



Abigal Muchechetti

THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF
A NON-ACADEMIC
WOMAN OF COLOUR
WORKING IN UK
HIGHER EDUCATION

Black Studies

Collection Editor

CHRISTOPHER MCAULEY

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF
A NON-ACADEMIC
WOMAN OF COLOUR
WORKING IN UK
HIGHER EDUCATION

Abigal Muchechetti

THE LIVED
EXPERIENCES OF
A NON-ACADEMIC
WOMAN OF COLOUR
WORKING IN UK
HIGHER EDUCATION

Black Studies

Collection Editor

Christopher McAuley



First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790, Lived Places Publishing expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

The author and editor have made every effort to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication, but assume no responsibility for any errors, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or omissions. Likewise, every effort has been made to contact copyright holders. If any copyright material has been reproduced unwittingly and without permission, the publisher will gladly receive information enabling them to rectify any error or omission in subsequent editions.

Copyright © 2025 Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781917566421 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781917566445 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781917566438 (ePUB)

The right of Abigail Muchecheti to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988.

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

To my son, Farai Nigel – my pride, my joy, and a reflection of all the love and sacrifices that have shaped me. Watching you grow into the person you are today has been one of my greatest blessings. May you always walk in confidence, knowing that you stand on the shoulders of those who came before you. Your journey is your own, but never forget that you carry within you a legacy of strength, resilience, and boundless potential.

To my husband, Phillip – my unwavering support, my partner in life, and my greatest champion. Your patience, love, and encouragement have given me the strength to share my story, even when the weight of it felt too heavy. Thank you for believing in me, for standing beside me through every triumph and every trial, and for reminding me that my voice matters.

To my late mother – your wisdom, resilience, and sacrifices paved the way for me to stand tall. Everything I am, I owe in part to you. Your love, even in absence, continues to guide me, and your lessons remain etched in my heart. This book is a tribute to your legacy, a testament to the strength you instilled in me. I hope I have made you proud.

And to every Black woman navigating the complex and often unforgiving world of higher education – this book is for you. For those who have been overlooked, silenced, or made to feel like they do not belong. Your struggles, your perseverance, and your brilliance deserve to be acknowledged. May these pages remind you that you are not alone, that your voice is powerful, and that you belong in every space you choose to occupy.

Epigraph

To be a Black woman in UK higher education spaces is to carry history on your shoulders while carving out a future that was never meant to include you – but still, you rise.

Abstract

This book offers a deeply personal and scholarly examination of the challenges faced by Black women in UK higher education, particularly those who are foreign-born. It explores how race, gender, and foreignness intersect to shape their academic experiences, revealing systemic colourism, unconscious bias, and institutional racism that hinder career progression and well-being. Through personal narratives and academic analysis, the book underscores how Black women navigate academic spaces marked by exclusionary practices while highlighting their resilience and identity negotiation strategies. It calls for transformative change in higher education, emphasising the need for inclusive environments that empower marginalised groups and confront racial, gendered, and national exclusions. Drawing on theories of intersectionality and key scholarly work, it serves as both a critical reflection and a call to action for more inclusive, equitable academic spaces.

Key words

Black women, higher education, colourism, identity negotiation, representation, systemic racism, inclusivity, empowerment, mental health, academia

Contents

| | | |
|----------------------------|---|-------------|
| Diagrams | | xi |
| Warning | | xii |
| Learning objectives | | xiii |
| Introduction | | xiv |
| Part I | Staff: Race, gender, and survival in the workplace | 1 |
| Chapter 1 | Race and gender on professional identity within higher education | 3 |
| Chapter 2 | The influence of colourism on career progression and representation | 49 |
| Chapter 3 | The emotional toll of diversity, equality, and inclusion: Rejection, shame, and the burden of belonging in higher education | 95 |
| Chapter 4 | Resistance | 133 |
| Part II | Students: Navigating institutions that were not built for you | 183 |
| Chapter 5 | Supporting marginalised students through mentorship | 185 |
| Chapter 6 | Introduction to colourism in higher education: The student experience | 255 |

| | | |
|------------------|--|------------|
| Chapter 7 | Institutional neglect and invisibility: Underreporting of BME student mental health issues | 327 |
| Chapter 8 | Conclusion | 375 |
| Epilogue | | 411 |
| Index | | 415 |

Diagrams

| | | |
|------------------|--|------------|
| Diagram 1 | Intersectional gatekeeping framework | 158 |
| Diagram 2 | The toll of colourist racism on students of colour | 274 |
| Diagram 3 | Cycle of institutional neglect and its long-term impacts on BME students | 360 |

Warning

This book draws on the lived experiences of both staff and students in UK higher education who generously contributed to this research. Their reflections address issues such as racism, colourism, exclusion, and institutional harm. Given the sensitive and, at times, distressing nature of these topics, readers are advised that some content may be triggering. All names and identifying details have been changed to protect anonymity.

Learning objectives

By engaging with this book, readers will critically examine the lived experiences of Black women in UK higher education, with attention to race, gender, and systemic barriers. They will be encouraged to reflect on institutional power, identify the impact of microaggressions and bias, and explore ways to advocate for inclusive practice. The book aims to inspire both personal insight and institutional change through a deeper understanding of marginalisation, resistance, and empowerment.

Introduction

Higher education in the UK is often praised for its diversity and inclusion. Yet beneath this polished surface lies a reality shaped by systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect Black women, women of colour, and other marginalised groups. While universities promote their equity commitments, the lived experiences of non-academic staff and Black women in academia expose a stark gap between institutional rhetoric and practice.

This book critically examines how race, gender, and institutional power intersect within UK universities, revealing the barriers marginalised groups face and offering pathways for meaningful change.

At its core, the book draws on intersectionality – a term coined by Crenshaw (1989) – to explore how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, shape experiences of marginalisation. For Black women and women of colour, this takes the form of gendered racism, colourism, and structural exclusion. These forces shape professional identity, limit career progression, and inflict emotional and psychological tolls that often go unseen.

Combining critical theory with lived experience, the book challenges institutional norms and advances a vision for equity grounded in testimony, analysis, and transformation.

The first part of the book focuses on staff, exploring how race and gender intersect to shape professional identity within higher

education. **Chapter 1, Race and gender on professional identity within higher education**, interrogates how race and gender intersect to shape the professional identities of non-academic staff, particularly Black women and women of colour. It uncovers how their contributions – though essential – are often undervalued and how they navigate daily experiences of gendered racism, microaggressions, and a lack of meaningful representation and mentorship within the university hierarchy. **Chapter 2, Influence of colourism on career progression**, examines how skin tone influences perceptions of professionalism, leadership, and suitability for advancement. **Chapter 3, Exploring the lived experiences of Black women in academia**, focuses specifically on Black women navigating predominantly White institutions, this chapter explores the compounded pressures of racial and gendered expectations. It sheds light on the emotional labour, systemic exclusion, and resilience strategies Black women employ to survive and succeed in academia, as well as the scarcity of Black women in senior leadership roles. Closing Part I, **Chapter 4, Resilience and resistance in academia**, centres on the ways non-academic Black women resist institutional marginalisation and assert agency in spaces that were not built for them. It highlights stories of quiet defiance, collective action, and transformative resilience, exploring how resistance can be both personal and political in higher education workplaces.

The second part of the book turns to students, who likewise must navigate institutions that were not built for them. **Chapter 5, Supporting marginalised students through Mentorship**, identifies the critical role of mentorship in supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds. It explores

how culturally aware mentoring can offer guidance, affirmation, and advocacy in a system that often fails to acknowledge the full humanity and potential of marginalised students. Building on earlier themes, **Chapter 6, Colourism in the student body**, explores how colourism manifests among students, affecting peer dynamics, inclusion, self-image, and opportunities for leadership and visibility. It also considers how institutional silence around colourism allows these dynamics to persist unchallenged. **Chapter 7, Institutional neglect, invisibility, and mental health**, then exposes the emotional and mental health toll of being persistently unseen and unsupported in university spaces. It critically examines the consequences of institutional neglect, the pathologisation of Black and Brown distress, and the urgent need for responsive, trauma-informed mental health support. Concluding the book, **Chapter 8, Establishing accountability mechanisms**, shifts from critique to solutions, offering tangible ways institutions can create systems of accountability. It proposes frameworks for assessing progress on equity goals, elevating marginalised voices in decision-making, and ensuring that diversity and inclusion initiatives translate into structural transformation.

Part I

Staff: Race, gender, and survival in the workplace

1

Race and gender on professional identity within higher education

Introduction

This chapter examines the professional identities of women of colour in non-academic roles within UK higher education. While the experiences of Black and racially minoritised academics have received some attention, the realities faced by those in professional services remain underexplored. Here, I focus on how race and gender intersect to shape visibility, belonging, and career progression for women of colour working beyond the academic track.

Women of colour in these roles are often clustered in lower-paid, precarious positions – such as administrative support, cleaning, and catering – while being significantly underrepresented in senior management and strategic decision-making (Rollock, 2019; Mirza, 2015). This occupational segregation reflects broader racialised and gendered hierarchies that persist in UK workplaces. Discriminatory recruitment, limited access to mentoring, and exclusion from professional networks further compound

their marginalisation (Morley, 2020). Recognising and addressing these dynamics is essential for achieving meaningful, sustainable change within higher education institutions (HEIs).

Terms matter

In this book, I use terms such as Black, women of colour, and racially minoritised to reflect the complexity of identity and experience among non-White women in UK higher education. While “Black and Minority Ethnic” (BME) remains common in institutional discourse, it is increasingly criticised for masking difference and reinforcing Whiteness as the norm. Participants themselves highlighted the inadequacy of such labels, noting that even institutional terminology can feel like a form of othering. Where “BME” appears in the text, it reflects the language used by participants or in the policies they engage with.

I also make a deliberate choice to use the term lighter-skinned rather than “mixed-race” or “mixed-heritage” when discussing participants who appeared to benefit from colourist hierarchies. This choice reflects the fact that lighter skin in African and diasporic communities does not necessarily indicate White or mixed ancestry. Genetic studies show that variation in skin pigmentation is ancient and indigenous to the African continent, with both light and dark pigmentation genes circulating long before European colonial contact (Crawford et al., 2017; Feng, McQuillan & Tishkoff, 2021). Using “lighter-skinned” therefore allows for a more accurate discussion of colourism – a social hierarchy organised by visible skin tone without imposing racial categories that do not match either the scientific evidence or participants’ lived identities.

Methodology

This book draws on a qualitative, narrative-based methodology that brings together interviews, focus groups, policy analysis, and autoethnography. My own experience as a Black, migrant, non-academic woman working and studying within UK higher education forms an essential part of the analytical frame. I use my voice not as an add-on to the research, but as part of the evidence a site where institutional structures become visible.

Staff Participants

The study involved 28 non-academic women working across seven English universities, including both collegiate and post-1992 institutions. These women worked in a wide range of professional services roles student support, HR, estates, libraries, admissions, administration, international offices, welfare, and equality and diversity and ranged from junior to senior grades.

Data collection took place primarily through both individual interviews and focus groups with the same participants. The focus groups helped illuminate shared patterns, collective tensions, and forms of institutional silence that individual interviews alone could not capture.

Although the fieldwork took place in England, the patterns reflect issues documented across the UK sector.

Student Participants

The research also included 15 students, mostly postgraduates with a small number of final-year undergraduates. Participants included both UK-based and international students, studying

full-time and part-time, and many belonged to racialised, working-class, disabled or migrant backgrounds. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, telephone, and occasional face-to-face meetings.

Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analysed thematically. I combined inductive coding with intersectional and critical race frameworks to identify recurring patterns such as belonging, microaggressions, foreignness, language, career barriers, and forms of refusal.

The analytic process was iterative, returning repeatedly to both the transcripts and my own autoethnographic reflections to trace where personal experience and collective experience converged.

Autoethnographic Positioning

Because I have lived and worked within the same structures as many participants, I use autoethnography not simply to describe my story but to clarify the institutional logics that shaped the experiences of others. My positionality as both staff and student enables a dual perspective on the cultures, silences, and forms of harm that underlie the sector.

The intersection of race and gender in higher education

Despite universities' claims of meritocracy, systemic barriers rooted in race and gender continue to shape career trajectories,

particularly for non-academic staff. These barriers – structural inequalities, implicit biases, and exclusionary professional cultures – create a labyrinth that many struggle to navigate.

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (1989) provides a powerful lens for understanding these challenges. Intersectionality reveals how Black women's professional identities are shaped by the dual forces of racial and gendered oppression shape Black women's professional identities. While all women face gender-based discrimination in the workplace, Black women experience a unique set of hurdles that set their experiences apart from those of White women or Black men. For instance, in professional services roles within universities, Black women are often overlooked for promotions despite possessing the requisite skills and experience (Bhopal, 2018).

Career progression in UK universities is not a level playing field. While academic staff often follow clear pathways tied to research, publications, and teaching milestones, non-academic staff face a far less defined trajectory. This lack of structure disproportionately affects Black women and women of colour, who must navigate multiple layers of systemic exclusion. Despite their vital contributions to university operations, many remain stuck in roles with limited mobility, burdened by racialised expectations and denied recognition for their expertise.

The statistics paint a stark picture. According to Advance HE (2023) staff data for 2021/22, shows that the number of BME employees in senior positions remains alarmingly low. This underrepresentation is not accidental but the result of deeply entrenched institutional inequalities. As Bhopal (2018) notes, the

lack of research into the experiences of Black and other racialised non-academic staff only exacerbates the problem.

For Black and other racialised women, the challenges extend beyond gender discrimination – they face compounded barriers shaped by both race and gender. As one participant, Tsitsi, reflected:

I get it, we are all women and face discrimination. But for us women of colour, it feels like we are still having to slave for white women, and their input is seen as more credible than mine. Even when I do diversity there's always a white woman taking my credit. We are mostly the grafters at the bottom.

Tsitsi's words capture a deep frustration: the erasure and exploitation many women of colour experience, especially in diversity work, where White colleagues often receive the credit. Her testimony underscores the need to address how race and gender intersect to reproduce professional inequality. These intersecting forms of gendered racism are not abstract; they are materialised in how Black women are sorted into particular kinds of jobs, valued in particular ways, and routinely kept away from the centres of institutional power.

Racialised roles and lack of recognition

One of the most persistent barriers to career progression for Black women in non-academic roles is the racialisation of their professional labour. Research has shown that Black women are disproportionately concentrated in administrative and student support roles within UK universities, often relegated to positions that provide essential institutional functions but lack clear

pathways to leadership (Bhopal, 2018). These roles, though integral to the daily functioning of universities, are often undervalued in terms of strategic decision-making and career advancement opportunities.

The overrepresentation of Black women in these lower positions, administrative roles or student-facing support services, further illustrates this phenomenon (Arday, 2022). As Bhopal (2018) argues, institutions frequently position diversity work as a necessary but peripheral function, often assigning these responsibilities to Black women without recognising their leadership potential.

The devaluation of administrative and student support roles is reinforced by structural hierarchies in universities. White men predominantly hold leadership positions, while professional services vital to achieving strategic goals – such as finance and operations – are largely dominated by White professionals (Morley, 2020). In contrast, roles involving emotional labour and diversity initiatives, often held by Black women, are viewed as “soft” and less essential to the institution’s mission. This perception affects career progression, as individuals in these roles are less likely to be considered for senior positions despite possessing the necessary skills and experience.

Moreover, Black women in non-academic roles frequently encounter what Rollock (2019) describes as the “invisibility paradox,” where they are highly visible in discussions on diversity yet overlooked in promotion and leadership structures. This paradox extends beyond EDI roles to administrative positions, where Black women often find themselves pigeonholed into roles that emphasise service rather than strategic influence.

For Black women in non-academic roles within UK universities, career stagnation is not simply a consequence of generic workplace barriers; it is deeply rooted in the intersection of race and gender, producing a unique form of discrimination described as gendered racism by Essed (1991). This double bind manifests in ways that make career advancement disproportionately difficult for Black women, who must navigate both the structural obstacles faced by women in higher education and the racial biases that affect Black professionals. While White women contend with sexism, Black women experience both simultaneously, compounding the challenges they face.

Black feminist scholars have long highlighted how mainstream feminist movements have historically centred the experiences of White women, failing to acknowledge the compounded oppression faced by women of colour (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000). Within UK universities, these dynamics are still evident in the ways Black women are marginalised within institutional structures, expected to perform undervalued labour, and systematically excluded from career progression opportunities.

One participant, Lucy, criticised the Athena Swan initiative for “centring White women’s advancement” while ignoring the compounded barriers faced by Black women. Her insight exposes the racial blind spots within mainstream gender equality efforts. One of the most pervasive manifestations of gendered racism in UK higher education is the extraction of unpaid labour from BME women, which benefits the institution while providing little to no career advancement. Scholars such as Ahmed (2012) and Bhopal (2018) have demonstrated how universities rely on the emotional and administrative labour

of women of colour without formally recognising or rewarding these contributions. For instance, participants like Laila described the emotional toll of acting as an informal counsellor for BME students. This role often falls outside their job descriptions and goes unacknowledged in performance evaluations. Similarly, Rosa expressed ambivalence about being repeatedly invited to represent diversity and inclusion efforts, a dynamic that highlights the tension between hyper-visibility and professional invisibility.

These expectations place a disproportionate burden on Black women, diverting time and energy away from career-building opportunities such as leadership training or professional development programs. While these contributions are valuable, they are rarely recognised in performance evaluations or promotion criteria, thereby reinforcing the devaluation of work traditionally associated with marginalised groups (Ahmed, 2012). Moreover, this emotional labour is often extracted without institutional support, placing an additional burden on Black women and contributing to mental health issues. In addition to emotional labour, Black women in non-academic roles are often assigned what researchers call “office housework” (Williams & Dempsey, 2018) – tasks that are essential to workplace functioning but do not lead to career progression.

Participants like Faith described performing these tasks on top of their regular workloads, only to be told that their roles were “limited” when they sought promotions. Similarly, Lucia recounted a deeply unsettling encounter with a White male colleague who dismissed her aspirations for career advancement, invoking the legacy of the Windrush generation to justify her marginalisation. These

experiences underscore how institutional structures and interpersonal dynamics converge to reinforce professional stagnation. Taken together, these patterns do not simply reflect “unfortunate” career outcomes; they expose a system in which Black women’s labour is indispensable yet structurally devalued. To understand how this is sustained, we need to examine the institutional logics that make such exploitation appear normal.

Institutional silence, racialised emotional taxation, and coded exclusion in UK higher education

UK HEIs present a paradox of progressive diversity rhetoric coexisting with entrenched racialised exclusion. While publicly committing to inclusion, most of institutions systematically marginalise Black women through three interconnected mechanisms: institutional silence, Racialised Emotional Taxation (RET), and coded exclusion. These systems operate synergistically to extract Black women’s intellectual, emotional, and administrative labour under the veneer of inclusion while structurally impeding their career progression. This chapter advances critical scholarship by theorising RET as a distinct phenomenon that emerges from and reinforces institutional racism, moving beyond generic conceptualisations of emotional labour to expose the racialised political economy of affect in academic spaces.

Institutional silence constitutes neither accidental oversight nor benign neglect but rather a deliberate technology of racial governance. When Black women articulate experiences of