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Surviving Academic Karens While Black

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While the country is dealing with social unrest around issues with the criminal legal system, Black scholars from around the country have taken to social media to use their voices and platforms to shed light on injustices in and out of the academy. The Black Lives Matter movement has sparked honest questions around issues of race and racism in academia. The hashtag [#Blackintheivory](#) became a trending hashtag on Twitter that featured Black faculty, staff, and students sharing their racial horror stories at their institutions of higher education (see [here](#)). In many tweets, Black scholars shared their experiences navigating predominately White institutions and the harms they have experienced. Academic departments around the U.S. often lack racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Many universities and departments around the country have committed to increasing diversity in their institutions, but many Black and other scholars of color have questioned the effectiveness of such diversity initiatives. Academia is often seen as a progressive and democratic space where ideas are shared, and knowledge is produced. However, for many Black scholars, academic institutions and departments are violent and oppressive spaces. Black scholars often deal with overt and covert forms of racism while trying to matriculate as junior faculty members. Being a junior faculty member can be an especially vulnerable position for faculty from underrepresented backgrounds. Senior faculty with malicious intentions can prey on junior faculty of color, by using their seniority to attempt to gain loyalty and control. As a result, Black faculty must be extremely careful of who they trust, who they open up to and who they consider to be mentors or people who have their best interests in mind.

A common theme amongst Black scholars who bravely shared their experiences publicly via social media utilizing [#Blackintheivory](#) on twitter was the reality that both White men and White women engage in exclusionary practices against Black scholars. Close attention was paid to academic 'Karens' who pose as progressive allies and social justice warriors while subjecting Black faculty to extreme microaggressions. The term Karen stems from privileged White women weaponizing their whiteness to the detriment of Black people. Karens often harass Black people in public by questioning their belonging in certain spaces and even calling the police on people whom they deem to be suspicious or not belonging. There have been many videos and memes circulating around the internet exposing Karens weaponizing their whiteness (see [here](#)). [#Blackintheivory](#) helped to bring awareness to the harms that academic Karens cause to Black faculty. My own experiences alongside others in the academy have brought us in close proximity to academic Karens. Often, when Black scholars enter the academy, they do so knowing that many of the institutions they enter have race and equity issues. Thus, finding allies who are committed to supporting and defending Black faculty is imperative. Yet, finding true allyship can be an extremely challenging and harmful experience.

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When entering an academic department, academic Karens are often initially extremely supportive of Black junior faculty. They appear to be friendly and progressive-minded and willing to go out of their way to prove that they are allies and different than other colleagues who may not be as welcoming to scholars from underrepresented backgrounds. Academic Karens often do research around issues of race and inequality and serve on committees geared for equity and diversity, which gives them legitimacy in the eyes of many. They are methodical with their dispositional interface with the broader campus community and the public. For the affected junior Black scholar, it is the literal teacup experience from Get Out. Their overly friendly demeanor towards Black junior faculty can be deceptive and harmful for individuals who may be unsuspecting of their disingenuous kindness. Their kindness is often used as a control mechanism to tame and target Black scholars. Once a Black junior faculty member shows an inkling of independent thought or views counter to an academic Karen they weaponize their whiteness. Moreover, their whiteness can be weaponized by labeling Black faculty as unprofessional and uncollegial, angry, and undeserving of employment. This labelling is extremely harmful to Black junior faculty because these mischaracterizations of one's character and professionalism can be used to prevent reappointment or promotion.

Karens often spend several years on campus creating an image of being progressive and committed to diversity and inclusion. Thus, when they weaponize their whiteness to harm Black junior faculty, they are believed. Black faculty then have to navigate an environment in which they are not believed, respected, or listened to because the respected academic Karen's feelings and beliefs are deemed legitimate while the lived experiences of the Black junior faculty member are dismissed. Academic Karens love Black junior faculty, but only those who they believe they can control as a means of helping them consolidate power on campus. In a sense, academic Karens prefer Blacks to be docile colleagues who shut up until they get tenure. Once a Black junior faculty member is seen as being independent or disloyal to an academic Karen, they are deemed to be expendable. As a result, Black junior faculty are often marginalized within their institutions because academic Karens tend to have more institutional support and power than them. Thus, academic Karens are empowered by institutions to carry out racialized attacks against Black junior faculty members with impunity.

Academic Karens are extremely dangerous and manipulative. They are often allowed to discursively harm Black junior faculty while maintaining their reputations as social justice warriors while Black junior faculty members suffer irreparable harms. Many of these harms being psychological given the free-range of attack senior scholars have against junior scholars in this industry. The Black junior colleague will undoubtedly be worried about all of the typical reappointment and promotion worries, but they will be compounded by race, gender, and other personal identifiers. Thus, while institutions may not consider these factors to be direct harms, they materialize as institutionalized racism that White counterparts do not experience. Certainly, the effects of this can be catastrophic for both the institution and all individuals involved, but academic Karens are about power and control, like any typical predator.

Institutions of higher education must implement mechanisms of protection for junior Black faculty members. The experiences and knowledges of Black junior faculty must be centered if academic institutions are truly committed to diversity and inclusion. Far too often the voices of Blacks are marginalized and the racial attacks they experience are rarely critically examined by administration. To ensure that institutions of higher education embrace and support inclusion, institutions must begin to reimagine what true diversity and inclusion really looks like. Black junior faculty should not be expected to not have opinions or not be allowed to participate in the democratic process of higher education, especially when many institutions claim to want to hire unrepresented populations to increase diversity and culturally enrich the campus environment. White allies must not engage in performative

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allyship, but instead should use their privilege to challenge and change discriminatory institutional policies and practices. Hanging a Black Lives Matter sticker on one's door or posting progressive tweets on Twitter is not true allyship when Black junior faculty are navigating hostile environments that can be changed with the help of White allies. Institutions most hold academic Karens accountable, they should not be allowed to terrorize Black junior faculty while maintaining their "self-created" social justice advocate image. In the era of Black Lives Matter, faculty diversity is extremely important. However, simply just having Black faces on campus is not enough if Black junior faculty face retaliation and experience racial aggressions from people who claim to be allies. Blacks in higher education must be respected and empowered to protect themselves and other marginalized scholars. If we want true democracy and equity in the academy White allies must self-reflect, hold themselves accountable for their misdeeds, and hold academic Karens accountable for their harms. I hope this op-ed serves as a call to arms for people truly committed to equity and diversity and I hope it empowers Black junior faculty members to use their voices to change oppressive institutions.



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