project enabled a renewed connection to poetic self-reflection which had been part of their prior arts disciplinary background. For the other (Francesca), it reconnected them to a childhood love of poetry-writing which they had revisited in recent months. We realized that our co-reflexive knowing began from our initial meeting and introduction to each other and a shared interest in writing poetry. Over time, what transpired in our work were notions of friendship as sisterhood, self-reflection, and positionality, which sets our study as being 'both an epistemological statement about the connected nature of knowledge and a political statement about the noninnocence of research' (De Freitas, 2008, p. 470).

As this unanticipated research iteratively and wholistically emerged as the result of a personal poetic exchange that we embarked on in 2016 as friends and early-stage PhD students, we did not submit such work for ethical review. We recognize that reading about the challenges we faced as PhD students in academia may be uncomfortable for our former institutions. However, we do not prioritize assuaging such discomfort, as to do so would be to

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betray some of the intentions at the core of this article and the work that it is based on: Acknowledging the intersecting forms of institutional oppression that many Black women ECRs encounter in PWIs in Britain and sharing our reflections on our experiences of forging forms of cross-institutional peer-to-peer co-reflexive identity work, support, and Black sisterhood.

Co-reflexive doing as analytical strategy

As part of this project, we built a deliberate analog process of sharing poems by post, supplemented by our use of digital tools and platforms (Skype and FaceTime) to perform our poetry to each other at a distance. We sent our poems to each other, initially, once a week via ‘snail mail’, in-keeping with a feeling of intimate sharing. It did not take long for our poems to become more sporadic in nature and our decision to let go of a clear project timeline was aligned with elements of ‘slow work’ approaches which dismiss the prioritization of speed and productivity. Such activity resulted in our generation of poems in response to each other, as well as each reading the other’s poetry back to the original author. By conducting this process for over two years, we have developed a shared archive in which our self-expressive creative artifacts exist (Abdi, 2015); hard copy poetry, as well as digital documentation of our collaboration (emails, audio recordings, a work-in-progress website).

In co-reflexive form, our analytical approach began at the stage of writing our poems individually and continued through to the sharing of our poems with each other. This cyclic, methodical process grounded our poetic exchange in a cycle of constant feedback: writing reflective poetry about our experiences, deliberately posting our poems to each other knowing they would undergo an interpretive analysis from a place of friendship, reflecting on

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the other's poem in private, then sharing meaning between each other by reading the received poem and the initial reflection, and finally a reflexive discussion on the poems, the process, the reflections, and the experiences.

A key part of our co-reflexive methodology is the cyclic effect of engaging in a praxis that allows for creation and analysis to interact simultaneously. Both our data collection and analytical approach offer a window into aspects of our own experiences as part of our shared effort to contribute to ongoing scholarship and conversations concerning the learning and workplace experiences of Black women in academia (Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Johnson et al., 2018; Pennant, 2021; Rollock, 2019), with an intention to acknowledge some of the specific challenges that can be faced by Black women ECRs in Britain.

Analysis and findings: Understanding our private poetic exchange as publicly resonant

The initially private nature of our project was part of its comforting qualities, but we recognize that had it not been for our meeting in a space where Black women were publicly sharing challenges that they face, we never would have come together in the first place. Hence, our decision to gradually move our collaborative project into public domains. While our analysis is a 'bottom-up' social constructionist approach based on a co-reflexive poetic praxis, it is also influenced by scholarship on creative solidarity, which is 'neither theory nor practice, but both at once, interweaved in the act of making' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2010, p. 90). Black women have a rich history of using creative, reflexive, and poetic methods, inside and outside of academia (Boylorn, 2006, 2011; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1988) as a way to explore, analyze, and archive their experiences. Both having a background in and/or practice in poetry, we began our exchange through the sharing of poetic reflections. This enabled us to record our realities and provide 'ways of knowing and becoming in the world' (Leggo, 2008,

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p. 167), as we 'become' academics while encountering the interdependent force of anti-Black racism and sexism, and connected experiences and processes.

'That which is other than yourself': Stereotypes, solitude, and self-awareness

35: a change

I've found that I am not this person I thought I was meant to be
and the words begin to wash away.

words I always felt held back by, but was desperate for their approval
words like: professional, supposed to, bossy, cultural assimilation
words that told me to be more like 'That which is Other Than yourself'

it's been

a

very

long

struggle

(Jaleesa, 2017)

This poetic excerpt was written by Jaleesa and includes lines that capture feelings of self-scrutiny in PWIs that Black women in academia can be accustomed to (Cutts et al., 2012).

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The poem points to feelings of solitude and self-doubt that are entangled with anti-Black racist and sexist perceptions of Black women being domineering and entitled. In a similar vein, the poem 'Performance' written by Francesca discusses the hypervisibility of being one of few Black people in various predominantly white public spheres.

Performance

The stage is set
and we watch,
as faces fill
empty
spaces.
Your face stands out
to me,
And maybe others too...

(Francesca, 2016)

Relatedly, Jaleesa wrote:

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...Needing to stand out in brown solidarity. This is a new space for me. I never needed to stand out in my brown [skin], [yet] would quickly push away any recognition of it because of others' white anxieties... (Jaleesa, 2017)

Feelings of inadequacy (often termed 'imposter syndrome') play a part in many people's Ph.D. process, but the reasons for, and extent of such feelings, can drastically differ (Breeze, 2019). After all, the omnipresence of the stoic mantra of 'work twice as hard' (Cottom, 2019) to be considered as good and employable as non-Black peers, can be part of the pressures experienced by Black women scholars. Through our poetry exchange, anchored in the spirit of friendship, we found a way to situate feelings of self-doubt in academia within macrostructural issues concerning anti-Black racism, sexism, and power (Bailey & Miller, 2017; Johnson, 2019, 2020).

At times, the experience of writing, enveloping, posting, receiving, opening, and reading each other's poems was a joyful one that provided a welcomed pause from the many restrictive parameters of academic writing and processes. To echo the words of Osei (2019, p. 2) when reflecting on her relationship to experimenting and engaging with fashion as part of her expression of Black girlhood and womanhood, 'But my goodness, it was joyous. Joyous, tangible freedom'. The act of writing poetry, reading her words, and her reading mine, was one that often pleasingly pierced the rigid bubble of isolation that can encase the Ph.D. journey. More pertinently, basking in the time spent sitting, scrawling, sealing, and sending her my words on a page often felt akin to basking in the reclamation of my own voice, which on many occasions in academia seemed to have been willfully misheard, muted, and whitewashed.

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Our poetic exchange became a means to build Black sisterhood while understanding and articulating institutional obstacles connected to anti-Black racism, sexism, and the in-betweenness of Black women ECRs' scholarly trajectories. In exploring innovative and intersubjective methodologies, we found ourselves both pushing against and reinforcing the emphasis on productivity underscoring dominant discourse regarding the Ph.D. process. Even when working relatively 'slowly', such as only exchanging a couple of poems each over the course of five months, we were producing potentially publishable material. Therefore, despite the resistant potential of our poetic exchange, we recognize that by communicating it via a peer-reviewed journal article, we risk losing the cathartic, creative, and relatively unconstrained qualities of what initially was a collaborative and private form of coping mechanism and Black sisterhood-based friendship.

'How do we claim...': Looking and writing back at the academy

While all ECRs face an academic labor market marred by neoliberal logics which can fuel their exploitation, as Emejulu (2018) affirms as part of discussion of how pervasive and intersecting forms of structural oppression limit the potential for academic disciplines to be decolonized, Black women are among those most likely to find themselves forging academic identities at the 'margins' of mainstream disciplinary and institutional activity. In addition, as research indicates (Croxford, 2018), Black women are also among those most likely to be on the lower end of salary scales and often face rife and systemic forms of bullying (Rollock, 2019).

In short, the precarity experienced by Black women in academia is shaped by the intersections of anti-Black racism, sexism, and capitalism, which frame 'how departments prioritize and value particular research agendas' (Emejulu, 2018, p. 2). This results in higher

education's common devaluation of work related to race, gender, and Black women, especially when such work is led by them and consequently labeled as being too personal and political (Kilomba, 2008). Our iterative poetry exchange speaks to often overlooked feelings of context-specific vulnerability (Gilson, 2014) that can contribute to Black sisterhood-building, as is indicated by Jaleesa's remarks about reading the poems of Francesca:

It's hard to read another's handwriting but there is something personal about a person's handwriting...imperfect. I actually have to read, not passively glancing over digitized symbols. I feel excited about this and the other poems I will read. I feel inspired to write more and to read hers out loud...in a classroom...in a lecture hall. I don't know if I relate to this poem? ...if I feel connected to it, maybe the feeling of reflected awkwardness from within the poem is making me feel that way...and challenging the desire to wear an impenetrable armor over my vulnerabilities.

(Jaleesa, 2017)

The vulnerability that is an inherent part of our poetic exchange is connected to both the vulnerability of being a Black woman in a PWI in Scotland and the vulnerability rooted in our ontological ponderings. Such ontological vulnerability relates to how we emotionally exposed ourselves by sharing personal thoughts on our experiences/understandings of being via poetic dialogue that entailed an openness which inevitably invites subjectivity to be constructed in relation to each other. An awareness of perceptions of their 'rite of passage' career stage and potentially oppressive assumptions about them, can leave little impetus for

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Black women ECRs to rightfully assert themselves and challenge issues in academia, without (feeling as though) these actions will be viewed within an oppressive white supremacist and patriarchal gaze. Despite this, through co-reflexive and creative praxis, a space-based on support and sisterhood-building can be co-created:

How do we claim back black

How do we claim back

Black

Back

Black

How do we claim

To be seen, transparently, yet invisible

To be

To be seen Black

How do we claim the enterprise of

Black Lives?

How do we see our hidden pasts

And see past that

Which is built to destroy us

Do we claim back Black? Black backs.

Show me your credentials.

Your potential.

And only then...

You can have Black back.

(Jaleesa, 2016)

Through poems such as ‘How do we claim back black’, we found ourselves reflecting on the relentless need to demonstrate ‘credentials’ and ‘potential’, for Black women’s competence in academia to be acknowledged (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). In examining such struggles through ‘testimony and self-narration as a methodological strategy’ (Dar & Ibrahim, 2019, p. 1249), our writing continually ignited our conversations about being treated as ‘less than’ (Stockfelt, 2018) in ways concerning our experiences as Black women ‘becoming’ academics. Had we immediately and more formally posed these topics of conversations to one another, the resulting discussions may have felt more forced and less based on the slow building of trust. Researching these issues as part of conventional academic writing that completely evades first-person pronouns would have constructed a counterintuitive and artificial distance between us and the experiences of Black women ECRs.

For Black women, first-person essay accounts have often been ‘the only point of access for telling the creative stories of empirical realities’ (Cottom, 2019, p. 18). While for now, we find a sense of self-ownership in how we choose to reveal ourselves through this work, we remain wary of the potential for such co-reflexive writing to become consumed by racialized and gendered expectations of the performance of Black women in academia;

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including due to assumptions that Black women are only qualified to do the ‘race work’ (Stockfelt, 2018) and reflect on related experiences of trauma. In addition, we reiterate Cottom’s (2019, p. 19) observation that personal essays became a way through which Black women can ‘claim legitimacy in public discourse’, and that although publications may benefit from Black women’s writing, this can come at the cost of the wellbeing of such authors.

Our project emerges somewhere in between silence and speaking up about experiences of structural oppression in academia. It is through writing down and around our experiences, and embracing the vulnerability that this can involve, that we have forged a way forward and a source of Black academic and inter-career stage sisterhood. In sum, ‘when we black women write ourselves, our autobiographies labor to dialogue with a story larger than our own’ (Henery, 2017, p. 440). Our poetry exchange became a way we could make sense of, share, and understand each other’s struggles, as part of both individual and collective claims about our experiences of academia. Although we were talking to each other, through our poetry, we were also writing and looking back (hooks, 1992) at ‘the Academy’ in oppositional ways; recording issues specific to Black women ECRs and their identity work.

Discussion

Previous studies have presented identity work as a dynamic struggle of power and resistance and/or as a coping mechanism (Thomas, 2009). However, few studies present poetry exchange/poetic co-reflection and dialogue as identity work or examine how this can be part of Black sisterhood and support experienced by Black women ECRs. Drawing on Black feminist traditions, our research examines often hidden forms of self-questioning identity work (Beech et al., 2016), specifically in relation to the experiences of Black women at early stages of their academic careers in PWIs. Such identity work includes critically and

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collaboratively examining (dis)connections between our sense of identity and belief in ourselves versus perceptions of us and our work that are projected by and within PWIs. Furthermore, such identity work can provide a space for resisting the intersectional effects of racism and sexism, as well as forming a facet of Black sisterhood in academia. Exploring and experiencing this identity work via creative and self-reflexive writing such as poetic exchanges, provides a freedom to articulate related reflections and matters in a way that is free from concerns with restrictive academic conventions that are often part of the oppressive and colonial structures that such identity work, at times, emerges in response to.

Shaped by Beech et al.'s (2016) conceptualization of identity work which includes self-questioning and resisting unwanted identities that are attributed by others, and struggles over time, the self-questioning which is reflected on in our article can be understood as departing from dominant discourse concerning 'imposter syndrome' which Black women in academia are often assumed to face. In contrast with the premise that notions of 'imposter syndrome' are often based on, and due to the evolution of our understandings of ourselves, academia, and systemic oppression, we do not regard the critical self-enquiry outlined in our work as simply being a form of structurally induced self-doubt. Instead, we view such self-questioning and unsettled feelings as being symptomatic of the specific raced and gendered scrutiny that Black women in academia commonly encounter, which can lead to intense, ongoing, and collaborative forms of introspection. We frame such self-questioning and co-reflexivity rooted in mutual vulnerability as being part of efforts to shield oneself from the emotional toll of institutional marginalization in PWIs, while remaining grounded by reflecting on the self with close others who too have found their experiences as Black women being reductively referred to and (re)presented within and by PWIs.

Our two-way dialogue connects to encounters within the wider, yet sparse, collective experiences of Black women ECRs in Britain, who ‘navigate institutionalized racism, sexism, and exploitative labor conditions, which undermine their present and future academic careers’ (Emejulu, 2018, p. 2). Our dialogue is also significantly shaped by the particularities of our identities and experiences, including commonalities between us (both being in our ‘twenties’ and based in Scotland during our doctoral studies, where the population of Black people in the country was recorded as being approx. 1% of the total population in the 2011 census), as well as differences (one of us being a Black, ‘mixed-race’, and light-skinned woman who was born and raised in Scotland where the nation’s racist and colonial legacy is scarcely institutionally acknowledged, and the other being a Black American woman). For these reasons, in writing about our experiences we do not attempt to speak for all Black women, nor do we deny differences between each of our own experiences.

Instead, we stress the fact that Black women’s identities and lives are different in many ways (Cutts et al., 2012), including but not limited to their different ages, gender identities, sexualities, ethnicities, material conditions, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, this article contributes to burgeoning fields of study that examine issues around gender, race, and identity work, including the experiences of Black women ECRs at PWIs in Britain. This collaborative project is a site of fieldwork and evolving friendship between individuals who communicate primarily via written letter and online, rather than in-person. Our poetry exchange has been a source of kinship, and, on occasion, comically ‘bad’ poetry which serves as a reminder that mediocrity is not to be feared, despite what normative academic rhetoric implies. Although some of our poetic reflections touch on challenges of the doctoral process, the dialogue between us that our poetry facilitated resulted in a distinctly Black sisterhood-based dynamic (Cutts et al., 2012), which involved reflection on how we respond to

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racialized and gendered assumptions about us which are rooted in forms of ‘governmentality in the White academy’ (Dar & Ibrahim, 2019).

Our musings over our poems segued into long-winded discussions about the various tropes associated with Black women; from the matronly maternalism and servitude of the Black mammy figure (Boylorn, 2008), who some have anticipated Black women dutifully embody in response to their anguish in academia, to the infinite stoicism and gratitude we have been expected to exhibit under circumstances rife with entangled anti-Black racism, sexism, and the xenophobic policing of Black students.

We posit that, in addition to the importance of cross-career stage mentorship, Black women ECRs benefit from spaces of inter-career stage support (Lampkin, 2018); including sisterhood-building which can be facilitated by creative praxis and approaches that prioritize care-full processes over pursuit of a precise and pressing timeline. Nevertheless, such inter-career stage support cannot be expected to be a means through which we, as Black women, are singularly tasked with dismantling forms of structural oppression and ‘disciplining by the White academy’ (Dar & Ibrahim, 2019).

To revisit the words of Osei (2019, p. 2) on the role of fashion/aesthetics in her Black feminist practice, and which resonate with how our poetic exchange experience contrasts with what can loom within PWIs, ‘I was able to *be* without the imminent threat of behavioral discipline that followed me at school’. Initially intended to help us document our doctoral experiences, and simply keep in touch with each other, our poetic exchange quickly expanded in ways that aided inter-subjective analysis of the ‘messier imaginary of academic work and careers’ (Breeze & Taylor, 2020, p. 412) for Black women forging scholarly paths at precarious points in their academic trajectories. By choosing to document our own challenges

and experiences as Black women at the early stages of their academic careers, we resist pressures to perform perfectionism and stoicism.

We focus on granular aspects of the everyday experiences of Black women ECRs in Britain, in a way that cannot be captured by macro-level studies of higher education which adopt terms such as ‘racial harassment’ (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019) rather than explicitly naming forms of systemic anti-Blackness, white supremacy and intersecting oppression. Collaboratively combing through our poetic articulations and putting them in conversation with research on Black women’s higher education experiences (Emejulu, 2018; Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Johnson, 2019, 2020; Pennant, 2021; Rollock, 2019; Stringfield, 2016), resulted in our conceptualization of components of the experiences of Black women ‘becoming’ academics (BWBA) in PWIs (TABLE 1).

TABLE 1 here

Although TABLE 1 is not an exhaustive list, it encompasses aspects of Black women’s experiences of ‘becoming’ academics (BWBA) in PWIs. Moreover, it captures aspects of the experiences of Black women who may be perceived as ‘becoming’ *unbecoming* academics. Still, it is important to account for the reality that Black women are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences of academia can distinctly differ, including due to the impact of ableism, classism, colourism, homophobia, transphobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and other interconnected oppressions.

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In reflecting on our positionality in this work (as the subject and authors of it), we echo the energy of Stockfelt (2018) and hooks (1989), who attest that there is resistance to be found in working and writing from the margins. We also refuse to uphold colonialist notions of the value of knowledge being solely based on it being quantifiable, measurable, and generalizable in nature (Kilomba, 2008). Situating our own personal narratives within the context of extant literature on academia, Black feminist methodologies, and Black women's lives, we use our experiences to develop a framework (BWBA) intended to support Black women's navigation of early career experiences in PWIs, including by documenting it in collaborative and cross-institutional ways. The BWBA framework [TABLE 2] is conducive with research approaches, which embrace creative methodologies, introspection, and non-hierarchical forms of support.

TABLE 2 here

Black women ECRs' expertise is often undermined, even when employed as educators. Their experiences of 'Working Identity' (Carbado & Gulati 2000, 2012), which may involve consciously negotiating their presence within PWIs, are often marked by a perpetual questioning of their abilities by others and the inference of their presumed incompetence. Our poetic exchange co-creates a space of sisterhood, which serves as a Black feminist method for cataloguing a 'living archive' of Black women's ECR experiences. This is not the only way to achieve such a sense of support and Black sisterhood. Rather than being a blueprint of

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sorts, our work illustrates aspects of our collaborative and cross-institutional construction of coping mechanisms as Black women ECRs in Britain.

Creative praxis can provide a means for individuals to report and reflect on their experiences at the intersections of structural inequalities in academia. It can also enable them to do so in ways that involve finding momentary ‘peace from the psychological gymnastics of racism and sexism’ (Osei, 2019, p. 2), and can facilitate individuals’ support-forming and the (re)claiming of collective struggles, while exploring their authorial voice(s) on their own terms. Accordingly, co-reflexive creative methods can play an integral part in ‘social and political becomings’ (Lambert, 2018, p. 2), including the ongoing formation of academic identities and intellectual activism (Collins, 2012).

Concluding insights

This article examines issues regarding Black women’s early career academic experiences in Britain, via a self-directed longitudinal project which involved us exchanging poems and revealing ourselves during our doctoral journeys. Shaped by Johnson’s (2019, p.3) insightful work on ‘the ways that we “remain ourselves” despite how our beings are “surged upon” and “overswept” by racist systems that center and neutralize whiteness’ in academia, through poetry we found a way to think through, share, and conceptualize our experiences as Black women ‘becoming’ academics (BWBA).

Our exchange is a vessel through which we can theorize and poetically ‘talk back to’ moments we experienced, where silence or whispered words initially felt like the only viable and self-preservationist options. By publicly reflecting on this, we aid the ongoing creation of artifacts of self-expression (Abdi, 2015; Boylorn, 2006) and a praxis-based framework (BWBA), which shed light on the under-explored experiences of Black women ECRs in

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Britain. Such work contributes to sociological conceptualizations of academic careers, through a Black feminist lens which attends to how Black women's ECR experiences are shaped by anti-Black racism, sexism, and the in-betweenness of their career stage.

This article took us five years to develop, starting with our first meeting in 2016. Although the physical distance between us could have been a challenge to navigate, it became an opportunity to engage in a temporal and spatial co-reflexive poetry exchange. We embraced the time between writing, sending, receiving, and reflecting on our poetry, in conjunction with the amount of private and reflective time afforded during full-time doctoral work. Concurrently, though, we dealt with difficulties, including forms of oppression during the doctoral journey, and working full-time as Lecturers in parallel with finishing our PhDs. Slow ways of working, writing, and being together became the foundation for us to manage our rapidly changing, yet shared experiences of 'becoming' academics; and grew to become a critical part of our conceptual knowing, working, and existing within academia.

Through theorizing our poetic exchange as being a form of 'slow work' and Black feminist praxis, we unearth tensions concerning the potential for collaborative and private identity work to become both a coping mechanism and source of public academic productivity. Related questions worthy of future examination include: How does publicly documenting their private coping mechanisms impact the experiences of Black women ECRs in Britain? Who does this work benefit and how? As more and more universities globally grapple with issues concerning structural oppression, our article is intended to spark interest in future inter-subjective and creative methods that embrace the spirit of 'resisting from the margins' (hooks, 1989; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001) and Black women's efforts to archive, evidence, and engage with our liminal experiences of 'becoming academics'.

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TABLE 1: Black women’s experiences of ‘becoming’ academics (BWBA) in predominantly white institutions (PWIs)

Component	Identity Work Challenge
One of very few Black women (PhD) Early Career Researchers (if not the only one) within their department.	Negotiating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Normativity of whiteness and the (in)visibility/hypervisibility of Blackness ● Tokenistic and spectacularising treatment
Lack of Black women mentors within their institution.	Negotiating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Trying to ‘become’ an academic in institutions where there are few, if any, Black women Lecturers and Professors, and with scarce access to advice from others who navigate anti-Black racist and sexist oppression in academia
Expertise questioned and undermined	Negotiating: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-Black racist and sexist interactions and power relations that undermine their expertise, even when employed as an educator

TABLE 2: Black women ‘becoming’ academics (BWBA): a praxis-based framework

Component	Putting into Practice
<p>(Y)our Own Words:</p> <p>Foregrounding the experiences of Black women ECRS in PWIs, as understood/expressed by and between them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Writing/working/creating with each other in ways rooted in affirming Black feminist epistemologies and Black women’s knowledge-production
<p>Archiving the Everyday:</p> <p>Exploring and documenting quotidian aspects of BWBA processes, including experiences that occur within and beyond academic institutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Embracing ‘slow’, creative and/or counternarrative writing which provides an outlet to think through and share experiences with other Black women ECRs
<p>Black Sisterhood:</p> <p>An underpinning Black feminist ethics of care, support, and camaraderie.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritizing (y)our health and wellbeing over academic productivity, through efforts to disrupt and resist normalized academic rhetoric and activity that reinforces an emphasis on perfectionism

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