

Afterlives of the Plantation: Black Women's Narratives and the Geographies of Academic Violence

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Abstract: I theorize the contemporary university as a plantation landscape — a haunted geography in which the afterlives of slavery materialize through practices of surveillance, spatial enclosure, epistemic extraction, and the systematic exploitation of Black women's labor. Drawing on Black Feminist Hauntology and Plantation Logics, I examine how racialized and gendered violence is reproduced across academic spaces, from the physical design of campuses to the invisible labor expected of Black women students, staff, and faculty. Grounded in a synthesis of critical geography, Black studies, and Black Feminist Thought, I argue universities perpetuate plantation-derived structures of domination and disposability. Awareness of mistreatment also illuminates the long genealogy of Black women's resistance within and against these institutions. Structural transformation — not symbolic representation — is the precondition for Black women's flourishing in higher education.

American colleges and universities have never been passive beneficiaries of slavery. According to Craig Steven Wilder's (2013) *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, colleges were active architects of slavery. Alongside the church and the state, the academy stood as what Wilder calls a third pillar of a civilization built on bondage; entangled from its origins in the exploitation of enslaved African labor and the violent dispossession of Indigenous lands. Faculty enslaved people. Trustees profited from slave-trading networks. Campus buildings rose on stolen ground. Wilder's account makes clear that the university's relationship to racial violence is not incidental or historical in the sense of being a thing of the past — it is foundational, structural, and ongoing. Wilder's argument permits extension of his point into the present by asking what it means for the institution that Wilder historicizes to remain, in its spatial logic, its labor expectations, and its treatment of Black women, a plantation landscape in the present tense. In 2011, Katherine McKittrick wrote that “the plantation is a viable blueprint for the modern city and Black diasporic claims to space” (p. 953). Where Wilder grounds us in the historical record, McKittrick's insight pushes that record into the present — insisting that the plantation is not merely a historical artifact but an ongoing spatial and epistemic formation that continues to structure who belongs, who labors, and who is expendable. The university, like the city McKittrick theorizes, inherits and reproduces the plantation's logics of domination, surveillance, and racialized labor. For Black women in particular, the academy is not simply a site of intellectual production; it is a haunted geography in which the violences of slavery and colonialism persist in embodied, institutional, and spatial forms.

A Tripartite Theoretical Framework

Argument that universities act as plantations emerges from a presentation I delivered at the New York State Foundations of Education Association (NYSFEA) Annual Meeting in March 2026. In the presentation I mapped the spatial, epistemic, and affective connections between the antebellum plantation and the contemporary university campus. I am now able to ground my analogy more firmly in three interlocking theoretical frameworks: Black Feminist Hauntology, Black Feminist Thought (BFT), and Plantation Logics. Together, these frameworks illuminate how academic institutions reproduce plantation-derived structures of surveillance, discipline,

spatial organization, and labor management — structures that disproportionately target Black women. Black women in academia today are continuously living in what Hartman (1997) calls the afterlives of slavery and what Sharpe (2016) describes as “the wake.” The premature deaths of Black women administrators such as Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey, Lincoln University’s Vice President of Student Affairs who committed suicide at the age of 49 in response to cruelty inflicted upon her at work. Or, Orinthia T. Montague, president of Vol State Community College, and JoAnne A. Epps, president of Temple University, who both died of apparent stress-related causes at 56 and 72 years of age, respectively (Hudson-Ward, 2023). The public targeting of Claudine Gay, when president of Harvard University, is another case in point (Deliso, 2024). Mistreatments of Black women administrators are not aberrations — they are symptoms of structural conditions I name and theorize as afterlives of the plantation. But there is more at stake here than theory. By situating these contemporary realities within plantation afterlives, I offer both a vocabulary and an analytic framework for understanding and transforming what I call the geographies of academic violence. As a Black woman navigating a predominantly white institution, my lived experiences, values, and identity profoundly shape my research. My scholarly approach is rooted in personal and community testimonials and collective memory, guided by a desire to center the voices and experiences of those marginalized or silenced in academic spaces. I am both the researcher and the researched — a position that Black feminist scholars have long recognized as a source of epistemological strength rather than a methodological liability (Collins, 2009; hooks, 1989). I write from within the institution I critique, and that location is not incidental to the argument. It is the argument.

Black Feminist Hauntology: Black feminist hauntologies theorize how the unfinished violences of slavery, colonialism, and racial capitalism persist in the present through gendered and embodied forms of haunting. Building on Derridean hauntology (Derrida, 1994) and Black feminist theory (Collins, 2009; Hartman, 1997; hooks, 1989; Sharpe, 2016; Spillers, 1987), Black feminist hauntology insists that Black women’s lives are marked by a spectral simultaneity of presence and absence: hypervisibility as laboring bodies and invisibility as intellectual and affective subjects (Hsiao, 2022; Lovelace, 2021; Nzinga-Johnson, 2013; Saleh-Hanna, 2015). Black feminist hauntology examines how the intertwined legacies of slavery, colonialism, patriarchy, and systemic racism continue to haunt the experiences of Black women within academic institutions (Nzinga-Johnson, 2020; Saleh-Hanna, 2015; Squire et al., 2021; Bozalek, et al., 2021). Crucially, however, this framework does not reduce Black women to victims of haunting — it also centers their practices of memory, refusal, and world-making, showing how spectrality can generate modes of resistance that unsettle dominant narratives of gender, race, and temporality. As Amponsah (2023, p. 30) observes, the United States’ relationship with its colonial past has symptomatically involved “silence, repression, suppression, collective amnesia, active forgetting, and colonial memory loss.” Black feminist hauntology insists on remembering.

Black Feminist Thought: Black Feminist Thought (BFT) is a critical framework that centers experiences, knowledge, and agency of Black women to understand and challenge intersecting systems of oppression within academic institutions (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1989; Lans, 2024). BFT emphasizes both the everyday knowledge Black women generate through lived experience and the specialized knowledge produced by Black women scholars across disciplines. BFT highlights how Black women navigate and resist overlapping structures of racism, patriarchy, and institutional hierarchy, while reimagining the academic spaces they inhabit. Central to this framework is the question of what it means to trust Black women. Cottom (2017) argues that trusting Black women requires distinguishing between trust in individual

Black women and trust in the structural analyses that Black feminist thought produces. This distinction matters because representation within hierarchical whiteness does not guarantee emancipatory outcomes. A Black woman placed at the helm of a white institution may be constrained, co-opted, or ultimately abandoned by the very structures she was meant to reform — as the case of Claudine Gay makes plain. BFT thus insists that structural transformation, not symbolic inclusion, is the precondition for Black women’s flourishing in academic spaces.

Plantation Logics: Plantation Logics is a theoretical framework that examines how the cultural, social, and epistemic structures of the plantation system continue to shape contemporary institutions, notably higher education (Eldar & Jansson, 2023; Gilmore, 2007; Marquez, 2024; McKittrick, 2011, 2013). Rooted in the afterlives of slavery, Plantation Logics reveals how racial hierarchies, expectations of Black labor, and the invisibilization of Black knowledge are normalized across academic spaces. Scholars, including McKittrick (2013), Sharpe (2016), and Spillers (1987), employ Plantation Logics to examine how white supremacy shapes institutional policies, classroom dynamics, and professional expectations; and to show how Black women navigate and resist the enduring legacies of the plantation. Two related concepts extend Plantation Logics into specific institutional domains. Plantation Politics refers to the systemic policies, hierarchies, and power structures within universities that reproduce racialized control, surveillance, and labor expectations for Black women and other marginalized employees (Edwards & Dancy, 2023; Squire et al., 2021; Woods, 2017; Wynter, 1971). As Squire et al. (2018, p. 1) argue, these structures “parallel organizational and cultural norms between contemporary higher education institutions and slave plantations.” Plantation Pedagogy describes the mechanism “through which slavery as an educational project was enacted materially through the spatial formation of the plantation” (Marquez, 2024, p. 12). Together, Plantation Politics and Plantation Pedagogy reveal how the academy disciplines and contains Black life in the service of racial capitalism.

Plantation Spatial Design and the University Campus

The physical layout of a slave plantation was a spatial configuration designed to maintain discipline, optimize economic productivity, enforce surveillance, and reinforce the subordinate status of enslaved individuals (Bates, 2015; Delle et al., 2011; Marshall, 2022; Singleton, 2001). The plantation’s spatial landscape subjected enslaved people’s labor to constant surveillance through arrangements reminiscent of the panopticon: The overseer’s residence functioned as a strategic vantage point for observing enslaved individuals, creating a constant sense of potential observation that compelled the enslaved to self-monitor even when overseers were not actively watching (Foucault, 1975; Hartman, 2022; Singleton, 2001). Plantation housing structures — sometimes referred to as *barracones* (barracks) — were deliberately uniform and monolithic, stripping enslaved people of individuality and imposing spatial conditions of containment and control. The spatial logic of control did not disappear with emancipation. The 1959 fire at the Negro Boys Industrial School in Wrightsville, Arkansas, in which twenty-one Black boys perished, illustrates how plantation spatial logics were reproduced in carceral and institutional settings well into the twentieth century (Momodu, 2025). Conditions at the Industrial School — confinement, surveillance, and indifference to Black life — are continuous with the plantation architectures described above. The overseer becomes the officer; the quarters become the dormitory; the surveillance becomes institutionalized through what Foucault (1975) calls disciplinary space, a space architecturally designed to make people useful and obedient.

The university campus participates in the plantation's spatial inheritance. Cornell University, as one of the largest beneficiaries of the 1862 Morrill Land-Grant Act, contributed \$25,000 from its grant-derived funds toward the founding of Syracuse University in 1865 — funds derived from the sale of nearly 11 million acres of land seized from Indigenous nations, including the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe, and Dakota peoples (Burnam, 2024). In 1883, Syracuse Chancellor Charles Sims attempted to acquire additional land through a fraudulent treaty with the Onondaga Nation, which the Onondaga chiefs unanimously rejected (Burnam, 2024; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The university's reliance on dispossessed land mirrors the plantation as a spatial order in which property functions as a technology of domination — determining who can inhabit, who can be expelled, and whose bodies are rendered permeable to extraction (Bhandar, 2018; Gilmore, 2019; Russell, 2001). Reframing the university campus as a plantation landscape requires recognizing how deeply the spatial organization of plantations was rooted in the dehumanization of Black people (Berry, 2017; Singleton, 2001; Vlach, 1993). The logic of panoptic surveillance persists in campus public safety structures, the monitoring of Black student protests, and the racialized regulation of space and belonging. As Camp (2004, p. 16) theorizes, “geographies of containment.” describe not only the plantation's physical boundaries but the ongoing spatial regulation of Black mobility within and beyond institutional grounds.

The Exploitation of Black Women's Labor in Academia

The afterlives of slavery signal not merely the temporal residue of slavery but its ongoing structuring force in the present. Within higher education, Black women disproportionately shoulder the “invisible” labor of mentorship, diversity initiatives, and affective care, even as they face systemic barriers that hinder their advancement (García-Louis & Reyes-Barrientos, 2022; Nzinga-Johnson, 2013). Asymmetrical extraction of labor mirrors the plantation economy, where Black women's labor was indispensable yet unrecognized, reinscribing a condition of social death in which their contributions are both demanded and disregarded (Dillon, 2012; Dumas, 2016; Love, 2016). The university reproduces these conditions not only materially but epistemically. As Hartman (2008) demonstrates, archives render Black women as non-persons — distorted, dismembered, and dehumanized. The academy similarly disciplines knowledge production in ways that obscure Black women's intellectual contributions through what Hartman (2008, p. 10) calls “the protocols of intellectual disciplines.” McKittrick (2006) extends this analysis by theorizing Black women's geographies as lived, possible, and imaginable terrains that push beyond the academy's narrow frameworks, bringing into focus the spaces where Black women persist and create. But even when Black women are acknowledged within higher education, it is often through logics of containment and commodification (Contreras et al., 2023; Mahtani, 2004; Matias, 2014; Nzinga-Johnson, 2020). The enslaved woman, once compelled to sing and dance, is refigured as the Black woman student, staff member, or faculty member cast as the “happy symbol of diversity” (Baldwin, 2022; Contreras et al., 2023). Identified by Kupenda (2012), the three ghost archetypes affecting Black women in academe — “I want my mammy ghosts,” “just be our negro ghosts,” and “flying with the white female ghosts and their disappearing acts” — capture the specific forms of haunting Black women academics face within the ivory tower. Symbolic visibility belies deeper exclusions: Black women's cultural and communal practices are sidelined when institutional programming privileges white norms and white comfort (Andrews et al., 2019; Marquez, 2024; Matias, 2014; McKittrick, 2011). Within academic institutions, Black women often assume the role of othermothers, providing emotional support, guidance, and advocacy for students and colleagues from marginalized backgrounds

(Bernard et al., 2000; Burley et al., 2022; Collins, 2009; Nzinga-Johnson, 2013). While this work is vital for fostering inclusivity, it places additional labor demands on Black women and compounds the challenges of navigating racialized academic spaces.

The “Black Pink Tax” (BPT), a concept attributed to Sharnell Myles, names “the unique financial, racial, and social burdens that Black women often face due to intersectional discrimination” (McGee, 2025, p. 707). A manifestation of this burden is Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF), which produces psychological, physiological, and behavioral health consequences, especially for Black people working in predominantly white institutions (Fasching-Varner et al., 2014; Hartlep & Ball, 2019; Yosso et al., 2006). Without healthy support systems and counterbalancing spaces, Black women navigating these institutions are more likely to develop the health consequences associated with RBF — consequences that, at their most extreme, become life-threatening. Layer upon layer of exploitation and exhaustion do not simply create professional challenges. They have life-and-death consequences. The emotional, intellectual, and physiological toll of Black women’s labor in the academy contributes to what scholars describe as Black premature death (Dillon, 2012; Gilmore, 2007; McKittrick, 2015; Smith et al., 2007; Yosso et al., 2006). Academic lynching is defined as “attempting to kill the personality, soul, and spirit of people of color... centered on eliminating any threat to white social order” (Hayes, 2014, p. 71). Closely related is the concept of spirit murder, which reveals how systemic racism and discrimination damage not only the individual psyche but the collective well-being of marginalized communities (Love, 2016; Revilla, 2021). The very real and literal death of Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey in January 2024 exemplifies these dynamics. Following months of harassment, bullying, and racial discrimination at Lincoln University, Candia-Bailey died by suicide. Her death illuminates the life-and-death stakes of systemic racism in academia, where Black women disproportionately endure “premature and preventable death” as a result of intersecting racial and gendered oppression (Collins, 2009; Hartman, 2006; McKittrick, 2006, 2015). Orinthia T. Montague and JoAnne A. Epps both passed away prematurely due to preventable causes (Williams, 2023). The institutional targeting and abandonment of Claudine Gay extends this analysis to the domain of senior academic leadership. Gay’s case demonstrates that even positions of formal authority offer little insulation from plantation logics of fungibility, disposability, and racial spectacle. As Cottom (2017) argues, trusting Black women cannot mean assuming that placing individual Black women in positions of institutional power automatically produces emancipatory outcomes. Rather, it requires trusting the structural analysis that Black feminist thought provides — an analysis that reveals how the plantation politics of disposability operate across rank and institution. The plantation’s logics of fungibility, discipline, and extraction persist through racial battle fatigue, othermothering expectations, academic lynching, and the mammification of Black women’s emotional and intellectual labor (Edwards & Dancy, 2023; Marquez, 2024; McKittrick, 2013).

The Genealogy of Black Women’s Protest from Representation to Transformation

College protests by Black women serve as both immediate acts of resistance and profound rituals of collective memory and reclamation (Hall et al., 2020; Hanna, 2024; Jeffers & Dixon, 2024; Saleh-Hanna, 2015; Squire et al., 2021). These protests summon the specters of Black women’s historical resilience against intersectional oppressions and continue a long genealogy of revolt and revolution. Bazner and Button (2021) connect slave rebellions to college student activism, arguing that systems of language and power must be established to suppress potential

uprisings — a dynamic traceable through anti-Black sites, including both plantations and colonial colleges. The 2020 #NotAgainSU student occupation at Syracuse University offers a contemporaneous illustration of these dynamics (Kalnitz, 2020). Protestors — disproportionately Black — were subjected to institutional violence, deprivation, and disposability. The administration's response demonstrated how spatial confinement, managerial force, and punishment for dissent reflect the continuity of plantation pedagogy on the modern campus. Even under conditions of extreme violence, enslaved people resisted, prompting oppressors to codify restrictions through slave codes — later transformed into Black codes — that can be paralleled with modern universities' codes of conduct. As Holden (2021, p. 6) observes, “enslaved men rebel while enslaved women resist,” yet Black women's everyday acts of resistance and survival were central to the very rebellions often (unfairly) attributed only to men. Following the antebellum period, Black people's legacy of resistance carried into educational spaces, where Black women were positioned as agents of “race uplift. At the same time, their leadership was constrained by the gendered politics of respectability (Perkins, 2024). Squire et al. (2021p. 230) argue that neoliberalism has birthed “cultural codes and attacks on downwardly redistributive social movements,” universities have been repeatedly criticized for their attempts to contain the protest speech and organizing strategies of Black student activists (Giroux, 2007; Squire et al., 2018, 2021).

For Black women in higher education, living and working in an atmosphere haunted by the afterlives of the plantation means navigating institutions that simultaneously demand their labor and render them disposable, that both acknowledge Black women's presence as symbols of diversity and suppress their intellectual and political contributions; that reproduce the plantation's logics of surveillance, confinement, and racial hierarchy. The theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Hauntology, Black Feminist Thought, and Plantation Logics together provide analytic tools necessary to name and theorize these conditions. They also illuminate the long genealogy of Black women's resistance — from enslaved women's everyday acts of refusal to contemporary campus protests — reminding us that the plantation was never only a site of domination. It was also always a site of resistance and world-making. Candia-Bailey, Gay, Montague, and Epps demand more than acknowledgment. They demand a reckoning with the structural mechanisms that produce Black women's overwork, underrecognition, and disposability in academic spaces. This reckoning requires moving beyond representation — beyond the symbolic placement of Black women within hierarchical whiteness — toward the structural transformation of academe that Black feminist thought has long insisted upon: Construction of work environments in which the professional courtesies of collegiality, presumed competence, and recognition of accomplishment are, as a matter of course, enjoyed by Black women, too. Educational institutions cannot claim commitments to equity while relying on the very logics that historically commodified and controlled Black women's bodies, labor, and lives. The university must reckon with what it is before it can become what it claims to be. The plantation's legacy does not merely shape the contemporary university — *the contemporary university is a plantation*, a haunted geography in which the afterlives of slavery materialize in spatial, epistemic, and affective forms. I ask the reader to consider whether the university can be otherwise. If the university continues to reproduce the spatial, social, and racial logics of the plantation, then perhaps the task is not to reform the plantation, nor to make it more hospitable, but to ask whether an institution organized through plantation logics can ever become otherwise without fundamentally disrupting the conditions that sustain it. Can we imagine a university beyond the plantation? And what would it mean for Black women to flourish within that

possibility — not as evidence that they have learned to survive the institution, but as evidence that the institution no longer requires their survival?

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