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## **Breaching the Walls of Academe: the Case of Five Afro-Caribbean Immigrant Women within United States Institutions of Higher Education**

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Date of publication: October 25th, 2019

Edition period: October-February 2020

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**To cite this article:** Esnard, T. & Cobb-Roberts, D. (2019). Breaching the Walls of Academe: the Case of Five Afro-Caribbean Immigrant Women within United States Institutions of Higher Education.

*Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 8(3), 206-233. doi: 10.17583/generos.2019.4726

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/generos.2019.4726>

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# **Breaching the Walls of Academe: the Case of Five Afro-Caribbean Immigrant Women within United States Institutions of Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

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While a growing tendency among researchers has been for the examination of diverse forms of discrimination against Afro-Caribbean immigrants within the United States (US), the types of ambiguities that these create for framing the personal and professional identities of Afro-Caribbean women academics who operate within that space remain relatively absent. The literature is also devoid of substantive explorations that delve into the ways and extent to which the cultural scripts of Afro-Caribbean women both constrain and enable their professional success in academe. The call therefore is for critical examinations that deepen, while extending existing examinations of the lived realities for Afro-Caribbean immigrants within the US, and, the specific trepidations that they both confront and overcome in the quest for academic success while in their host societies. Using intersectionality as the overarching framework for this work, we demonstrate, through the use of narrative inquiry, the extent to which cultural constructions of difference nuance the social axes of power, the politics of space and identity, and professional outcomes of Afro-Caribbean immigrant women who operate within a given context. These are captured within our interrogation of the structures of power that they confront and their use of culture to fight against and to break through institutional politics.

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**Keywords:** academe, afro-caribbean immigrant women, higher education, success

# **Rompiendo los Muros de la Academia: el Caso de Cinco Mujeres Inmigrantes Afro-Caribeñas dentro de las Instituciones de Educación Superior de los Estados Unidos**

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## **Resumen**

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Mientras una tendencia creciente entre los investigadores ha sido el examen de diversas formas de discriminación contra las inmigrantes afro-caribeñas dentro de los Estados Unidos (EE. UU.), quedan en cierta manera obviadas las ambigüedades creadas para enmarcar las identidades personales y profesionales de las académicas afro-caribeñas que trabajan en ese contexto. La literatura también carece de exploraciones sustantivas que profundicen en las formas y el grado en que los guiones culturales de las mujeres afro-caribeñas limitan y permiten su éxito profesional en la academia. Por lo tanto, se hacen necesarios exámenes críticos que profundicen, al tiempo que amplíen los exámenes existentes de las realidades vividas para los inmigrantes afro-caribeños dentro de los EE. UU., y las inquietudes específicas que enfrentan y superan en la búsqueda del éxito académico en sus sociedades de acogida. Utilizando la interseccionalidad como marco general para este trabajo, demostramos, mediante el uso de la investigación narrativa, hasta qué punto las construcciones culturales de la diferencia matizan los ejes sociales del poder, las políticas del espacio y la identidad, y los resultados profesionales de las mujeres inmigrantes afro-caribeñas que operan dentro de un contexto dado. Estos temas se abordan enmarcadas en las estructuras de poder que enfrentan y su uso de la cultura para luchar y romper la política institucional.

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**Keywords:** academia, mujeres inmigrantes afrocaribeñas, educación superior, éxito

While Afro-Caribbean immigrants represent a substantive number of the Black immigrant population in the United States-US (Deux, Bikmen, Gilkes, Ventuneac, Joseph, Payne, & Steele, 2007; Kent, 2007; Waters, Kasinitz, & Asad, 2014), they continue to struggle against systemic forms of discrimination and marginalization that extend into institutions of higher education (Gregory, 1999, 2006; Fourniller, 2010; McLean, 2010; Alfred, 2011; Jean-Marie, 2014). A growing tendency among researchers has been for the examination of diverse forms of discrimination (related to racism, classism, sexism), and the types of ambiguities that these create for framing the personal and professional identities of Afro-Caribbean women academics who operate within that space (Alfred, 2001; Fourniller & Lewis, 2010; Jean-Marie, 2014). As a way of extending such lines of research, Fournillier, McLean and George (2013, p. 261) contend that the “overarching\umbrella categories of race\ethnicity that are currently used to identify migrant and minority groups fail to address the distinct real-world perspectives, sociocultural practices, and identities that exist in authentic ways with which individuals identify”. The push in this case is for deepened and extended understandings of the complexities that immigrant groups encounter and the implications of these for their experiences and practices within host societies. The call is also for greater scholarship on Afro-Caribbean immigrants in the US academy that takes into consideration their identity, the relevance of context, the peculiarities of that space, and, the extent to which these influence their lived realities within the walls of academe. This renewed line of research is particularly necessary given the invisibility that obtains on the multiple ways in which Afro-Caribbean immigrant women both experience and resist institutional marginalization in their quest to claim professional success (Guy, 2003; Alfred, 2003; Hine-St. Hilaire, 2008; Jean-Marie, 2009, 2014; Fournillier, 2010; Louis, Thompson, Smith, Williams, & Watson, 2017).

Our work on Afro-Caribbean immigrant women within the US academy emerges as a response to these concerns and calls to advance existing research within this field. In addressing these, the paper therefore speaks to the experiences of Afro-Caribbean immigrant women in the US academy, and, explores the ways in which they attempt to breach the walls of academe. In so doing, we take the position that the cultural

sensitivities of Afro-Caribbean represent a critical frame from which they both experience and cope with the intricacies associated with working in institutions of higher education in the United States. Using intersectionality as the overarching framework for this work, we demonstrate the extent to which cultural constructions of difference nuance the expressions and implications of social axes of power for the professional identity, experiences, and outcomes of Afro-Caribbean immigrant women who operate within a given context. We specifically articulate, (i) the cultural particularity in constructions of difference for Afro-Caribbean immigrant in the US, (ii) the tensions that these created for adapting to their institutional and broader societal contexts, (iii) the relative importance of these cultural proclivities, both to the psycho-social orientations of Afro-Caribbean women, and, (iv) to the strategies that they adopt to push through the walls of academe. While these cultural references intensified the multiple sources of conflict within their host contexts, we underscore the ways in which these also served as critical points of departure that influenced how they successfully breach the walls of academe.

### **Intersectionality**

In this paper, we premise our examination of Afro-Caribbean women within the US academy on the theoretical tenets of intersectionality. The rationales here are twofold. First, intersectionality offers an important framework from which we can begin to trouble socially constituted categorization of difference that configure the everyday experiences of persons within a given context. At the crux of intersectionality theory is the examination of the various ways in which social categories and axes of difference (such as race, gender, and sexual orientation) intersect to frame the individual identity (Crenshaw, 1995; Knapp, 2005; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Lykke, 2011; Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Second, intersectionality presents critical insights into the mechanisms and processes through which these social axes of power create inclusive and exclusive politics around individual opportunities and positionalities; particularly for marginalized groups (Davis, 2008). Such interrogation

calls for close assessments of the discursive and relational aspects of social experience. A unique benefit here is that of using a macro-micro level analysis that allows for the contextualization or the social location of identity and experience (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). We also extend such analysis to address the comparative ways in which identity and experience are both conditioned by and challenged by the nuances of context (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018). In applying this framework to the study of Afro-Caribbean immigrant women, we interrogate the contextual differences within the social constitution of power, difference, identity, and experience across context; that is, in the United States and the Caribbean. A critical reflection in this case therefore is for the cross-examination of the situated meanings and experiences related to these constructions of difference and the unique challenges that these introduce for immigrant Afro-Caribbean women who remain the core area of interest in the study. The use of an intersectional perspective in this case also provides a theoretical framework through which we make visible the connection between the systems of power that exist at an institutional level and that of the personal narratives and stories of Afro-Caribbean women who operate within US based institutions of higher education.

### **Methodology**

The study centers the lived experiences of Afro-Caribbean women in the US. To understand the complexities around these, we embraced narrative inquiry as a research design that allows for examinations of the stories that speak to social experiences within a given context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). For this study, participants were purposively selected based on specific characteristics (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this case, the inclusion criteria were participants who identified as being Afro or Black Caribbean women, and, employed as an academic within a US institution of higher education. To initiate this process, we tapped into the Caribbean Educators Research Initiative (CURVE) group to identify a list of Afro-Caribbean immigrant women who now work within US institutions of higher education and used this initial connection to seek additional referrals or potential persons to be interviewed. Once we obtained initial contact from Caribbean

networks of academics, we invited persons to participate in an estimated hour-long interview on issues related to these experiences, challenges, and strategies for navigating the academy. Once participants consented, we asked for a reflection on their social and professional relations and an evaluation of how these affected their experiences within their respective institutions.

We interviewed five Afro-Caribbean women academics for this study. Participants varied in institutional experiences and rank. Two of the participants were assistant professors with between 5-10 years of experience within that role. One participant served in the capacity of an associate professor and has at least 15 years in academe. She is currently employed at a predominantly white institution. Another participant is at the level of a research associate. She has been in that position for over four years and in a similar position for another 5. While she has the desire to move into the teaching and research stream, she has not been able to secure an appointment as a faculty member. Our final participant is a full professor with over thirty years in academe. She was also a former administrator with a wealth of experience from serving at different types of institutions across the US. She is also directly involved with issues of diversity in higher education.

Each interview was conducted by the two researchers, audio-taped, and professionally transcribed to allow structural coding and thematic analysis of the data. We also employed the use of McCall's (2005) inter-categorical analysis to draw on the findings related to various axes and relations of power that work to affect the lived experiences of these women. Using the framework of comparative intersectionality (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018), we specifically probed into the contextual nature of their identities, and the tensions and/or ambiguities that unfold around their experiences as Afro-Caribbean immigrants within the US. Based on that process, two key findings were that of the difficulties associated with confronting diverse yet complex systems of power in academe, and, the significant ways in which these women were able to break through the barriers that surface through that experience. In the case of the latter, we point to the relative importance of culture; both

for how they respond to institutional politics, and, creatively draw on existing systems of support.

### **Confronting systems of power**

Our examinations point to the many ways in which these five women fought against everyday expressions of racial discrimination and marginalization within and beyond their professional lives. On a broad level, both Terry and Stacy spoke to the pervasive racial structures and relations of power that affected the experiences of Black persons within the US academy. In expounding on this, Terry for instance spoke to her own engagements or conversations with other professional Black women and who have “traversed this [academic] landscape...[who have] attend[ed] university [whether public or private or even Ivy league, and, who have all pointed to their own] struggles within the university.” In most cases, she remarked that the “struggles were always the same; those being with tenure and promotion, about being a Black person on tenure track, the stereotypical and dismissive perceptions that exist around race related work, especially if it addresses the specific experiences of minority groups”. She noted therefore that in the context of the US, Black persons (regardless of their place of origin, particular socio-economic standing, ethnic upbringings), become part of systemic structures of oppression that ignores the injustices that these introduce in general to Black persons, and, more specifically, to other ethnic groups. For Terry, this oppressive and monolithic treatment of Blacks created a *troubling sense of invisibility*, as in her case, where Afro-Caribbean immigrant women did not identify with, or remained sensitive to the prisms of race, and, the socio-political meanings that were associated with being Black in the US. A consistent contention here therefore is that of the conflicting meanings of what it means to be Black in the US vis-à-vis that of what obtains within their homelands, and, the stresses associated with that reality (Vickerman, 2001; Hine-St. Hilaire, 2008; Warner, 2012; Johnson, 2016; Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018). The issue therefore becomes one of the politics around identity (Rogers, 2001, 2006), the importance of context in the construction of identities for Afro-Caribbean women (Gregory, 2006), and



the ways in which these created misconceptions and inter-racial controversies within that context (Kent, 2007; Greer, 2013).

This process of racialization and of being racialized present a particular challenge for these women (Lee, 2004; Benson, 2006; Boyce Davies & M'Bow, 2007). Researchers suggest that such racial and ethnic discrimination in the US affects identity construction and ethnic development, and, the tensions associated with working through these (Hintzen, 2001; Lee & Rice, 2007; Fries-Britt, George Mwangi, & Peralta, 2014; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014). Our findings confirm this conjecture. In fact, our findings suggest that these women also struggled with the use of dominant cultural and racial filters to define their personal and professional identities within the US context. In many cases, they pointed to the cultural peculiarities around race and gender, and, the extent to which these introduced many rigidities related to how they defined themselves, how they were identified within their homeland or place of birth, and were being defined by others in the US. Where these cultural or ethnic filters remained at odds with those that were dominant within the space, these women also experienced intense periods of cultural dissonance within academe. Thus, both Joy and Martha for instance spoke to their experiences of working within predominantly white institutions and the cultural parameters that these imposed onto their sense of selves. In the case of Joy, she particularly spoke to what it meant to occupy or to be part of “white spaces;” to be racially and ethnically minoritized, and/or, to feel isolated within the academy. Joy specified for instance that “I struggled in white spaces...somehow when...they see a Black person, and they hear a different accent... [then] it goes back [to an understanding of how Black persons are supposed to] act in a [particular way]”. In this sense, acting in the particular or “right way,” therefore becomes a case of whether or not persons are aware of and embrace the dominant cultural norms and values (as subtle and not so subtle forms of cultural imperialism or perhaps oppression) that pervade in a given context. These stressors are further muddled by the need for one to respond to dominant Eurocentric white cultures and those of other Black groups within the US; who they are often (mis)identified with. This is particularly the case where the thinking and practices of diverse cultural and ethnic groups are

not validated within a given space (Schiele, 2000; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). These conversations also raise questions around the possible relevance of situating Caribbean-centric frameworks within broader debates related to Eurocentricism, Africanism, Pan-Africanism and nationalism. In the context of higher education, these issues also point to related reservations around the use of the “hidden curriculum;” as cultural artefacts of the dominant social-cultural and racial landscape within the US, which in one way or the other affect the collective success of Black women in academe (Bertrand Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013),

It is this sense of racial and cultural conflict which affect the emotional and psychological wellbeing of immigrants (Foner, 2000; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014; Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018). Martha for instance elaborated on the liminal feelings that emerged from her cultural adaptation to the US context, the retention of her own cultural proclivities, and implications of these for ethnic networks to which she gravitated. In fact, while Martha attained professorial status, she reflected on the difficulties associated with the process of acculturation, and, the invisibility of her own cultural inclinations in that space. In both cases, this cultural tension created a growing sense of cultural erasure on one end and that of cultural adaptation on the other, and, in some cases, the adoption of a bi-cultural modus operandi, which allowed for code switching when this was deemed necessary. For Joy, such ambiguity produced a sense of being “in limbo...where you are really trying to find your identity; of who you are as a person, as a scholar, and being able to fit in”. This also created many points of discomfort and discontent; particularly around the use of native languages or cultural reference points within the classroom. This lack of sensitivity to the cultural practices and norms of Afro-Caribbean immigrant women or push for developing cultural competencies within the host societies created a distinctive sense of marginality (Alfred, 2001, 2003) and related strains within and between other racial groups (Rogers, 2001, 2004; Vickerman, 2001; Fournillier & Lewis 2010; Alfred, 2011; Thornton, Taylor, & Chatters, 2013). It is this intersection of race, ethnicity, and gender that leave Afro-Caribbean immigrant women isolated within academe (Louis et al. 2017; Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018).

### **Securing Success: the lived and the imagined**

Typically, faculty are assessed on their academic achievements (in teaching, research, and service), and the extent to which these result in the award of tenure and promotion. Where race and class become the axes of power through which Black women are structurally and socially disadvantaged, they are often forced to adopt specific strategies to sustain their engagement in academe (Collins, 2000; Alfred, 2001; Stanley, 2006). Our findings also point to the conscious ways in which these Afro-Caribbean women attempt to resist the complex web of power (inclusion of race, gender, and ethnicity) that operate within their institutional spaces. In so doing, these Afro-Caribbean women also spoke, not only to the many strategies (mentoring, social support from significant others, cultural lessons, and self-motivation) that they employ to breach the walls of academe, but their own considerations for (re)defining and (re)crafting strategies *of* and *for* their success in academe.

### **Breaking Barriers: Fighting politics with culture**

One of the key findings within this study was that of how these Afro-Caribbean women employed the cultural scripts from their homeland to combat institutional forms of marginalization. In all cases, this strategy served as a central aspect of how they broke through institutional politics. Terry can be considered as one of the Afro-Caribbean women who has successfully breached the walls of academe. She is a tenured associate professor at a predominantly white institution, and one who sees her tenured position within a PWI as a hallmark of achievement for a Black woman within such marginalized context. She noted in this case that she was now the “fourth Black woman” to be tenured at the institution”. She stressed on “those kind of achievements” and the symbolic meanings that unfold through these; particularly where [she is] “one in a very rare group of individuals”; not just as Afro-Caribbean migrant women, but as Black women in a collective group. For other researchers, this type of penetration of Black minority women on a general level is both symbolically and materially significant given the insider-outsider status

that obtains for Black women within predominantly white institutions (Collins, 2000; Stanley, 2006; Griffin, Bennett, & Harris, 2013; Jean-Marie, 2014). However, on a more specific level, this culturally embedded response also introduces a way of talking back to systems of oppression while shifting the axes of influence. In speaking to this issue, Terry's narrative also drew on *the strength of a Black woman discourse* (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Nelson, Cardemil & Adeoye, 2016). In fact, she spoke of the resilience of Black women, the "ability to be steady...and to navigate certain situations". She also spoke to the importance of early socialization patterns and messages of resilience that emanated through her interaction with her immediate family (friends and family) within the Caribbean. Here, she referenced her particular thinking around the need for achievement, the value of education, and the need for persistence in the process. She also spoke of important messages around being resourceful, strategic and self-confident. These became cultural reference points through which she adopted a mantra that "you do not set yourself up for questions about why you are not succeeding". She contended that these cultural reference points become both a tool and a shield through which she was able to move beyond the view that the academy is a "place of deprivation". The key disposition in this case was for the rethinking and reimagining of the academy; using her own knowledge of the structures and relations of power that operate within that contexts and her own cultural reference points to carve out strategies for her own survival and success. In fact, she argued that "if you are fortunate enough to land a position in the academy, that [you need to draw on all] the [external] resources and internal skills in order to succeed". For Terry therefore, an important aspect of being progressive within academic climates involves the need to understand the nature and dynamics of the social and professional networks that exists within the academe". However, she also called on other Afro-Caribbean immigrant women to be their "own advocate and to understand how the policies and the political situation" within the academe affects whether or not one succeeds. In such contexts, she suggested that these women should also draw on the lessons of resilience acquired in the home or in the Caribbean contexts to navigate this political terrain. While she is aware of the cultural nuances across contexts, she remained convinced of the power of strategic thinking and

certain values that support this in breaking through different landscapes. Therefore, while the tensions of “fitting in” for Afro-Caribbean immigrant women within the US academic system remains an issues for which they must confront (Alfred, 2001, 2003), our findings also speak to the importance of cultural practices to their reported levels of resilience (Gregory, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Benet-Martinez & Haritatos 2005).

### **Building on critical systems of support**

Another important finding within our study was that of how these women used their cultural reference points to build on their systems of support. In these cases, we noted that while these Afro-Caribbean women drew on the support of other professional women in that space, they also extended their working systems of support to that of their own thinking and practices within that space. We speak to this.

Terry, June, and Martha all spoke to the importance of mentoring and social support; albeit in varied ways. Terry for instance drew on the importance of being mentored by persons in positions of leadership (department heads and deans). These relationships were presented in her narrative as important to how one navigates the academic landscape and strategically maps one’s professional trajectory. In particular, she suggested that they have the ability to “pull the first strings and to open doors.” She also highlighted the role and impact of a department chair who “offered a candid conversation ...about [her] professional trajectory” and her dean for instance who placed her on a “number of different college-wide committees.” It is this type of professional and social support that led Terry to suggest that even though promotion and tenure is supposed to be “based on your productivity, [that there are other non-written and political threads that] determine one’s progress within higher education. Her thinking here was that of the extent to which department chairs and deans can bolster or to “halt [academic] success”. Outside of the support of administrative heads, Terry also stressed on the importance of having other non-administrative faculty mentors within the academy. She indicated that “these mentors could be folks that were in your

graduate program that you can pick up the phone and call us say, hey, this what's happening". For Terry, these informal networks with faculty offer flexible and open spaces through which Black women can develop their personal and professional identity, while gaining some visibility within their academic circles. On one level, this underscores the need for mentoring frameworks and opportunities (whether formal or informal that advance the professional development of Black scholars while framing systems of psycho-social support and development that align with aspects of their cultural reference points (Alfred, 2001; Archibald, 2011; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2014). Thus, we see for instance that these experiences provided invaluable moments through which June learnt how to "think strategically, communicate effectively and all these things that we know are important, that we learn along the way once you get here". On another level, these narratives also underscore the importance of professional relationships in building the professional identity of foreign born academics (King, 2005; Williams & Johnson, 2011), and, of dismantling while creating non-hierarchical spaces for mentoring marginalized women in academe (Zellers, Howard, & Barcic, 2008; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2014). An important spin off here is that of how these asymmetrical frameworks create pedagogical opportunities to mentor or to socialize early career academics and minoritized faculty in alternative and productive ways (Bertrand Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013; Davis-Maye, Davis, & Bertrand Jones, 2013; Perlow, Bethea, & Wheeler, 2014; Cobb-Roberts, Esnard, Unterreiner, Agosto, Karanxha & Wu, 2017).

Professional development and mentoring however do not typically address the intersectionality of Black women's experiences (Bertrand Jones & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). This is particularly the case where there are sources of conflict and exclusive practices that hinge on the relative significance of race, gender, and ethnicity for instance within the broader constructions and functions of professional academic networks (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2012; Esnard, Cobb-Roberts, Agosto, Karanxha, Beck, Unterreiner, & Wu, 2015). Our interviews also spoke to the shortcomings of these professional spaces and the need for tapping into their strengths for their survival. In this case, we saw through the interviews, the ways in which these women used their cultural referents points to build on professional systems of support within academe. This

allowed these women to break through the oppressive intersections of power that existed in academe. June exemplifies this individual who takes charge of the processes around which she is being evaluated while in academe. June also spoke of the importance of “staying true to [herself], and to listen to her inner voice.” Staying true to yourself for her would extend to the considerations of the one’s values and ethical standards within considerations of possible research agendas. Like Terry, June contended that Black women must take “responsibility for their own career development”. She elaborated that part of doing this requires that these women seek information and advice from those who have gone before and to get the necessary resources that are needed to become successful. At the heart of that process therefore is a negotiation of personal (individual), social (group), and the political (power dynamics) artefacts of that space. This would imply that one “cannot sit and complain” about the structures of power that persist within his or her environment, but also to take charge of a process through which s\he can create opportunities for success. Like June, Stacy who is also up for tenure this year, continues to support efforts at diversity and social justice; particularly among vulnerable groups. Stacy insisted that part of her achievements in that regard center around her connections with her own value systems and how these inform her own engagement within academe. She also spoke of “knowing what you value, knowing what...is your core principle...knowing what standards you want to preserve...knowing your likes and dislikes...knowing what your breaking point is....and, being true to yourself”. It is here that we begin to understand therefore how these socio-cultural patterns of socializations serve as important learning moments through which Terry, as an Afro-Caribbean immigrant woman, was able to make sense of and navigate the politics of her institutional context.

Such is the also case of Martha who celebrated her success in breaching the walls of academe. As someone who has served within various administrative roles and who has been awarded full professor, she remains one of the few Afro-Caribbean women who has entered into such ranks. However, unlike Terry, Martha drew on the value of her early childhood upbringing in the Caribbean and its connection to her personal

sense of strength. While in discussing this as the basis of her success, Martha, returned to her own social biography to note the learning moments in her early childhood period, the opportunities to observe the coping mechanisms within the home, and the push from her parents to take overcome adversities. Key lessons within her narrative therefore were those of persistence, strength and determination. These were also developed to contest related concerns associated with experiences of gendered racism within the US. When these are transferred into their new environments, then the role of community and the practices that are learnt within that community becomes critical (Sutton & Chaney, 1992; Alfred, 2001). What we observe therefore are the ways in which Martha uses her cultural scripts as mentoring queues through which she has successfully navigated academe. She claimed that while you have to work within oppressive institutional and societal contexts that transcend racism, you are to be remain “encouraged and motivated” and work towards the “betterment of others”. She cautioned however of the need to “check oneself” in the process; particularly if one is “losing the focus on why [s\he] came [to academe] in the first place”.

Joy also raises a serious question over the *raison d’etre* or the reasons for being in academe, the meanings that are attached to that role, the experiences that capture these, and the implications for someone who remains outside of that role. While she continues to plan around breaking the glass ceilings that exist in academe, and, securing a tenured position, she questioned the purpose and notions of success within academe within the core. While she acknowledges the importance of mentoring and informal social networks in moving from the margins, to the center, she also questions the narrowness of thinking around notions of success within the center, and, the ways in which such conceptualizations, render invisible, the successes that take place on the margins. In particular, she reflected on notions of success and non-success, and the ways in which these are defined from the core, communicated through the core, and radiate across and through the structures and practices within academe. She stressed on the ways in which graduate training processes for instance serve to “indoctrinate” graduate students into what it means to be successful in academe. In that discussion, she highlighted the need for someone on a tenure track position, to prove one’s worth as a researcher



and educator in ways that were consistent with how these were institutionally defined and measured. She stressed on the many ways in which those processes and imaginations around academic success intensify professional struggles; particularly for Afro-Caribbean women who confront both the complexities of race, gender, class and ethnicity, and, who attempt to reframe notions of success within that space. While the key takeaway here is for the reconfiguring and reimagining of the academic space, these narratives underscore the need for safe and supportive environments that move beyond the skills required for functioning within academic contexts but also for developing strong psycho-social dispositions that aid their success in academe (Davis-Maye, Davis, & Bertrand Jones, 2013).

### **Discussion**

There is very little research on Afro-Caribbean women faculty in the US. Much of the research focuses on challenges facing Black women generally defined (Allen, Epps, Guillory, Suh, & Bonous-Hammarth, 2000; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001); a reality that negates the nuanced experiences of Afro-Caribbean women in the US, who would/could be defined as Black immigrants from the Caribbean (Alfred, 2001; Jean-Marie, 2014; Louis et al. 2017). What we see therefore is how Afro-Caribbean women are othered, raced, gendered and classed in their professional environments, and how those intersecting realities are either neglected in the literature or subsumed by the research on Black women in the academy. This type of invisibility can have a tremendous impact of women and their psychological well-being (Jean-Marie, 2009; Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018). In this paper, cultural tensions muddled the challenges associated with working within a web of gendered racism that operated within US institutions of higher academe. In these cases, the lumping of these women into broader categories of Black and female, created specific stains around their own personal and professional identities. These women are faced with discrimination and marginalization based upon their identity and culture and it is the very intersections of their social identities that makes their experiences unique

and nuanced. Thus, when we look at the challenges of these Afro-Caribbean women, examinations of the data point to the salience of identity struggles, cultural incongruences, and the related tensions that emerge when these intersect. At a professional level, this burden or struggle transformed into that how they located themselves within and respond to the realities and labels associated with being part of a marginalised minority. In the case of the latter, we also noted that such an identity struggles also influenced experiences of racial tension (from both black and white colleagues) within the professional space, their own positionalities within the institution, as well as their fight for scholarly legitimacy. Thus, the very institutions that they have been recruited for these positions, is the place where their very intellect and contributions are challenged. The core issues here was that of how these women were pressured to either succumb to being “African American/Black” or reject being “Black” to emphasize their cultural heritage; a reactive pressure that places them in a vulnerable state. By so doing, this work illuminates the discourses on diversity in particular race, ethnicity, culture, geo-spaces and various other aspects of identity within higher education.

However, what is less known is how they respond to this climate of marginalization. As such, participants were not only subjected to racial stereotypes but actively used of cultural markers to demarcate their unique ethnic identities. This exploratory study examined the experiences of five Afro-Caribbean women who sought to thrive in an environment that was fraught with racism, sexism, and identity politics. Their lived experiences provide a significant commentary on the challenges and opportunities of being an Afro-Caribbean woman in the US context of higher education. In many ways, participants saw this as a fluid, dynamic and complex struggle that morphed overtime. In other words, we noted that while they all recognize themselves as Afro-Caribbean, they also acknowledged the complex ways in which their identities intersect, shift and take on a different significance or emphasis based on contexts, personal or professional standpoint, career trajectory or type of institution, that is research versus teaching. The stories of these women challenge us to contextualize and to appreciate the persistent struggles of Black Caribbean women in the academy as they attempt to circumvent the inherent processes that are designed to impede their progress, their breach. The use

of their voice provides a vehicle, mechanism through which these women can openly counter the norms of mainstream society, while reconstructing their own realities that render the invisible visible. Albeit to different degrees, participants acknowledged the ways in which the cultural messages of resilience and hard work differently framed broader perceptions of racism and responses of Black academics from the Caribbean region. It is this sense of historicity and cultural specificity that not only generates a sense of critical consciousness and identity (both personally and professionally), but that also make possible their attempts to strategically deconstruct and breach the walls of academe. When, how and to what extent they successfully breach that space become that of their academic position within the university, whether or not they are tenured, length of time there, professional network that they tap into or sense of self that they adopt. Often, the latter provided safe spaces wherein they were able to retreat, return and in some cases, resist the marginalisation that they faced.

These women have to speak back to being marginalized as Black women and Afro Caribbean within the ivory tower. They are doubly bound to race/color in a way that forces them to re-identify as such in a middle space, a space of liminality (Collins, 2000; Alfred, 2001). It is this space, the acknowledgement of difference and struggle that we centre their stories to explicate the unique perspective of Afro-Caribbean women and the stories of success and survival in academe (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018). This is particularly important for how we begin to disrupt socially constituted notion of difference. In some ways, we see these cultural navigations of institutional oppression as a way of speaking back to dominant conceptualizations of race and ethnicity in the United States (Butterfield, 2004). However, such findings are also critical to how we begin to strategize or make critical interventions around the professional development of immigrant groups, such as these Afro-Caribbean women who are included within the study. On a basic level, the call is for expanding and/or reimagining career development programs within institutions of higher education that promote issues of diversity and inclusion (Alfred, 2001; Bass & Faircloth, 2011). In such cases, a suggestion is for the use of multicultural professional development

programmes for early career academics (Stanley, 2010) and for multicultural counselling framework to address the challenges around identity development and sustenance for Afro-Caribbean migrants (Richardson, Bethea, Hayling, & Williamson-Taylor, 2010). In advancing the legacies of Black women (Grant, 2012) therefore, these findings strengthen the need for further considerations of how Black leaders promote the inclusion of tenure earning Black women in academe (Davis & Bertrand Jones, 2011; Davis-Maye, Davis, & Bertrand Jones, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Social justice requires a reorganization of wealth, privilege, power and advantage in a broader context. These women, through their narratives have introduced their social justice agenda and activism, by operationalizing their individual experiences with disadvantage, lack of privilege, to one where their work and presence benefit the entire community. This group of women, through community (personal and professional), tenacity, grit and strategic alliances have demonstrated their ability to not only carve out a space but to dismantle their invisibility within the academy. They have exposed the limited ways in which they are viewed (identity) and expected to engage professionally and align politically. Through their stories we learn how Black immigrants shun the category of being silent and docile and reject being forced into a racial/ethnic dynamic that would require them to become solely “Black” and not allow the space for them to be Afro-Caribbean, or to self-identify. This work provides a lesson for others that are at the margins by force or choice. These Afro-Caribbean women chose to push back against all forms of hegemony and “isms” and made it clear that their presence and work was not to be ignored or reimagined through unrealistic and unwanted lenses. A rejection of an unwanted lens replaced with corrective vision provides higher education with a foundation of authentic displays of difference. Where difference is unique, valued and appreciated.

Highlighting the voices and experiences of Afro Caribbean women in academe opens the door for other marginalized groups to find their space and connection to a broader network. It is through the voices of these women that we can begin to understand the impact their identity

has on them personally and professionally. That impact, visibility, then can ameliorate the value the university places on all faculty members and by encouraging its constituent population to “see” all of their faculty members as integral members of the academy. An initial benefit is this study adds to literature by making a seemingly invisible population visible. A large part of the visibility of these women is exhibited through their adherence to their cultural scripts and patterns for adaptation beyond their native contexts. In spite of the challenges associated with claiming their Afro Caribbean culture, these women opted to remain true to their identity. They engaged in work that was important to them and sought out strategic alliances within the academy. In the efforts to connect with allies they were purposeful in those interactions and surveyed their landscapes. In some instances, they found allies in African American women and in other cases they were connected to a Caribbean group. In each space these women understood the dynamics and interfaced accordingly without feeling circumspect. This required them to know their audience and with whom they were interacting, which meant they could be their authentic selves without judgement and as such their visibility and support increased.

More is also needed on the culturally induced scripts, practices, and meaningful ways in which these provide important pedagogies of Afro-Caribbean women faculty. More research is required to explain the variability that exists for Afro-Caribbean women in public US institutions, across race, ethnicity, gender and other forms of identity and the roles these identities play within the halls of academe and structures of power within. Findings from this study can inform Universities and Colleges on how to create inclusive cultures/environments for these women, by incorporating culturally specific strategies and professional interventions to sustain both an authentic sense of self at the personal level and professional success for these women in academe. Afro Caribbean women in higher education bring to bear a unique perspective and as such should be able to contribute without feeling as though they must morph into an idealized notion of being in this space as defined by the power structure. In addition to entering a dialogue on how these Afro-Caribbean women have created an inclusive space for themselves within their departments,

academic colleges and within the larger university, it's a lesson in the tenets of social justice.

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