Chronicling the Intersectional Lives of Blackwomen Academics and MAMAscholars

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Abstract: Being a Blackwoman and a mother are two complicated realities that are difficult for many to fully and deeply understand. Couple those lived experiences with the role of an academic and you seemingly become a unicorn: a mythical and supernatural being. It is a reality the authors contend with daily as Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars (emphasis on MAMA). In this essay, the authors attempt to make plain what is undeniably nuanced and make visible what is highly invisible: the lived experiences of Blackwomen, MAMAscholars in academia. The authors share their story in vignettes to encourage readers to be in solidarity with Blackwomen academics (faculty and students) to undo the intersectional erasure and disposability politics that undermine Blackwomen's wellbeing in (and outside) the academy.

Keywords: Black women faculty, Black mothering, other-mothering, mammification and intersectionality

Titel: Eine Chronik intersektionaler Lebensentwürfe von *Blackwomen Academics* und *MAMAscholars*

Zusammenfassung: Eine Schwarze Frau und eine Mutter zu sein, sind zwei komplizierte Realitäten, die für viele schwer zu verstehen sind. Kombiniert man diese gelebten Erfahrungen mit der Rolle einer Akademikerin, wird man scheinbar zu einem Einhorn: ein mythisches und übernatürliches Wesen. Es ist eine Realität, mit der die Autorinnen als *Blackwomen Academics* und *MAMAscholars* (Betonung auf MAMA) täglich zu kämpfen haben. Mit diesem Essay versuchen die Autorinnen zu verdeutlichen, was unbestreitbar nuanciert und in hohem Maße unsichtbar ist: die gelebten Erfahrungen von *Blackwomen*, *MAMAscholars* in der Wissenschaft. Die Autorinnen erzählen ihre Geschichte in Vignetten, um die Leser:innen zu ermutigen, sich mit *Blackwomen Academics* zu solidarisieren, um die intersektionale Auslöschung und die Politik der Austauschbarkeit, die das Wohlergehen Schwarzer Frauen in (und außerhalb) der Wissenschaft untergräbt, zu überwinden.

Schlüsselwörter: Schwarze Akademikerinnen, Schwarze Mutterschaft, Othering Mutterschaft, *Mammification* und Intersektionalität

Introduction

Being a Blackwoman[1] and a mother are two complicated realities that are difficult for many to fully and deeply understand, especially within the United States. Couple those lived experi-

1 Blackmotherhood, Blackwoman and MAMAscholars are spelled in a way to show our raced, gendered and classed identities are indivisible further underscoring Blackwomen live intersectional lives. The emphasis on MAMA stresses the centrality of Blackmothering in our identity.

ences with the role of an academic and you seemingly become a unicorn: a mythical and supernatural being. It is a reality we contend with daily as Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars (emphasis on MAMA). In this essay, we attempt to make plain what is undeniably nuanced and make visible what is highly invisible: the lived experiences of Blackwomen, MAMAscholars in academia. Writing about our lives as MAMAscholars, and journey through Blackmotherhood is not easy. Blackwomen's bodies are constantly scrutinized as illustrated by the harsh ways Blackmothers are judged. The "good mother" (Charlton 2014) is a concept rooted in white patriarchal values of white femininity and thus, an impossibility for Blackmothers. Blackmotherhood is embroiled in racist, gendered and classist stereotypes that cast Blackwomen as mammy, the welfare mother, and/or the unwanted, single-mother, ultimately to devalue their labor in and outside of the workplace (cf. Collins 1987; Richard et al. 2019). In that regard, putting our interior lives on display is no harder than being a Blackwoman academic and MAMAscholar.

1 Vignettes: Intersectional Literary Devices

MAMAscholars live intersectional lives. Intersectionality prioritizes Blackwomen's ways of knowing. Thus, we use vignettes to chronicle the ambiguous and complicated parts of our interior lives as MAMAscholars. Our vignettes are intentionally formatted to keep our voices intact, capturing our realities in [somewhat] real time. Blackwomen are not a monolithic group. Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars are a diverse population. MAMAscholars are Blackwomen faculty, institutional leaders and students, to name a few. MAMAscholars are Blackwomen of all genders and sexual identities. MAMAscholars have varied relationship statuses including, single, co-parent, life-partner, married, and widowed. Hence, our narratives cannot be treated as representative. We share these vignettes to help make the unseen seen, and illuminate the necessary and vital contributions of Blackwomen academics with MAMAscholar skillsets.

According to *Master Class (2021),*

> Vignettes — poetic slices-of-life — are a literary device that bring us deeper into a story. Vignettes step away from the action momentarily to zoom in for a closer examination of a particular character, concept, or place. Writers use vignettes to shed light on something that wouldn't be visible in the story's main plot.

The slice-of-life vignettes below highlight a very specific time in our lives as Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars; and that is, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 through the end of 2021. Our five vignettes are presented across three interconnected themes. The two vignettes in theme one show how we each ascribe to our identities as MAMAscholars, while attempting to navigate the academy. The two vignettes in theme two capture the impact of COVID-19 on our mothering. Finally, the vignette in theme three consists of a dialogue between Chayla and Saran, showing the ways intersectionality weaves their lives together creating a much needed intervention and support.

2 Intersectional Lives of Blackmothers

Blackmotherhood is understudied broadly, and most especially within the higher education literature, with the exception of the recent and important research highlighting the failures of the U.S. healthcare system in addressing Black maternal health and mortality (see for example, Davis 2020; Parker 2021). The global impact of COVID-19 has introduced the world to parts of mother-work that are taken for granted and go unnoticed. For instance, "second-shift" (Parnell 2022) and the "mental load" (Floyd 2022) are now a part of our vocabulary to describe mothering, particularly in the aftermath of COVID-19. An intersectional analysis of mother-work that centers Blackwomen reveals "invisible labor" (Porter 2023), "other-mothering" (Nzinga-Johnson 2013), and "mammification" (Chang 2007; Patton et al. 2018) can be added to our lexicon. Still, there is no excuse for institutional leaders, as leaders of industry, to not concern themselves with workplace conditions for Blackmothers. Blackwomen are the lowest paid of all women in today's workforce (cf. Corbett 2023). Also, Blackwomen are the primary caregivers and breadwinners in their families (cf. Porter et al. 2023). In Hulu's *Hair Tale*s, Oprah Winfrey said early in her career, "how other people valued my hair was ultimately how other people valued me". At times, the same sentiment can be attributed to the value the academy places on Blackmothering and Blackwomen.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) is the sense-making tool we use to contextualize Blackmother-work in faculty life. Intersectionality is a Black feminist epistemology and analytic framework that illustrates how micro and macro level power dimensions of race-gender-class subordination, create the interlocking systems of oppression, such as anti-Black-gendered-racism-misogynoir-poverty, that is specific to the lives of Blackwomen and similarly minoritized populations (cf. Haynes et al. 2023). Intersectionality keeps us grounded in societal and institutional contexts that seem chaotic to us. At its core, intersectionality represents Black feminist tradition, triumph and legacy that helps to explain how Blackwomen make a way out of no way.

As MAMAscholars, we translate intersectionality in theory, inquiry and praxis. Intersectionality research prompts an analysis of intersectional erasure and the intersectional failures Blackwomen contend with, as well as the intersectional interventions they create to protect themselves from the epistemic and physical violence they encounter in higher education settings. For example, our research on Intersectionality Methodology (IM) (see Haynes et al. 2020) demonstrates how scholars can apply Kimberlé Crenshaw's three-dimensional intersectionality framework in education research, and social science research broadly, in their study of Blackwomen's experiences. We have also taken an intersectional approach to study our experiences as Blackwomen doctoral students (cf. Stewart et al. 2020). This scholarship is yet another example of us taking up intersectionality to share in "Write-Us" research (cf. Austin 1989) by writing Blackwomen into existence (cf. Haynes et al. 2022).

Our immersion into intersectionality began some time ago, while being higher education PhD students, in the same cohort. Our bond to one another was formed as our identities as Blackwomen scholars were developing. We have clung close to one another since, chronicling our collective experiences as Blackwomen academics, noting how our reliance on intersectionality has helped our scholar identity to evolve to center ourselves as Blackmothers. Our Blackwomanhood is also shaped by our ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, religious affiliation and social economic status. Saran is a Black Jamaican, cis-hetero woman, of im-

migrant origin who is Christian from a working-class family. Chayla is a Black American cis-hetero woman who is also Christian from a working-poor family.

3 The Intersectional Lives of Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars

Theme 1: How Black MAMAscholars Contend with Academe

Never an option, but a decision. (Saran)

I don't know the academy without a child because when I got pregnant with her I was doing my second Masters. So by the time I had her I had started the PhD journey. I always thought it was a blessing because 100% it meant that I had no time to do anything else. [However] Having a child in grad school definitely drove home the stereotypes. So if I didn't think they were there before, they were. It's funny, I was just showing her [my daughter] pictures of herself, where I was bringing her with me to these international conferences and stuff like that. She doesn't remember any of that. I kind of said to her 'you know, you weren't an option, you were absolutely the decision'.

I started at NAU just before we knew what COVID-19 was. My institution has a policy about children being on campus and I think the two things [I took away] are what's written and what's implemented. So what's written from HR policy is that children are a liability and they should not be on campus.

However, what happily was a part of even my interview process was a discussion of my needs as a single-mother. I said, if you hire me, you're also hiring that part of me, and that will mean I will occasionally need to leave meetings early, I cannot always show up at every meeting, and I will likely send emails at 5:00 a.m., when I have to wake up. But, I will not respond to them between 5:00 p.m- 7:00 p.m. So that was good. Honestly, I remember in the interview, the Dean asked me, out of concern, "how are you planning to do this without any family in the State and any help?" She was very sweet and very much like "I'm curious." I am sure the Dean was thinking to herself, who is this woman? I told her in response, "you are talking to a person who has nothing to lose and everything to gain. So, I was going to lay everything out and then you would know what decision you were going to make that way. Then, if you couldn't make it happen, this position wouldn't be for me because it wouldn't be for my girls".

Somebody prayed for me. (Chayla)

I find myself wishing I could have face-to-face conversations with my maternal grandmother, who helped raise me. Her name was Harriet. She was married, then became a widow. She was a mother, a grandmother and a great-grandmother. She died when I was just starting High School. She is a Black woman who lived through more than her fair share of challenging times. My baby was born in a new post-pandemic era of white antagonism on Black life happening globally. I believe her counsel is often the insight I need to carry on. In quiet prayer-like fashion, my conversation with my grandmother goes like this,

Grandma, how in the world did you do this?

How did you do this?

How did you get through the day, living in such terrifying times?

How did you avoid blaming yourself for life circumstances that you in fact did not create? How did you work as a maid in white people's houses? I know why you did it, but how did you do it? How did you ride the bus and then walk because the bus-line did not get you all the way there? How did you travel the world and feel as though you could? How did you make time for yourself? How did you do it? And, how do I do it because I struggle. How do I do a job that is trying its best to nullify me? Where can I do my job safely? How can I do it in a way that doesn't require the greatest, most impossible sacrifice; where the consequence is my peace and my baby's joy? How do I know that I'm making the right choice for my family? Being in the academy right now is the hardest work I've ever done. It's very hard to do my job well when the expectation is that I "shut up and dribble". Grandma, the stakes feel just too high.

While my grandmother has gone on, I do have the benefit of a relationship with my mom. When I asked my mom about her perception of how grandma mothered and managed all she faced, she said, "I believe she clung deeply to her faith". My mom recalls my grandmother constantly humming and singing hymns under her breath as she moved about the house, seemingly praying over all of us. My mom's recounting brought a tearful smile to my face. I believe what my mom said about my grandma was true, as I do the same thing.

Theme 2: Circumstances Unforgiving

COVID! COVID redefined every damn thing. (Saran)

2020 was like…whoa… it is still a post traumatic-like-process, which I don't think none of us have really processed. I was transitioning [to NAU] in isolation, not seeing anybody, not knowing anybody, with two young children, who were being schooled at home, in a foreign country; and everything was new. You're trying to find a new physician, establish new networks for yourself and your children, and you have no family, not to mention you are being told you don't know when you could travel [out of the country] to see your family because of COVID restrictions. It required new levels of trying my best to raise and rear, while also trying to provide, protect and care; and you are feeling like you are failing 24/7, while also taking on the full runs of a new job, with new expectations, new culture, new everything. My nervous system was in overdrive. That period of time was rattled with an overactivated nervous system — that entire time. There was never a period during that time, where my nervous system was on chill. Not until, we were fully vaccinated, which brought minimal relief, then the girls started back school, and I saw their difficult transition and then you are living with the guilt: it was a mess. And we witnessed the death of George Floyd; so, I am living in a heightened fear 'What did I just decide to do? What the hell?'; there is so much guilt. I spent the first year in full isolation. Not seeing anybody, not knowing anybody, with two young children. I was trying to figure out what I was doing. I thought it was one of the most inhumane situations because you are dealing with just a different level of invisibility. You're fully visible in your crisis, but everybody's going through crisis. So, it's like tears upon tears. It's one of those: here is crisis [gestures with hands raising above chest], here's crisis [gestures with hands raised above head] and here's crisis again [throws hands up]. It's a period of my life that will stand out because it didn't break me, but the damn thing will haunt me as a form of PTSD. My department head, a white woman, continues to be one of the reasons I was retained; it was

insane because my first academic year, damn near killed me; in every which way possible. Everything was online, classes, department meetings, advising, even exams and conferences. That wasn't it though. It was watching my two babies struggle with their transition to school in the U.S. and online/ hybrid learning. And the other reason, that was also the year I lost my student[2] who happened to be a Black woman. That did me in! I will never forget it, April 2021, the end of my first academic year. I was going through the strides, making it, literally crawling [through the semester] and my student passed away. My whole everything shuts down. I wish I never knew the process for when a student dies. But, I was the program director. So, I didn't have a choice. So, I was asked to be on what we call a 72-hour rapid makeshift crisis team. It starts the minute you become aware that the student passes. I literally quit my role — as program director — at the end of the 72 hours. That's how bad it got, and I was about to quit completely. I went to my chair and I said this is beyond my role as an academic – this is more than my soul can take; and I booked a one-way ticket to Florida to see my family with my girls. I could not take it. I started therapy right after that because I was going to break. I'd given everything and it still breaks me because I had given everything to my daughters. I'd given everything to my students, so when my student passed, there was a level of guilt that stayed with me and still stays. I couldn't go to her funeral. I could not talk to her parents. It will be absolutely one of those moments in my journey in academia of loss because I was not able to help this other Black woman. [That moment] stands out as one of those real kind of like: Damn, what more can we take on in a pandemic? What more can we do? And see how much the system failed us. In her obituary, I never forgot it, her parents or her family wrote that there needs to be more mental health for Women of Color that is geared towards what they're dealing with. They didn't have intersectionality to help guide their thinking. Still, they knew that their daughter was suffering from mental health and little is done for Blackwomen and mental health. In hindsight, that period of time was so dark for all of us. It was COVID, it was the U.S., it was George Floyd and there were going to be real casualties, and she was one of them. And, I thought to myself, yeah I'm no different from this girl. The biggest difference was I was a mom. These two littles girls saved the hell outta me because I was no different from feeling that level of exhaustion.

My new normal, period (Chayla)

I feel like there's so many stories I could tell that would create or paint a picture of what it's like to be a Blackwoman academic and a MAMAscholar. No one taught a course on this in the doctorate program. March 2020 was when universities across the U.S. shut down. I remember feeling such perplexity because I was unsure how to do my job with a baby at home. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-Black racism, two public health crises, were recklessly wreaking havoc on my life, and most people seemingly ignored it, insisting faculty/ staff return to work as normal. Still, I wanted to work. But you know, it's hard to prioritize any of your wants as a mother. Babies demand your whole attention — at every single second. Thank God, breathing happens automatically because I was barely doing that. I remember struggling trying to figure out how to be a part of SAAHE comp exams. I was chairing several students' committees. The comp exams are set up as a case study, where the student presents their case analysis and then there's a Q&A and committee deliberation. I am working from home, conducting exams via Zoom, which I had back-to-back. It's very characteristic and problematic in the academy for the exams for all graduating students to be conducted over one

2 Authors consciously exclude the students names to protect their privacy.

week. This type of academic tradition presumes that all academics are available between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM. It also takes for granted that people are comfortable with Zoom culture. In accordance with Zoom culture, I was expected to sit in front of the camera and allow people to peer into my home-life. Ironically, this made me miss going into the office. I know my body is disruptive and hypervisible on campus and I am prepared for what that feels like, when I go into the office. I know going into the office requires me to engage in identity management strategies to keep myself safe. Oddly enough, I lost my ability to engage in identity management, in my early days of navigating Zoom culture. At that stage, my baby was rarely out of my arms. I remember my baby's daily regimen was more constant than consistent, which included overnight feeds and little sleeping (for either of us) through the night. Mothering is not a job you can clock-out-of, and the fact of the matter is Blackwomen academics are often made to feel the same is true of the jobs at the institution. That said, I am at home with my baby and I don't feel like I have a right to privacy. As the committee chair, I am the lead facilitator of the exam and feel ultimately responsible for the student's experience. I am aware students feel like this is a very, very high stakes academic exercise, even though we do everything to try to make them feel like they are prepared for this moment, and we have every confidence in their ability to do well. There's all sorts of support mechanisms built into our SAAHE program, so students are prepared and feeling prepared going into the comprehensive exam. Still, I felt super accountable to that moment, even more accountable to mothering my baby, which was taking place simultaneously. I did not schedule the exam. The times to hold the exam were pre-assigned. I spent lots of time thinking, strategizing about how I was going to conduct these exams, which did not fit nicely into my baby's regimen. Do I try to shift naptime or a feeding, so I can be present during the exam? Where do I set-up my laptop? It had to be someplace where all my baby's accessories/items are in arm's reach, but also out of view. God forbid my baby knocks the laptop over in the middle of the exam. Respectability politics are real. Blackwomen academics have no room for error; that is, I can be a mother just not at work. So, I made an uneasy decision to set everything up in the nursery. I felt the decision was unavoidable because the exam coincided with my baby's first nap of the day. I thought, this way, I can open the exam and mute myself at a certain point, then turn my camera off at a certain point to rock the baby, then unmute everything to open deliberations and close the exam. I had figured a strategy out in my mind. The morning of that exam, I got myself all together and was stressing. I had gotten the baby's regimen started and got the nursey's rocking chair in the right place. I got the lighting and computer in the right spots. More than being presentable, I was increasingly becoming uncomfortable with the reality that the white gaze of anti-Blackness and white supremacy of academe (cf. Asare 2021), would be forcibly entering my nursery. The white gaze cultivates white supremacist, anti-Black workplace conditions that are precarious for me. The last place I want the white gaze to be is my home, my sanctuary amidst my loving nursery. But Zoom created a vehicle for its transmission. I was distraught. Just then, another Blackwoman academic and MAMAscholar, and good friend, called to check in on me. I unloaded all my stress on her. She responded, sis, I feel you. Here is what you are going to do. Activate the waiting room at your Zoom meeting. Let everyone in and open the meeting thanking everyone for their time and let them know, you are home today with your child. Next, ask a specific committee member to take on the facilitator role, in the event you are muted or off camera, so as not to delay today's proceedings. My girlfriend said, of course your colleague will oblige your request and she was right. My MAMAscholar friend encouraged me to be transparent and to always show up in the fullness of my humanity, to

model for people how they should treat me. She continued saying, "yeah sis, take this exam proceeding off your plate". My girlfriend's advice was so simple it was almost obvious. But, until she said it to me, I swear I had no clue how to navigate this academic exercise, while also doing my real job of Blackmother-work. That piece of healing advice was exactly what I needed.

Theme 3. The Intersectional Intervention

Saran: I thought I was really good at supervising students but this transition into this new space of what Blackwomen need on a COVID level was very different. It became where I had to understand my own mental health in order for me to mother, and to teach. I realized I was taking my mental health for granted and cannot anymore. So, I know now that how I supervise/mentor and how I mother is very intertwined. I've had to understand that I couldn't be a MAMAscholar without understanding my own traumas and healing. I have been in therapy for two years, prompting a shift, where I understand better how to do this [life+mothering +academia]. And I don't claim to do it well. I do not. But it has definitely shifted my mothering since that time and the way I teach. Ultimately, the thing I have learned with my therapist is acceptance and patience, accepting that I cannot control how I'm going to be viewed; and that there is no control over what happens to my daughters. None. None. And, this has been the hardest thing for me to accept because you are supposed to be the mother and supposed to be the one who saves and helps them. I am a much more patient mom. And losing my student and working through the grief and the guilt, and the transition as well, questioning: *Am I teaching in a way that is really edifying, really caring, really inclusive because here I thought I was and then boom this happened. You know?* So, it's shifted something fully in my core and how I go about trying to become even more critically aware of the content, the risk factors, how I mother in the teaching space. I think that is what I took with me because when I was faced with it again with another student, another Black female, I immediately acted but it tears at you, if it doesn't kill you in the process.

Chayla: Here you have three Blackwomen in the same program at different phases of their career in the academy, pursuing the Masters, pursuing the doctorate, and their Black woman faculty member. Each of you, experiencing some level of exhaustion and hysteria in that academic space. *What do we know about intersectionality that would help us to understand the conditions that we are working and learning in? You know?* And, the BS of COVID on top of what Blackwomen encounter in white academic spaces is inhumane already, COVID is the doubling down on that inhumanity, if you can imagine.

Saran: When you bring those three points together it becomes so crystal — there is a level of being fully rendered invisible to the point where you don't matter. You don't matter and all of us being from immigrant origin. We, our uniqueness, our pain is completely invisible. It is almost like we do not exist because we are treated by these institutions like we are not supposed to exist. Hence, our life does not matter. My Blackwomen students and I come from spaces, where it's normative to see so many from the same culture, who are eating the same food. In our home country context, we felt more seen. Comparably, in this white academic space, we are rendered incompetent, and made to feel like we shouldn't even be here because…

Chayla: You are an oddity.

Saran: Yeah, full of stereotypes that have preceded us before we came into the country.
Chayla: Coupled with isolation too.
Saran: 100%
Chayla: And that's already there; it was only intensified by the circumstances of the pandemic.
Saran: Absolutely. Absolutely. And so it adds a different layer of intersectionality, for immigrant-origin-Blackwomen, where there is a cultural component that is lost and there's an assimilation that is fully expected and failure to assimilate really renders you as someone who is always going to be outside, and it puts you in a survival-threat mode constantly. For my second student who was on a student visa, it is that survival-threat mode that exacerbates fear. In her case, fear of being taken away, forced to end your studies and leave the country; easily forgotten. I recently saw a post on the social media page of another Jamaican woman that it was the anniversary of Sandra Bland and I thought about the forgetfulness again. How many people remember what happened to Sandra Bland?
Chayla: Girl, I do. Sandra Bland, stays with me. You know she was an alumna of Prairie View A&M University, where she was soon to start a new job. Every time I cross over Sandra Bland Parkway[3], where she was arrested by police for a minor traffic violation[4] I think about Sandra. She was pulled over in Waller County, where racial tensions[5] grip the local Black community, surrounding Prairie View A&M, a historically Black university. Me and some other Women of Color academics, most of us mothers, most of us also Black, would drive to campus together and the first time we were to ride through Waller there was a discussion about how we are to drive as we pass through Waller because of what happened to Sandra Bland. We agreed that the driver was to enter Waller at the exact speed limit, using the cruise control. The goal was for us all to make it home at the end of the workday, unlike Sandra and to our dismay. She is never far from my mind. But, the forgetfulness you describe highlights Blackwomen's disposability through institutional and societal neglect. Disposability politics that suggests Blackwomen's lives are not worth saving or protecting. It's not even a suggestion. It is …
Saran: It's everything.

[in walks Sammy– chiming in with rhythmic laughter and Black girl joy]
[Saran says to Sammy]
You are so silly. We're going to go out to get lunch by the way. So can you change your clothes? You might as well come in because you are a part of this conversation. Come, say hi to auntie Chayla
[Sammy laughs and says hello.]
[Collective laughter]
Chayla: How are you? How are you, beautiful?
[Saran says to Sammy]
Bye. Come, pick this up for mommy.
Chayla: How old is this baby now?

3 Hasan, S. (2015). Street where Sandra Bland was arrested renamed in her honor. *National Public Radio.* Retrieved August 27, 2023, from https://www.npr.org/2015/08/27/435273211/street-where-sandra-bland-was-arrested-renamed-in-her-honor

4 Lemieux, J. (2019). What happened to Sandra Bland? *Ebony.* Retrieved August 27, 2023, from https://www.ebony.com/what-happened-to-sandra-bland-505/

5 Rowley, T. (2015). Sandra Bland's death divides Texas county with ugly history of racism. The Washington Post. Retrived August 27, 2023, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/ugly-history-of-racism-dogs-texas-county-where-sandra-bland-died/2015/07/27/e69ac168-3317-11e5-8353-1215475949f4_story.html

Saran: 8
Chayla: Going on 18.
Saran: Exactly.
[Saran proceeds, jumping right back into her original train of thought. Chayla, pauses with amazement]
Saran: So yeah, girl.
Chayla: For real. The forgottenness, the isolation, and fear we are talking about are threats to Blackwomen's wellbeing that are enacted by higher education institutions trying to exercise control over Blackwomen's bodies and their choices.
Saran: Intersectionality methodology really helps with that, right.
Chayla: Absolutely! It reminds you and me that we belong to ourselves. Like, Jada Pinkett said to her daughter Willow, a Blackwoman's "body, spirit and mind are her domain".
Saran: And, that is how Blackwomen protect themselves in white academic spaces.
Saran: Love you babes.
Chayla: Love you too.

4 Concluding Thoughts

We use our lived experiences and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) as a launch point by which to illuminate the vital work and contributions of Blackwomen academics with MAMAscholar skillsets. If it feels like this essay ends abruptly, it does. We felt it too and attributed the uneasiness we felt to the white hetero-patriarchal norms of academic writing, which insist our essay's conclusion fit neatly into a package. But, we cannot oblige. Our essay is written in the raw to underscore our lives are not simple or one-dimensional. Moreover, the vignettes presented highlight only part of what it means for us to be Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars. Our story is filled with grief, loss, love, beauty and joy because Blackwomen are complex and thus, our lives are nuanced. Vignettes provided the literary device we needed to share our story. And while we only share part of our story, we do not want readers to dismiss our experiences by categorizing these as isolated incidents and impossible realities for other Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars. Rather, we share our story to encourage others to be in solidarity with us, and other Blackwomen academics (faculty and students) by aligning themselves with our interests to exercise agency and create intersectional interventions (Patton & Njoku 2019) that undo the intersectional erasure and disposability politics that undermine our wellbeing in (and outside) the academy.

To that end, we unpack the intersectionality concepts emphasized within our vignettes. The first being **intersectional erasure** (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectional erasure explains how and why Blackwomen and MAMAscholars experience extreme invisibility. From the onset, we observe Saran apply her MAMAscholar skillset to confront extreme invisibility by unapologetically talking about herself and her needs as a single-mother in the hiring process. This is a vulnerable space for Blackwomen academics, in particular because of the ways that Blackmotherhood is dehumanized in the larger societal context. The precarious and often invisible circumstances force Blackwomen academics to adhere to respectability politics that Chayla describes. It's respectability politics that insist Blackwomen academics can be mothers

though not at work or in the context of their job or career. Saran chose to disclose that she is a single-mother and expressed her workplace needs in that regard, in her attempt to undo the race, gender and class oppression that shapes her life in the academy. Similarly, Chayla's narrative highlighting conversations with her grandmother, further underscores the impact of intersectional erasure. Chayla is attempting to make-sense of the hidden emotional labor and responsibilities Blackmothers carry as part of their mental load (e. g., "How do I do my work safely?*"* and having a "nervous system in overdrive."). A mental load laced with the same intersectional subordination or anti-Black-gendered-racism-and-misogynoir that shaped both her life and her grandmother's life, despite their different generations and occupations. The academy's determination to ignore the intersectional subordination we experience keeps the trauma and terror we encounter (e. g., "make it home [alive]" as Chayla denotes, as well as, the white supremacist, anti-Black workplace conditions, she describes) completely invisible. In this example, we see how intersectional erasure contributes to higher education institutions failing Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars, like us. The intersectional invisibility we encounter permits the academy as a microcosm of society to devalue Blackmothers and their motherwork, which go a long way to explain why Blackwomen remain so grossly underpaid compared to their white women and Women of Color counterparts. Additionally, Blackwomen are the largest population working in low paying jobs such as adult/child care and domestic labor, and Blackwomen carry the largest amount of student loan debt in the U.S. (Bostick et al. 2022). In short, intersectional erasure illuminates why it takes a Blackmother, like Chayla, more than two generations to subvert the intersectional subordination that contributes to the generational poverty she was likely born into, regardless if she was college educated or not.

More plainly, **intersectional failure** (Crenshaw 1991) helps us to understand how racist and sexist stereotypes of Blackwomanhood are used to justify or blame Blackwomen for the epistemic and physical violence that they encounter. In this way, it is socially acceptable for academic norms and traditions to harm Blackwomen and try to control Blackwomen's bodies and Blackmothering. For example, Chayla's narrative highlights how white cis-hetero-patriarchal academic norms can reinforce the traditional gender roles of a working white dad and the stay-at-home white mom, subordinating Black-working-moms, ensnared by performance expectations within the traditional work environment.

There are examples of harm and control throughout the vignettes, highlighting the inequitable gendered impacts of COVID-19. In Saran's reflection on her two students, we see three Blackwomen academics all in the same white academic space, each being made to feel like their lives don't matter, further exacerbating the disposability Black people felt in the aftermath of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the impact of COVID-19. At the same time, we learn from Saran's narrative that Blackwomen academics care for and protect Blackwomen students, holding their personhood in such high regard, to the extent that her role as mother to her own children becomes intertwined with her role as MAMAscholar. Saran took on the role of other-mothering (Collins 1987, 2000; Stewart 2019) providing support in ways that the institution would not. Other-mothering is one way that the institution mammifies Blackwomen academics (Collins 1987, 2000; Stewart 2019). Mammy is a racist and sexist stereotype that constructs Blackwomen as docile and submissive, concerned with the wellbeing of [white] other's and at the expense of her own. As Saran's narrative stresses, other-mothering requires MAMAscholar skillsets and includes responsibilities not often expected of white faculty. Saran's MAMAscholar skillsets were vital in uplifting the humanity

of her Blackwomen student, but her labor as other-mother went unacknowledged and remained invisible because Blackmothering is undervalued in the academy.

MAMAscholars also experience mammification by way of academic norms that make them feel being a Blackwoman academic is a job where they cannot clock out. In turn, MAMAscholars are expected to show up like normal in the abnormal circumstances of anti-Black violence and COVID-19, and fit mothering within and around responsibilities of faculty life, which contributes to feelings of desperation, burnout, and other health and medical risk factors. Such intersectional failures are revealed in Saran's narrative, highlighting how inadequately the institution addressed the specific needs of BlackJamaicanwomen of immigrant origin and within Chayla's narrative, highlighting the impact of Zoom culture on Blackmothers. Mammy, and other racist and sexist stereotypes like Superwoman renders Blackwomen as superhuman and able to prevail against the physical and psychological impact of overworking and constant striving toward freedom to improve her family's life chances. The Mammy and Superwoman trope rob Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars of their personhood and fragility, permitting higher education institutions to have little regard for their mental health and wellbeing. What might it look like for institutional leaders to address one of the intersectional failures underscored in our vignettes with a sense of urgency, barring no expense, and with Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars in mind? Such institutional efforts would need to be the basis of intersectional interventions designed to protect Blackwomen, like us.

Intersectional interventions (Crenshaw 1991; Patton & Njoku 2019) are the strategies that Blackwomen and those working in solidarity with us, enact to name and dismantle the societal/institutional norms that make violence toward them socially acceptable and create hostile work and learning environments for Blackwomen. Throughout the vignettes, both Saran and Chayla highlight how self-care and beloved-bonds, two forms of intersectional interventions, help them to heal and persist in their roles as academics and MAMAscholars. For instance, Saran's narrative sheds light on the benefits of therapy, where Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars can find the identity-affirming support and care they need to navigate life+mothering+academia. Therapy is a form of self-care that can be especially helpful to Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars, like us, who encounter disposability-politics-related trauma that contributes to the grief and loss they experience in the academy. Saran and Chayla's narratives also illustrate the importance of beloved-bonds. Pronounced the same way as Toni Morrison's (1987/2004) *Beloved* (Bee-Love-Ed), beloved-bonds, like Toni's literary work by same name, places emphasis on the way Blackmother's love, and the bond of love between Blackmothers, their children, particularly their daughters. Blackmother's love from this point of view, is intimate, political, and life-altering. Beloved-bonds between Blackmothers and their daughters can be seen in the love-relationship between Saran and her daughters, when Saran proclaims, "these two little girls saved the hell outta me". Beloved-bonds also illustrate how Blackmothering takes precedence in the lives of Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars. Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars, like Chayla, who are unwilling to "sacrifice her peace or her baby's joy" are more likely to set necessary workplace boundaries to protect themselves from the racist and gendered performance expectations (e. g., mammification) being imposed on their bodies. The beloved-bonds of Blackmothers for their Black children is also reflected in the interactions between Saran, Sammy and Chayla, where we see how Blackmothering creates the conditions by which Saran and [auntie] Chayla do their work. Finally, beloved-bonds between Blackwomen

friends serve as much needed intersectional interventions for Saran and Chayla. For instance, Chayla describes sage advice she received from another Blackwoman academic and MAMAscholar, who lovingly provided the comfort and reassurance she needed to set workplace boundaries, giving Chayla the confidence to show up as a Black-working-mother. Blackwomen friendships, particularly between Blackwomen academics and MAMAscholars, show the expansiveness and capacity of Blackmothering to promote healing, provide compassion and security, and nurture self-assured Black people. In this way, Blackwomen friends serve as the intersectional intervention Blackwomen need in a societal and institutional context that constantly tries to dispossess and subordinate them. It is with this expanded framework of Blackmother work that Chayla and Saran have formed the beloved-bond of Blackwomen friendship that sustains them.

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