The Miner's Canary: A Critical Race Perspective on the Representation of Black Women Full Professors

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The Miner’s Canary: A Critical Race Perspective on the Representation of Black Women Full Professors

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Abstract

This article examines experiences of a Black woman full professor, and the benefits and privileges associated with reaching this rank. Its purpose is to leave little room for conjecture about the rank and those who have earned it. Using critical race theory and a critical race feminism framework coupled with the concept of the miner’s canary, we suggest that by examining the experiences of Black women full professors we can gain an understanding of the role of full professors in academe and the systemic issues prohibiting their promotion to the highest rank of the professoriate. We call for disciplined scholarship in this area and offer questions that could assist in creating research agendas that examine the complex issues of access to the senior faculty rank of full professor.

Introduction

In 2005, Lani Guinier presented the attendees of the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities with a useful metaphor for how to think about issues facing people who are racially marginalized in higher education—the miner’s canary. She explained that in some mining communities, miners would take a canary into the mines with them to test the quality of the air. The collapse of the canary would serve as an early warning sign that miners were in danger of inhaling poisonous gases in the mine’s

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atmosphere. In her speech, she challenged higher education to “rethink race and the role of those who have been excluded from, or underrepresented in, positions of authority or decision making in our society” (Guinier, 2005, p. 2005). She, alongside her colleague Gerald Torres (2002), urged that rather than interpreting the issues and experiences facing racially marginalized people in the academy as indicative of group pathology, scholars and leaders in higher education should instead view those issues and experiences as emblematic of broader systemic concerns. As Guinier and Torres (2002) reasoned:

Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner’s canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to [non-White] communities. …Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning that we are all at risk (p. 11).

What Guinier and Torres suggest is that the convergence of racism and power not only endangers racially minoritized groups. This convergence also has significant implications for every person in society regardless of their racial standing.

As a point of departure in this conceptual essay, we borrow Guinier and Torres’ metaphor of the miner’s canary and apply it to an area of scholarship that has received a dismal amount of attention in the literature and the academic mines, the experiences of Black women full professors. We do not use the miner’s canary metaphor to suggest that they are expendable by any means. Rather, we argue that some of their experiences reflect longstanding, endemic racism and sexism that still exists and marginalizes them based on aspects of difference. There are several benefits of examining and understanding the experiences of Black women at the rank of full professor. First, this line of inquiry provides an opportunity to acknowledge and address inequities often present in the process of promotion to full professor. Such inquiry serves the community of scholars by serving as a springboard for assessing both the environments and processes that many faculty encounter (particularly non-White women) as they continue in their academic careers beyond tenure. Second, this work calls to question how racialized and gendered hegemony exists to maintain the status quo in the professoriate and the academy. For example, comprehending hegemony through the experiences of Black women may help us to better understand (a) who pursues promotion to full professor and their motivations for such action,
(b) what perceptions and biases involved in the processes related to promotion to full professor, (c) the connections between promotion to full professor and the selection of top academic institutional leaders (i.e., provosts, deans, vice presidents), and (d) the consequences of a lack of various forms of diversity in the setting of institutional priorities and policy. This hegemony is not only detrimental to the status and opportunities of Black female faculty, but can also have tremendous effects on a variety of higher education constituencies (i.e., students, fellow faculty, and administrators).

Explicitly, through the lenses of critical race theory and critical race feminism, this conceptual essay highlights how the hegemonic atmosphere of Whiteness and maleness not only permeate the professoriate, but the broader context of higher education including the curriculum and policies that dictate tenure and promotion to the rank of full professor. We provide an overview of what the literature reveals about Black women faculty in the academy in terms of demographics and their presence in the senior faculty ranks. We then introduce critical race theory and critical race feminism as frameworks that, when used appropriately, raise important and thought provoking perspectives with regard to why so few Black women hold the title of full professor. We close with a clarion call for more research and offer enduring questions to encourage scholars to engage a critical race research agenda that examines issues of access to the senior faculty rank of full professor.

A Demographic Snapshot

While Black women are an underrepresented group in the faculty ranks (Trower & Chait, 2002; Turner & Myers, 2000; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999) broadly speaking, little has been written with regard to their numerical presence or lack thereof at the senior faculty level. To gauge how populations are represented in the senior faculty ranks, we examined data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) from the National Center for Education Statistics 2000 and 2008. The data from 1997 revealed that among 260 doctoral granting institutions, 87% of full professors were White. In other words, 7 of 8 full professors were White (69% were White men; 18% were White women; 13% were non-White women and men). Of the 13% of non-White faculty, only 2% were Black and African American and within this 2%, Black men and women represented 69% and 31%, respectively (NCES, 2000). These data clearly reveal both racial and gender disparities among full professors.
Official reports by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) offer an equally stark picture. NCES data indicated that 703,463 full-time faculty members were employed at U.S. higher education institutions overall in 2007 (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Black women represented a dismally low 2.86% (N=20,148) of that number (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). A ten-year glance into past data indicated Black women represented 2.40% of faculty in 1997 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000), indicating not much in the way of percentage change. In terms of rank, approximately 25% (N=173,395) of all faculty have attained the academic rank of full professor (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). However, Black women represented only 1.26% (N=2,193) of all faculty holding full professor rank in 2007 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). While it is arguable that the academy has become more accessible for Black women seeking faculty positions (Gregory, 2001), we concur with Cole (2001) who stated, “it is critically important to acknowledge the obvious: that being present in a college or university does not mean that one is welcomed, given the support needed to gain tenure [or promotion], or paid equally for equal work” (p. 231). Further, although there are more Black women faculty today, than 20 years ago, their concentration in the lower ranks, likelihood of being in part-time, untenured positions, and slower promotion rates indicate that their faculty status has not significantly changed in the academy (Gregory, 2001; Williams-Green & Singh, 1995). These data not only reveal the numerical status of Black women faculty in postsecondary education, but also serve as a symptom of underlying issues in the academy. These data indicate that within the academic mines, the canary is being exposed to racially toxic environments that act as the catalyst for their numerical underrepresentation, as well as their invisibility.

**Black Female Faculty**

The condition of the miner’s canary can also be situated in current literature about Black female faculty. Exploring the existing literature can expose a host of other symptoms that hinder the canary’s survival in the academic mines. Turner, Gonzalez, and Wood (2008) stated,

To better prepare students for an increasingly diverse society, campuses across the country are engaged in efforts to diversify the racial and ethnic makeup of their faculties. These efforts are perhaps the least successful of campus diversity initiatives as [non-White] faculty...remain underrepresented and their achievements in the academy almost invisible. (p. 139).
What Turner et al. share is symptomatic of the larger narrative that emerges from current literature about non-White faculty. Broadly speaking, this literature suggests several troubling trends including: (a) devaluation and marginalization of research; (b) disrespect from students in the classroom; (c) limited opportunities to collaborate on research and grant opportunities; (d) presence of a few or of only one non-White person; (e) higher service loads; (f) pain of experiencing racial hostility; (g) lack of mentoring; (h) hypervisibility; (i) pressures to work twice as hard as White counterparts; and (j) experience of ‘teaching while Black’, in which they are presumed to be out of place and subjected to assumptions regarding whether and where they belong (Aguirre, 2000; Allen, Epps, & Guillory, 2000; Bower, 2002; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Laden & Hagedorn, 2000; McGowan, 2000; Patton & Catching, 2009; Stanley, 2006; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner & Myers, 2000; Tusmith & Reddy, 2002; Vargas, 2002). While the literature suggests that collectively they experience the aforementioned challenges, some of these issues disproportionately impact Black female faculty as we explain below.

Many scholars have documented the challenges Black female faculty face in the academy (Bowie, 1995; Cole, 2001; Grant & Simmons, 2008; King, 1995; Myers, 2002; Turner, 2002; Womble, 1995). Most, if not all, of the literature about Black female faculty is focused on women in the early stages of their faculty career (i.e., assistant professors) and tenure and promotion to associate professor, which is almost always exclusively coupled. The experiences shared in this body of scholarship indicate patterns of inequity and inequality, as well as persistence and resistance, for this sub-group of faculty.

An extensive review of this literature reveals that lack of mentoring, sense of isolation, and endurance of racially and gender based occupational stressors that challenge them on a daily basis, limit their authority and influence as full fledged members of the professoriate and academy (Turner, 2002). Mentoring from senior faculty is a crucial component to a successful academic career (Blackwell, 1989; Boice, 1993; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). Through mentoring, senior faculty can provide invaluable counsel with regard to teaching, service, and research and serve as bridges to both formal and informal networking groups within and outside of their departments and institutions. They provide crucial information about important aspects of a successful faculty career, such as particulars on promotion practices and expectations, as well as insights into departmental and institutional histories, behaviors, and cultures (Bowie, 1995; Smith, 2000; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). Of particular importance, mentors can assist Black women in their resistance to institutional
and organizational barriers by illuminating the unwritten rules often present in academe (Britt & Kelly, 2005; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). Without mentors, faculty life can be isolating and difficult for Black women as they navigate their disciplines, departments, and institutions. When Black women faculty are not connected to networks in their disciplines, departments, and/or institutions and find themselves situated as the only Black woman in their program, department, or college, feelings of isolation and marginalization are inevitable (Atwater, 1995; Bronstein, 1993; Grant & Simmons, 2008; Myers, 2002; Tillman, 2001; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999).

Feelings of isolation and marginalization are also often fueled by the reactions of colleagues to their scholarship, teaching, and service commitments. One source of occupational stress for Black women faculty has to do with the devaluation of their scholarship (Grant & Simmons, 2008; Milem & Astin, 1993; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). Black women faculty members are often engaged in research that examines and illuminates social issues in their communities and they use non-traditional epistemological, methodological, and theoretical paradigms. Further, their scholarship is accepted more often in non-traditional disciplinary journal outlets (Womble, 1995). In the area of teaching, King (1995) illuminated ways in which students’ behaviors “reflect deeply-embedded race-gender related feelings, beliefs, assumptions and needs” (p. 16) in a classroom with a Black woman professor. Her premise was that Black women faculty experience burnout as a result of needing to negotiate several psychological roles for differently racialized and gendered students. As it relates to service to the institution, Black women faculty are often overloaded with the call to serve on departmental, divisional, and institutional committees where racial and gender diversity is desired (Brayboy, 2003; Turner, Myers, Creswell, 1999). Thompson and Dey (1998) found that the greatest sources of stress were time constraints and the overloading of responsibilities.

Although these issues serve as barriers to opportunities, Black women have opened and at times broken through doors to be successful in their careers. As Ladson-Billings (1997) stated:

The academy is shaped by many social forces. More [non-White] women...are defining and redefining their roles within it. New ways of thinking about teaching and research have provided spaces for women scholars to challenge old assumptions about what it means to be in the academy. While both the women’s movement and Black [ethnic] studies movement have helped increase the parameters of academic work, new paradigms
emerging from Black women’s scholarship provide me with a liberatory lens through which to view and construct my scholarly life. The academy and my scholarly life need not be in conflict with the community and cultural work I do (and intend to do) (p. 66).

Ladson-Billings’ words speak to the daily battle Black women fight in the academy as they challenge, change, and disrupt the current power structure (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001).

Despite a growing body of scholarship of the experiences of Black women faculty, as previously stated, most, if not all, of this work is focused on those at the assistant professor rank. This dearth of literature provides a space for misinterpretations and erroneous assumptions regarding why so few Black women are full professors. One interpretation could be that perhaps Black women and other non-White faculty are socialized to work toward tenure and promotion to associate, rather than toward full professor. Another assumption is that given the hurdles and hoops involved with tenure and promotion, many Black women may feel a sense of burnout and are content to remain at the associate level, seeing no point in pursuing the full professorial rank. A third assumption is that the rewards at the full professor level do not differ in any significant way that would prompt Black women to aspire to this particular rank. We assert that any of these interpretations could warrant merit, yet they fail to acknowledge the systemic issues that may potentially reinforce such thinking among Black women faculty. Moreover, such interpretations imply that the low representation of Black women at the more senior faculty level is solely situated with them and confounds issues of racism and sexism that are likely to influence the women’s decision to pursue the higher rank. Missing from this overall discourse is a deeper understanding of the meanings and rewards associated with full professor rank, as well as the voices of Black women who have successfully navigated the early career hurdles (i.e., tenure, promotion to associate professor rank) and are now in more hierarchically powerful positions in the professoriate (i.e., the full professor rank). Listening to the voices of the 1.26% Black women full professors could possibly illuminate the raced and gendered disconnects and contradictions of a faculty reward system supposedly grounded in meritocracy and hard work.

**Professorial Rank and Privilege**

A key symptom that calls attention to the condition of the academic mines and ultimately the survival of the miner’s canary involves the underlying
meanings that dictate the value and importance of the full professor rank. Recognizing interdependence among and across institutional actors (e.g., administrators, governing boards, students) with regard to authority, influence, and decision-making, faculty, specifically, are able to wield their authority and influence through their primary responsibilities of service, teaching, and research (Birnbaum, 1989). While all faculty members have some level of status and influence, it is fair to assume that full professors have earned a fair amount of status allowing for influence in many aspects of higher education in ways that differ from their junior and mid-level faculty colleagues. Such rewards present themselves internally and externally. Full professors possess the full rights and privileges of the title. Thus, they no longer hold a probationary status, similar to what might be found at the assistant professor level, for example. Individuals who attain the rank of full professor are considered to possess the qualifications to serve as a department chair, dean, provost, president, and in endowed professorships. They are also positioned to make policy, both covertly and overtly to protect the coveted position of full professor.

Full professors can also chair and serve on search committees for deans and other senior level positions, influencing who will ultimately hold institutional leadership roles. While serving on such committees is directly related to university service, participation on such committees is girded with power and influence. Tierney (1997) found that service was the least valued function of the faculty. However, through service, faculty members play a crucial role in the decision-making and governance of the institution (AAUP, 2008; Kerr, 1995; Rhode, 2006). Committees that faculty participate on, and often chair, determine the curriculum (Bogue & Aper, 2000; Rhode, 2006), are responsible for hiring key staff and administrators of the institution (Bogue & Aper, 2000), and oversee and manage tenure and promotion cases (AAUP, 2008; Rhode, 2006). For example, only tenured faculty members are allowed to sit on committees and vote on candidates for tenure and promotion. Similarly, only full professors are granted the power to accept or reject associate professors who seek the more senior rank.

Also, faculty members are legitimated through their own respective ranks (i.e., associate professors, full professors). Without higher rank, than that of the candidate, one is unable to be involved in the conversation and/or vote on the worthiness of the candidate in question (Adams, 1976). And although the faculty does not have the complete authority to tenure or promote someone, because of the diffusion of power across institutional actors, recommendations originate with the faculty (Adams, 1976).
The full professor role offers increased opportunities to earn greater monetary rewards and full access to academic spaces reserved solely for the most senior faculty persons. When considering the full professor rank, a key issue at stake becomes accessibility. In other words, particular rewards, such as the conferring of status, power and influence are all associated with being a full professor. Power according to Birnbaum (1989) involves “the ability to produce intended change in others, to influence them so that they will be more likely to act in accordance with one’s own preferences” (p. 12). In order to systematize and control the business of people and groups in universities, power is necessary because it is the basis of influence. The premise is that power and influence are interrelated concepts, but without power, influence, or the capacity to affect others in significant ways, is not possible. However, not all faculty members can exercise influence in the same way. The more status one has, the more influence and power they are able to employ. For example, junior faculty members are likely to have fewer opportunities to exert power and influence in comparison to senior faculty.

Externally, full professors have greater prestige and status in academia. For example, it is highly unlikely that the president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the largest educational organization in the nation, would be an associate professor. To be perceived as capable of leading AERA or a similar organization, the full professor rank is necessary. Other potential rewards include being sought out by major funding agencies to lead grant-supported research and invitations to apply for various job opportunities. These rewards become tangible for full professors because upon attaining this rank, individuals are presumed to be seasoned professionals with a strong track record for scholarship, teaching, and service. Thus increased resources, power, and networks converge to make the full professor rank appealing on one hand, but very inaccessible on the other.

Theoretical Perspectives

The best method of diagnosing issues in the academic mines, given the three major symptoms we have highlighted is to identify a sound theoretical perspective. One strategy to illuminate the voices of Black women full professors is to situate the promotion process and their experiences within appropriate theoretical frameworks. To engage deeper thinking regarding the near absence of Black women in senior faculty roles, we rely on critical race theory (CRT) and critical race feminism (CRF). CRT is an oppositional framework geared toward naming and disrupting White supremacy in legal, educational, and social institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). At its core,
CRT acknowledges that racism is real and firmly embedded in the systems that guide the daily operations of individuals within a United States context, whether educational, social, or political (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Moreover, CRT has its roots in the legal field but has expanded to a host of disciplinary areas of study and interdisciplinary in nature (Lynn & Adams, 2002). CRT scholars insist that in order to understand present race relations, they must be appropriately situated in a historical context that disrupts ahistoric depictions of people, policies, and events (Solórzano, 1998). Critical race theorists argue that meritocracy, neutrality, and colorblindness are often used to disenfranchise non-White persons (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). They contend that such perspectives are indeed faulty because they fail to account for history, discrimination, and bias, while relying on the notion of hard work as the sole key to advancement in society. CRT is committed to a social justice agenda focused upon eradicating all forms of injustice. However, this framework is not without critique for failing to fully address the intersections of race and gender.

Critical race feminism is a movement stemming from the larger CRT movement. Influenced by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1986; 2000) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), CRF not only uses racism and race as explanatory tools for persistent inequities, but also contends that gender and sexism (sexuality, class etc.) also play dominant roles in the plight of non-White women to be treated equitably. CRF is grounded in the notion that these women occupy a liminal space. Crenshaw (1991) stated, “when the [social and political] practices expound identity as ‘woman’ or ‘person of color’ as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of [non-White] women to a location that resists telling” (p. 1242). Further, CRF scholars challenge the monolithic woman or Black experience, to argue the interdependence of individuals’ experiences based on the multiple facets of their identity, to include race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. More directly, Wing (2003) argued, “our anti-essentialist premise is that identity is not additive. In other words, Black women are not White women plus color, or Black men, plus gender” (p. 7). Critical race feminists assert that because of the social locations of these women, their individual experiences can provide insights into the greater social and political landscape, of education for example, and their collective experiences can help to unveil the systemic effects of racism and sexism. As a part of this framework, CRF assists in addressing the essentialism that often occurs when research is conducted under the guise of women (translated as White women) and/or Black faculty (translated as (Black) men).
CRT and CRF as Lenses to Examine Full Professor Rank

As noted, both CRT and CRF can be useful analytical tools for examining why there are so few Black women full professors. One point that critical race scholars stress is the importance of placing issues within their proper historical context to disrupt ahistoricism. The history of higher education is rooted in racist hegemonic ideologies, among them being that “higher” education was intended only for White men. Higher education in the United States from its inception to present day has been a largely White, male enterprise wherein students, administrators, and faculty consisted solely of this population. In seventeenth century United States higher education, “instructional staffs were composed entirely of tutors, young [White] men … who had just received their baccalaureate degree and who were preparing for careers in the ministry” (Finkelstein, 1996, pp. 23-24). They were responsible for teaching all subjects required to earn a degree (Finkelstein, 1996; Thelin, 2004). However, they were not contractually obligated to serve institutions. By the mid-eighteenth century, as a result of student enrollment growth and the development of new colleges, institutions needed more stability in the instructional staff. In response to both the revolving nature of the tutorship and the need for more expertise in the curriculum, philanthropists began endowing a limited number of permanent faculty, or professors, at institutions, marking the first distinctions in faculty rank as well as status and influence (Finkelstein, 1996). The distinctions in rank and status soon became evident in the everyday work of both tutors and professors. Tutors remained with a cohort of students throughout the students’ academic experience, continued teaching general courses, and still existed in temporary, short-termed appointments. Professors, however, did not follow a class of students, were “appointed in a particular subject area (e.g., natural philosophy, divinity, ancient languages), and were for the most part engaged in the supervision within that area” (Finkelstein, 1997, p. 82), and had permanent appointments. Thus, professors possessed a higher status than tutors, solidifying a key difference between the two academic positions. These two groups quickly became termed as senior (professors) and junior (tutors) faculty (Finkelstein, 1996).

By the Civil War, curriculums were changing at many of the original institutions (i.e., Yale, Harvard, Columbia) and more faculty were needed with specializations and subject expertise (Metzger, 1984). The professoriate was marked by an emergence of more than half of the faculty entering after graduate education with training in academic specializations from German institutions (Smith, 1989). The German (i.e., scientific) model, focused on knowledge production, would forever change American higher education, which had, up
to this point, been following a “classical” model of education that focused on diffusion of knowledge (Cheney, 1990). While once teaching was the primary focus of higher education and a symbol of status, research and scholarship took its place in the newly developing research institutions (Bogue & Aper, 2000). With the continued increasing student enrollments, booming institutional developments, and increased professionalization and specializations of the professoriate, the academic career became a more attractive career opportunity attracting many new faculty (i.e., assistant professors) into the newly rank-defined system. The professors, now commonly known as “full” professors, would be handpicked by Presidents to select bright scholars to fill the academic ranks (Smith, 1989). Where promotion to full professor was once based on being handpicked (Kerr, 1995), today, promotion (to associate or full professor) is, at least in theory and on paper, based on one’s teaching, research, and service record (Boyer, 1990; Fairweather, 2005; Rhode, 2006; Youn & Price, 2009).

In contemporary times, the rank system (i.e., assistant, associate, full professor) has been, to a large degree, standardized among institutions as a hierarchical structure (Tien & Blackburn, 1996) with the full professorship as the pinnacle. Clark (1987) defined the current system as “a continuous, incremental structure of ranks … firmly institutionalized: [where] usually one progresses from assistant to associate to full professor, with the possible addition of instructor on the front end and the endowed chair at the peak” (p. 211). Though more literature exists regarding the tenure process, few empirical investigations have examined promotion to full. For example, Youn and Price (2009) noted that the tenure process is purportedly based on a set of fixed criteria, while the promotion process is based on more subjective criteria, such as collegiality and loyalty, and is more institution-specific.

The history of faculty rank is directly linked to the current status of how faculty are presently positioned in the academy. What is clear from this history is that the entire system, though seemingly neutral is actually rooted in racism and sexism. The faculty rank system was created by and for White men, who were presumed to be the only people capable of holding such positions. Thus populations beyond this group (e.g., Black women) were of no consequence in the establishment of this system. As a result present day ramifications are that Black women likely have a more difficult time with attaining this rank because their experiences were never considered in the origins of the professorial ranking system. This suggests a severe problem in the faculty ranks. Stated differently, the miner’s canary is symptomatic of the larger problems looming within the faculty rank system, not simply an issue regarding Black women that exists in isolation. Non-White female and male faculty are underrepresented in the
most influential positions in faculty ranks (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999) indicating a lack of power to change the system. Rhode (2006) posited that, “those who begin without [status] may be unable to move from the margins of the academic establishment” (p. 13). For Black women who, by virtue of residing in a White, male dominated society, have been relegated to the margins for most of their existence, this is particularly problematic because it decreases the chances that they can or will have greater representation or voice at the senior faculty rank.

Given the ingrained nature of White supremacy in higher education, critical race scholarship acknowledges that the persistent use of colorblind ideologies could also be used to explain away the exclusion of Black female faculty at the full professor level. Bonilla Silva (2006) argues that colorblind ideologies are often used to minimize racism (e.g. to claim that there has been progress and that the present situation is better than the past) and to rely on cultural racism (e.g. blaming Non-White people for their societal status rather than acknowledging institutional, systemic, and oppressive forces that reinscribe White supremacy). The use of colorblindness significantly reinforces the notion of Black inferiority, suggesting that if Black women worked harder, conducted more relevant research, and made the right connections through networking, they too would have greater representation at the senior level. However, this argument fails to account for institutional racism and the networks currently in place that hinder Black women from accessing the full professor rank in significant numbers. As Bell (2000) stated, “A major function of racial discrimination is… to deny…access to benefits and opportunities that would otherwise be available, and to blame all the manifestations of exclusion-bred despair on the asserted inferiority of the victims” (p. 71). To understand the low numbers of Black women full professors, requires acknowledgement of racism in the tenure and promotion rank system as well as how such racism reproduces pipeline issues and restricts the capacity for Black women to be situated in ways that allow them to build strong coalitions and shape institutional policies that dictate (covertly and overtly) the decisions regarding who is granted full professorship.

Another critical race theoretical perspective that is quite helpful in understanding the dilemma of low representation of Black women in senior ranks is Harris’ (1993) Whiteness as Property thesis. Harris argues, “The law has accorded holders of Whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property” (p. 1731). She identifies four rights embedded in Whiteness as the: rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and absolute right to exclude. Framing the full professor
rank within Harris’ perspective offers a critical race rationale for the limited number of Black women represented at the full professor rank.

Rights to disposition indicate that the role of full professor has a certain level of transferability from generation to generation. Considering the history and current demographics of this particular rank, it is possible and highly likely that White men the key holders of the full professor rank offer mentoring, support and guidance to other White men at the assistant and associate rank to ensure their ultimate success in attaining full professor. Rights to use and enjoyment suggest that those at the full professor rank, namely White males have full access to and use of all benefits and rewards of the full professorship; despite the presence of other populations at the full professor rank, the demographics clearly demarcate that White males likely enjoy the lion’s share of benefits and rewards at the full professor level. Reputation and status property reveal the benefits of being perceived as having earned full professor based upon merit and hard work alone. This right in Whiteness assumes that based primarily upon skin color, White people are presumed to have fairly and meritoriously earned their full professor status. This is a benefit that Black women at the senior rank cannot enjoy. The convergence of their skin color and gender may lead others in academia to view their rank as a handout or the result of affirmative action. In other words, the potential exists for Blacks to work twice as hard as their White counterparts to earn full professor status, yet lack the credibility to hold that status because of racism and sexism. The absolute right to exclude indicates those full professors, White men in particular, occupy a majority of the academic spaces and set the standards and rules upon which full professor status is granted. As a result, access to the full professor rank is coveted and exclusive, ensuring that the current demographic of full professors remains disproportionately White and male.

Critical race feminism is also important in examining the small numbers of Black women at the full professor level, given its focus on intersectionality and challenging notions of essentialism. It is important to not only consider issues of racism, but also sexism. Investigating how these oppressive systems intersect lends itself to better understanding the lack of Black female representation. First, a CRF perspective recognizes that institutions of higher education are both racialized and gendered. Thus, while it is important to consider the experiences of all non-White faculty in the promotion and faculty rank system, CRF supports examining these experiences through a lens that recognizes diverse experiences; meaning this process may be shaped very differently for Black and Asian American women, and Latinas, and their male counterparts. Moreover, CRF acknowledges there is no one way that any particular minoritized group
or individual will experience this process, but that there may be common experiences that manifest in diverse ways. Thus, it is very appropriate to center the experiences of Black women to engage a more nuanced perspective.

In terms of closely examining gender issues through a CRF lens, Acker’s (1990) notion of gendered organizations is particularly relevant as we think about the ways in which gender is exhibited and experienced in higher education organizations. More explicitly, her scholarship allows scholars to challenge the idea that perhaps academe is gender-neutral. Acker stated,

Images of men’s bodies and masculinity pervade organizational processes, marginalizing women and contributing to the maintenance of gender segregation in organizations. The positing of gender-neutral and disembodied organizational structures and work relations is part of the larger strategy of control in industrial capitalist societies, which, at least partly, are built upon a deeply embedded substructure of gender difference (p. 139).

An example of gender segregation in the professoriate is the gender gap represented in the ranks. Bellas (2001) and West and Curtis (2006) found that the gender gap gets wider the higher up in the faculty ranks one goes. Forty-two percent of all full-time instructional faculty are women (NCES, 2008), of that number 38% are below the rank of assistant professor, 28% are assistant professors, 19% are associate professors, and 16% are full professors (NCES, 2008). The trend for men is opposite. Thirty-one percent (31%) of men are full professors, 21% associate, 22% assistant professor, and 26% below the rank of assistant professor (NCES, 2008).

Many scholars, who have studied the experiences of female faculty, have noted that women perceive gender discrimination as a major barrier to their success (American Council on Education, 2005; Astin & Bayer, 1973; Carr, Szalacha, Barnett, Caswell, & Inui, 2003; Ginther & Hays, 2001; Valian, 1998). In a survey of approximately 47,000 faculty across ranks, Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden (2008) put forth that the academy is configured in an inflexible way that supports a male-centered career. As such, women are forced to choose between family and work. Other scholars show that women must balance their multiple roles, in and out of the academy, with little in the way of institutional support (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). For many, it is less of a balance and more of a choice between starting a family and remaining steadfast to the traditional path of tenure-track professors (i.e., focusing solely on research, teaching, and service to get tenure) (Finkel & Olswang, 1996; Finkel, Olswang, & She, 1994;
In addition to the major gaps in rank attainment (Menges & Exum, 1983) and gender discrimination by way of family “un”-friendly policies and practices, women still experience salary differences (Perna, 2001). Perna (2001) found that “overall, [the] data show that women full-time faculty at four-year institutions receive institutional base salaries that are about 26% lower than the base salaries men receive as full-time faculty at four-year institutions” (p. 295).

Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004), in their study of 29 women faculty from across nine research universities, found that while women enjoy their teaching and research responsibilities, challenges included such common faculty concerns as not having enough time for tasks, work overload, and ambiguous tenure expectations. However for the women who were planning on having children or are already mothers, they found they had to carefully plan the timing of having children around tenure and that the mothers were responsible for much of the childcare and housework in their homes, making it more stressful for them as they balanced work and home. Ward and Wolf-Wendel stated:

Today, as the demographics of the faculty change and the concerns about balancing work and family are becoming more public, it is incumbent upon academic institutions to rethink their policies. Understanding the experiences of women faculty with small children and responding proactively to their needs will provide institutions with necessary returns on the investment that these institutions make in their faculties. It will also encourage more high-quality individuals to consider academic careers (p. 255).

What the scholarship reveals about the experiences of women in education is that gender-bias and sexist behavior still exists. Lack of support and insensitive institutional policies and colleague and peer behavior all provide a “chilly climate” (Hall & Sandler, 1982) for women in academe. Undoubtedly women have come quite far in terms of access and participation in education, but if one applies an intersectional analysis, examining, for example, the experiences of Black women, scholars might find that the same issues not only affect these women differently, but the reactions may be different as well. As Hull, Bell Scott, and Smith (1982) proclaimed, “all the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave” (n.p.).

In that braveness we find, not only resilience, but struggle, tensions, successes, as well as an eagerness to complicate misleading perceptions.
Furthermore, implications for those who are neither male nor White, along with other actions, reactions, and outcomes all deserve voice and light.

**Crafting a Critical Race Research Agenda**

In pondering Black women in the academy and their representation as full professors, we were left with a host of enduring questions on a broader level and specifically regarding Black women. At the broader level, we wondered: (a) what pipeline issues prevent advancement from associate to full for non-White faculty; (b) how full professors wield power and influence on campus and the larger academic community; (c) how race, gender, and sexuality mediate the experiences of these faculty who aspire to/attain the full rank; (d) how faculty socialization change upon earning tenure; (e) how institutional type, race, and gender facilitate access to full professor rewards for those holding the associate professor rank; and (f) if non-White people should be concerned with achieving the full professor rank. Pertaining to Black women, we considered the following questions: (a) Is it enough to simply increase the numbers of Black women in the faculty pipeline to ensure greater representation of these women at the associate and full professor rank? (b) Is it sufficient for Black women to pursue the associate professor rank and remain at that rank for the duration of their careers? (c) Upon promotion to full professor, how do issues of status, power, and influence manifest in the lives of Black women? (d) Even at the highest faculty rank how do status, power, and influence shift to ensure that Black women do not enjoy the same benefits as their counterparts at this rank? (e) How can or do Black women full professors galvanize their power, status, and influence to collectively work toward changing the promotion system? If examined through comprehensive research, the answers to these questions could contribute rich and diverse perspectives to the literature and perhaps bring greater awareness pertaining to the full professor rank broadly and Black women specifically. We propose the generation of a critical race research agenda—one in which issues of racism, the intersections of race and gender, and institutional policies and practices are more thoroughly explored, critiqued, and called into question. As Guinier and Torres (2005) assert, “the canary is diagnostic, signaling the need for more systemic critique” (p. 12). In this regard, research that centers and further examines the experiences of Black women faculty in the academy as they seek full professor rank is appropriate when situated in the miner’s canary metaphor because through their experiences, issues that permeate the entire promotion and rank system can be unveiled and disrupted.
A central tenet of critical race scholarship is foregrounding the experiences of non-White communities and doing so through counterstorytelling (Delgado, 1989). Counterstories and counternarratives can be especially powerful in centering lived experiences of those who are marginalized and presenting perspectives that more accurately portray people’s realities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Love, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso 2001; 2002). In other words, a critical race research agenda by its very nature can be extremely useful in illuminating the stories of Black women who have attained full professor status and can shed light on what these experiences have meant for them both personally and professionally. Moreover, counterstorytelling can be useful in centering the voices of Black women who have not been awarded full professor status, or have otherwise decided to forego pursuing full professor status.

Using a critical race research agenda to pursue further inquiry into the full professor rank would consist of a more detailed examination of the history of the rank and promotion system in higher education to uncover and disrupt dominant conceptions of the full professor. It could also be used to frame questions regarding the ways in which White supremacy and male dominance are embedded in the promotion process and the full professor status. We argue that the full professor role is latent with power, status, and influence; and that its values that are rooted in westernized, colonialist ideologies. Hence, looming questions and a tension exist for Black women. In attaining full professor status, how does one serve in this capacity without also reproducing dominant values and beliefs? Stated differently, how do Black women play the game without becoming pawns in the process?

In conclusion, we assert that a critical race research agenda would also create the opportunity to examine the legal and political implications associated with the full professorial rank. Such an approach is necessary for identifying any legal decisions associated with this rank as well as institutional policies and procedures that ensure the positioning of White men as the overwhelming beneficiaries of full professor status. Furthermore the incorporation of an intersectionality perspective would center the exploration of how various social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) and systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, sexism, classism, heterosexism) converge in ways that influence who has access to full professor status. Clearly, much remains to be studied about the full professor rank and how Black women are situated in the rank and promotion process. We contend that studying Black women would also lend itself to a broader research agenda inclusive of a range of populations, particularly those who are as dismally represented (numerically) as full professors. Our call to inquiry suggests that 1.26% of Black women full
professors are indeed a miner’s canary. Their presence or lack thereof as full professors is not simply a warning, but a sign of danger for decades to come.

References


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