

Carefully Vetted

Black Academic Women's Negotiations of Motherhood

It is important to situate Black academic women's active yet intersectionally constrained reproductive choices within the discourse on mothering in the academy. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of Black women's decision-making and negotiations of parenting and professing within the professional context of the academy. The goal was to better understand the role academic institutions have in shaping academic women's parenting and reproductive decisions and how Black academic women confront institutionalized norms of corporeal control. I privilege Black academic mothers' voices at the forefront of their professional journeys, where they are first met with the impositions of the profession. The data herein are drawn from semi-structured interviews with 20 Black academic women. The respondents were doctoral students or junior professors from large predominantly white research institutions in the northeast United States. A systematic, constant comparison approach to developing grounded theory was applied to interpret the data. The final concepts and design of the study emerged from the data and resulted in three dominant categories: Dual Journey, Eyes Wide Open, and Competency Questioned. The data reveal that Black academic mothers embody living contradictions who are defiantly claiming an embodied intellectual place and space within academe.

"Don't get pregnant before getting tenure!" "Have one, no more!"

Sound familiar? I too, recall hearing this professional "advice" during my own graduate education. A Black female faculty mentor of mine said to me on the first day of my doctoral program, "Congrats on getting engaged, but don't you go have any babies while you're in this program!" I was six months pregnant before I shared my pregnancy with her. I was excited about my pregnancy but was afraid that I would lose much needed mentoring and support because I had

actively chosen not to comply with her directions. Later in my doctoral studies, I was in a meeting with a white female faculty mentor and was discussing the possibility of publishing one of my papers. Unprompted she advised, “Be sure not to get pregnant before you complete your dissertation proposal.” I was happily three months pregnant at the time. In both instances, I was both offended and shocked. I was an adult and therefore was not expecting instruction about my personal life within a professional setting. The aforementioned examples are not offered as justification for my own personal ax grinding but do serve as testimonial evidence of common sanctions given to female graduate students and junior faculty by their colleagues and mentors within the academy. Such well meaning, albeit conformist and gendered advice, is often relayed by academics regardless of their social location, academic field, rank or institutional affiliation. Some might offer a counter argument by suggesting that academic mentors and peers are simply attempting to decrease the documented career risk of underrepresented and vulnerable scholars, including women of color like myself. Yet, these impositions hold significant cultural meaning for all bodies in the academy but may hold particular meaning for women of color academics as they make decisions about family and careers. Black women, in particular, must negotiate the simultaneity of the academy’s patriarchal and gendered practices of managing women’s reproduction along with the U.S.’s racialized practices of controlling Black women’s bodies and sexuality.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of Black women’s decision-making and negotiations of parenting and professing at the beginning of their careers within the professional context of the academy. The goal is to better understand the role academic culture has in shaping academic women’s parenting and reproductive decisions. By interrogating the implicit and explicit messages academic culture communicates to Black academic women, we may be able to discern and confront these interactive and normalized forms of corporeal control.

Background and Significance

The academy represents a contradictory location, which is responsible for both producing and perpetuating much of the racialized gendered cultural messages that can often impede Black women’s and mothers’ success within the U.S. and yet it is also an institution that can serve as a vehicle for their upward mobility. The compounded intersectional disadvantage that women of color experience as they navigate becoming or being academic mothers has been alluded to but has largely been absent in the recent discourse on mothering in the academy (Williams 2012). Volumes published on gender equity research such as Susan Bracken, Jeannie Allen and Diane Dean’s *The Balancing Act: Gendered*

Perspectives in Faculty Roles and Work Lives and well received anthologies such as Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant's *Mama PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic Life* and Rachel Hile Basset's *Parenting and Professing: Balancing Family Work with an Academic Career* all offer much needed analysis and testimony in the pursuit of shattering the silence surrounding academic mothers' existences within the academy (Leonard and Malina 30). Feminist scholar, Carmen Armenti has offered a rich analysis of the interplay between gender, power, and organizational culture on academic women's reproductive choices (211-231). However the majority of academic-mothering narratives and academic-mothering scholarship offer limited intersectional analysis of the complexity of academic women of colors' parenting decisions and career issues.

As unwelcome outsiders within the academy, many Black women enter the profession with a keen awareness of their gendered and racially marked bodies. Carmen Gonzalez and Angela Harris' timely volume, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, highlights the professional issues, struggles and triumphs of women of color within academia in the twenty first century. However, pregnancy and subsequent motherhood call attention to Black women's racialized gender and activates a host of additional cultural meanings within this professional context. Their bodies, with or without child, are most often read as intrusive, (hyper)sexualized, out of control, and yet invisible (Hammonds 93). Yet, Robin Silbergleid suggests a pregnant belly serves to legitimize heteronormative family structures and thus is a welcome sight within the academy (134). Susan Bordo complicates Silbergleid's position by asserting "the pregnant body is simultaneously a (hetero)normative female body—a body that is most outwardly marked as female by extension feminine—and also the female body at its most excessive and unruly, intruding visibly into a space, the university, that is historically rendered bodies invisible in the privileging the mind" (132). I would like to extend Bordo's insight by suggesting that her analysis invites new questions about academic mothering. We might then ask how do Black women, whose bodies are marked by their racialized gender and rendered unruly and visibly intruding into space, navigate the academy?

Specifically, it is important to situate Black women's active yet complexly constrained reproductive choices within the discourse on mothering and the academy. I begin by offering a brief discussion of the politics of Black women's reproduction within the U.S. and then link this history to contemporary Black academic women's circumstance. I then review the current literature on mothering in the academy and locate the compounded intersectional barriers faced by women of color academics within this very limited body of scholarship. Finally, I privilege Black academic mothers' voices who are at the beginning of their professional journeys and where they are first met with the

impositions of the profession. The participants' collective voices reveal that as academic-mothers they embody living contradictions through defiantly claiming an embodied intellectual space and place within a profession that many have deemed as belonging to a sacred few.

Policing Black Women's Reproduction and Sexuality

The control of Black women's reproduction, motherhood and sexuality delineates a particularly dark trajectory within American economic and social history. Dorothy Roberts' groundbreaking book, *Killing the Black Body*, expertly chronicles the vast ways Black women's bodies have been manipulated on behalf of U.S. economic and political interests by controlling their reproduction and the African American population as a whole. From forced reproduction during slavery to population control through birth control and sterilization, Roberts' deftly documents how Black women's bodies have been consistently monitored and managed by a patriarchal and racialized state. Contemporary Black women continue to battle for reproductive autonomy and rights to their bodies. For example, a recent anti-abortion billboard campaign sponsored by "Life Always" and "That's Abortion," utilized a racist shaming campaign to challenge Black women's reproductive freedom by suggesting that the high rate of abortions among Black women serves as an indictment of their complicity in the genocide of the Black population in the U.S. These racialized attacks allege the widespread incompetence of Black women with regard to their ability to make independent decisions concerning their bodies and reproduction. These ideologies historicize the contemporary thoughts, attitudes and behaviors of contemporary Americans, including those who are college and university professors. Thus, academics' purportedly benign messages about managing motherhood cannot simply be framed as pertaining solely to career success but also are connected to long histories of "knowing what's best" for hypersexual and "poor choice" making Black women. Unsupportive and indoctrinated, and even feminist, colleagues do little to transform the institutions we inhabit when they embrace the ideologies of exclusion that define academia.

Thus, the assumed liberal academy provides fruitful terrain upon which to examine the functions and impact of the work based reproductive control of academic women. I am not suggesting this form of control is comparable to the forced medical practices of sterilization and mandated birth control underwent by untold masses of poor, disabled and women and girls of color (Davis 217); rather, I argue the academy may enact a more subtle coercive manifestation of corporeal control or a "psychological sterilization" for many women, which has particular implications for women of color who desire biological or legal

motherhood. Many Black academic women, like most academic women, feel compelled to comply with these cultural mandates of the profession. Yet a growing minority of “others” have chosen to take uncharted course of becoming mother-academics as they navigate the choppy gendered and racialized waters of academe.

Walls, Pipelines and Other Barriers Facing Academic Mothers

Exploring women’s interests in mothering runs the danger of being interpreted as pronatalist. Feminists have long since identified the limitations of compulsory motherhood and celebrated education as an emancipatory vehicle to counter women’s economic dependence on men. Advances in reproductive technologies have also granted many women, particularly middle class Western women, greater power over their reproductive decisions (Davis 203). Black feminists and other feminists of color have consistently argued that motherhood is not limited by biology and can include social aspects of mothering and motherwork such as othermothering (Collins 1994: 49) and community mothering (James 45). Additionally, queer scholars have also challenged the hegemony of heteronormativity by privileging child-free, non-biological family formations, and other queer family configurations in discourses on the family (Epstein 7-14). Nonetheless, the emerging data on academic women suggests that many desire to become mothers but feel constrained by their careers (Kemkes-Grottenhaler 213-226; Krakauer and Chen 65-70). “Professional” advice of discouraging child bearing is illegal according the *Pregnancy Discrimination Act* of 1978 (Title VII). Yet, despite legislative inroads, these messages impart a persistent cultural mandate that women’s bodies, while tolerated, must not become unruly with the physicality of pregnancy and motherhood and should fit neatly within the confines of the patriarchal norms of academia. Not surprisingly, recently Nicholas Wolfinger, Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden using census data found women academics are the least likely to become mothers when compared to highly educated women in other professions (1652-1670). Women faculty who desire children practice in what Robert Drago and Carol Colbeck describe as “bias avoidance” strategies because they fear pregnancy and motherhood may further mark their already alien gendered bodies (1222). Academic women who enter the job market are often faced with hiding their pregnancies or mothering status during their interview process. Pregnancy, like race, announces the body as present, disobedient, and sexualized. Thus not becoming pregnant or cloaking a pregnancy can be viewed as a survival strategy for navigating a highly gendered workplace environment.

Those disobedient women who dare not to heed the university’s persistent disembodied, self-sacrificing, labor intensive norms by becoming pregnant

and/or mothers run the risk of later judgment. The emergence of what has been called “second generation” sex/gender discrimination litigations offers us evidence of academic women’s resistance against these patterns of covert forms of discrimination (AAUW 13). The physical condition of the pregnant body has been interpreted as passive, unreliable, unintelligent, feminine and uncommitted to their careers. For example, research conducted by Jane Halpert and Julia Burg revealed that respondents rated professional women who were pregnant as incompetent when compared to non-pregnant women and reported that they tended to receive negative performance evaluations (241). Academic women are aware that their gendered bodies are read by students and peers and ultimately learn that pregnancy and motherhood are penalties their careers cannot afford (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 191).

Those academic women who become mothers may attempt to “avoid bias” by presenting themselves as unchanged by their motherhood or by any other caregiving responsibilities for that matter. This is most evidenced by the scarce and hesitant use of work-life balance policies by women academics found in analyses of family leave usage (Drago and Colbeck 1222; Wolfinger, Mason and Goulden 1652). However, the performance of being “just one of the boys,” as Martha Ellis Crone articulated, has short-term benefits at best (160). Of course, privileging non-reproductive ways of being are valid existences for women. Yet, if one’s existence entails a performance of detachment for individualist professional gain it may be an ineffective means of establishing gender equity within the workplace. This “survival” strategy also does not benefit academicians who may not desire children but do indeed desire relational connections and time away from the workplace without penalty. Despite the long history of feminist activism within the academy is clear that many women (and men) continue to face great dilemmas of career-life balance (Mason, Goulden and Wolfinger 9). Apathy and inaction reinforce the status quo and place all bodies and all desire for work-life balance at further risk.

Many scholars have attempted to explain the stifling of academic mothers’ careers. Faye Crosby, Joan Williams and Monica Biernat used the term “the maternal wall” to define the economic and professional ghettos that academic women face once they become mothers (675-682). Mary Ann Mason, Marc Goulden and Nicholas Wolfinger’s research identified “the leaky pipeline” as the widespread pattern of career disruption faced by many academic mothers, particularly those with young children, at every point of the professional trajectory for academics. Their work suggests some women are forced to retreat to the domestic sphere under the cloak of “choice” or “opting out” (Stadtman-Tucker 1). This appears to be a pattern for those academic women with more economic privilege and has been overstated in the press (Williams 2010: 14; Stone 4). For example, Sheila Gregory’s study of Black women who leave the

academy found that many chose other employment opportunities that offered better work climate and which afforded them greater chances of being promoted based on their intellectual and professional contributions. The need to both economically provide for their families and maintain self-respect was critical to their well being (141). These “choices” carry dimensions of free will but also of constraint because they represent the forced yet stabilizing economic decisions many women make in order to make a life for themselves and to provide for their families.

Joan Williams (2010) asserts that gendered structural barriers such as the “maternal wall” and “the leaking pipeline” operate in ways that unjustly penalize academic women who mother. Williams and Biernat further argues that these workplace barriers are mobilized against working mothers because there remains an unresolvable contradiction between the expectation of the ideal (and masculine/disembodied/objective/rational) worker and the expectation of the ideal (and feminine/embodyed/subjective/emotional) mother (675). Indeed, rank and file workers, including academics, must often suppress their connections to family, community, culture and any other evidence of their corporeal existence in order to be touted as “ideal workers” within capitalist rational economic models of productivity. However, the maternal wall has generally been conceptualized and researched independent of women’s social locations. Williams’ work has begun to explore the nature of women of color’s workplace experiences and has suggested that they may face “double jeopardy” when confronted with the maternal wall. The mutually constitutive barriers of race and gender are captured by a woman who participated in a focus group conducted by Williams and her colleagues with the Center for WorkLife Law as she explained the possibilities of the maternal wall for women of color:

I think gender biases work differently for women of different groups—race/ethnicity, immigration status, class of family of origin, and language. It’s not just heightened for “other” women. For example, the stereotype that women of certain groups have “too many babies” affects perceptions of which women take time for family leave. (2012: 10)

Thus women of color mothers may not only face the economic and career penalty due to pregnancy and motherhood, but their motherhood is complicated by racialized gender stereotypes as well.

Although Black women’s working conditions within the academy involve context specific challenges, working outside the home is a familiar role for many Black women and Black mothers. Thus, Black academic women who choose to become mothers embody an axis of contradiction within the binary of “ideal worker/ideal mother” framework used by most scholars who study

academic motherhood. The metaphor of the “ideal worker” narrowly considers gender exclusive of its interaction with race, class and other social factors. Black women’s mothering and work have never had the privilege to be dichotomized. In addition, Patricia Hill Collins also has suggested that economic providing has historically been part of Black women’s conceptions of “good mothering” (1994: 49). This serves as a counter point to the binary of “ideal mother” and “ideal worker” metaphors because good mothering has been connected to economic provision for many Black women. As stated earlier, resolving the “Ideal mother/ideal worker” conflict by “opting out” is also a rare privilege for many working women, including woman of color. Thus, the “ideal worker/ideal mother” framework is helpful in understanding some of the forces at play for working mothers but does not fully explain the structural factors associated with the majority of working women’s career and family issues.

Finally, the rise in “maternal wall” based discrimination litigation among academic women evidences the disturbing nuanced trend in gender based discrimination within the work place (AAUW 1). Current data suggests that only six percent discrimination cases are brought to trial and only one third of them are won on the basis of race, ethnicity, disability or gender (Nielsen, Nelson, and Lancaster 175-201); however, pregnancy discrimination cases have a significantly higher success rate of 50 percent (AAUW 9). This trend in litigation runs the risk of privileging women who articulate pregnancy and motherhood as the sole issue in their discrimination and potentially undermines any intersectional discrimination claims that might be put forth by women of color who are pregnant and/or mothers/caregivers. Collectively, the aforementioned issues, histories, and sociocultural understandings outline a series of interactive barriers that Black women and other women of color face upon entry into the academy and consider motherhood. It behooves us to then examine Black women’s decisions, choices and the journeys as academic mothers within this context.

Methods

What does this disembodied professional environment mean for women of color? Why would Black women who are already marginalized by gender and race choose to become mothers under these oppressive work place conditions? How do Black women academics’ negotiate their mothering within the academy?

The voices and themes herein are drawn from semi-structured interviews and email surveys from an ongoing project with 20 Black academic women who are in the early stages of their academic and mothering careers. The respondents were doctoral students or junior professors from large predominantly white research institutions in the northeast United States. Most interviews took place

in person and lasted one to two hours. A few respondents submitted their responses via email. A basic interview outline was used to guide the interviews. A systematic, constant comparison approach to developing grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 61) was applied to the analysis and interpretation of the data as presented in the transcribed interviews.

The themes and variations about the mother academics' experiences were integrated with an interdisciplinary review of scholarly literature. Collaboration with an external researcher was established in order to assure that issues of validity and reliability were met. Specifically, transcripts were given to an outside researcher who read all transcripts and interview summaries to identify possible themes and areas for further exploration (Thurmond 254). However, the final concepts and design of this study emerged from the data collected. The following sections offers three dominant themes or categories that emerged concerning the respondents' experiences as mother-academics: Dual Journey, Eyes Wide Open; and Competency Questioned.

Dual Journey

An important factor for the majority of participants was their active decision to become mothers and to become academics. They described the co-occurrence of these life events as reclamation of their rights to educational and reproductive freedom. Many participants stated that they were aware of the rules for women but refused to have their bodies controlled by the culture of the academy. The majority of the respondents also stated that their personal and professional goals were clear and realistic. At the time of the interviews they were all actively moving towards tenure or the completion of their doctorates with support and encouragement from their families and communities. More than half of the participants said they received direct messages from other faculty and their mentors to delay or forego mothering. Thus, for these women choosing to mother and being an intellectual concurrently was a conscious choice to disobey the rules. For example, an African American doctoral candidate and new mother reported, "Yes I knew what I was getting into but I wanted to live my life on my own terms." Another shared,

I had another female professor say to me, 'How are you going to finish with two children?' Interestingly enough, this professor is a feminist scholar. I've sometimes wondered if in some such scholars' minds feminism excludes the experiences of marriage and motherhood. I resist labels, but I am clear that the oppression of women is something I abhor and challenge consistently. Can't I be opposed to the oppression of women and still desire a bond with a man and children?

For some, mothering as well as being an academic is defined as an act of resistance against a system that has yet to accept their intellectual capabilities or personal and adult choices. The respondents' personification of the Black academic-mother defies both the popularized inferential racist representations of the incapable "bad Black mother" as well as the unintelligent "other." Neither of these representations seemingly have a rightful place in the "esteemed" academy. Dorothy Roberts decried that "Black mothers have bourn the weight of a century's worth of disgrace that has been manufactured in popular culture and the academy" (21). Thus their ironic presence in the academy has often been viewed as undeserving, unwelcome, alien and illegitimate (Harris and Gonzalez 3). Respondents reported not being dissuaded by the disembodied culture of the academy and referenced Black women's long history as balancing work and family as well as dealing with workplace hostility. "My grandmother had six children and worked for twelve hours a day. I pull strength from her." They arrive in this relatively new workplace with a history of resistance that has informed their journey to and through the academy.

Their very presence disrupts what it means to be an intellectual; a counter location to the expected white, male, hetero, grey haired, and relationally unattached stereotype. Their presence in the academy also brings the fictional picture of not conventionally good enough mothers into the fore" and disrupts the binaries of "good mother/bad mother" and "ideal worker/ideal mother."

Eyes Wide Open

All interviews began by asking respondents if they were fully aware of what lies ahead for them professionally within the academy. They unanimously responded affirmatively that they were keenly aware of the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of their bodies as academics. Many of the interviewees reported that (mis)readings of their bodies extended across the academic environment, in their classrooms, prying into meetings, in their interactions with colleagues as well as in their early review processes towards promotion and tenure. Several respondents reported that they believed their multiply marked existence had great implications for their professional trajectory. Vesta, an assistant professor stated, "I know my ways of thinking and being are not welcome here. I feel it. But I am clear about why I am here." Another respondent, Sheila shared, "Yes, I'm the only one. However, I am determined that I will make my way through this place unscathed and on course." Their testimonies reveal that they are claiming their stake within the academy despite the circumstance of their objectified legacy of speculation, interrogation, and misinterpretation.

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Yolanda Covington-Ward maintains that the phantoms of many racialized and gendered stereotypes follow Black women into the academy (forthcoming). Several respondents echo her assertion and contend that these phantoms not only follow them into the academy, but also inform their procreative decisions. The majority of the women interviewed reported cautiously vetting their procreative desires as they also weighed the challenges of establishing intellectual authority within the academy.

Those who consider pregnancy with its accompanying, ever present, protruding abdomen confront the long held sexualized and racialized gender stereotypes that may be projected upon them by their colleagues and students. A doctoral candidate shared:

Almost all the Black women in my grad program had babies while in the program. Almost none of my white peers did. So when I became pregnant, I was very quiet about. Although I had planned this pregnancy, I felt over-exposed—like I did something wrong. Like I was telling the world—“yea, I have sex.”

Others reported feeling the pressure to further “avoid bias” in an attempt to not have their competency questioned and may also choose not to trigger any unearthed and unspoken racism and sexism. The testimony of a Black female doctoral student, illustrates this dilemma in choosing to disclose her second pregnancy. “We wanted to have the children while we were young. However, I was so uncomfortable telling my grad advisor. She has already warned me not to have children while in the program. I had already broken the rules once.” These testimonies suggest an awareness that is grounded in their understanding of their marginalized reality yet also demonstrate their desire to mother despite the resistance with which they were confronted.

Each woman revealed an active thought process in making the decision despite the direct messages they received from peers, professors, and mentors as well as indirect messages they received from the masculinist and alienating culture of the academy. Mothering as an academic for them was an act of defiance against a system that does not respect nor make space for their existence. As one respondent celebrated, “I knew we could do it, we saw others doing it and it was inspiring.”

As bell hooks suggests, marginality can be a site of resistance and strength (15) and several of the respondents turned towards other women of color academic mothers, particularly graduate students and junior faculty, for support, validation, and camaraderie.

Competency Questioned

Robin Silbergleid's asserts "we are all bodies, even if we are hired for our minds" (143). Yet it remains unclear whether "twofers" such as women of color academics are indeed hired or desired for their minds or their institution's diversity fulfillment. One respondent who was an assistant professor and new mother, counters Silbergleid's claim by reporting, "I exist in a highly toxic and alienating climate of institutionalized injustice, I am not sure why they hired me." Lisa's comment suggests that she must negotiate her hyper visible body and any subsequent pregnancy and motherhood within a workplace that does not honor her presence. Those academic women who are already multiply marked by race, ethnicity, and other social categories must consider whether they desire this additional chapter of potential diminishment to be superimposed upon their hyper-exposed bodies. Like Lisa, Black women academics who chose to mother must consider these precarious choices within the constraints of withering diversity policies and "use at your own risk" work-life policies, which doubly threaten their professional success. Allison Griffen contends that the bodies of heterosexual pregnant women are "at home in the academy" (206). Yet, Pam, a doctoral student shares, "I tried to hide my pregnancy, make myself more invisible than I already was." The perception that a pregnant abdomen within the academy is of no threat to the status quo, disregards the material conditions of those whose existence is already unwelcome and vulnerable. Many other respondents were well aware of how the risk of mothering heightens the potential of having their commitment to their careers further discredited. Another participant recalls her treatment from a professor whom she was working for as a graduate assistant:

He didn't talk about it, so I couldn't talk about it. I felt disempowered already and the pregnancy seemed to only give him further authority to disregard me, treat me as if I am not focused and therefore am not serious about being a scholar. (June, graduate assistant)

Vanessa Dickerson and Michael Bennet, in their work on Black women's embodiment, contend "all too often the black female body is looked upon or made the object of the gaze. The body is still perceived as unworthy, if not worthless" (197) and therefore unwelcomed—especially in the university.

Several respondents who were interviewed reported that once they become pregnant and/or mothers they were also touted as the chief architects of their own professional demise. Their decisions are often framed as poor personal choices instead of penalties from noncompliance with the unwritten sets of guidelines and was reminiscent of the racist and sexist rhetoric spoken about

mothers who receive public assistance. In an interview, one respondent who was denied tenure from a research university, shared the following, “I was discussing my situation with a senior (white female) colleague of mine and she said, ‘You know, I waited to have my children until after I was tenured.’” Her hopes had been that her colleagues would not hold her cultural “transgression” against her, though she now had to accept, even with her high level of productivity, as many women do, that she was being punished for being “irresponsible.” Such a culture forces women to resist self-inflicting narratives around their reproductive choices and competence.

Conclusions

Maria Balderrama, Mary Texeira, and Elsa Valdez urge us “to continue [to] name the traditions of exclusion in academia” and that “humanizing the academy begins in understanding the ideology grounding its everyday practices” (211-212). This preliminary research project provides a picture of the experiences of Black academic women who decide to become mothers early in their careers. Results reveal Black academic mothers have a host of mutually constituted cultural issues that they confront within the academic workplace.

Black women like many women of color have had their reproductive choices managed by others for far too long. I argue, based on the academic women’s voice herein, that reproductive freedom continues to be locations for feminist intervention both outside and within the academy. Yes, we must adamantly resist notions of compulsory motherhood and heteronormative models of family formations. However, we must search a balance between our valid critiques of pronatalist ideologies and our urgent necessity to validate the embodied and situated conditions of the majority of women in the world. These data, despite overarching themes of trepidation, reveal that the mother-academics herein are subversively confronting the norms of the academy and have refused to be obedient and splinter themselves. Their embodied professional lives serve as counter narratives despite the unsupportiveness that they face.

Aside from the individual acts of subversion noted herein, the sheer lack of numbers soberly reminds us that Black women remain professionally and economically vulnerable as academics. Family policy researchers have offered a multitude of policy-based solutions; however, they continue to be plagued by institutional resistance and worker trepidation. These policies require collective support from the professoriate so that the work of keeping our profession diverse does not fall solely on academic women’s informal supports.

Professional women of color may have greater social capital due to their advanced education but as scores of academic mothers of color’s families’ material

conditions and their own disenfranchised positions within their institutions deserve our attention (Nzinga-Johnson, forthcoming), much more work is needed to track the interactive effects of structural barriers, which continue to limit professional mothers' career trajectories.

In closing, Black mother academics are just one critical and urgent location to initiate a wide scale cultural shift in the notions of "work-life" balance within the academic workplace. Academics must collectively become what Robert Drago and Carol Colbeck term as "bias resisters" (18). There is a dire need to build alliances and name and oppose the discriminatory and exclusionary practices of the academy; otherwise, all bodies will be penalized. All academics in their multiplicities deserve fulfilled lives without having to deny their embodied existence as intellectuals. The "bias avoidance" tactics of not acknowledging one's life desires outside of work may serve as individualist survival strategies for many, however, these strategies do little to address the collective freedoms of workers and institutional transformation.

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