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Pieces of Us: A Collaborative Critical Autoethnography of Black Women's Experiences and Professional Work Cycle within Residence Life

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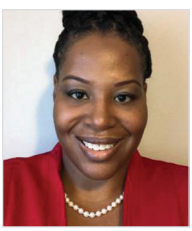

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THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY is to examine the lived experiences of Black women in housing, especially the various stages of the work cycle of Black women in the field. This study includes Black women across multiple roles within residential life, including graduate assistants, resident directors, and associate directors. Particular emphasis will be placed on understanding the factors influencing Black women's decisions to remain in or depart from the field, with a focus on the role of gendered racism in shaping these choices. The authors will also offer guidelines and discuss implications for promoting well-being within this context. The methodology employed will be collaborative autoethnography, utilizing a series of reflective questions to facilitate the processing and analysis of personal experiences.

Black women housing professionals occupy a complex and often overlooked space in higher education. Tasked with fostering inclusive campus communities while navigating institutional structures that were not built with them in mind (Myrick & Lewis-Flenaugh, 2022), Black women consistently demonstrate resilience, innovation, and leadership. However, their contributions are frequently met with challenges rooted in gendered racism and professional marginalization (Bizzell, 2024; Essed, 1991). College and university housing also demands a deep emotional

investment, requiring professionals to be constantly available, highly adaptable, and deeply committed to student success. This often comes at a personal cost to Black women, who usually navigate intersecting layers of workplace inequities (Haynes, 2019). For instance, according to a study conducted by N.M. West (2020), "although Black women are the most represented minoritized group among U.S. higher education administrators, they continue to lag behind white women and men in terms of leadership in the student affairs profession" (West, 2020, p. 72), meaning they are primarily concentrated in mid-level positions, regardless of experience and degree attainment (Miles, 2012). This reality, coupled with the expectation of being ever-present, emotionally available, and tirelessly dedicated, can lead to burnout, racial fatigue, and—in some cases—a departure from the field (Porter et al., 2025; Quaye et al., 2023; Weaver-Douglas, 2022).

Although emerging research is being conducted on the experiences of Black women professionals in higher education (Haynes, 2019; Porter et al., 2025; Quaye et al., 2023; West, 2020), we contend that further research is needed that centers the experiences of Black women housing professionals at various career levels. We aim to address this research gap by employing critical collaborative autoethnography (Chang, 2008) to center the experiences of seven Black women who worked in university housing, from graduate assistants to associate directors. Our narratives highlight the realities of Black women in residential life, impacting decisions to continue or depart from the field. This study addresses the following research questions: 1) How do Black women in residence life as entry- and mid-level professionals make meaning of their work experiences? 2) What influences Black women in residence life to remain in or depart from the field?

This study enables Black women to "write themselves into existence" (Davis et al., 2021, p. 4) by employing critical collaborative autoethnography, which allows us to be both researchers and participants, thereby moving beyond the insider/outsider binary (Reed-Danahay, 2017). The study's application of resistance theory (Ward & Robinson-Wood, 2022) further ensures cultural relevance is centered, fostering collective meaning-making around key themes such as personal-professional balance, mentoring development, and career advancement strategies.

Thus, through a critical examination of our lived experiences, the study makes a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on Black women in housing across various career stages, providing insight into what determines their continued presence in the field. This study is also a valuable resource for current administrators,

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scholar-practitioners, and higher education leaders seeking to understand, support, and retain Black women housing professionals through the cultivation of more inclusive and equitable workplace environments.

The following section presents a review of the literature that informed the development of the framework for this study.

Literature Review

The presence of Black women in housing and residence life (HRL) positions, ranging from resident assistants (RAs) and graduate assistants (GAs) to mid- and senior-level professionals, represents a vital, yet underrepresented and underrecognized, cornerstone of higher education (Myrick & Lewis-Flenaugh, 2022; Watley, 2024). These professionals not only carry out essential logistical and emotional labor, but they also navigate intersecting systems of oppression, including racism and sexism, at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Breeden, 2021; Quaye et al., 2023). In the following sections, we share existing literature that highlights the challenges and successes of Black women housing professionals at various employment levels in residence life.

Black Women Housing Professionals and Challenges

The emotional toll of serving in housing and residence life is substantial. Thompson (2025) argued the "StrongBlackWoman" narrative compelled Black women to internalize unrealistic standards of self-sacrifice, resulting in racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007). Quaye et al. (2023) further documented how caregiving expectations often compromised Black women's ability to prioritize self-care. For instance, participants reported feeling obligated to shoulder the emotional well-being of students and colleagues while navigating exclusion from decision-making processes (Quaye et al., 2023). This dual marginalization exacerbates mental health stressors and directly contributes to the attrition—or the "Black exodus"—of Black housing professionals from the field, with experiences of exploitation and cultural taxation being key reasons for departure (Weaver-Douglas, 2022). Such environments reflect institutional betrayal, which indicates the failure of higher education systems to protect those most vulnerable to its injustices (Breeden, 2021; Haynes, 2019).

Black Women Resident Assistants

Black women serving as RAs face a unique burden labeled the "double whammy," a simultaneous experience of racial and gender bias (Watley, 2024). These women are often expected to fulfill emotionally intensive, nurturing roles that their male counterparts are not, which leads to disproportionate emotional labor and burnout; an expectation that stems from deeply ingrained stereotypes and manifests through microaggressions and institutional neglect (Watley, 2024). The support systems necessary for Black women RAs to thrive often originate outside of institutional networks; namely, through personal and community ties (Breeden, 2021; Watley, 2024).

Black Women Graduate Assistants and Entry-Level Professionals

Black women GAs and entry-level professionals, such as hall coordinators and resident directors, are grouped together as emerging professionals who occupy similar organizational positions and face comparable structural barriers in housing and residence life. As both groups contend with a lack of mentorship, isolation, and the need to constantly prove their competence within White-dominated professional environments, themes of hyper self-awareness, the negotiation of personal and professional boundaries, and the importance of relationships with other Black women pervade their narratives (Wiggins, 2017). Additionally, both groups experience limited access to representational mentorship, advocacy, and senior-level role models, which often leads to early departure from the field (Robinson, 2025).

Black Women Mid-Level and Senior-Level Professionals

For mid- and senior-level professionals, there is currently a dearth of literature on their experiences in the field. Within the existing literature, their challenges intensify. Breeden (2021) outlined the compounded effect of "race and gender, lack of support, and familial commitments, contributing to chronic overachievement and the superwoman syndrome" (p. 168). Black women at these levels also encounter the "concrete ceiling"—a more impenetrable version of the glass ceiling that results in delayed promotions and tokenism (Breeden, 2021, p. 176). Myrick and Lewis-Flenaugh (2022) emphasized that Black women senior housing officers at PWIs often serve as unrecognized agents of diversity, equity, and inclusion while enduring scrutiny and microaggressions.

Black Women Housing Professionals' Strategies for Success

Despite these barriers, Black women professionals consistently embody resilience and transformative leadership, which emerge as key characteristics and skills for success (Myrick & Lewis-Flenaugh, 2022; Wiggins, 2017). These women navigate systemic oppression not merely by enduring it, but by engaging in culturally responsive leadership, mentoring, advocacy, and community-building efforts that redefine leadership in higher education (Johnson & Delmas, 2022; Sterling, 2024). Black women also engage in and contribute to student mentorship that transforms institutional norms (Myrick & Lewis-Flenaugh, 2022; Sterling, 2024). Johnson and Delmas (2022) affirmed that despite institutional barriers persisting, many Black women still aspire to senior roles and remain motivated by a commitment to uplift their communities.

Several scholars advocated for structural reforms to address these entrenched issues (Bell, 2016; Johnson, 2023; Weaver-Douglas, 2022). West (2019) highlighted the significance of professional counterspaces that were "by us, for us," offering safe environments for Black women to share strategies and support one another (p. 159). These spaces serve as sanctuaries from the daily onslaught of microaggressions and institutional neglect. According to Bell (2016), fostering equity in student affairs

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requires institutions to employ culturally competent leadership, dismantle White normativity, and implement mentorship pipelines that support women of color. Sterling (2024) and Wiggins (2017) argued storytelling and narrative inquiry should be foundational tools in policymaking and leadership development. Centering lived experiences ensures the inclusion of historically marginalized voices and enables meaningful reform. Notably, Johnson (2023) contended that theoretical frameworks such as the strong Black woman collective theory and Black feminist thought not only helped scholars interpret oppression, but also revealed paths to collective healing and leadership.

Despite their professional experiences often being marked by systemic neglect, racialized and gendered burdens, and unrewarded emotional labor, Black women in HRL serve as indispensable leaders, mentors, and caregivers in higher education (Patitu & Hinton, 2003; Thompson, 2025). While their contributions are foundational to student development and institutional equity, the retention crisis among Black women professionals in HRL highlights a pressing need for structural transformation (Fisher, 2024; Weaver-Douglas, 2022). Future research must continue to center the voices of these individuals not as anomalies or survivors of oppression, but as visionaries and changemakers reimagining inclusive, affirming, and just academic communities (Sterling, 2024; West, 2019).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by resistance theory, which is a critical theory that examines how Black women challenge and survive oppressive structures (Ward & Robinson-Wood, 2022). We applied this framework in two ways: 1) as a guide to frame our research questions and overall inquiry, and 2) to guide our analysis of the data. Resistance theory provides a critical framework for examining how Black women in residence life roles actively navigate and push back against institutional norms shaped by racism, sexism, and other intersecting forms of oppression. In residence life, a field shaped by hierarchy, emotional labor, and White-dominated leadership, Black women use overt and subtle resistance to affirm identity, support marginalized students, and confront inequities.

In this study, resistance theory was employed with a critical, collaborative, and autoethnographic methodology, enabling us—as Black women who work or have worked in residence life—to collectively examine our lived experiences and acts of resistance. This methodological pairing centers our voices and lived realities as legitimate sources of knowledge (Collins, 2009). By situating our narratives within

broader sociopolitical and institutional contexts, this approach illuminates how resistance operates not only at the individual level, but also as a shared, relational process (Ward & Robinson-Wood, 2022). Through co-constructed storytelling and critical reflection, we disrupt dominant narratives in higher education and create space for solidarity, healing, and transformative praxis.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we used critical collaborative autoethnography to understand our environment by understanding ourselves in specific societal contexts and incorporated reflective journals and focus groups as primary data sources (Chang, 2008). Through this methodology, we explore the complexities of our experiences in residence life, detailing how we navigated challenges, built support networks, and worked to create spaces of belonging for ourselves and other students of color at PWIs (Strayhorn, 2012). As we immerse ourselves in the study by sharing our lived experiences and challenges in HRL, we would also like to share our position as researchers in exploring this work.

Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality is essential to a collaborative autoethnography about Black women professionals in university housing, as it clarifies how our identities and experiences shape the study. By openly reflecting on race, gender, and professional context, we make our assumptions and influences visible (Davis et al., 2021).

Katrina A. Calhoun

As a Black American woman, my lived experiences offer valuable insight into this research, particularly in understanding the systemic oppression that Black women often face. It also shapes my methodological and theoretical approaches, grounding them in a critical commitment to challenging the silences and systemic discrimination that Black women continue to encounter.

Deanna C. Hughes

As a cisgender Black American woman, wife, mother, and full-time HRL professional, I approach this collective work with privilege and gratitude. My writing is grounded in the intersections of Blackness, womanhood, and first-generation college experiences that have shaped my professional identity. Through this work, I seek to affirm and empower current and aspiring HRL professionals to honor faith, family, and identity as key assets in their student affairs journeys.

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Syntina Nesbitt

As a Black, heterosexual, Christian woman grounded in both community leadership and entrepreneurial practice, my lived experiences shape how I understand and engage the stories of Black women in higher education and organizational life. My professional journey through HRL, community college administration, and strategic leadership has informed my awareness of how communication, culture, and institutional structures impact the pathways and well-being of Black women.

Tiffany Bromfield

As a first-generation American and first-generation college student, I desire to write about the perspectives I want to see in the research. With over a decade of experience in HRL supervising paraprofessional, graduate, entry-level, and mid-level staff, these stories are truly personal to me and are the sole motivator to pursue my doctorate. Having held several volunteer leadership roles in various housing organizations, I understand and value what my presence means for representation across the field of HRL. I am an auntie to many, including my students on campus. I have a genuine love for the work I do, and I cannot imagine doing anything else.

Kpandi Lumeh

As a cisgender Black woman in HRL, I bring a unique perspective as a first-generation college student, an immigrant, and a person from a low socioeconomic background. These identities inform how I write, how I relate to other Black women doing this work, and the stories I choose to tell.

Tasha Roberts

As a Christian, African American, cisgendered, educated woman, my identities inform my practice and my interests in researching and storytelling of Black women. My social identities enable me to approach research not only with my intellect, but also through a lens of experience and empathy. This self-actualization also informs my interest in critical theoretical frameworks; specifically, those focused on resistance, meaning-making, and faith.

Quiana M. Stone

As an African American, cisgender woman, and first-generation college graduate with a career spanning entry-level through executive leadership in HRL, I approach this collaborative work from deep personal investment and lived experience. Currently an EdD student in Interdisciplinary Leadership at Governors State University and a former GLACUHO regional president, my positionality provides critical insights into how identity, background, and institutional dynamics impact professionals from underrepresented backgrounds.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through reflective journals and three focus groups. The focus groups were conducted via Zoom and lasted about 75 minutes each. We [the "participants"] responded to reflective journal questions, chronicling our experiences in residence life, our modalities of resistance, and our use of self-care as a form of praxis. Example protocol questions included: Tell us about your experiences as a Black/woman of color at a PWI and, in particular, within residence life; and What resources and/or support would you like to see improved or implemented by institutions to better support Black women? Participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1) The participant self-identified as a woman of color: African American, Black, or Afro-Latina; 2) The participant also self-identified as a woman; 3) The participant previously worked or was currently working in residence life either as a graduate student or a full-time professional at a college or university; and 4) The participant was at least 18 years of age.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began with the transcription of each focus group session. To ensure accuracy, these recordings were transcribed by Rev.com, a professional transcription service. Once transcriptions were complete, the data were analyzed using in vivo coding, a method that anchors the analysis in the participants' own words (Saldaña, 2021). Additionally, we employed thematic analysis, which uses paradigms or theoretical frameworks to identify recurring codes and categorizes them into themes (Kim, 2016). To facilitate analysis, we developed a manual coding system that grouped and compared recurring concepts and expressions across participants (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Codes were recorded and organized in a Google spreadsheet for categorization and analysis. We also applied comparative analysis and triangulation techniques, whereby codes were continuously compared for similarities and differences (Creswell, 2014). Through this iterative coding process, consistent patterns emerged and were distilled into overarching themes.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in narrative inquiry because it strengthens the credibility and dependability of findings (Jones et al., 2006). To authentically represent participants' experiences, researchers must demonstrate methodological rigor. This study employed triangulation and member checking to enhance trustworthiness. Triangulation involves using multiple methods and data sources to strengthen the study's validity (Johnson & Christenson, 2008). Member checking, a form of participant validation (Creswell, 2014), included sharing preliminary findings with participants to verify accuracy and interpretation. Together, these strategies ensured the findings reflected participants' lived experiences while reducing researcher bias and methodological limitations (Jones et al., 2006).

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FINDINGS

Drawing from in-depth reflections and focus group discussions, the study reveals emerging themes related to gendered and racial microaggressions, emotional burnout, and the critical role of peer and staff support. Our narratives provide a nuanced understanding of how race and gender intersect in residential settings, often highlighting the challenges, the hope, and the community that define our experiences. These findings lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the structural and social power dynamics that influence the residential experiences of Black women professionals and what determines whether they continue or depart from the HRL profession.

Gendered Racism Shapes Our Experiences

We consistently described the ways gendered racism and power dynamics manifested in our daily experiences in residence life. Gendered racism was demonstrated in our daily lives in two major ways. The first form was racial and gendered micro-aggressions, which impacted how we showed up in the workplace, and the second was inequitable workloads related to our racial and gendered identities. Below, we expand upon each theme.

Showing Up in Spaces That Were Not Made for Us

Our Black womanhood was central to how we presented ourselves in residence life spaces and how we navigated them. The delineation of what was perceived as professional for Black women was based on White professional norms, which often dictate what was deemed professional and accepted in the workplace (Williams, 2023). Thus, microaggressions rooted in controlling stereotypes of Black womanhood impacted how we as Black women were able to "show up" in predominantly White spaces. Below, we explain how our appearance and authority were challenged.

Challenges to Our Appearance

Microaggressions related to physical appearance, such as hair, body size, style of dress, and mannerisms, were all shaped by White-dominant norms. For instance, Deanna explained the objectification she experienced regarding her hairstyle. She stated, "Will the microaggressions ever stop? The comments about how you do your hair like that, or can I touch your hair? [These] types of things feel like they're not always compliments." Similarly, Tiffany stated:

> *I do a lot of different things with my hair, and the executive director walked up to me during a meeting and said, "Oh, new hair? I like your other hair better." I was shocked, but tried to brush it off. I didn't work at that institution for much longer after that.*

Syntina and Quiana described their experiences due to body size. Quiana stated, "I also think being a plus-size woman was challenging because [people] assume you're argumentative or have an attitude, even if you are just engaging in conversation." Syntina even stated that coworkers made inappropriate comments about her body. She said, "I'm a more shapely person . . . Like, if I'm bending over to get something, people would make remarks or jokes." These types of comments are rooted in gendered racism, which shapes how Black women are perceived, judged, and treated in society through reinforcing Eurocentric standards of beauty.

Challenging Our Authority

Microaggressions also manifested as a rejection or disregard for Black women's presence and authority in supervisory positions. Multiple Black women explained experiences with their authority being challenged by White students and parents. The refusal to believe that a Black woman was in a management position and had the authority to make decisions regarding students caused conflict and tension. For example, Quiana explained instances where parents were asked to speak to those who were "truly" in charge of the hall. She explained:

> *Sometimes it is exhausting. . . being questioned about your credentials and constantly having to verify or justify [your position]. Even dealing with the occasional parent who didn't want to speak to you because of who you are or how you showed up. They would ask me, "Are you authorized to make this decision?" I would say, "Yes, I am. I am the person."*

Tasha also explained incidents questioning her authority by White graduate students:

> *It was the first time that I had anyone purposely gang up on me and accuse me of not doing my job. They even asked me, "What do you do all day?" and demanded to see my calendar. They treated me as if I didn't belong there, or as if I shouldn't be a supervisor.*

Kpandi also reflected on how her presence was often questioned by White colleagues, particularly when she was in community with other staff of color. She recounted one incident in particular that illustrated this dynamic. Kpandi stated:

> *A White coworker came up to us and said, "What are you guys conspiring about?" They repeat[ed] it a couple of times. We were just kind of confused, and we went back to our seats. What I learned from that experience is that there's always a perception of Black folks as having ulterior motives. Even when we don't, we are still being perceived [that way].*

Overall, these dynamics reveal how such spaces, while claiming to be diverse, continue to marginalize Black women in housing by operating from a place of gendered racism, which fails to fully acknowledge our humanity and lived experiences in their daily operations.

"All Skin Folk Ain't Kin Folk": Navigating the complexity of BIPOC Relationships

There is a common saying in the Black community that "all skin folk ain't kin folk." It is essentially a warning to people of color that, in a system of racism and inequality, people in one's own community may be tempted to mistreat and/or compete with them to gain favor and potential benefits. Although most of the Black women in this study received much support from the other Black women in the field, we also experienced competitive, unsupportive, and untrustworthy Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who viewed us as threats to the status quo. For example, Syntina described the conditions that create this type of environment:

> *"A common experience is the need to make Black women compete against each other. [They] put us on separate committees, on separate kinds of conferences when we would go to present, not really allowing us to work together or be together as a group or as a community intentionally."*

Syntina explained that for insecure and unaware professionals, this type of pressure can create a hostile work culture that fuels mistrust and competition instead of honesty and collaboration. She also shared an incident with a BIPOC coworker who threatened violence against her. After Syntina reported the colleague to human resources, the situation heightened with more threats of retaliation. Syntina eventually left that position.

Quiana explained that just because a department is diverse, it does not necessarily mean it is inclusive. She explained the complexity of working in a diverse department, yet still confronting anti-Black racism and prejudice, in which non-Black people of color perpetuate the bias. Quiana stated, "There's this idea that we are diverse because everybody is here [or represented]. However, simply having diversity doesn't mean that we are meeting our needs in terms of conversations on race and diversity." Quiana's experience highlighted the complexity of navigating her role as a Black woman among staff of color while simultaneously bearing responsibility for addressing, challenging, and educating others about bias in ostensibly diverse environments. In the next section, we discuss the toll of invisible labor on Black women in residence life.

The Emotional Cost of Labor

Black women housing professionals often perform significant yet invisible labor that is critical to student success, belonging, and overall well-being, especially for students of color. Beyond our official job duties, we frequently take on emotional caregiving

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or (other) mothering, mentoring, and informal social justice advocacy to support students in challenging racial discrimination. This labor, while essential, is often unrecognized and uncompensated, reflecting broader patterns of Black women being social justice mules or mammies in higher education. Black women are consistently relied upon to create safe and affirming environments for students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, while receiving little institutional support ourselves. Although our efforts contribute to sustaining the emotional and social fabric of campus life and student well-being, ironically, it often comes at a cost to our own emotional and physical well-being. For example, Katrina stated, "Colleagues were repeatedly referring students of color to me directly about racial incidents and trauma. I would spend numerous hours listening to them, providing advice, and offering support services. After a while, it became draining."

Similar to Katrina, Tasha also recounted her experiences processing trauma with students. She stated, "It was a lot, and it really tainted my experience in residence life, which had me feeling like it's time to go. I've given a lot to residence life, and I'm burned out." Syntina and Deanna also experienced being overworked. For instance, Syntina stated, "I've had experiences across residence life where I've been overly assigned work because I may be seen as someone who can consistently execute tasks." Deanna also stated, "I'm used to being the worker bee and being complimented about how well I do the work. I'm then given even more work to do. That's been a constant theme."

Tiffany summarized these experiences effectively as being connected to controlling stereotypes of Black women working for everyone else's benefit. She said, "When these institutions think about Black women in residence life, it gives a [feeling] very much [like] the mammy. The way that folks would talk about women, and specifically Black women. . . they use Black women as mammies." Tiffany continued, "It's hard because we can essentially end up making our lives our jobs. It can consume us if we do not set boundaries and say no to invisible labor." As mentioned previously, mammies are viewed as objects to be worked, used, and discarded when no longer valued by the institution (Porter et al., 2025). Based on these experiences, it is understandable that Black women are considering their futures and whether it is worth continuing in residence life on a long-term basis.

DISCUSSION: NEGOTIATING THE DECISION TO STAY OR TO LEAVE

The findings of this study highlight the ways in which our appearance, authority, and emotional labor are shaped by gendered racism while working in residence life. Black women in residence life frequently navigate institutional climates that marginalize our contributions while simultaneously relying on our invisible labor to support diverse student populations. Such dynamics not only reflect broader systemic inequities in student affairs, but also raise critical questions about institutional accountability,

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support structures, and recruitment and retention practices (Breeden, 2021). This discussion situates these findings in the existing literature (Haynes, 2019; Porter et al., 2025; Thompson, 2025; West, 2019) on Black women's racialized labor in higher education. This study is in conversation with previous literature on how gendered racism exploits Black women in student affairs, leading to racial battle fatigue and burnout (Quaye et al., 2023; West, 2020; Williams, 2023), which drastically impacts our roles in residence life.

The study is also framed by resistance theory, which frames how Black women successfully resist oppressive environments and advocate for our own needs and self-care. Based on these prior experiences, our resistance was demonstrated in different ways. For instance, depending on whether an effective support system was in place, resistance took the form of staying in the field to assist other students and staff of color, while also setting up healthy boundaries and establishing sites of advocacy. For others, resistance looked like choosing to heal and recover from the trauma that gendered racism imparted and depart from the field, either permanently or temporarily.

At the time of this study, three participants were no longer working in residence life. Three participants remained in the field and are committed to the long term. There is one participant who remains in the field, but is questioning whether to continue because her values seem to be misaligned with academia's treatment of BIPOC students. For the three participants who departed from residence life, it was a challenging decision. We all entered with high hopes of transforming the field, supporting students—especially BIPOC students—and serving as positive role models and leaders. However, repeated microaggressions related to our race and gender, inequitable workloads, the lack of work-life balance, and hostility from some BIPOC folks led to our departure. In the absence of adequate institutional support, such as strong allies, adequate resources, and mentorship, we were pulled between our desire to serve students and self-preservation. Thus, we chose ourselves and focused on our faith, recovery, healing, peace, and joy, rather than toxic work environments that sought to exploit us.

Although the three participants who remained committed to residence life experienced similar experiences to those who departed, the main difference that impacted their decision was the institutional support they received. The three participants who remained reported having culturally aware leadership, supportive allies of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and a strong community, on and off campus. They are also in higher-ranking positions, which means they have more autonomy and authority in their positions. It explores their implications for practice and future research aimed at fostering more equitable and sustainable working environments for Black women in residence life.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study also highlights important implications for professional practice and leadership development in student affairs. The unique challenges faced by Black women in residence life—including navigating racialized and gendered expectations, performing disproportionate emotional labor, and contending with limited mentorship and advancement opportunities—demand intentional and systemic reform. Institutions must move beyond performative commitments to diversity and instead implement structural changes that acknowledge and address the lived realities of Black women in these roles. Thus, institutional implications for practice include the following:

- *Conduct assessments in departments to ensure an equitable distribution of labor.*
- *Pay and promote Black women equitably for the work we do.*
- *Provide clear and transparent guidelines for promotions, pay, and benefits, including access to mental health services.*
- *Invest in effective professional development, especially mentorship programs for Black women professionals.*
- *Listen to your staff and take their comments seriously about gendered racism.*
- *Hire and train diverse, culturally aware leaders who are skilled to effectively address racism, discrimination, and bias in residence life. For instance, do all senior- and mid-level leaders in housing have the same race, gender, ability, etc.?*

For Black women housing professionals, we recommend the following:

- *Complete a self-assessment. Is the position still worth it? Are you seen, valued, and paid for your labor? Do you have a supportive supervisor and a strong work community? Are you being used, exploited, taken for granted, or treated like a mammy? Are you still excited about pursuing this work, or do you dread going to work every day? If so, what needs to change?*
- *Keep a record of incidents of discrimination/bias and report them.*
- *Document the extra hours spent on duties that are outside of your formal duties. Work to eliminate these things and establish boundaries.*
- *Know your worth and do not be afraid to advocate for your needs. If your department is unresponsive or apathetic, it may be time to explore other options. No position is worth your mental, physical, or spiritual well-being.*

These implications highlight the need for HRL leaders to implement equity-centered strategies that intentionally consider the experiences of Black women, thereby supporting their value and retention in the field.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Black women in housing reflect their strong commitment to student support while highlighting the challenges of navigating predominantly White, and often inequitable, institutions. Although many Black women professionals find purpose in mentorship and community-building, limited representation, racial and gender bias, restricted advancement opportunities, and unsupportive leadership contribute to burnout and attrition. In contrast, affirming supervisors, inclusive work environments, and meaningful professional development significantly influence Black women's decisions to stay in the field. Thus, retention is not about individual resilience, but about institutional accountability, equitable workload distribution, and leadership that genuinely supports diverse professionals. Colleges and universities must move beyond symbolic inclusion and create systemic change that affirms the well-being and leadership of Black women. Therefore, continued research is essential to guide policies that sustain our long-term success in higher education. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. A key implication from the article is the distribution of labor. How is labor distributed within your department? In what ways might this distribution be equitable or inequitable across different identities, and what patterns do you notice?

2. What systems of mentorship, support, and professional development currently exist for staff, particularly those with minoritized identities? Where are the gaps, and what changes or new initiatives could better address the challenges raised in the article?

3. How does your department currently practice culturally aware leadership? What does this look like in day-to-day supervision, decision making, and staff support?

4. What forms of "invisible" or informal labor (e.g., emotional support, diversity work, mentoring) exist in your department? Who most often takes on this work, and how is it acknowledged or rewarded?

5. How is staff well-being defined and supported in your department? Who appears to benefit most from these efforts, and who might be unintentionally overlooked?

Discussion questions were developed by Matthew M. Inman, Clemson University.