

My Body is a Temple:

Affirming our bodies as Afro-Caribbean Women in Academic Spaces

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Received February 2025

Accepted for publication May 2025

Published July 2025

Abstract

In a world where Black women are policed and overly sexualized, we seek to explore the ways Black women engage with their bodies as instruments of confidence, empowerment, and self-love. We explore the research questions: 1) What stories can be told through poetic narratives on the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women academics; and 2) What does a holistic education look like for Black women's bodies to be well in the academy? Using poetic duoethnography, we present our storied narratives in poems and conclude by discussing holistic education and its role in promoting Black women's well-being in the academy.

Keywords: *Afro-Caribbean, black women academics, black women's bodies, poetic duoethnography*

Introduction

A simple search for “Black Women’s bodies” garners a plethora of studies. The research examines the ways their bodies are negatively perceived in the media (Dickens & Stephens, 2023), subjugated in religious institutions (Xhinti & Khosa-Nkatini, 2023), implicated in the criminal justice system (Fuentes, 2020; Saar et al., 2018), and mislabeled in K-12 institutions (Reynolds et al., 2021). Other scholars examine the cruel punishments their bodies endured in medical experiments (Villarosa, 2019) or the dehumanizing ways enslaved women like Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman were objectified for the erotic and viewing pleasures of the White colonial gaze

(Dickens & Stephens, 2023). In much of this work, the thematic strands are similar: Black women and girls’ bodies are either *ghetto*, hypersexual, promiscuous, violent, or too talkative. Their bodies simultaneously intersect at the conjunction of being invisible yet hypervisible (Williams-Brown et al., 2022) and continue to be implicated within the contexts of White imperialism and coloniality.

In this paper, we offer a counter-narrative (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) that honors the beauty and complexity of our bodies as Black women. As two Afro-Caribbean women academics, one an assistant professor and the other a doctoral student, we recognize that our bodies are contested spaces that are judged before we utter a

word (Nganga et al., 2022). However, despite the challenges of working and studying in predominantly White institutions, we wish to view our bodies as temples and sites of resistance. We also hope to find a connection between loving our bodies in all its complexities while honoring them as instruments of confidence, empowerment, and self-love. In this vein, we ask the following research questions: 1) What stories can be told through poetic narratives on the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women academics, and 2) What does a holistic education look like for Black women's bodies to be well in the academy? We explore these questions through poetic duoethnography (Breckenridge & Clark, 2017) and conclude this paper with implications for holistic education.

Rooting the Problem in Black Women's Bodies

Young Black girls grow up with the implicit and explicit social messages to dislike the varying melanin in their skin, the kinky curls in their hair, the fullness of their lips, or the broadness of their noses. The irony is not lost on us, as those who are of White European origin frequent tanning salons and get lip injections. Yet, Black women's bodies maintain within the both/and contradiction—both “desirable and repulsive” (Tate, 2015, p. 1) and envied yet disdained (McAdoo et al., 2023). At present, young Black girls rarely see their favorite actors or music entertainers with dark skin and thick coily hair. They also rarely see shapely Black women honored as beautiful without being seen as exotic. The movie *Black Panther* is a clear example of the exoticized strong Black woman warrior with shaved heads, oiled skin, and defined muscles. On the opposite spectrum, Black women continue to play the mammy figure, as seen in Tyler Perry's character, Madea, and Martin Lawrence's “Big Mamma,” both roles played by Black men. While we may laugh at the comedic relief these actors bring, we cannot ignore the codified racial politics of beauty that align with anti-Blackness (McAdoo

et al., 2023) and the honoring of the White-thin aesthetic. Even as Black women like Gabourey Sidibe, the American actress, or Lizzo, the American singer and actress, grace our screens and radio airwaves, they are often caught in a tug of war of being body shamed by some, and honored and celebrated by others. However, the looming message is (and has always been) clear: Black women who are dark-skinned and voluptuous (i.e., Gabourey or Lizzo) are not as beautiful as those who are slim and light-skinned (i.e., Rihanna or Beyoncé). As Black women, we live with these contradictions and internalize them, sometimes to our detriment. hooks (1992/2015) has asserted,

It has taken our collective oppressors centuries to teach Africans to hate themselves. Global White supremacy is very real and ancient. Not a single African in America was ever supposed to survive. Slavery, institutional racism, constant media attacks, incessant eurocentric imagery were all designed to deliberately destroy us. (hooks, 1992/2015, as cited in Badruddoja, 2022, p. 621)

Socialized images of Black women's bodies permeate the halls of academia. Our bodies are read as being out of place while also the object of the White male and female gaze. This is especially true when an international accent is detected (Banda, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2021). Dr. Nganga, an academic from Kenya wrote about her experiences at a predominantly White institution. In sharing her story, she noted,

I used to be asked about my clothes, and then was asked about dressing up in African attire when I come to work. I mean, like, gosh, being asked when I'm gonna wear African clothes at work is ridiculous. I had to tell someone, I'm actually here for a job. I'm not here for a cultural experience. I'm here for a tenure track position not an

adventure. So once they figured that out, then it's like okay, so now, what do we do with them? (Nganga et al., 2022, p. 7)

Here, Nganga et al. (2022) note the contradictory ways her body is read in the academy. Similarly, as Black women, whether we are native-born or immigrants in the U.S., the mere presence of our bodies amplifies society's contradictory messages—fascinating yet jaded and conflicting. When our brilliance is undeniable, or when the White gaze of curiosity has fizzled, many are often left with the question, 'Now what do we *do* with them?' Thus, Black women's bodies, even in academia, are sites of contention as our presence causes cognitive dissonance for our White students and colleagues.

The literature continues to illuminate the ways Black women's bodies are implicated within society's social institutions and the systemic barriers we endure as a result of the skin we are in (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Flake, 2000). As we, the authors, contribute to this literature, we wish to untangle ourselves from damaging social body politics and the personal impact it had on us as young Black girls. We now seek to rewrite our stories with healing lessons and contribute to the literature by discussing what it means to be an Afro-Caribbean woman living in our bodies. Although we live and work in male and White hegemonic spaces, we wish to view our bodies as "resistance against all forms of oppression and one of bodily and discursive reclamation and self-reconstruction" (Moïse, 2018, p. 138). The voices from our bodies speak of trauma but also liberation, freedom, resistance, and rebellion.

We also recognize that Black women are not a monolith. We are tall, short, immigrant or native-born to the U.S., light-skinned, brown-skinned, wealthy, poor, and represent religious diversity, etc. Our experiences also differ with respect to our positionalities and the region of

the world we live in. Therefore, although we recognize our limitations in speaking for other Black women (Dillard, 2008), we chose to use terms like "us" or "we." In fact, Kendi and Blain (2021) remind us that there is no better word than *we*, for it is because of our community that the individual exists, thrives, and survives. Therefore, *we* are part of a choir that sings, chants, and speaks with a loud collective voice on the ways our bodies are implicated at the intersections of our oppressions—whether we are Black women in the Americas or the Global South (Williams-Brown et al., 2022).

Theory: My Body is a Temple. Black Women and Spirituality

So, what is the body? The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines the body as a physical structure that includes bones, flesh, and organs. Others define the body as a physical or biological object controlled by the mind (Moïse, 2018). Yet even in these simplistic definitions, the Black woman's body is ignored. An entirely different meaning for the body is imagined when we consider *her* bones, flesh, muscles, fat, and skin within the context of racism, sexism, and colonialism (Tate, 2015). Moreover, even in these definitions, the body is considered separate from the mind or spirit and is viewed simply as an object.

The dark skin that encases our bodies bears the historical and physical markings of our shared DNA and ancestral lineage to Africa, where our foremothers and fathers were taken. The richness of our dark skin also bears witness to how our epistemological ways of knowing are constructed (Dillard et al., 2000). Therefore, our Black bodies are more than that objectified 'thing' that others see but rather:

... a product of the tensions between women's lived experiences and the cultural meanings which have marked women's bodily experiences. As a matter of fact, the

Black female body must be analyzed within its very specificities, as a marked historicised space of conflicts, a site of trauma and dehumanization through the processes of enslavement, colonialism and neo-colonialism. (Moïse, 2018, p. 136)

Viewing Black bodies as objects disconnects us from our spiritual selves and historical legacies (Moïse, 2018). Our bodies are more than what can be seen physically, but are also temples that hold our spirit. It is no wonder that our bodies may feel like giving up when our spirits are broken. However, even a tired body can persevere if the spirit is willing, strong, and unbroken. Furthermore, when Du Bois (1986/2007) refers to the *The Souls of Black Folk*, we interpret this as that even when our bodies are beaten or killed, our spiritual selves, the entity that is connected to the souls of another Black folk, will always remain.

Drawing on musical artists such as Marley and the Wailers (1999), Dillard (2011) posits, “Who feels it knows it all.” As Black women, we believe we are connected to other Black people through space, time, on the continent of Africa, and the diaspora because we *feel* each other’s pain, love, and sacrifices. Thus, acknowledging our spirituality also recognizes that our humanity is tied to and led by our ancestors, who walk with us daily (Nganga et al., 2021). In the sections below, we use poetry to highlight the complexity of our spiritual and intersectional identities within the context of academia. We argue that storytelling, through poetry, serves as a liberating and spiritual practice that reflects Black women’s diversity as well as our resilience throughout history.

Methodology: Poetic Duoethnography

Ethnographic poetry is an emerging field that calls attention to the experiences of women of color academics. Poetic inquiry or research poetry is an arts-based approach to qualitative research and has gained momentum since the early 2000’s

(Cahnmann, 2003). We draw on Cutts’ (2020) notion of *ars spirituality* as a reflexive practice in poetic inquiry. She criticizes Faulkner’s (2007, 2016) *ars poetica* and *ars criteria*, arguing that the craft, aesthetics, and evaluation of research poetry do not account for the ways spirituality influences Black women’s poetic inquiry. She coined the term *ars spirituality* to conceptualize Black women’s poetry that is born of the spirit and crafted from and for personal experiences, historical research, or transcripts (Cutts, 2020).

Cutts (2020) offers three guiding principles of *ars spirituality* for our data collection:

1. Writing is a critical necessity, particularly for those who have been forced to be or have chosen to be silent about their pain, oppression, and marginalization.
2. Accessing racial/cultural memory and engaging in the process of (re)membering are radical acts that facilitate much-needed awakening and healing.
3. Spirituality is a conscious relationship with the mind, body, and spirit, for both the individual and community. (p. 912)

These guiding principles allow us to “focus on the spirituality or potentially innate feeling associated with writing poetry” (p. 910) as we explore and make sense of our experiences as Black women in the academy. She further explains that the innate connection to writing is a channeling of spirituality, and being pulled to write poetry is a form of deliberate reflection. She refers to this reflection as “spiritual musing” which “facilitates the way we embrace memory, community, nature, and interconnectedness” (West, 2011, as cited in Cutts, 2020, p. 910).

We use duoethnographic poems as a means to engage in collective spiritual musing. Unlike autoethnography, where the researcher seeks to

understand oneself better, duoethnography is a method of shared critical reflection (Breckenridge & Clark, 2017) situated in “knowing oneself in relation to another” (Shelton & McDermott, 2015 p. 452). This method explores multiple voices in dialogue and seeks to understand how the “life histories of different individuals impact the meanings they give to those experiences” (Sawyer & Norris, 2015, p. 2).

It is important to note that while duoethnography relies on narrative methods, not all co-written narratives are duoethnographic research. In order for a co-written narrative to be considered duoethnographic, Sawyer and Norris (2015) explain that they must (1) be dialogical and polyvocal; (2) explore individuals’ own life histories; (3) result in learning and change as key outcomes; and (4) arrive at learning through juxtaposing difference (Sawyer and Norris, 2015, p. 453). Breckenridge and Clark (2017) further argue that “poetry offers a promising vehicle for actualizing these core tenets of duoethnography” (p. 453). Herein lies the beauty of poetic duoethnography as a methodology, for it allows us to share learning from our lived experiences, spiritual connections, and collective sensemaking in narrative, poetic form.

Poetry as Writing Style

Poetry is visible (Bradley, 2017) and uses figurative language, imagery, and metaphors to convey the author’s point. This can be done through various forms of writing, such as meter (terms that stress and unstress syllables) or rhyme (repetition of syllables at the end of a lined verse) (Cahnmann, 2003). Biggie Smalls, one of our favorite rappers, is among the most skillful poets. In his song, “Juicy,” he says:

It was all a dream
I used to read Word Up! Magazine

Salt-N-Pepa and Heavy D up in the
limousine

Hangin’ pictures on my wall

Every Saturday *Rap Attack*, Mr. Magic,
Marley Marl

In this song, he uses rhyme to express how he dreamed about becoming successful like his favorite rappers as a young child. In another song, “Warning,” he uses meter and imagery to express his annoyance with a phone call he received early in the morning. He says,

Who the f*#! is dis?
Paging me at 5:46 in the morn-in
crack of dawn-in
Now I’m yawn-in
wipe the cold out my eye
See who’s this paging me
and why

In these stanzas, he stressed and unstressed syllables (morn-in, dawn-in, and yawn-in) and used imagery (i.e., ‘wipe the cold out my eye’) to show he was in a deep sleep. Kendrick Lamar, another influential rapper, employed the art of poetry to express his struggle with internalized colorism and prejudice toward darker shades of women. In his song “Complexion,” he described his journey of maturing and resolving his internal disdain for darker women. He states,

Beauty is what you make it, I used to be so
mistaken
By different shades of faces
Then wit told me, “A woman is woman,
love the creation”

It all came from God then you was my
confirmation

I came to where you reside

And looked around to see more sights for
sore eyes

Let the Willie Lynch theory reverse a
million times

Poetry allows us to tell our stories in unique and melodic ways. The above examples show Biggie Smalls and Kendrick Lamar's ability to present poetic lines in a way that is "enchanting [and] full of unusual vocal ripples and eddies" (Bradley, 2017, p. 12). Their poetic lyricism presents creative ebbs and flows with each line and stanza, thus allowing them to narrate their life's histories and learnings in creative, dialogical ways (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). Narrative storytelling through poetic duoethnography provides us, as researchers, with this same creative space to express our body's lived experiences.

Black Women in the Academy: Weaving Together Our Poetic Storied Lives

Makini and Keara met in the summer of 2023 at a 10-day Writing Our Lives Retreat in Ghana, West Africa. We were accompanied by 12 other women academics and had the best fortune of being roommates. The idea of writing about our bodies came one day while we talked in our room. We decided on this topic because we are both shapely Afro-Caribbean women who proudly display our curves. Whether with friends and family or in the halls of academia, we boldly wear heels, red lipstick, large earrings, and form-fitting clothing. We are from different parts of the U.S. and Caribbean, however. Makini was born in Brooklyn, NY, and raised in a Jamaican family that immigrated to the U.S. in the 1970s. Keara was born and raised in Los Angeles, CA. Her mother migrated from Belize in the 1970s, and her African

American father was born and raised in Los Angeles. Keara is also the first in her family to attend college. Makini is an assistant professor at a predominantly White 4-year institution, and Keara is a fourth-year doctoral student at a research-intensive (also known as R-1) institution.

Cahnmann (2003) has argued that "high school is the place where poetry goes to die" (p. 29). Reflecting on our schooling experiences, we remembered being taught that only those recognized by the literary canon—such as Edgar Allan Poe or Maya Angelou—were considered poets. As Black girls, we were seldom offered opportunities to express ourselves through poetry. It is no wonder we believed, "I can't write poetry." Looking back, we realize that these feelings were accompanied by baggage, past hurts, and inadequate teachings that needed to be addressed.

We used poetic expression as a means to engage in a healing methodology (Dillard, 2008). Poetry allowed us to share our experiences in a way that flowed naturally from our minds onto the page. As part of the poetic duoethnography process, we provided each other with prompts to write about our bodies in academic spaces and our experiences growing up. In writing about our academic journeys, we unknowingly created poems that honored and thanked the scholars who supported our survival and success in academia. While exploring the literature on Saartjie Baartman, Makini felt inspired to write a poem in her honor. Keara chose to celebrate Black women who embrace their Blackness, intellect, and beauty.

The poems are ultimately categorized into five themes: 1) Honoring Black women; 2) Our cultured bodies; 3) Our bodies in academia; 4) Our bodies in community; and 5) Collective imaginaries for improved higher education. Although the poems have been edited for grammar and length, they remain largely intact as originally written. Each poem stands on its own, conveying

the unique feelings of its author without additional commentary or analysis. They reflect our life experiences, internal struggles, and the complexities of our life's lessons learned.

Honoring Black Women

Makini: A poem to My Sister, Saartjie (Sarah Baartman)

I honor you.

I honor your memory.

I imagine your pain

You were made an object - never seen or valued for your humanity

You had a voice that was never heard

I cry for you, my sister

I close my eyes and can feel your pain while your body was on display

I imagine your voice and cries to God

All the things not recorded in the history books—

The rapes, beatings, assaults, and “entangled scientific racism” —all on the accord of your body

Did you ever feel loved?

Appreciated?

Beautiful?

How many times did you cry to God about the way you were made?

How often did you cry and plead, perhaps feeling like your body was a curse?

Did you ever ask for your body to be “normal” like the White woman?

To have a different skin color or gender?

Our Black feminist sister, enduring the ultimate triple bind of being property, Black, and a woman

I honor your spirit and your body.

Today, I uplift you!

Keara: Shine, Black Women.

I see you, sister.

You are glistening!

The oil shining on your shoulders and cheek bones,

Reminds me that we are mirrors to the sun.

The way you sashay through the world

Reminds me that we are dancers of femininity.

The Blackness of our skin is the same Blackness that gives us space to imagine.

A Black blank canvas is the true backdrop for us.

Your intellect brings light to many galaxies

Because you are a star.

The way you skip syllables and words when you speak reminds me of the skip in my

double dutch.

Fierce.

Rhythmic.

Joyful.

You are

How dare we let them tell us who we are.

Only WE get to tell us who we are.

Our Cultured Bodies

Makini's Story

I remember my great-grandmother

A petite woman—4'11

We lived in the projects.

I lived on the 1st floor, she lived on the 5th

Even in her 80s she wore pearls and perfume

I first learned to walk in her heels

She drank tea each morning with a teapot, cup, and saucer

At dinner, we ate with a cloth napkin, knife, and fork

She was pure elegance

I lived at the intersections of love and disdain for my body

My skin too dark

My hair too thick

The pain I endured when mom pulled the comb through my 4C curls

My big, glasses-wearing eyes

And my name,

What is a Makini anyway?

Why couldn't it be Emily?

Then I was given Zakiya

Makini-Zakiya??

My young self falling within the traps of deficit thinking of anything associated with Africa

But in my family, my body was celebrated

We learned to whine our waistline

We learned to whine to the floor and come back up without buckling our knees

Mom, grandma, auntie, cousins—backyard jams mixed with dancehall music

Our Jamaican culture embedded in our West African roots

Here, our bodies were celebrated, honored, and revered.

As we got older and left the safety of our communities, we placed those ways to the side

We were told those displays of body were vulgar and uncouth.

It was here that I learned the cost of upward mobility and assimilation—

separation from self, family, culture, and community

Our Bodies in Academia

Makini: Invisibility

I wanted to be invisible

I changed my dressing from bold colors to grays, blues, and lots of Black

I sold my door knocker earrings and bought pearl studs

I traded my heels for flats and Ugg boots

I wanted to fit in and not be seen

Then I realized, I was reading the signs of the academy—you are invisible.

Keara: What if Academia were a Melon?

Before I knew how to wear them, I had breasts the size of melons.

My mother, a sensual being herself, gave me permission to show flesh.

Imagine my confusion when the world asked me to cover up.

My face stuck like grandma's face when we were acting up in church.

How can you tell me what's too much for you to see on my body?

Why do you feel that fitting clothes means I am less capable? Less intelligent? Less worthy?

Why do I have to hide in order to make you feel comfortable?

Can you not control your mind, body, and spirit?

Do you lack self-control?

I need not to remind you that I come from regal beings who wore their bodies with pride

Jewelry for armor

And smiles like perfume.

The world of intellect is more concerned with suffocating than liberating.

Talking the talk but struggling to walk

Walk in truth

In freedom

In joy

In expression

In sensuality.

In the flesh of our melons.

Our Bodies in Community

Makini: Love For My Network

I love my network.

A running bamboo

A strong network of women who support and build me up

I thought it was like this everywhere

C-Y-F is unique

Going over 10-years strong

These are Black women, Caribbean women, immigrant women, Chinese women, White women

We love each other and love ON each other

We push each other to write, rest, and celebrate

Wow the love, support, and brains when we gather in the same room

You make my heart smile

You mentored me to be an academic

You always saw me.

I never had to fight for the limelight because we shined the light on each other

You encouraged me to shine bright like a diamond and bloom where I was rooted

You provided the platform for me to soar

One sister, whom I deeply admire told me off one day

But I deserved it.

She expected more.

I stand where I am today because you all held me up

You
believed in me
You dragged me along even when I was faltering,
and encouraged me when I didn't see a light at the
end of the tunnel.
You were my sisters and my lifeline.
Academia is hard.
I couldn't have done this alone—
But my sisters,
I can be weak with you
I can cry with you
I can pray with you
You give me hope, power, dialogue
You are my homeplace

Keara: West Africa: An Ode to My Community

I walk with my right hand on your shoulder.
If you fall, I will catch you by your shoulder and
stand you up.
While the shackles on us bind us
I need you to know we were bounded before we
were shackled
We need not the pain to know this
We know it when we smile as hello
When we dance freely at the drop of a drum
When we cut with our eyes like spades
When we roll 'em like the Black Stars
When we celebrate 45 like it's 25

Because it is
But finer.
When we remember the day our love ones
transitioned
So that the hug is ready before the grief
When we remind each other that we learn
differently but we are all here for the same lesson,
Our lesson.
When we open doors over and across the Continent
for each other.
Because we have returned.
When we laugh in abundance
Because that is our language.
When we meet for the first time yet our stories
share characters
Because we are writers.
Your shoulder is my strength
And my hand is yours.

Collective Imaginaries for an Improved Higher Education

In this section, we present an unstructured Renga poem. Renga has roots in Japanese haiku collaborative poetry. We liked the idea of alternating collaborative voices and applied this technique to our imagining of an improved higher education. Keara wrote the first line of each stanza, and Makini wrote the second. Our poem is unstructured because it does not follow the rules of a traditional Renga poem. Instead, we imagine our Renga to resemble a rap duo alternating lines between our favorite rappers. It is also a reflective conversation where we share our vision for the academy. Our poetic lines do not rhyme, but maybe one day they will. For now, we focused on a

collaborative duoethnographic voice that envisions equitable spaces for Black women's bodies to be well in higher education.

Keara and Makini: Freedom Dreaming in Higher Ed

What would the academy look like if it cared for Black women?

What would inclusivity look like?

I imagine it would fund their dreams and research.

Black women would be free to freedom dream

It would meet their needs during negotiation

Everyone would be treated and compensated equitably

It would offer grant writing support and research funds

We would never have to fight for the limelight and never be invisible

Mentorship would be provided as an act of love and not to check a box

Belongingness would be a term of the past, never to have a place in the future

Structural questions would be answered with an affirmative—yes!

Yes, we seek change—real change

The academy would be a place for Black women to feel whole in a place that invests in their wellbeing

There would be no margins, only equal spaces that everyone occupies

The institution would recognize that for research to be well, the researcher has to be well.

The institution would say, I *see* you! I honor you, I respect you.

The message would be clear:

You are valuable and you have so much to offer.

You are an equal!

Implications: A Charge for Holistic Education

At the onset of this paper, we sought to answer two research questions: 1) What stories can be told through poetic narratives on the experiences of Afro-Caribbean women academics, and 2) What does a holistic education look like for Black women's bodies to be well in the academy? Our duoethnographic poems honor Black women who have come before us and (re)member the struggles they endured. We reflect on our childhood experiences growing up in Caribbean households (and being of the diaspora) and commemorate the strength of our communities (both academic and familial). We also share how our bodies are treated in academia and our collective visions for an improved higher education. Our poems also reflect our positionality as *outsiders within* (Collins, 1986) the halls of higher education. Although physically present in these spaces, we still occupy the margins (Nganga & Beck, 2017). However, there is power in our positionality as it grants us epistemological privilege (Lightfoot, 1994) and a deeper understanding of how oppression works, and which bodies are most affected.

From this standpoint, we envision a holistic education for Black women, particularly because we understand academia's disposability politics (Giroux, 2007). Our positionality equips us with a critical lens to improve our institutions, because, despite the hegemony of the academy, Black

women have always embodied spiritual and historical ways of transforming oppression into “expressive strategies of healing and care” (Davis, 2008, p. 177[HER1] [MB2]). In the following sections, we share suggestions for fostering a holistic education, drawing on the practices that have sustained us within the academy. While these suggestions are not exhaustive, they represent achievable steps that can be implemented at any college or university. We use our poems as a basis for our suggestions, as they offer a counter-narrative that honors our bodies as temples and sites of resistance within the spaces we work and study.

Mentoring Networks as Hopeful Rhizomes

The research on peer mentoring networks attests to their positive impact on the professional development and psychosocial health of Black women in academia (Esnard et al., 2015). Agosto et al. (2016) uses the metaphor of Rhizomes and running bamboo to illustrate how women scholars develop and sustain meaningful mentoring networks. Like running bamboo that grows under the earth, their network is nourished and fertilized by caring peer mentoring relationships. Network members frequently publish and present their research, aid each other in fulfilling tenure and promotion expectations, and attend to each other’s psychosocial and emotional well-being. Building on the concept of rhizomes, Butler et al. (2020) note,

Rhizome is an underground interconnected root system. New plants pop up here and there along various points of the root system. We recognize that decolonial academic work is also interconnected, frequently below the institutional surface, since the business of the academy doesn’t intrinsically support interdisciplinary decolonial perspectives, especially in publishing practices. While it might not be

what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten recognize as “fugitive,” it is very much work off-radar / under the surface/outside of the “traditional” academic landscape. (p. 129)

Interconnected network systems like running bamboo can help Black women thrive in the academy (Esnard et al., 2015).

Our poems under the theme, *Our Bodies in Community*, attest to the ways our bodies thrive in caring academic communities. In the poem, “*West Africa: An Ode to My Community*,” Keara wrote about the meaning of sisterhood, having a shared historical legacy tied to slavery, and the resiliency that ensues when we strengthen and lean on each other. Through shared legacies and shared struggles of grief and pain, Keara uplifts the importance and power of community to heal, dream, and achieve our goals. Makini’s poem, “*Love for My Network*,” honors the community of scholars who have supported her academic journey. Like running bamboo, her C-Y-F (Curve-Y-Friends) women’s network operates as caring academic sisters and aunties. They frequently produce academic publications, send caring texts, and vacation in each other’s homes. They also pool their institutional resources and conference travel funds when one sister’s institution is lacking. We wish to see more of these rhizomatic networks to ensure graduate students and Black women faculty thrive within the walls of the academy.

Colleges and universities across the U.S. can offer similar rhizomatic professional networks for faculty and graduate students. As Black women often find themselves as the only ones in their departments, and navigate their academic journeys in isolation, it is essential for them to engage in caring professional mentoring networks. Some institutions have made efforts to address this need by partnering with national networks like NCFDD

or Sisters of the Academy. These networks provide various forms of support, like summer writing boot camps, workshops, and 1:1 coaching and mentoring services. However, it is equally important for Black women to cultivate longstanding sister friendships within these networks. As Keara's poem highlights, these caring networks can serve as a healing balm for laughter and strength as we learn from each other's shared stories of success and resistance.

Feminist Co-mentoring

Feminist co-mentoring is another way Black women academics can feel supported at an institution. Feminist co-mentoring is "an equal balance of power between participants, seeks to integrate emotion into the academic, professional experience, and values paid and unpaid work" (McGuire & Reger, 2003 p. 54). Feminist co-mentors (re)member the academic abilities of other women and uplift them into spaces and places in the academy where they can thrive. They also advocate for each other when the other does not have a seat at the table or a foot in the door.

In a previous publication, Makini discussed the power of co-mentoring dialogues and meaningful connectedness among Black women scholars (Nganga & Beck, 2017). She reflected on the sacrifices necessary for academic success and her use of feminist co-mentoring to navigate the academy's expectations and hidden agendas. Makini and Keara's Renga poem, "*Freedom Dreaming in Higher Ed,*" mirrors a feminist co-mentoring dialogue as we envisioned what the academy would look like if it supported Black women. We imagined what it would be like to freedom dream (Love, 2023; Stewart, 2024), receive equal pay, conduct the research we loved, and feel validated without competing with others for academic recognition. Our collective renga poem gives voice to Black women academics who struggle with feelings of belongingness at their

institutions and envisions a space for equity and inclusivity.

Feminist co-mentors recognize the academic demands placed on students and faculty, which include engaging in research, fulfilling service obligations, and teaching. They also understand the additional challenges Black women face, as faculty and students must also navigate their intersecting identities related to race, gender, sexuality, religion, immigration, etc. While some universities have established mentoring programs, these initiatives may be less effective if mentoring is viewed as merely a service obligation rather than an opportunity to foster meaningful connections. Instead, effective feminist co-mentoring relationships are built on mutual trust (Agosto et al., 2016). The insights from one-on-one dialogues can also help drive institutional change at their colleges or universities.

Lastly, feminist co-mentoring is non-hierarchical. As noted in Makini and Keara's Renga poem, it offers students and faculty the opportunity to learn from and support each other. We wish to see less hierarchical relationships between faculty and graduate students, as Makini and Keara have done. Through feminist co-mentorship (Nganga & Beck, 2017), non-hierarchical relationships can disrupt the institutional harm cycle, creating a new practice of love, synergy, and care among Black women students and faculty (Thorsos et al., 2016).

Retreat Homespaces in the U.S. and Abroad

While it is easy to admire the impressive beauty of our institutions—the tall buildings, state-of-the-art classrooms, perfectly maintained lawns, and winding pathways—we are often reminded of how our Black bodies are perceived in these spaces (Butler et al., 2020). Under the theme, *Our Bodies in Academia*, Makini wrote about feeling invisible. She felt compelled to alter her clothing to conform to the uniform color palette of blues, Blacks, and grays commonly seen on campus. Over time, she

realized that it was not her clothing that needed alteration, but rather her reading of the implicit (and violent) messages of the academy that urged assimilation and conformity. In her poem, “*What if Academia were a Melon?*” Keara expressed the conflicting and suffocating feelings she experienced at her liberal institution. The unspoken expectations to conceal and “cover up” her curvaceous figure was reinforced by unwanted stares and deficit thinking regarding her intellectual abilities. However, she resisted these implicit messages and chose clothing that reflected her confidence as a young and educated Black woman. In both cases- whether through conformity or resistance- we felt the burden of others’ gazes prompting us to (re)member our sister, Saartjie Baartman. Although we strive to (re)create the world we would like to live in, we still *feel* the pressures of navigating academia’s hidden curriculum. At times, we feel powerless in our efforts to enact structural change. In these situations, seeking solace outside the confines of academia may be our only option.

Homespaces are retreat spaces and healing communities that enable Black women to recover our wholeness (Pour- Khorshid, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2021). These homespaces allow us to “create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance” (Hunter et al., 2016, p. 32) and “engage in the process of cycle-breaking” (Reynolds et al., 2021, p. 17). Makini and Keara have been fortunate to participate in writing retreats and conferences, allowing us to engage in caring communities with other sister scholars. We often leave these gatherings and sister circles smiling, renewed, and ready to confront the next academic challenge, because we know they will continue to come.

At a time when many universities are facing closures or budget cuts, institutions that prioritize holistic educational practices should allocate resources for faculty and graduate students to attend retreats, enabling individuals to come back

refreshed and renewed. Fortunately, Makini and Keara secured over \$5,000 in university funding (on two separate occasions) to attend a 10-day Writing Our Lives retreat in Ghana, West Africa. During our time there, we were able to write, connect with other Black women scholars, and reestablish ties with our African heritage and culture. Participation in writing retreats helps us combat the challenges we often experience on campus and provides a space at a *merciful distance* away from the university (Dillard, 2022) to acquire new research ideas, rest, and rejuvenation. While we are grateful for the funding from our institutions, we recognize that not everyone has access to such opportunities. Therefore, securing this type of funding for Black women faculty is essential for our well-being, as it ensures we are in the best mental and physical state to fulfill our professional responsibilities within the institution.

Conclusion: A Lesson from *Milo* on Black Women’s Bodies

Milo, a product of the Nestlé Company, is a chocolate malt powder used to make hot or cold beverages when mixed with water or milk. In the U.S., children typically drink Hershey’s or some derivative of chocolate milk, but Makini and Keara’s Caribbean family always reached for Milo. While working on this manuscript, Makini noticed the green tin container of Milo she brought back from her visit to Ghana. The tin of Milo serves as a reminder of Makini and Keara’s time at the 10-day writing retreat in Ghana, the serendipity of meeting and becoming roommates, and the meaningful co-mentoring conversations they shared. The unassuming can of Milo can also be seen as a metaphor for our bodies, which are more than vessels that can be seen or the clothing that wraps around our skin. Like the velvety texture of the chocolate beverage, our brown bodies contain intertwined histories that few onlookers recognize or appreciate. As Black women, we are culturally rich, packed with ancestral lineages and

epistemological knowledge that arise from our lived experiences. We are also the sweet cup of Milo that the academy needs.

On the other hand, our bodies are more than objects to be consumed. As Black women, we wish not to be put on display or used as pawns for profit like Milo. Far too many times, Black women faculty and students are made visible on websites and brochures as a sign of diversity and inclusion. Yet, they feel invisible in their academic departments. As we seek undergraduate and graduate degrees or tenure and promotion, we instead wish to be seen for our intellect and scholarly contributions. We want to be valued in the work that makes us whole and engage in meaningful research that serves the betterment of our communities, elders, and children. Moreover, we wish to own our bodies and sashay through our academic campuses without being questioned or judged by our hair or clothing. Our scholarly journey demands this kind of holistic education for our bodies to be well. Our bodies have traversed continents and endured diverse experiences- a physical and spiritual journey we *feel* daily. These experiences provide us with a credible standpoint on how to inform change in higher education institutions for the better.

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