

#TenureTrackHustle¹: Examining Academic Poverty of First-Generation Women of Color From an Intersectional Standpoint

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Abstract

Women of color in academia face challenging obstacles when it comes to surviving and thriving in the ivory tower. Enduring the grind of graduate school and immediately upon attaining a PhD, women of color are often burdened with heavy student loan debt, large teaching loads, unrealistic service expectations, experience microaggressions based on race, gender and class, isolation, alienation and other challenges which compound and negatively impact the path to tenure. Many of the challenges mentioned above often differ from those of their white and/or male counterparts in the academy. Throughout this article, we will examine the literature of Black women in academia, provide personal narratives situating these complexities, and root them all in the context of being Black and Woman in academia. The academy is a place we are rarely welcomed and constantly fighting to survive and thrive.

Keywords

Women of color, academia, intersectionality, personal narratives, racism, sexism, standpoint theory

Introduction

Women of color in academia face challenging obstacles when it comes to surviving and thriving in the ivory tower. Enduring the grind of graduate school and immediately upon attaining a PhD, women of color are often burdened with heavy student loan debt, large teaching loads, unrealistic service expectations, experience microaggressions based on race, gender and class, isolation, alienation and other challenges which compound and negatively impact the path to tenure. Many of the challenges mentioned above often differ from those of their white and/or male counterparts in the academy. Warnock (2016) identifies five characteristics that encapsulate working class academic narratives: alienation, cultural capital, stereotyping/microaggression,

¹ A special thanks to Meredith Clark who contextualized the hashtag Tenure Track Hustle and made sense of the academic journey for Black women

survivor guilt/impostor syndrome and middle-class networking. While each of these tenets reveal themselves as different stages in one's academic career, it is important to highlight the impacts of intersectionality on these and other narratives experienced by women of color. For instance, an additional factor includes marginality anxiety which is the mental health aspect of being Black, and woman, and poor while academic. These narratives will be explored through the lens of intersectionality which is a core component of Black feminist thought. Throughout this article, we will examine the literature of Black women in academia, provide personal narratives situating these complexities, and root them all in the context of being Black and Woman in academia.

Making Sense of Intersectional Experiences in Academia

Intersectionality asserts that marginalized identities are independent, multiply interlocking, and mutually exclusive; this framework has become essential to positioning and understanding cultural identity and structural oppressions within social institutions (Collins, 1998, 2000, Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectionality is defined as 'a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias' (AAPF, 2003, p. 3). Supporting this definition, intersectional identity is concerned with how our marginalized identities interact with each other to shape multiple dimensions of personhood. bell hooks (1986) suggests that feminism is possible not because women share the same experiences, but because it is possible to learn from the varied experiences of oppression and common resistance situated around resistance to oppression. The experiences of Black women exist beneath the consciousness of whiteness and/or masculinity in an invisible and unknown place, which is an extremely complex system of oppressions that can only be understood through detailing their experiences from our perspective or standpoint (Collins, 1998).

Feminist standpoint theory is another framework to situate the realities of being Black and Woman in academia. It focuses on the individual having a sense of agency to represent her position and to challenge these dominant, hegemonic discourses. Feminist standpoint theory argues that knowledge can be gained from the insights derived from the lived experiences of women of color. For women who have been historically ignored and marginalized, according to Black feminist scholars like bell hooks, Barbara Smith and Patricia Hill Collins, using women's experiences as a form of knowledge can be an effective tool for activism, social change and resistance against the dominant narrative. For Black women, race does not exist outside of gender and gender does not exist outside of race (Parker & Lynn, 2002 p.12). Being bound to these identities highlights the impossibility of escaping marginalization. Debunking the popular myth that education is the great equalizer where anyone can achieve success if you work hard enough, Black women and other marginalized populations acknowledge that educational attainment doesn't liberate one from any chain of oppression. Academic discourse oftentimes reifies and determines who is qualified and who belongs. For instance, the academic job search process is in itself a discursive formation, with its own unwritten and well-established set of 'rules' and expectations. One has to develop the cultural capital to unlock the secrets for success within this structure; and for many White men in particular, they are given the capital to succeed.

Within academic discourse, it is unprofessional to discuss money until negotiation time. For those who are privileged enough to not have the conversation, it is often considered irrelevant. Navigating the academic job search requires a specialized knowledge and the academic community creates that domain of knowledge.

On Being Black and Woman in the Academy: The Hustle

Experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia, isolation, marginalization and other intersecting systems of oppression have an extreme effect on the ability to feel connected to a university and ultimately to obtain tenure - especially for female faculty of color (Brayboy, 2003, TuSmith & Reddy, 2002, Turner, C. S. V. 2002, Turner, González, & Wood, 2008). These barriers can include racial, gendered, and class based oppression, lack of access to mentors, unequal educational opportunities as their Black male and White female counterparts and lack of strong preparation for academic life (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996). Many of these women will succeed but not without a difficult road and a tremendous amount of challenges. Many of these barriers are socially constructed assumptions about women of color from marginalized backgrounds that find their way into the public discourse. The assumptions that most women of color, particularly Black and Brown women are lazy, unmarried, uneducated, welfare queens, who have multiple children only to game the system, are often connected to negative stereotypes of Black women and working and welfare class individuals despite research to the contrary. These assumptions also play a prominent role in defining our identities and shaping how others define us (Harris-Perry, 2011). These misrepresentations of women of color can find their way into the academy and paint a negative picture of who we are, thus making it more difficult for us to be successful and ultimately gain tenure.

Black women and other women of color in academia spend most of their time battling false assumptions of who we are, while hustling to survive simultaneously. We engage in a type of 'hustle,' a mythological idea that causes us to believe that if we work three times as hard as our counterparts, we will be seen as equals and earn the recognition we deserve. To further explain the tenure track hustle, we offer these definitions: the standard dictionary defines *hustle* in two ways: 1) to force (someone) to move hurriedly or 2) to fraud or swindle. The Urban Dictionary (2017) defines the word hustle as, 'Working hard, usually towards the common goal of creating an income.' For the purposes of this article, we will use the urban dictionary's definition of hustle to highlight some of the struggles that women of color encounter to survive in academia. The academy is a place we are rarely welcomed and constantly fighting to survive and thrive.

As women of color, we are taught from childhood to hustle, and to do whatever we need to do to survive and thrive. But these experiences often lead to women of color to develop 'imposter syndrome' early in their academic career because of the lack of recognition. Many of us will choose to leave the academy, sacrificing years of education and abandoning dreams of teaching and mentoring other students of color. Brookfield (1995) defined *impostor syndrome* as the innate fear of being unmasked as something we are not (p. 253). Women who choose to endure the academy, they are often burdened with the reality of living in poverty in academia. Poverty connected to both a lack of financial resources and losing one's soul and spirit. We often care for our families, friends and strangers who need our assistance. This is often done in the background

without recognition. Since we do not view ourselves as legitimate members of the academy, we often operate in the shadows. For example, women of color will often engage in mentorship activities and service to the community often without seeking recognition for our talent, payment for our services or credit for our time. We fall into martyrdom in academia. We feel obligated to perform large amounts of service because there are so few women of color in higher education, so students, peers and community members gravitate to us. Consider a conversation with a colleague, a Black cisgender, lesbian woman who holds a position in leadership in a national professional organization. In her leadership capacity, she organized a mentorship breakfast at a conference meeting for LGBTQ+ identified students and junior faculty. When asked about her mentorship accomplishments, she insisted that she was not a mentor. She stated, 'I am not a mentor; I am just doing what we do!' We further explained to her that when she meets with students, colleagues or members of the community to provide them with advice or counseling this is indeed 'mentorship'. Unfortunately, with so few examples of mentors for us in the academy it is difficult to ascertain the difference between formalized mentorship and 'hustling to survive'. The normalization of emotional labor and unacknowledged service leads to the culture of academic poverty, and convinces Black women that we are impostors who do not belong, while at the same time causing us to minimize the actual work we do.

Navigating Whiteness While Black and Woman

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), Black faculty comprised 3% of all full-time faculty at degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Forty-two percent were white males, 35 percent were white females, 6 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander males, 4 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander females, and 2 percent each were Hispanic males and Hispanic females. (In)visible within these numbers is a larger story of systemic and structural exclusion and exploitation within the academic industrial complex. These numbers reveal that racial minorities are largely absent and underrepresented. And what these numbers are unable to convey, is the narrative associated with being a cog in the academic machine while Black, Woman, and economically marginalized.

As Tamara Lomax (2015) articulates, 'academia and the growing academic-corporate trend is a microcosm of the world house in its disappearing and disenfranchising of black women' (para. 7). While exploring the precarity of the growing class of academics trying to survive and exist within the confines of exploitation, it has become necessary to provide an intersectional examination of the underbelly of our universities. While the reality of being a part of the adjunct caste is even bleaker, we focus on the 'Tenure Track Hustle' to expose the hypocrisy of tenure and the tenure track for marginalized academics. The path which historically signaled job security, financial stability, and an esteemed status more readily resembles a rat race, not rooted in meritocracy, but a game where players like us are unable to learn the rules but still must play.

In their 2000 book, *Faculty of Color in Academia: Bittersweet Success*, Caroline Turner and Samuel Myers focus on the perceptions held by 64 faculty of color regarding 'campus climate' and institutional practices that govern the recruitment and retention of faculty of color. The authors identify four themes that are indicative of the experiences of Black women and other professionals of color working on predominantly white college campuses. Common experiences include: (1) isolated and not well respected, (2) over-worked, (3) tension between family and

career choices, and (4) students challenging authority (p. 105-106). These themes, coupled with those outlined by Warnock (2016) must be unpacked when they exist at the intersection; and by providing personal narratives, we hope to provide context to understanding this academic hustle.

Intersection of Race, Class, and (Social) Capital

Black women's experiences with race and gender are unique intersections that often place them in an interlocking matrix of domination. And acknowledging the dimension of class makes our reality almost unbearable, volatile and highly toxic. Consider this particular narrative that Kishonna recalls:

I was invited to serve as a Visiting Scholar at MIT for the 2016-2017 school year. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. So, I began the process to make the move from Kentucky to Cambridge, MA to embark upon this remarkable opportunity. Except I couldn't afford it. Me and my partner spent weeks calculating moving costs, shipping, child care, and knew we either had to decline the offer from MIT or start begging for money. Hey, we're not too proud to beg. So, I created a crowd fund where me and my family relied on the goodness of others to help us take advantage of this opportunity. We generated almost \$9,000 dollars which was enough to cover first month's rent, last month's rent and a security deposit in the expensive Cambridge community. Our problems didn't end there. My partner was unable to get a job that covered child care costs. So, \$3,000 for rent, \$1,600 for child care, and... you know I am going to stop there. My income was only about \$5,000 a month after taxes and insurance. So, we were left with \$400 a month for groceries, gas for vehicle or public transportation costs, utilities, cell phone bill, credit card bill (which we ran up from the move), co-pays, etc. So, my partner, who has a Master's degree and experience in academic advising and management, quit his \$7.00 an hour job he found in retail to be a stay at home parent. We were broke. We were isolated. We were depressed. Hell. We are still broke. I am currently working three jobs to get out of this hole we are in. My partner found a job but he must pass a test for licensing or certification before he is able to make money (selling insurance). In the meantime, I am literally a mammy. I do overnight caregiving for an elderly man and work on the weekends at a support home for individuals with disabilities. Like we said, the #TenureTrackHustle... (Kishonna explaining her financial precarity while on the tenure track).

The narrative above does not exist in isolation. When sharing stories such as these in digital support groups and at conferences with those from similar backgrounds, it becomes clear that this is a pattern for many women of color in academia. These challenges suggest that Black women experience acute forms of 'gendered racism' continuously bound within economic exploitation.

Family and (Im)Mobility

Family is an additional consideration for women of color within academia. Being partnered with an academic, with a person underemployed or unemployed, and/or having children creates additional concerns in mobility for Black women wanting to engage in the processes of

academia. For instance, applying for fellowships, attending conferences, or doing field research abroad, one would have to factor in financial security for a family, the means to move a family, and also consider other members of the family. Similar to Kishonna's narrative, Reshawna also recalls her decision to uproot her family and move from Phoenix to Boston to accept a tenure track position:

A year prior to graduating with my PhD, my husband told me that he would be willing to leave his job of 5 years and relocate to help me advance my career. It had become clear that I would not be able to secure a tenure track teaching position in Phoenix, Arizona. In March 2013, I accepted a tenure track position outside of Boston, Massachusetts and prepared to move my family. My partner and I made a house hunting visit to Boston and quickly realized that the cost of rent was extremely high and it would be a challenge to afford to live there; it would be nearly impossible to rent a place similar to our home in Phoenix. We owned our home with a manageable mortgage payment. Against my better judgement, I accepted the job and moved my husband and two daughters from our five bedroom, three bathroom pool home to a third floor apartment with a monthly rent payment double the amount of my mortgage. Our original plan was to keep the house in Arizona and rent it out, but we discovered a roof leak had caused major damage to a retaining wall while moving out. Due to the cost of the cross country move and no moving allowance we were forced to 'short sale' our home. We walked away from the home we built with our life savings (nearly \$100,000 down payment) and nearly 10 years of memories...just like that our wealth was gone.

Due to the difficulty of obtaining that coveted 'tenure track' position, many women of color have to make impossible choices to gain entry into the academy like giving up one's home or living apart from one's family. While in graduate school, the focus is often on finishing the degree and landing a job not on gathering the tools to accomplish in the position. Considering the small number of mentors of color, discussions regarding family life and success after graduation often do not occur. Most students of color are first-generation and believe that graduation equals success. Sadly, graduation is merely the beginning of the challenges that women of color in the academy will face.

Academic Mobility

For many first-generation academics of color the thought of being a college professor and a scholar was never a consideration growing up. Movies and television shows often feature scholars who are white and male, leaving little room to fantasize about being a Black female scholar. Without academic role models, it is difficult to plan for success in the academy. Even when we believe we are prepared we end up in a place that is not welcoming to people of color especially Black women. This is when we learn that we lack the academic capital to succeed in a hostile environment. Academic capital is a pairing of the culture transmitted by the family with that transmitted by school, but the efficacy of the school-transmitted knowledge is dependent upon the capital the student brings to the classroom from home, which leaves the working-class student at an immediate disadvantage (and it's compounded if one is from the welfare class). Fast forward and imagine this child who has had second and third hand cultural capital and attempts to exist within the elite establishment of academia. Consider this narrative:

In recalling my first tenure track job, I was pulled to the side by a tenured Black woman after I was discussing feelings of ostracization in my department. She politely urged me to reconsider my style of clothing and way of speaking in faculty meetings. She suggested I need to 'play the part' so they would perceive that I belonged. I was baffled a bit because she rooted my negative experiences in outward appearance. But I obliged. My treatment didn't change and I explained this to her. What became clear was that I needed to uphold a particular narrative of being Black in academia that are always professionally dressed, professionally speaking, and professional behaved. My 'lower class' ways of speaking and dressing offended her and my other colleagues' sensibilities. She was unable to see past her own expectations that she couldn't even consider what I might be experiencing in a mostly white and male department. This led to more isolation and I was never able to redevelop that relationship because I didn't belong in their club (Kishonna on being 'too ghetto' for Black folks in academia).

The microaggressions experienced around 'white idealized' professional dress standards for female faculty of color can further isolate Black female faculty and add to the notion of impostor syndrome. Simple critiques and criticisms directed at our style of dress, how we talk, and the way we wear our hair can further alienate women of color from white colleagues and students (and even from our own 'bougie black' colleagues). These microinsults can have a significant impact on our sense of belonging, legitimacy and connection to the academy. Being concerned about not fitting in or not living up to the role of professor can be an added challenge, many women of color on the tenure track participate in a form of performance. An activity in which we try to become the person that we think others want us to be. However, if we decide to drop this façade and be ourselves we run the risk of further alienating ourselves.

Reshawna also shares a similar experience surrounding her 'presentation/performance of the academy' as one of few Black women on campus in Boston.

Growing up in Los Angeles, California the product of a teenage mother, I quickly learned to observe my environment, speak up for myself and fight for my place. I can say with absolute certainty, Boston is not Los Angeles. The year I spent in Boston was a major wake up call for me and my family. I was often the only person of color in the room. This included the classroom. I was the product of a public-school education but I lived a short distance from some of the most elite private schools in the nation. I did not understand the traditions nor did I adhere to the hierarchies. Many of my students and colleagues challenged the way I dressed, wore my hair and the way I taught my classes. I was often showcased as the 'articulate Black professor' for purposes of diversity but ignored and silenced when I spoke about racial injustice and the need for people of color to feel included at the university. The year I was hired (along with another woman of color) a new faculty mentorship program was installed. We were told it was meant to make us feel comfortable. It further alienated us and make us feel like outsiders who needed to be micromanaged. The highlight of the year was when I attended the commencement ceremony and I was mocked for wearing my public school doctoral regalia. I was told the material was odd and it looked 'cheap'. (jokingly of course). I immediately put myself back on the job market and the following year we relocated again. (Reshawna describing the performance of the academy)

These examples illustrate just how tough it can be being Black, Woman, and from poor and working, welfare, class backgrounds. As these examples highlight, at predominantly white institutions or in spaces emulating whiteness, Black women are often times ostracized because of their assertiveness, experience more failed relationships, and suffer from severe isolation (Jackson, 2001 p. 361).

Educational context is a significant site to explore Black women's experiences in regard to structural oppression. In particular, Black women who are faculty center their own experiences as critical to the formation and production of alternative theories, which run counter to traditional modes of inquiry. Willis and Lewis (1999) narrate their intersectional interactions with White students and faculty members. Because racism and sexism are systematic in academia as elsewhere, the authors assert that when teaching in predominantly white institutions: 'our experiences have taught us that these incidents are more than insensitive acts of non-thinking public or acts of ignorance or naiveté. They are part and parcel of a legendary history of oppression encountered by African American women in America' (p. 247). The mere presence of Black women in academia (and their subsequent treatment) may shock people.

I can recall an incident that happened my first year at my current university. I had been teaching a course that ends at 1:20pm on Tuesdays. I would often end class about 10 minutes early to allow for questions. One afternoon a group of individuals (they appeared to be students) entered my classroom to set up for a meeting. This was not the first time they entered before I was done with the room. The second time this happened, I asked a member of the group to give me a few minutes to wrap up. She responded, 'we need to set up for a meeting'. I told her that the room was mine for another ten minutes. She proceeded to argue with me about reserving the room. I had to physically approach her to let her know that she will not enter my classroom until I am done using it. (Reshawna narrating microaggressions on campus).

The combination of gendered and racial oppression creates a unique and challenging experience for Black women working and advancing in academia. In the 1969 classic essay 'Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,' Frances Beal critiques white feminism for not only discounting Black women's experiences, but overlooking systems of class-based oppression. She asserts that the double bind of racism and sexism that Black women have historically experienced is also intertwined with economic and imperialist exploitation. In the current context, we aim to center the connectedness of these identities.

Hustlin' and Surviving in Academia

Collins (2000) argues that there is not one singular experience encompassing all women's experiences, but that women's experiences are complicated by their 'lived' experiences and situated oppressions. In other words, women's representations of themselves speak truths and how they derive at those truths should be analyzed in a manner that substantiates their being. Our daily experiences form a collective knowledge that women of color are able to understand and decipher. This code is also what instills resilience and persistence to continue to exist within

academia. But at what costs? Black women's overburdened bodies have held capitalist institutions together for decades. Many of us continue to hold on because we are too stubborn to quit, admit defeat, throw in the towel, or admit we were playing an unfair game and never had a chance to win. Angela Davis (1981) argues that the capitalistic structure, which bounds Black women to ideas of domestic and public work, creates a context where Black women are often forced to use their bodies to care for families, pay for food and diminish the severity of inhumane treatment or increase safety for children. So, we often work within 'oppressive structures performing backbreaking labor and for long hours, working without or for lower pay, taking jobs where they are overqualified, not attending to health, participating in sex work, and even selling blood. The North American academic structure and its proximation to the institution of slavery as well as its particular treatment of Black women cannot be ignored' (Lomax, 2015, para. 12). Our labor in the academic cog, rooted in the corporate model depends on free and cheap racialized and gendered work. And we are stigmatized for questioning such a model and are expected to accept this status, dismissing our experiences. We are often told to 'slow down', 'wait your turn,' 'you're the lucky one,' etc. without deconstructing these statements that blame us, the victims (Ibid). Because we've been systematically relegated to the service class in the hierarchy of academia and are unfairly pitted against one another and assessed based on the productivity of the well-resourced tokens, we cannot complain. And this would signal a disruption to the rules of the game that has been created for them.

Author Bios

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