Unruly legacies: Black male academics' survivance, embodied refusal as praxis and pedagogical imaginaries in the UK higher education

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Abstract

Higher education institutions are sites for racialised subjectification that 'enable only certain bodies' to thrive and flourish whilst the racially minoritised body is marked as 'Other', out of place and subjected to scrutiny. Black male academics navigate discrepancies and racialised discrimination over their contracts, career progression, and opportunities available to them. They often experience overt and hidden forms racism, leading to vulnerability and employment fatigue. Through conversational *intraviews* and drawing on embodied intersectionality as an analytic framework, and the conceptual argumentation of survivance, posited by Vizenor, we tell the stories of five Black male academics' beyond the contextual temporality of 'survival' to consider their embodied refusal, and strategic agency, innovation and imaginative continuity and presence in academia as 'survivance' in the context of persistent forms of colonial subjugation and marginalisation. This study highlights implications for higher education policy and practice, particularly how institutions might embrace an infinitude of ways of knowing and being, through a relational orientation that centres care, equality, and co-liberation where difference and plurality are not framed as problems to be fixed, hierarchised, or annihilated.

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Introduction

> The task is not to measure and assess the unfree - and seek consolation in naming violence - but rather posit that many divergent and different and relational voices of unfreedom are analytical and intellectual sites that can tell us something new about our academic concerns and our anti-colonial futures (McKittrick, 2016: p.5).

Black academics' experiences of 'institutional racism' (Adisa et al., 2025) in higher education have been extensively documented in the literature and often variously framed as the 'unspoken system of exclusion' (Bhopal, 2022a), persistent 'struggles and challenges' (Belkin et al., 2024), 'everyday racial slights and degradation' (Marandure, 2022), 'the absence of opportunity to progress and realise academic ambitions' (Arday, 2022a), and the enduring 'trauma of racism' (Arday, 2022b) that collectively manifest as racialised ontological terror. These studies help us appreciate the challenges Black academics encounter in higher education (HE) as they provide crucial insights into structural, institutional, and interpersonal barriers. Drawing on the conceptual argumentation of survivance posited by Vizenor (2008), refusal as praxis and pedagogical imaginaries, we deliberately reorient our conceptual and analytical gaze to Black male academics' agency, innovation and enactment of epistemic leadership in the face of systemic negation and a matrix of domination that is sustained through enduring patterns of control. We seek to compliment the rich and invaluable body of work that is documenting racialised inequalities by highlighting Black male academics' contributions, their everyday generative acts of refusal, influence on institutional cultures and insistence on liveable Black futurity – a 'pre-figuration that involves living the future *now* – as imperative rather than subjunctive – as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present' in UK higher education (Campt, 2017: p.35).

Literature asserts that the White, colonised spaces of UK universities are found to be problematic and restrictive for Black academics (Arday, 2022a). Arday (2015) asserts, 'the chasm for inequality is still visibly evident' (p.40). In the last decade, the HE landscape reveals sudden, and at times, startling leaps to meet equality and diversity goals and requirements. In this scramble to unhitch from colonial legacies and show that it recognises its hidden white agendas, universities are still overlooking the reality of what it means to be Black, Asian, and racially minoritised (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). For Black academics, it requires, as Belluigi and Thondhlana (2020) assert, a certain amount of 'skin elasticity' to fit in and adapt, to avert racial discrimination and inequalities of power. In their South African study of Black academics, they documented the cost of not-surviving in terms of lack of recognition, unbelonging, and stress and depression, leading to high attrition rates.

In the UK, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports that in 2022, 22% of academic staff are from ethnic minority backgrounds, an increase from 16% in 2017/18. In the same time frame, the number of Black academic staff who are professors rose by 25%. However, this represents only 1% of all UK professors. Between 2021 and 2023 alone, there was a rapid increase of 40 Black professors at UK universities. The majority of professors from ethnic minority backgrounds are of Asian heritage. The paucity of how future Black academics are nurtured and prepared is noted by Arday (2020), who outlines that just 3% of UK PhD students, in their first year of study, are of a Black heritage. Further figures show that those who are funded represent just over 1% while those on studentships represent 0.15% (Akinbosede, 2021). Funding is crucial for success on a PhD course because most tend to be mature students with personal financial commitments. This is a negative portent for the number of future Black academics who were born or brought up in the UK, who are British nationals. Richards (2013) identifies that non-

UK minority-ethnic academics represent a significant number who bolster university figures for employing Black academics. He describes this phenomenon as a 'particular type of subtle injustice' that overlooks Black and Asian British populations. It also does not actively contribute to an agenda that pushes for more Black academics who are British.

The following research questions orient our study.

1. What are the early life experiences of Black male academics, and how did these experiences influence their career journeys?
2. What challenges/opportunities related to ethnicity, gender, and other factors have Black male academics encountered during their professional lives?
3. Are there specific critical events that significantly influenced their career paths?
4. What life insights have Black male academics developed to navigate challenges?

Situating the inquiry

> The race-tribe exists only at the level of an oppressed race, and in the name of the oppression it suffers; there is no race but inferior, minoritarian; there is no dominant race; a race is defined not by its purity but rather by the impurity conferred upon it by a system of domination (Deleuze and Guattari,1987, p.379).

The issue of whiteness acts as a padlock to aspirations and careers of Black academics, aligning with Joseph-Salisbury (2019) concept of a 'web of whiteness'. This alludes to a weave of threads that frame, solidify, and normalise whiteness and its accompanying power. It pervades structures of management and organisation, the curriculum, and how the World is portrayed and what is constituted as legitimate knowledge. It is manifested in the majority of white staff and Eurocentric ways of seeing and being, where Black bodies are awkwardly positioned and overlooked. Black academics are therefore positioned to adopt white norms and produce certain types of knowledge (Rollock, 2021). The marginalisation process is habitual and continual in what Arday (2020) terms a 'symbolically violent legacy', referencing the impact of colonialism, that has lasting consequences for Black academics' sense of well-being and purpose. Arday (2018) further notes that the very presence of Black academics threatens white normativity, but they can still challenge the system by bringing their powerful narratives to the fore by recognising and speaking against micro-invalidations, micro-aggressions, lack of support, and lack of career progression.

The specific plight of Black male academics is characterised by a routine diminishment and undermining of their intellectual capabilities, in an often 'chilly climate' of academia that can affect their gaining contractual employment and promotion (Brooms, 2020; Christian, 2016; Miller et al., 2025). Their racially minoritised positioning is further compounded if they work within a mainly white university or faculty or engage in race research that challenges systemic racism. This problematic underrepresentation spans positions ranging from research assistants to professors (Johnson and Bryan, 2016). Black males may also be part of re-masculinizing teaching spaces because they are projected as better disciplinarians, particularly for Black students; and for acting as role models and mentors for Black boys, who are often perceived as lacking father figures (Young and Young, 2020). These perceived characteristics can be disputed as being suppositions imposed by white social perceptions and stereotypes, which as Brockenbrough (2015) argues confines the scope of these Black educators to narrowed roles. Their knowledge and pedagogical capabilities are overlooked. However, there is recognition that Black academics and educators show stronger beliefs in Black students' abilities, over White educators, have higher expectations, and can support and mediate in racial and cultural issues

for students ([Woodson et al., 2020](); [Young and Young, 2020]()).

The presence of the Black male body in academia is noted as instilling suspicion and fear because they are perceived as violent, criminalised, and sexualised. This image emerges from the reflection that they are:

> ready-made constructs formed by the repetitive narrative of Black males as problematic [producing a] hegemonic tension between how masculinity was defined for white men and how Black men were allowed to perform maleness...Black masculinity as an ongoing negotiation. ([Johnson and Bryan, 2016](): p.164 and p.321).

[Christian (2016)]() and [Jackson and Crawley (2003)]() also recognise that mental and emotional isolation of Black male academics exists alongside fear of their Blackness and maleness inhabiting the university. Negotiating this perceived position is a tricky endeavour that involves checking one's assertiveness, posture, and voice tone in an emasculative process. Seeking white acceptability from peers and students is necessary because 'To be "overly Black and masculine" is dangerous in higher education' ([Christian, 2016](),p.415). Christian cites the alternative as disillusionment and leaving academia. However, Black academics engaged in bonding activities to negate isolation and rejection. It supported a sense of belonging, learning from other Black men, identity-building, and support to challenge unfair systems and map career moves ([Brooms, 2020]()). Bonding encouraged positive beliefs about themselves and revealed Black male academics as legitimate knowledge bearers.

Being the outsider, inside the university ([Rollock, 2021]()) includes feelings of marginalisation and being undervalued or having their expertise and role questioned and delegitimised. It is about defending oneself against the myriad attacking acts that occur daily. It is further problematised when Black academics feel they have to be grateful for being in their position

and have to adopt a certain academic style of talking and working to avoid subtle exclusion from colleagues ([Bhopal, 2022a]()). This, however, does not eliminate 'uneven and convoluted pathways' ([Rollock, 2021](), p.209) that include Black academics being subjected to bullying. [Rollock (2021)]() identifies two types of bullying: passive and explicit, and takes care to distinguish passive bullying from racial microaggressions. The former, she asserts, are acts that are hard to name and often fleeting or unnoticed, such as an off-hand, slightly negative comment given with a smile, or exclusion from informal staff social events. Racial microaggressions are continual slights designed to remind Black people of their perceived unjust 'lower position', such as the rise of an eyebrow or being ignored in meetings. Explicit bullying, Rollock outlines, is personal verbal abuse, but both types of bullying are used to induce self-doubt about academic competence and worth. Other factors that inhibit Black academics are career progression and hitting a ceiling over which they have to work harder than their white colleagues ([Arday, 2015](); [Bhopal, 2022a]()). Some consciously took on this additional labour to overcome institutional obstacles of race, class, and gender and prove themselves knowledgeable and worthy ([Bhopal, 2022b](); [Rollock, 2021]()). Reluctant respect and a 'gatekeeper mentality' imposed by white colleagues and managers, alongside a lack of career progression, raise significant barriers for Black academics ([Bhopal, 2022b]()). Subtle organisational obstacles, such as being overlooked and not being seen as credible or qualified, have been found to impact their careers and mental health. They often feel pressured to perform in hypervisible ways, such as engaging in high-level research and managing courses, to negate feelings of being the outsider ([Lander and Santoro, 2017]()).

Whatever individuals chose to do to alleviate their racialised, classed and gendered positions, there remained their research and other work were pushed to the periphery if it did not match acceptable topics and methodologies, and they had to teach white, Eurocentric curricula. Also,

having to survive in institutions that reify equality and diversity in a tick box manner, rather than making authentic and meaningful changes. Black academics often see institutional moves to write inclusion policies and invite greater representation as mere 'window-dressing' and lacking in depth (Lander and Santoro, 2017). This contrasts with the idea of universities pushing boundaries and being places to challenge the status quo through the pursuit of knowledge (Arday, 2020). Their difficult trajectories are eased by gathering with other Black academics to receive personal and professional guidance and mentoring through communities of collective care and solidarity.

Onto-epistemic methodological wanderings

> If we are committed to anticolonial thought, our starting point must be one of disobedient relationality that always questions, and thus is not beholden to, normative academic logics (McKittrick, 2021: p.49).

We introduce *onto-epistemic methodological wanderings* as a way that enables us to describe our research approach that refuses linearity, hierarchy, and methodological rigidity. Building on the recognition that ontology (ways of being) and epistemology (ways of knowing) are inseparable, this orientation frames our research as an entangled practice of being-knowing-doing. Methodological *wanderings* afford us the space for radical openness, responsiveness and willingness to follow unexpected 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) whilst staying with uncertainty and remaining response-able and accountable to the relational, contextual, and ethical dimensions of our inquiry. It speaks to methodological practices that are experimental yet rigorous, situated, dynamic, and shaped by living knowledges as much as by theoretical orientation. As such, *onto-epistemic methodological wanderings,* aligned with this study's theoretical framing, offering conceptual

possibilities to disrupt hierarchical boundaries in research and embrace inquiry as relational and (un)folding and refolding.

We draw on the conceptual argumentation and vision of 'survivance', posited by the Anishinaabe tribe scholar Vizenor (2008), to tell the stories of racially minoritised Black male academic trailblazers. It takes us beyond the contextual temporality of 'survival' to consider their embodied refusal as praxis, and strategic agency, imaginative continuity and presence in academia as 'survivance' in the context of persistent forms of colonial subjugation and marginalisation. 'Refusal', as a praxis, highlights Black male academics' perpetual abnegation of colonial dominance, 'a kind of abstention, a disinvestment from rules of engagement' (Bhungalia, 2020: p. 390) that signals Black male academics' refusal to sanctify the dominant narratives of victimhood in favour of 'survivance' as their active presence in higher education. Grounded in the conceptual framing of survivance, refusal as praxis, pedagogical imaginaries, our methodological positioning centre agency, reciprocal relationality and ethical accountability beyond deficit logics in ways that honour Black male academics' living knowledges and realities.

Embodied intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) orients our thinking as we share how five racially minoritised Black male academic trailblazers from different institutions in the UK narrate their living knowledges and experiences as inseparable from the embodied and affective dimensions of being, challenging dominant paradigms that privilege abstraction over corporeal realities. Conversational intraviews, lasting up to 40-45 minutes, informed by semistructured prompts, unfolded as a dialogic space and a non-extractive ethical and relational encounter that meaningfully honours Black academics expertise and wisdom in co-constructing meaning. We conceptualise intraviews as qualitative leaps that disrupt the assumption of a fixed, stable present. Instead of viewing our research encounters with these Black academics as bounded moments in linear time, we turn to

Morales (2025) concept of 'intraviews' to recognise how these research encounters are relationally entangled across past, present, and future. Thus, we think-feel that knowledge is produced through the coming together of relational, temporal, and material connections where our memories, embodied experiences in higher education and anticipatory futures, 'intra-act' (Barad, 2010) within our research encounters in ways that unsettle linear accounts to allow us to consider survivance and refusal as ongoing, dynamic practices rather than discrete events.

We centre Black male academics' embodied knowledges, truths and realities within the intersections of race, gender and class, particularly considering Warmington's (2024) contention that Black and Brown communities are often stripped of their working class identities by how 'Britain's current policy and media discourses depict Britain's authentic working class (the "left behind") as White, and only White'. This enables a breadth of observation and reflection that extended beyond the spoken word (Thornberg, 2017), allowing us to attune to affective and textured silences, body language and gestures. Conversations with collaborators become ceremonies of story sharing (un)folding with a rhythm affording relational accountability that enable a shift from 'thinking about methods as processes of gathering data, toward methods as becoming entangled in relations' (Springgay and Truman, 2018: p. 204), inviting us to slow down, to be responsible *to* and *for,* centring care and connection. Each Black male academic (collaborator) received an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, approach, and dissemination strategies. Informed consent was obtained for virtual audio-recorded interviews via the university's Microsoft Teams. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the University of Greenwich's Research Ethics processes.

We acknowledge our positionality as racially minoritised female academics and antiracist scholars to make our roles visible as an integral part of the onto-epistemic entanglements shaping this inquiry. Our commitments to antiracist

practice and praxis are not external to the research process but rather folds, unfolds, and refolds with the conceptual and material flows through which knowledge manifests. Foregrounding these entanglements constitutes a refusal of the power-laden positioning within research dynamics, which often obscures the relational nature of re-searching. We embrace, instead, an openness to inquiry as an ongoing movement of knowing and being – one that ceaselessly disrupts fixed categories and hierarchies. This also includes a recognition of pluriversal relationality, which allow us to reflexively examine our positionality as racially minoritised women in academia, to (re-)imagine our collective presence and a possible future forged by different choices. We met weekly to discuss our research, and our 'situated affective encounters' (Ayata et al., 2019), with Black male academics' stories and the rupturing of layers of living knowledges, experiences and sense-making which facilitated the emergence of mutually affirmative understandings and connectivity (Ashlee and Quaye, 2021). At various points, during this study, we experienced a sense of frustration, exhaustion and despair listening to the Black male academics' testimonies. These counterstories of Black academic lives reveal how structures of power often operate through racialised logics to obstruct progression, diminish recognition, and reproduce institutional harm under the guise of meritocracy and liberal neutrality (Keval, 2021; Warmington, 2012). The persistence of systemic racism, epistemic erasure, and the cumulative toll these forces have on their career trajectories and ontological security is palpable. As researchers, our refusal to probe deeply into some of the painful stories they shared is an intentional act of radical care *with* and *for* these Black male academics and as preservation of our collective well-being.

Tuck (2009) inspires us to resist 'damage-centred' research that stockpiles a singular narrative of failure, struggle, victimhood, pain, and hopelessness for the purposes of holding those in power accountable as this operates with a flawed theory of change. We find solace in

Adikwu and Catchings (2020) wisdom and their warning against the exploitation of Black pain that often functions as a desensitisation machinery which diminishes the responsiveness of those in power to enact the change we envisage but instead, perpetuates a stereotype that Black people are to be measured by the degree of their pain and 'the determination of deviance in relation to the White-Man face, which endeavours to integrate nonconforming traits into increasingly eccentric and backward waves' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: p. 178).

Survivance and refusal narratives have the potential to collectively counterbalance the normalised spectacle, intellectual production and consumption of Black pain where, under colonial imaginaries, trauma and suffering becomes academic capital. This allows us to work towards social justice through 'story holding' (Torland, 2023) that seeks to understand Black male academics' contributions and realities through complexity, contradiction, and self-determination. Thinking with Meyer (2008, p.221) we contend that 'knowledge that does not heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage, or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs now'.

Thinking with stories, situations, and sensibilities

> We relate, know, think, world, and tell stories through and with other stories, worlds, knowledges, thinkings, yearnings (Haraway, 2016: p. 97).

Thinking with stories, situations, and sensibilities allow us to attune to the textures of what is shared, the silences and ruptures, the refusals, the temporalities, and affects that move *through* and *within* these narratives. Our analytic processes are therefore not a distanced 'meaning-making', but relational responsibility and accountability, a careful, reverent holding that refuses epistemic extraction and instead honours the intellectual sovereignty of what is shared by these Black male academics. We carefully curated testimonies that offer counter-positions to the normalised 'damage-centred' narratives, to illuminate Black academics' contributions, survivance, refusal as praxis and pedagogical imaginaries. We were drawn to 'data that glows', particularly bits of data that 'glimmer, gathering our attention' (MacLure, 2010) within a specific material arrangement that resonates with our Black co-liberatory futurity. We argue that racialised experience is rarely, if ever, past-tense as often referred to as 'lived experience'. Instead, it endures as a living force, recursive, anticipatory, and affectively inscribed across time and space. We, therefore, resist the tendency to fix Black academics' experiences as 'lived', in the past, as if it were a completed event, a *lived experience*, to be analysed from a temporal distance. It is, therefore, not only *lived* but *living* where the past, present, and future co-constitute in '*SpaceTime*' (Barad, 2010) unfolding through ongoing entanglement *with* the world, *being in* and of it. As such, racialised experience becomes a site of generative world-making, a *living* archive of becoming.

In what follows, we share Black male academics' testimonies not as '*data*' to *dissect*, *code*, and *neatly* categorise, but as co-constitutive presences that shift how we come to know. We treat these testimonies with dignity as expressions of *living* knowledge and *world-building*, guiding our plane of thought. They function as interjections, affective intensities, and situated expressions that unsettle entrenched hierarchies, disrupt a single story of perceived Black 'inferiority' and victimhood, whilst (re-)configuring academic spaces that frequently deny them recognition.

Whilst the spectral echoes of historical and ongoing racialised injustices may linger in some of these Black male academics' testimonies, their invocation forms part of a broader praxis of survivance, one that (re-)

claims narrative space not through victimhood, but through the self-authored re-signification of trauma as a living archive of Black sovereignty. Thus, while survivance does not erase pain or traumatic experiences, it transmutes it into a generative force that gestures toward the possibilities of a liveable Black futurity within UK higher education.

Early life encounters as catalysts for academic pursuit and becoming

> We are never so steeped in history as when we pretend not to be, but if we stop pretending we may gain in understanding what we lose in false innocence. Naiveté is often an excuse for those who exercise power. For those upon whom that power is exercised, naiveté is always a mistake (Trouillot, 1997, p. 23).

Survivance inspires hope in resisting the portrayal of Black academics as hopeless victims and, instead, whilst acknowledging the challenges they encounter, it allows us to consider their agency and active presence (Vizenor, 2008). Collaborator 4's early life experiences illustrate a foundational narrative of survivance that traverses racialised and classed disadvantages. His upbringing in a socio-economically disadvantaged but education-focused family instilled in him a belief in education as a pathway for success. The place and value of education was informed *by*, *with* and *for* the benefit of the community as a collective responsibility. His choice to pursue higher education reflects an active negotiation within systemic constraints and an education system still haunted by the spectres of colonial legacies.

> Yes, when we were growing up in Jamaica, we were told many things, I think many of them were fantasies or phallices about education in the UK, you know, we were told that things in the UK were

so hard. It was almost in built into you, you are brainwashed into thinking that the UK's system is so difficult and so much better. Education system. Um, but when I came here, I realised that it wasn't, this system is better. It's just that in Jamaica, we are still so much suffering from colonialism. That makes things hard for our people (C4).

This is echoed in Collaborator 2's account, who, while being the first in his family to go to university, described the expectation as 'being in the air'. He recognised in his early 20s that he needed to achieve a PhD if he wanted to pursue his dream of teaching and being taken seriously as a historian of Black history.

> when I started starting African history, so this is in the 1970s, there was already a kind of move, a foot to teach. By the time I came out of University, those ideas, kind of dissipated somewhat. It was actually quite difficult. Then it's sort of been early 80s, to do that, And Umm, Yeah, so therefore I needed to get a PhD I needed to probably teach at University level. Um, and so that's kind of why I went back into the academic world and did a PhD (C2)

Similarly, Collaborator 1 experienced an economically challenging early life. He lived in a number of places and attended many schools in his family's pursuit of achieving a good education for their children. At the higher education level, he chose to attend a university abroad when he could not get into the local university. He maintains that his educational trajectory was the result of parents who viewed education as very important, but it has also shaped his outlook on himself: 'I kind of fit everywhere'.

As a mixed-race school pupil, Collaborator 3 experienced very difficult times at school. He was one of only four minority ethnic students out of 200 in his year at one of his secondary schools. In what he describes as 'naked racism', white teachers would say directly racist slurs to him. When his parents complained, they were seen as troublemakers for questioning the authority of the teachers. Such institutional

microaggression and racialised betrayal inflicts harm and portrays complaining as *the* problem itself. As an enactment of refusal to accept the racialised status quo, complaining is often met with hostility from those invested in preserving white comfort. As Ahmed (2017, online) puts it:

> Those who complain about a system, those who intervene by saying no at some point, and saying no can sometimes be a matter of not saying yes, of not going along with something, encounter the full force of that system. A system: can be what comes down on you; a ton of bricks.

Collaborator 3 still remembers these memories as 'damaging' and understands that his Black heritage meant he was perceived as being even less acceptable than Asian people, an interpretation that resonates with Keval (2025) analysis of how institutional whiteness produces layered forms of racial trauma through hierarchies of conditional acceptance and belonging. While he originally thought the idea of 'racial trauma' was extreme, he contends that he navigated:

> a very traumatizing experience. Growing up in a deeply racist culture, it does impact on you...The way you look at the world, the way you engage with power structures.

Collaborator 3 recognises his lighter skin and mainly white friends, afforded him levels of privilege and insight on how to work within and succeed in a white majority society. This reveals the subtle ways in which racial power permeates everyday life and functions through micro-encounters that sustain racialised hierarchies.

Entangled struggles and refusal as praxis

> 'When we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent we are still afraid. So, it is better to speak

remembering we were never meant to survive' (Lorde, 1978a).

Racialised dynamics of academia are starkly evident in all the collaborators' narratives. Collaborator 2 experienced multiple challenges, which had a deeply negative impact on him over the years, including the difficulty of establishing his minoritised academic field of Black history. Significantly, when he achieved a senior position, he was not congratulated by any UK academics and is 'normally never invited to speak at events and conferences' in the UK, mainly receiving invitations from abroad creating necessary entryways for sharing practice. He feels the lack of collaboration from academics in his subject, coupled with the narrowness of his specialism, leads to him feeling Other-ed and isolated. This is an example of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007) and ontological constraint which illustrates how differently and unequally valued Black academics are and whose knowledge counts as legitimate and what gets dismissed or remain in the periphery. Gilmore (2002, p. 16) notes that 'racism produces effects at the most intimately "sovereign" scale, insofar as particular kinds of bodies, one by one, are materially (if not always visibly) configured by racism into a hierarchy of human and nonhuman persons that in sum, form the category human being'.

Somewhat contrastingly for Collaborator 5, the challenge of entering university as a Black male academic was also an opportunity. His appointment came after George Floyd's murder in the US, and he was already involved in race activism, so that when he entered academia in his early fifties, he came in 'fully formed'. He states that it helped him to navigate both microaggressions and overt racism.

> My thinking was already formed or I mean, of course it's always developing and growing. I came to the university with a strong intellectual idea of who I am and a strong, you know, intellectual tradition.

It also helped him to gain a perspective about racism in HE and see it as less life-threatening

because of earlier involvement in advocating against police brutality and anti-racism in society, at the policy level. However, he acknowledged that racially minoritised people may have a 'higher tolerance level' to injustices and not speak out, which he deemed as 'unhealthy'.

Collaborator 1, who had previously experienced HE in at least two other countries, had spent 20 years in UK HE institutions, 12 of those as a tutor/lecturer. He describes himself as 'proudly Black African', maintaining that his ethnicity was not a barrier to his ambitions until he moved to Europe. He does, however, acknowledge that he faced discrimination and challenges before living and working in Europe due to his ethnicity. Following his achievement of a first-class degree, followed by a teaching qualification, in another country, when he returned to his home country, he could only get a job in a less desirable location. This prompted him to leave teaching and pursue an academic career in other countries, including the UK, where he gained refugee status.

> The UK experience, uh brought up some issues that I had never encountered elsewhere. People were getting promoted above me. I realised that despite my qualifications and experience, my line managers were white, less qualified, and less experienced than me. The answer is simple. This is where you realise who you are and you don't pick the battles.(C1)

Collaborator 4's experience of systemic barriers to obtaining a Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for teachers from the Global South is juxtaposed with the relative ease for those trained in predominantly white societies, highlighting a form of epistemic injustice. His reference to 'deceit' in the recruitment of Caribbean teachers underscored the exploitative structures that racialised academics navigate:

> We discovered that you had to send your qualifications to UK NARIC, an organisation that assesses

the qualifications. I didn't know anything about that before we came, so I think we were tricked into coming here, and I think that's about the deceit. Many of us may still have made the decision to come for whatever reasons. But we didn't have this full information, and now we told you'd have to go through this process. And you repeat on the unqualified teaching scale and all of those things. So, in my case, my MBA from the University of the West Indies. Was deemed by the UK. Now it is equivalent to a master's degree here (C4).

But rather than succumbing to these obstacles, Collaborator 4 enacts survivance through mentorship, explicitly working to create pathways for others. His decision to seek to understand the rules of the game, stating '*We cannot change the game by only standing on the sidelines,*' challenges the conditionality and exclusionary norms in academia. Such refusal to accept the spectator positioning is a political and pedagogical act that affirms a desire for dignity, agency, and full humanity, disrupting the (un) intentionally imposed portrayal of Black docility that often seeks to confine Black academics to symbols of endurance, they enact transformative praxis and epistemic sovereignty. It is an assertion of agency within a complicated epistemic misalignment and relational system of subjugation that often marginalises racialised scholars, creating stereotypical Black subjectivities. Such a difference shapes particular positioning within academia. The need for 'white sanction' (Miller, 2016) to advance in academia highlights the racialised gatekeeping mechanisms that determine career progression.

Understanding how white sanctions eased progression, permeated Collaborator 3's narrative. Following a good degree from a Russell Group university and a PhD, he hit blocks as a post-doctoral researcher and noticed how people are 'cherry picked' for roles – Black researchers doing a lot of the teaching, but the White, and even Chinese or South Asian assigned to do the 'intellectual stuff'.

Survivance is evident in Collaborator 4's insistence that visibility, networking, and

strategic partnerships with white academics as advocates and co-conspirators are necessary tools for change in individual career advancement and for disrupting normative regimes of truths in academia. Given the potential pathway of progression through building strategic partnerships with white academics, Moten (2013, p. 140) enunciates, 'I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?'. It also speaks to the significance of representation:

> because, as we know, children can't be what they can't see. So, it is about raising aspiration. And so, the younger generation, plus people like you and me, will be able to have that confidence, that we can do it because we have, there's no doubt in our aspiration. There's no doubt in our potential. But when we go into those spaces, people don't understand that Black people can achieve those positions. I think we need to see more of those people in those positions. So, it becomes normalised or usualised (C4).

This highlights how race as a social construct, is often weaponised to justify unequal access to particular positions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). In addition, Collaborator 5, despite only being an academic for 6 years, realises how Black academics are easily overworked and overlooked. Due to precarious contracts, they take on more work to gain economic security. Higher education, he maintains:

> Understand how to mask racism and structural racism. It knows the language, it knows the game to play, that these things exist, but they've done it structurally, so [it's] very impersonal. It's very difficult to put your finger on it and so people's careers could be cut short. People's jobs could be terminated and it [appears] to have nothing to do with ethnicity [making] it difficult to prove because of the way that the systems and the structures are put together. (C5).

He recognises that Black academics can also get 'pigeonholed' into the university's agenda of antiracist work, rather than being able to express and enact their values of authentic and meaningful decolonising work. For that reason, he is adamant that working with a mentor is crucial.

After 20 years in academia, Collaborator 3 is thankful for the experiences and has helped younger Black academics to stop them feeling overwhelmed and overworked. He said he prioritised family over work, and along with some health problems, he recognises he will not be able to pursue a professorship:

> I am probably not going to have a stellar ending to my career, but that's not the end of the World. I have worked in places where you have lots of academics working into their 70s (C3).

As noted by Kuokkanen (2003), survivance is a standpoint, a worldview, and a presence. It is about raising aspiration, which speaks to the transformative potential of an active presence. Positioning Black academics in leadership roles, therefore, challenges the (un)conscious systemic erasure of Black excellence that creates normalised and flawed discourses of 'underachievement' often shaped by a myopic fallacy that ignores structural inequalities and centres deficit narratives.

Embodied wisdom and pedagogical imaginaries

> Sankofa, an Akan term in Ghana means, we must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; we must understand why and how we came to be who we are today (Aboagye, 2022: p.8).

Asked what he would tell his younger self, Collaborator 4 cautions against naively 'trusting everything you are told', which reveals the embodied distrust engendered by the lived racialised realities. Whilst this perspective emanates from trauma, it also reflects a strategic form of self-preservation within an environment

where power dynamics often work against racially minoritised academics. His acknowledgement of being 'too sharing' in knowledge suggests an awareness of the exploitative and extractive nature of academic spaces where, often, racially minoritised academics' intellectual labour is appropriated and/or undervalued. Collaborator 4's insistence on academic circumspection is another survivance praxis to intentionally maintain control over his narrative and protect his academic contributions. The advice to other Black academics to actively engage in academic and professional networks is a refusal to participate in own isolation:

> So, find your tribe. Penetrate your professional networks. Because remember, it's the White people who are the gatekeepers, and they need to see you at those conferences. Putting out your papers. Getting the awards, writing the books, writing the papers, and the citations- all of those kinds of things- and respectability won't come. From you, not penetrating those spaces. Uh, it's a shame, but you, it's almost like you have to prepare yourself, because it's when the white man or the white one tells you that you're okay. Then you're okay. Uh, on it. It's just what it is (C4).

Collaborator 5 agreed that finding your 'clan' is imperative for survival and success, and to '*prevent yourself from getting lost in the quagmire*'. He described the university as '*a hostile space*'. A clan, which also includes family and friends, he asserted, provides a safe, spiritual space where Black male academics can be anchored in the community. He also called for roles that are fully funded, permanent, and are culturally specific, refuting racial homogeneity and representing different ethnicities. '*It's that absence of safe spaces that causes people to have breakdowns, to give up and acquiesce*'.

These views are somewhat echoed by Collaborator 1, who advocates for the necessity for self-preservation. He is aware of being given a larger workload and not being given

opportunities for progression and how such unspoken reasoning and assumptions impact on his career progression.

> *I get frustrated when I see these things and the best way sometimes is just to move. I've never worked for more than 3 years in one university... you move on to another one, hoping that you get better experience* (C1).

He describes himself as being at the 'operational level' as a lecturer, and although he has undergone leadership training, he feels there is a lack of transparency for moving up the ladder. He is aware that senior managers and interview panellists are White and realising that Black academics do not influence policy.

> We dance to the tune [whereby] if you exhibit any form of resistance, then the outing starts. They create an atmosphere which makes you feel like you don't belong. You feel like you are deficient...lacking something. There's no adequate representation.

The difficulty of opening doors in HE has led him to call for a commitment to equity. Where access to opportunities and being supported to develop access to higher positions are provided. He is however mindful of remembering and mentoring his racially minoritised colleagues because he believes very little is happening, despite the ongoing '*fight for change*'. He is hopeful and calls himself a '*disruptor...change agent...pushing at boundaries*'. Tellingly he suggests that it is important to find someone who can tell you the 'truth' about the challenges faced by Black male academics.

Truth-telling involved being careful of aligning to networks and making career decisions for Collaborator 3 which comes in the vacuum of help and guidance from other Black academics. He states that he has been victimised as a result of challenging racism at his university, '*they will go out of their way to make everything*

you do, really difficult'. After 20 years as an academic and currently on a 3-year contract, he realises the precarity of his situation.

> You've really got to suck up to people from the time you are a student. And it's gonna sound awful, but if you go anywhere near post 92 universities, you won't get out because it's almost like they trap you into teaching. Workload is going to be so heavy that you're never going to get the publication (C3).

Collaborator 2 recognised his vulnerability and advocated establishing and taking part in organisations within your field; seek continual publication to create a sense of belonging in the academic community and build your academic identity, *'you don't give up...you keep going'*. He also asserted that Black male academics need to be aware of the discrimination and inequalities that surround them, from knowing how recruitment operates, to knowing the importance of having role models and mentors, to contributing to policies and structures in the university.

In a system that is experienced as obfuscating and somewhat hostile, being a member of a community of practice and asserting presence within academic spaces are radical acts of refusal and survivance. Communities of practice, as put forward according to Wenger (2000, p. 229), 'are bound together by their collectively developed understanding of what their community is about, and they hold each other accountable' to this sense of joint enterprise that produces a shared repertoire of communal resources, language, routines, sensibilities. The emphasis is on *visibility through publishing, generating income for the university, and securing awards to ensure Black academics are not merely present but actively and strategically contributing to knowledge and university priorities*.

We recognise how this research may be met with denial and hostility from those who will push an alternative view, which they will see as rational. We offer real stories of five Black male academics who are pained by an incessant system that denies their intellectual gifts and masculinity but refuse to succumb to racialised logics.

Coda: Envisioning and enacting Black futurity in higher education

> I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better - Maya Angelou

Now that I/we know better is an invitation to '*do better',* to *be better*, to *act with intention*, through a shared commitment to a co-liberatory praxis and hopeful embrace of new possibilities, letting go the safe and familiar certainties that have persistently narrowed Black academics' collective imagination. To *know better* then, is to reckon with the colonial logics that govern knowledge production, terms of participation and recognition in higher education. It is a provocation to radically (re-)imagine, and (re-)orient onto-epistemic legitimacy and the recognition of the often overlooked and undervalued Black male academics' labour, legacy, and existence.

This study raises practical implications for higher education policy and practice, particularly ways in which they could strategically embrace and incorporate difference and diversity as crucial pluriversal forms to transform the challenges that hinder the progression of Black male academics. Key findings highlight how the racially minoritised Black male academics (re) define themselves in the sector and refuse deficit narratives through a commitment to research, publications, and working with other colleagues in collective solidarity. Their career progression is often chequered, not linear, and sometimes involves moving overseas and returning. Institutions negate their prior experiences and qualifications from overseas. The challenge of racism affected these trailblazers from primary school onwards, affecting social and emotional aspects such as confidence. They felt strongly

about the importance of mentorship, developing collegiate networks, and '*finding your tribe*', a professional tribe as effective strategies for micro-inclusions (daily acts of inclusion), collective survivance and self and collective preservation within institutionalised, gendered, classed and racialised regimes of dominance and oppression. This emanated from an appreciation of reciprocity, where they felt a sense of responsibility to '*feed-forward*' support for present and future generations of Black academics. Future oriented survivance strategies (rei-)magine Black intellectual and professional in ways that foster belonging. These include advancing visibility through publishing and generating income for the university and securing external professional recognition. These survivance strategies constitute *refusal* of marginality, deficit-based logics, and victimhood in ways that cultivate possibilities for radical futures in the face of negation.

The underrepresentation of Black academics in professorial and senior leadership positions continues to haunt higher education institutions. This stark underrepresentation is symptomatic of the ongoing reproduction of 'institutional epistemic vices' (Fricker, 2020) that sustain racialised intellectual hierarchies where Black academics are systemically excluded from legitimised positions of academic authority through epistemic and institutional career gatekeeping. This manifests as a racial discomfort that creates a 'Black ceiling' (Woodson, 2023) which sustains the subordination of Black academics based on the imposition of racialised categorisation and the unjustly perceived Black 'intellectual inferiority'. Their underrepresentation in professorial and senior leadership positions can also be viewed as a consequence of what hooks (1984) call 'imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy' that continues to shape institutional norms, rendering Black intellectual labour hypervisible as diversity capital and metrics yet invisible in epistemic legitimacy and leadership. Their value is subsumed within the logics of institutional performativity, where their presence is often conflated

with progress, intellectual contributions are eclipsed by representational demands, and fungibility underpins their positioning as interchangeable symbols of diversity. It is a system in which various forms of oppression converge and work together in tandem where each one fuels and intensifies the effects of the others in one unified direction towards disenfranchisement. As such higher education institutions do not often hold space for Black academics' diverse forms of thought and being. As 'sites of colonial mimicry' (Fanon, 1952), HE institutions' *cannibalistic inclusion* allow Black academics to occupy specified positions as long as they do not disrupt the prevailing order or status quo. They are often seen through the lens of Blackness first rather than their intellectual contributions. It is not surprising that, the 'professorial gap' is not a lack of intellectual capabilities or ambition, but rather a function of the governing racialised, colonial machinery and architecture of recognition, that function as a systemic bottlenecking of Black academic career progression.

Racialised constructions of Blackness not only distort perceptions of competence but also governs Black academics' labour and intellect in particular ways. Often positioned as disciplinarians, cultural brokers and role models for Black students, they are disproportionately expected to manage 'difficult' students or perform undervalued and underappreciated diversity work that shores the institution's image without shaking its foundations. Diversity work is rarely considered in pathways to professorial recognition, yet Black academics are often overburdened with forms of invisible and emotional labour without institutional recognition (Belkin et al., 2024; Magoqwana et al., 2019). The criteria for career advancement remain tethered to dominant norms that disavow their intellectual labour, relationality, and care. And yet, within these constraining conditions, Black academics enact ongoing radical acts of survivance and ethics of care *for* and *with* their students. Their refusal to contort themselves into institutionally palatable forms of knowing, being and doing, Black male academics practice

epistemic refusal of deficit framings, re-producing colonial logics, and resisting the demand for disembodied objectivity and the masking of emotional labour. Refusal as praxis as such, becomes an act of world-making which enables them to carve out alternative relational spaces within and beyond the academy (Neufeld et al., 2025). In this context, the journey to senior leadership can be viewed as structurally obstructed, psychologically taxing, and deeply insurgent, a testament to Black male academics' refusal to be erased (Joseph and Hirshfield, 2010). Their stories embody a 'fierce vulnerability' (Haga, 2025), that acknowledges their own complicity within the systems they seek to dismantle whilst taking up space within rigid institutional spaces in ways that disrupt the dominant logics of invisibility and erasure.

This article is a call for a radical (re-)imagining of how the experiences of Black academics are narrated within higher education. Too often, stories of racialised pain and trauma dominate and (un)intentionally reduces Black academics to sites of suffering while rendering their intellectual, innovativeness, and transformative contributions invisible. While such narratives are useful to highlight structural inequalities and hold university leadership and policy makers accountable, too often they provoke defensiveness rather than reflection, self-reflexivity, and courageous accountability. Taking survivance and refusal as praxis, embodied intersectionality, and pedagogical imaginaries as a point of departure, this article sought to subvert the spectacle of Black pain and trauma. This intentional shift challenges myths of perceived racial inferiority and foster collective racial consciousness that centres Black humanity, their agency, highlighting the relational and innovative strategies through which they refuse limiting narratives and (re-)imagine possible futures. We frame their narratives through contribution rather than deficit, presence rather than absence and possibility rather than pain. Recognising and reframing how Black academics' experiences are narrated is itself a structural praxis that reshapes the epistemic conditions through which knowledge is legitimised and Black academic lives are rendered intelligible. Therefore, to imagine a liveable Black futurity in UK HE is to commit to structural transformation.

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