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Fighting Back While Black: The Relationship Between Racialised Resistance and Well-Being

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To my family's great surprise and dismay, a career in the British university system is not often a lucrative or successful one, especially for a Black woman. It did not take long for this to become evident to me. A brief look at my undergraduate cohort and the PhD researchers, staff and senior academics around me revealed vanishingly small numbers of Black scholars, let alone Black female scholars.

The figures are dismal. In the academic year 2016–2017, only 13.1% of UK staff were Black or minority ethnic and of that number, only 18.6% were Black[1] (AdvanceHE 2018, p. 134). This means Black staff comprise just 2.4% (Black women comprise 1.3%, and Black men the other 1.1%) of all academic staff in the UK[2] (ibid., p. 254). An examination of career progression is even more bleak. Of almost 19,000 professors in the UK, just 120 of that number are Black professors, and

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according to Dr Nicola Rollock's report in February 2019,[3] only 25 of those are Black women (p. 6).

Just 3% of over 15,000 full time, UK domiciled PhD students in UK universities in the academic year 2017/18 were Black (Williams et al. 2019, p. 3). The UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) council funds the majority of postgraduate students in the UK, and a recent report by *Leading Routes* revealed that over the last three academic years, of almost 20,000 UKRI-funded PhD studentships, only 1.2% (n = 245) were Black; of that cohort just 30 identified as being from Black Caribbean backgrounds (ibid).

So, I am now able to see my position as a minority in the academy. I am one of 30 Black Caribbean-funded PhD students in UK universities; a group small enough to have found each other online within days of the release of the aforementioned report by *Leading Routes*, and created a virtual community via WhatsApp. Being part of a group like that isn't a source of pride, it is a source of despair. I know that the statistics are not on my side when it comes to career success, and the odds of me being able to stay on this career path are slim.

I began to research with an aim of finding out the extent to which the lack of representation impacts the aspirations and well-being of Black PhD researchers? I also wanted to find out the extent to which Black PhD researcher's actions with the academy to improve conditions, contribute to an environment of hostility that negatively affects well-being? To what degree is fighting back while being Black the cause versus the solution to the problem of poor mental well-being? I interviewed four Black PhD researchers from my small cohort (Caribbean, funded[4] Black women and non-binary scholars) in order to gain their perspectives.

We know that Black women and non-binary people are lacking in numbers in the British academy. How, if at all, has this impacted your academic experience?

> Obviously, there's barely any of us anyway, but in STEM it's really bad, and in Earth Sciences it's even worse. I'm very involved in outreach, for example going into schools to talk about what I do, and running events within my university. I'd go into lectures and be able to count on one hand the

number of Black people, let alone Black women, and would feel a bit isolated. When you see another Black person at a conference you do go, 'oh my god, there is another one!' We face issues that only we understand, so I find it hard to communicate sometimes with my non-Black peers **Louisa**[5]

Our lack of numbers has made me more resilient. It's made me want to be the change that I want to see, and it's stirred up fire and fight in my belly to be exactly what society and institutions have said that Black women can't be. This is, of course, a burden. It has also made me navigate academia a lot differently. PhD life is very hard and very isolating, but I feel that with increased knowledge you have a responsibility to pay it forward. So now I've kind of made it my duty and responsibility to help other Black women get into academia **Renee**[6]

I am shook. Honestly, it can be so disheartening. Whenever I think about it my heart drops a little, so I don't like to think about it too much—which is easier said than done considering it is almost always on my mind. Knowing this, I put a lot of pressure on myself to achieve. I overwork. Then I stress. I worry. Then I overwork some more. Right now I'm trying to get the balancing act right. It's tough though because I know I have to work harder than non-Black students to then still not be considered good enough **Keisha**[7]

I feel like there's a lot of pressure to keep going. I don't know what I want to do with my life—people keep asking me what am I going to do after my PhD, and part of me thinks the simple answer is to do a Post-Doctorate, to start lecturing, eventually be a professor. On the one hand, that sounds like an appealing career, and then on the other hand, I'm interested in so many other things like creative writing, and these different activist projects, seeing where they go. It might be that I want to do it, but I think if I didn't have the social pressure I would have a clearer idea of if I actually wanted to. But I do feel like if I left academia it would be a shame because I'm one of few Black psycholinguists over Masters level in the country, and so there's this burden to keep doing it, to stay in the department, to stay in this field because you're one of the only ones. And I don't celebrate that. It's a very lonely position to be in and there is a lot of pressure to keep doing it, purely because they need people like us to do these jobs **Jessica**[8]

Similar to the examples above, I also feel this tension to commit to academia out of a sense of duty, as well as to make academia more hospitable to future Black scholars.

In this chapter, I use Black feminist frameworks as a lens to critique the academy. This is in keeping with its history as a politics of liberation that is cognisant of intersecting structural oppressions, focuses on the academy as a space of oppression, and that positions Black women as agents of social change. Black feminist epistemology captures power relations that are present during Black women's participation in the academy; it has a long history in both Black American and European Black feminist contexts. African-American theorists cited here such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, who have helped shape Black feminist praxis, are also in conversation with contemporary Black European feminists, who operate and ground their analysis and action within "particular and specific histories of colonialism, racial formation and gender hierarchy of the various European nation-states in which Black women live" (Emejulu and Sobande 2019, p. 5). bell hooks describe a choice of perspective for marginalised Black female scholars, as between a counter-hegemonic, radical, resistant standpoint, versus being on the side of colonising mentalities. By portraying marginal spaces as sites for radical productivity, hooks reframes the interlocking oppressions of race and gender as giving birth to a privileged viewpoint and a mode of seeing a broader reality. hooks elaborates on how survival for the marginally sited depends on an 'ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and centre, and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole' (1989, p. 29). She describes this edge as an unsafe place where "one is always at risk, one needs a community of resistance" (p. 19). This seems to be in conversation with Hill Collins' work, which expands on the labour necessary to create these communities, which:

> do not come into being by some inevitable process of evolution. Instead, their existence requires sustained labor on the part of Black women and our allies who see and experience Black women's intellectual work as vital to the individual and collective survival of Black women and girls'. (Hill Collins 2016, p. 136)

These communities are critical to Black women's well-being in the academy, both as a locus for oppositional action, but also a space for safe retreat. However, simply having more Black scholars does not guarantee oppositional work. More diversity is not necessarily a symptom of challenging social hierarchies; knowledge projects produced under these conditions may still conform to prevailing norms (ibid. p. 136). Instead, being oppositional is defined as doing intellectual work that "aims to dismantle unjust intellectual and political structures, beyond individual metrics of labour and success" (p. 134), and requires deliberate, intentional work by Black women and allies. This line of theorising repeatedly appears in works by Black women scholars. For Claudia Bernard, it "affirmed [her] position on the fringes of the academy, and allowed [her] to see [her] purpose and abilities to critique and make changes to the academic landscape, as a perspective that invigorates Black women to develop counter narratives and make creative use of our positionality" (2017, p. 83).

This need for a deliberate, oppositional community of Black women *producers and consumers* to develop *counter narratives* is also referenced by Deborah Gabriel, who cites the *Black Sister Network*—an academic network for women of colour—as the origins of her edited collection, *Inside the Ivory Tower* (2017, p. 1). This space is reminiscent of other spaces of community and solidarity mentioned by early career Black British scholars, such as the immediate call for a WhatsApp chat for the 30 identified Black Caribbean-funded researchers, historical Black women's campaign groups and collectives like the Brixton Black Women's Group (BBWG) and Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), which were politicised spaces for the Black (and Asian) communities to organise around education and anti-imperialism and address issues specific to those groups experiencing the intersection of racism and sexism (past tense 2017, p. 13).

Similarly, Young expounds on the *imaginary spaces* around which identities are constructed (Rattansi 1994, qtd. in Young 2000, p. 52), and "are seen in much of the writings and expressive creativity of Black diaspora women" as part of "a strategy for survival and relative mental health" (Young 2000, p. 52). It becomes clear that, for marginal scholars, these spaces are integral, as bases to organise and theorise counter narratives

from, but also as sites from, which to imagine and articulate better futures, and as spaces of rest, for survival and well-being. A contemporary example of a space that is both productive and validating is the FLY girls community for women of colour at Cambridge University, where their:

> voices fortified each other. The consequence of such validation and understanding was that […] I found a year's worth of beliefs about myself and Cambridge come crashing down. I recognised how much I had internalised the idea that I was not worthy of Cambridge, and that my being here was a benevolent favour. I now rejected that. I was worthy and the institution was oppressive. (Manzoor-Khan 2019, p. 121)

In this space, activism was secondary to the revival and validation that came from solidarity and community. Communing in this space, where the organising principle was outsiderness on the basis of racial difference, in fact provided the fortitude and reassurance necessary to begin to envision the institution as an oppressive force, rather than themselves as marginal because of unworthiness. And finally, the oppositional community appears again in the responses of interviewees on the question of where they looked for support when the institution could (or would) not provide it:

> My family are my rock. My mum, dad and younger sister. They have always supported me each in their own ways. I wouldn't be here without them and I wouldn't be able to continue this journey without them. My partner who is always on the end of the phone and prepared to learn with me and embark on this journey with me. My Black women peers and my women of colour peers who are also in academia. I can't imagine what my experience would've been like without these friendships I've made. They truly are beautiful. It's a level of understanding, solidarity, support, care that can't be replicated elsewhere. I'm so thankful to have made these friendships because it's so pure and in these moments, I feel like I can be a bit more of myself, as you can get into a routine of wearing a mask. A lot of my joy in academia has come from these inspiring women, who are my teachers and my friends. For me, these intimate connections keep me going **Keisha**

> The communities I'm involved in, and the radical spaces in the city like my local independent bookshop. Places that understand what it is that you're trying to do, and you don't have to explain the basics to them. Places that will happily give a space to those groups who need it, like reading groups or safe spaces. I look to my friends who I know are interested in similar things and fighting similar battles in whatever cities they are doing their research in **Jess**

From this perspective, where the marginal spaces that Black women inhabit in British academia are reconfigured as radical sites for knowledge production, Black women scholars who theorise and teach from this oppositional space are then participating in scholar-activism. This perspective is antithetical to mainstream pedagogy, where "pressure [is] placed on teachers to maintain a veneer of 'neutrality' and 'lack of bias'" (Mink 2019, p. 3). This creates an unequal burden for Black women teachers, as the:

> time and energy spent working with students in ways which respond to them as whole human beings, with differing needs at different times, is not only invisible but does not count… the consequence of this unquantifiable work is that it does not count as 'workload' and so the time and energy I give comes from my own resources'. (Deveci 2019, p. 177)

These *resources* that Deveci mentions here are not only the obvious—time, which could be spent doing our own work, also seem synonymous with *energy*. Being one of few visible representatives of the racial other in the academy leads to this invisible workload falling directly to us. Who better for a marginalised student to offload their traumas and needs in negotiating a hostile White system, than to the similarly othered academic who they have seen successfully negotiate it before them? These energies are not limitless, and are drawn from our own store.

Similarly, Khadijah Means gives an example from a student perspective of how the burden to educate students and staff falls on the affected community. Following a racially charged incident at her school, students of colour, namely Black girls, were expected to respond. Means elaborates on how Black students carry this burden and how it impacts them in the

classroom—"learning in this environment isn't impossible, but it is arduous" (2019, p. 32), as Black scholars feel an undue obligation to the institution to combat racism as an "unpaid advisor on race relations" (p. 33). Therefore, the Black student does not escape the burden on their time and energy, and in this scenario becomes an unpaid consultant, assuming the responsibilities of the institution without recompense or the support they are due as students for whom the academy has a duty of care—a relationship with the academy that will follow them throughout their academic careers. This invisible, uncompensated workload is common to Black women scholars. All interview participants, myself included, had at least one example of a project they had founded, simply to make the British academy more accessible to themselves and scholars in their wake. For example, in 2017 I co-founded Project Myopia,[9] one of many student-led *decolonisation* projects that exists in the UK. Our website calls on students to help make curricula *less pale, male, and stale* by crowdsourcing reviews of materials by marginalised producers, and advocating their inclusion in specific curricula. Project Myopia also delivers diversity and inclusion training workshops for higher education institutions in the UK, such as King's College London, University of Edinburgh, and the London Arts and Humanities Partnership.

The call to decolonise the academy has been taken up by many, including Lola Olufemi at Cambridge University, who asks us to "think about ways we can transform and decentre the university as the only site of legitimate knowledge production" (2019a; b, p. 58) so as to recognise contributions of marginalised scholars working at grassroots level, and work to "reassign cultural authority from the global north" as reform work that will "provide the framework for imagining a liberated future" (ibid., p. 213). This labour predominantly falls to Black women, for whom a decolonised, more inclusive academy is urgent.

Can you detail (if any) labour you undertake to make the academy more inclusive of Black women and nonbinary people?

Alongside my research I have been BAME Officer for two years. During that time, I have run various campaigns, started projects, changed policies, worked on improving recruitment and retention of BAME faculty and

staff, and raised awareness of issues of racism and discrimination on campus and in academia. I have founded a new non-profit initiative called Beyond Margins,[10] centring on development and achievement. We design strategies to encourage diversity and inclusion for staff and faculty in HE, organise career events to inspire and motivate BAME individuals, and promote current contributions of BAME scholars in their communities—including work they are doing outside of academia **Renee**

I've actually never considered myself as a scholar-activist until you asked these questions and I had time to ponder what it means to do scholar-activist work. I think because the assumption is that an activist is doing a very specific, visible and tangible form of work, such as public campaigns and protests. I didn't want to undermine that. I also never set out to embark on a PhD with the intention to become a scholar-activist. Everything I've done has been innate and natural—I do what I do because it's who I am. I am one of the co-founders of Anticipating Black Futures,[11] an initiative that facilitates a developmental environment for PhD and ECR Black Studies researchers in the U.K. I recently started a Black Studies reading group at my university, to encourage people to read Black, specifically Black women, theorists. I also try to put together panels of all Black women (mostly, if not all British) for conferences. I see this as an intervention in the Whiteness of these spaces, as well as a practice of solidarity for Black women researchers **Keisha**

I co-founded a conference entitled Resisting Whiteness.[12] I considered it as essentially a big teach-out. We took what we've seen at other conferences and said, actually, this format doesn't work for us. You go to an academic conference and they're talking about race, yet it's only White people talking, or they are using words originally from Black or PoC academics while erasing them. They're just regurgitating the words—that's not inspiring or productive to me. Resisting whiteness is a response to events and conferences that feel unsatisfying. We're trying to do the exact opposite and bring marginal voices for us to directly learn from **Jessica**

What toll does this culture of isolation and invisible labour take on Black women and non-binary scholars' mental health? This issue, of the impact of deracinated academic mental health environments and strategies to BAME well-being, led to me co-edit *The Colour of Madness,*[13] a

literary anthology focusing on BAME mental health in the UK. The proceeds of the book go to a Black mental health charity. Yet another extra-curricular, extra-academic, underpaid labour.

Tate writes of how, amidst increasing interest in good well-being as a metric for success in UK universities, the "unvoiceability yet central place of Black women's experience of racism within academia" (2017, p. 55) makes well-being a "deracinated strategic goal" (p. 54). Tate questions how these well-being strategies would respond, if 'in answer to the question of "feeling", Black women answered, "angry", and "upset", "marginalised"' (p. 54). Tate further states that, were tackling racism to become part of well-being indices, it would be revolutionary, a disruptive act to the White supremacy that designates unmarked racial Whiteness and its accompanying privileges go unchallenged (p. 59).

How would you describe your mental health and well-being? Are you adequately supported by your institution?

> The university does a lot to just put plasters over students' mental health. There's not really a structured framework to address mental health within academia. They just say 'look after your mental health' without explaining what that's supposed to mean! I think mental health should have a primary place throughout education, from primary school onwards **Louisa**

> I suffer from chronic disability, rheumatoid arthritis and chronic regional pain syndrome, and often my high levels of pain affect my mental health. In turn, that has greatly affected my experience of academia—of submitting essays on time, sitting for long periods of time for exams, and University services that are inadequate. Writing a document that is as big as a PhD while in physical pain has been **extremely** difficult, but being a Black woman has probably made it even more even more difficult. *It seems that for Black women in academia we have greater responsibilities. We have greater expectations put on us, and become accustomed to bearing burdens. Some of those burdens are borne with pride, like being the first in our families, first in the department, paving the way, but I feel like it draws on historical constructions such as the stereotype of the strong, independent, resilient, Black woman, which makes navigating academia more complex* **Renee**

My mental health is pretty good, but I do feel quite isolated [in Edinburgh] and in my department. I have wonderful friends, but there is something missing all the time, which is why I do all this activist work It supports my well-being. Otherwise I'd be going to work Monday to Friday, 9 till 5, I would see no Black people, and I would feel really sad. If I didn't do these projects I don't think I would be in a very mentally healthy place, but fortunately I do have these connections and I do have these communities around me. The problem with institutions like universities is they have a very basic understanding of racism, White supremacy, oppression, inequality. With [Resisting whiteness] we had a policy for audience questions of not giving the microphone to white people, because we wanted to ensure that there was time and space for people of colour in the audience to have their voices heard, as traditional conferences rarely make space for our contributions. This seemed like a pretty basic concept to me, but it was picked up on by right wing press, publications like the Daily Mail, the Telegraph, the Scotsman. All of these very big publications accused us of being racist towards white people by having these policies. *The university, instead of supporting us by saying 'this is not racism, because reverse racism doesn't exist', their statement was that the policy is problematic, and could be seen as direct discrimination against White people. There was no critical analysis of the difference between platforming the voices of people of colour who usually get silenced in these spaces and 'reverse racism'. So I don't trust the establishment to be on side, to be honest. Which is sad, because you have to tiptoe around it when you can't rely on them to support you – they're the ones paying your bills and you don't want to rock the boat too much because you need a job later! It was a very stressful period of time. I don't know what it meant for my career, am I not going to be able to work at this institution in the future, because they'll see me as a troublemaker? Or, are they going to see me as someone who is valuable to the future of their institution, as a person who is speaking out about institutional problems, and making real change?* **Jess**

What changes, if any, would you like to see, at a macro or micro level, in academia to support Black scholars and their well-being in the UK?

We need frameworks that account for differences within minority groups, because we have our own unique issues as marginal within a marginalised group **Louisa**

> You need to see people in management roles that actually understand why changes need to happen, and are interested in protecting people who are not at the top. Universities need to be equipped with proper public stances that you can't misinterpret, on where they stand on racism and discrimination. They need to publicly acknowledge the fact that White supremacy is the situation in the UK, and we can't tiptoe around that. Universities have a responsibility to look at the people they are employing and say 'is this person contributing to the oppression of another group and how?' **Jess**

What can our institutions do to mitigate this pervasive—and justified—distrust Black female scholars have of the academy? Black women have historically taken refuge in communities of their own, from which they actively work to disrupt the colonial and exclusive nature of the university. This work cannot—and should not—fall entirely to the subversive communities of Black scholars.

In order to make the academy an inclusive space for its marginalised members, comprehensive structural redress needs to be made. Discussions of well-being are limited in effectiveness if they do not consider how well-being is inextricably linked to identity, and if well-being strategies included eradicating the sources of marginalisation such as the burdens of racism, sexism, queerphobia and ableism, they would be far more effective. This must be visible in more than *diversity hires*. It must include more Black staff in leadership positions, and be accompanied by official institutional support, recognition, and financial compensation for the invisible scholar-activist work that minoritised staff undertake. Understanding what changes need to be made, and making scholar-activist labour visible, is where this work begins, and unfortunately even making clear the areas for redress seems to be work that will inevitably fall to the most marginal scholars. Improvements need to be made to university policy and official stances on liberatory work, so that the weight of the institution, with all accompanying status and finance, can support the radical work that activists have been doing for free.

Notes

1. *Equality in Higher Education: Statistical Report 2018.* Figure 3.2.
2. Ibid. Figure 5.6.
3. As of February 2020 this number is now 35, as indicated in a recent article by Emma Jacobs, and in a forthcoming photo-exhibition curated by Dr Nicola Rollock at London City Hall. It is important to note that there is some contention regarding the professors who constitute the official number, as the figure varies between different sources to potentially include 'politically Black' academics, rather than strictly those of African descent.
4. As funded scholars we arguably experience a degree of privilege in the academy that self-funded Black students have even less access to – when highlighting the stress and invisible labour we undertake as researchers, it is with the understanding that there are many more Black PhD students labouring under similar circumstances, but under greater financial precarity.
5. Louisa Brotherson, University of Liverpool, 2019.
6. Renée Landell, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2019.
7. Keisha Bruce, University of Nottingham, 2019.
8. Jessica Brough, University of Edinburgh, 2019.
9. www.projectmyopia.com
10. www.beyondmargins.co.uk
11. https://vpp.midlands3cities.ac.uk/display/Introduction/2019/01/22/Call+for+Papers+-+Anticipating+Black+Futures+Symposium
12. https://resistingwhiteness.com/
13. Linton, S. and Walcott, R. (2018). The Colour of Madness. London: Stirling Publishing Ltd.

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