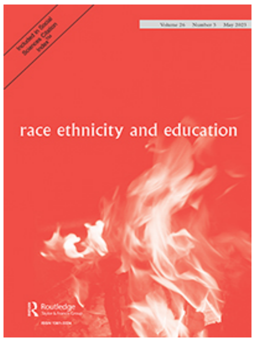

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‘Demonstrable experience of being a *Mammy* or *Crazy Black Bitch*’ (essential). A critical race feminist approach to understanding Black women Headteachers’ experiences in English schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper builds on the emerging, but significant scholarship of Critical Race Feminism (CRF) in education. It adds to the literature in this area by applying the theoretical and methodological underpinnings to the British education context where such applications are vanishingly small in favour of broader critical race applications. Supported by racialised and gendered images of professional Black women in leadership roles as the analytical standpoint for understanding a Black woman Headteacher’s experiences in an English school, this paper argues that Black women’s tenure and trajectories are underpinned by the white racial colonial logics of the *Mammy*, *Crazy Black Bitch*, *Superwoman* and/or *Feisty Sapphire*. In so doing, institutional racism continues to underpin *and undermine* Black women Headteachers’ leadership potential, experiences and outcomes.

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Critical Race Feminism; Headteachers; English schools; Black women; Institutional Racism

Introduction

On 31 March 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published a report into race and ethnic disparities in the UK. The authors of the report were clear that they “no longer see a Britain where the system is deliberately rigged against ethnic minorities. The impediments and disparities do exist, they are varied, and ironically very few of them are directly to do with racism. Too often ‘racism’ is the catch-all explanation, and can be simply implicitly accepted rather than explicitly examined” (Gov.uk 2021a). Instead, it is argued that the UK already has a firm basis for presenting itself as a ‘beacon to the rest of Europe and the world’ (8) in modelling diversity and progressing race equality. As such, the report attempted to deliver a significant blow to anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter and other activist mobilisations, which made progress the preceding year getting organisations, institutions and wider society, to reassess the permanence and lived realities of racialisation and racism following the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America.

Further, the report suggests that institutional racism is of marginal to no significance and racism does not have the same power over the life-chances of racialised minorities as

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in yesteryear; they write “We have argued for the use of the term ‘institutional racism’ to be applied only when deep-seated racism can be proven on a systemic level and not be used as a general catch-all phrase for any microaggression, witting or unwitting” (8). It only takes a superficial reading of the report to immediately see red flags about the integrity of it and of the findings (read extended critique by Tikly 2022). The Chair, Dr Tony Sewell, writes that focusing on racism is ‘alienating the decent centre-ground’, rather than acknowledging that racism is alienating and literally *killing* racialised minorities who live (or not) with the painful consequences. What the report advances as strategies that make racial minorities successful – self-reliance and resilience – is a shutting down of wider conversations Global North countries have been having about white privilege, white supremacy and institutional racism. Since then, in 2021, there have been debates in Parliament about preventing use of the term ‘white privilege’ in schools to protect the educational experiences of white working-class pupils, Critical Race Theory and Black Lives Matter so that communities are potentially not even able to name the production and reproduction of racism and white supremacy in education (*inews*, October 22nd, 2020; *The Independent*, June 21st, 2021; *Red Pepper, June 22nd*, 2021a).

This paper is written by Black women the authors of the race report would say have ‘made it’, and therefore evidence of a racially equitable education system: one is a Headteacher and the other, an academic. However, the position of a Black woman Headteacher is so unique by the UK government’s own standards, in 2021, Black Africans were not reported on statistically because it would have breached their confidentiality (Gov.Uk 2021b).[1] This is particularly stark because 92.7% of Headteachers in England are white. Therefore, this paper offers a challenge to the findings of the Commissions’ Report that institutional racism no longer exists, and that racism does not have sufficient power to undermine the career trajectories of Black women senior leaders. Moreover, this paper seeks to move Black women Headteachers’ voices and experiences out from established forms of erasure because the UK government has determined not to statistically recognise their existence.

There is little research about Black women Headteachers’ experiences in senior positions. Where such literature exists about Headteachers, it is more broadly about diversifying senior leadership teams to incorporate more people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Rather than shy away from examining racism, this paper explores the specific anti-Black racism directed towards Black women Headteachers and how this intersects and compounds across gender and citizenship status. Using a counter-story from a Critical Race Feminist (CRF) perspective to humanise the experiences of a Black woman Headteacher called Wele, this paper asserts that institutional racism exists and is pervasive – manifesting in policy decisions, school governance, promotions and retention of Black women senior leaders in English schools. Further, this paper ‘shatters complacency’ that schools are colour-blind spaces underpinned by an ethos of equality of opportunity and meritocracy (Maylor et al. 2021). Whilst it is accurate that Black women in leadership positions have some elements of agency so long as their actions converge with the wishes of senior (read: white) executives and Local Education Authority,[2] their leadership capacity and trajectories are strongly buffeted by currents of whiteness – specifically, the racialised and gendered images of professional Black women as outlined by Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008).

Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) work is useful for identifying how Black women's experiences in leadership roles are mediated by historical white racial colonial logics that serve to hinder their career development. Specifically, Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008) identified unique and unexplored stereotypes that hinder Black women's career progression, which are guided and strengthened by racism and sexism. These stereotypes saturate wider society including the media and the professional working environment; they argue, 'Black women have to combat historical stereotypical images, such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire, which may affect people's perceptions and treatment of Black women in the workplace' (135). The *Mammy* in a professional working environment, is a faithful and loyal servant who prides herself on being self-sacrificing and nurturing to her white colleagues and seniors – at great expense to herself. In effect, she is the wet nurse for white supremacy and her leadership is curtailed to always being the 'fixer' of workplace problems. *The Feisty Sapphire* is loud, dramatic, overly assertive and a complainer – in the professional environment, her leadership potential and experiences are hindered because she is viewed as having a chip on her shoulder and drawing on the 'race card' for raising complaints, which will scare her colleagues. The *Crazy Black Bitch* and *Superwoman* are two sides of the same coin: in the former, the Black woman is viewed as a rampant careerist by any means necessary and this means she is not to be trusted by others. In the latter, the Black woman is highly intelligent and therefore portrayed as competent. Whilst this may seem positive, she is assumed not to have the same insecurities or weaknesses as other women and therefore she is expected to do it all. This paper draws on those stereotypes to understand Wele's experiences (an African woman Headteacher) in an English school.

Literature review

The literature on Black women Headteachers' tenure in England is painfully absent. More established literature centres around Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) leadership and the pipeline up to a Headship. Unfortunately, this provides a muddled picture that 'BAME' experiences are homogenous – when anti-Blackness and Afriphobia[3] are unique experiences that are worthy of careful unpacking and tackling.

Miller (2018) has explored Black men Headteachers experiences of the pipeline to a Headship, and of the Headteacher role, and identified a range of facilitating and limiting factors that guide their experiences as senior leaders. The facilitating factors include making the decision to become a Headteacher; support and mentoring; and sustaining Black leadership. The limiting factors include stereotyping and judgments about their capability; experience as Headteachers; and unfair treatment. Miller found that, 'all participants considered the lack of BAME Headteachers in a school a major issue of concern for students and for race equality within the teaching profession as a whole' (2018, 10).

Where research has explored Black women senior leaders' experiences of their Headship, not only do they continue to remind us of the lack of attention paid to this area, but they highlight the myriad and complex ways in which processes of racialisation and sexism – as well as the individual's own sense of purpose, ambition and drive – curtail and facilitate effective leadership in the early years (Curtis 2014) and primary and secondary schools (Curtis and Showunmi 2019; Hancock, Showunmi, and Lewis 2020).

Though not named as misogynoir, the few British studies on Black senior leaders centres around Black women Headteachers being acutely aware of their outsider status as racialised minorities and an expectation from senior peers that they 'play the game' in order to fit into their majority white senior leadership team (Bailey-Morrissey and Race 2019). For Bailey-Morrissey, this means 'conforming to organisational practices at the expense of their own personal and professional identities in order to fit into their senior leadership teams' (*Impact*, February 2nd, Bailey-Morrissey 2021). Whilst not all Black women felt they should conform (and so did not), they exercised their agency with a profound sense of duty towards racially minoritised children to see 'themselves' reflected in senior roles.

Johnson's research into eight Black and South Asian headteachers' lived experiences and leadership progression found that they are not receiving mentorship to advance, sustain and strengthen their leadership capacities for a number of reasons. This includes wider political moves since 2002 to consolidate multiple schools into large Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and convert single schools into an academy. For MATs, there would be many schools governed and operated with one Headteacher (and an Executive Headteacher above them) rather than multiple Headteachers. In both school types, the school rather than the local authority sets the curriculum, pay, working conditions and governance. This impacts Black and South Asian Headteachers because they are already so few in number at the senior level and this is compounded, now, by fewer leadership roles; as Johnson notes, 'Because Black and South Asian headteachers are often committed to the communities they serve there may be few opportunities for new advancements and little support for school improvement work. Retention data does not account for factors such as the lack of opportunity for professional development and career advancement' (Johnson 2021, 680). Additionally, Johnson (2021) explains that where previous governments offered culturally-responsive mentorship and leadership opportunities for Black and minority ethnic leaders, this support has diminished over recent years, and MATs have not made gaps in racial inequalities in representation or leadership, a priority.

Moreover, Johnson found that these Headteachers were frequently regarded as 'turnaround leaders' whereby they take these roles in underperforming schools and have to navigate the 'hidden cost of racism' adding to their workload, to turn the school round to achieving a 'Good' result in their inspections. So, this paper builds on that finding to demonstrate a turnaround Black woman Headteacher, who is assessed by the same accountability measures as every other Headteacher in the country, but the inspection framework fails to account for poverty, a lack of funding from the local authority, poor quality teachers, or racism – both individual and structural.

Despite pockets of agency that Black women have carved out at particular points in their role, existing research explains that they continue to face institutional and interpersonal racism and the findings are sobering: there is a feeling of having to work twice as hard as their white peers; racial microaggressions and stereotyping are an enduring feature of their tenure; and, pupils' achievement metrics are devoid of any special dispensation for wider structural issues outside of a Head's control such as poverty, location, deprivation and teacher quality. This means that in terms of accountability, Black women in charge of 'challenging schools' are judged against an unfair standard that their white peers in wealthier areas are not (Gov.Uk 2022).

The position of a Headteacher is undoubtedly a position of power – that person has a profound impact on the outcomes and ethos of the school. Miller describes educational leaders as, 'powerful individuals who are uniquely placed to influence staff, students, and other stakeholders' (Miller 2019, 987). Dantley and Tillman (2006) argue that a Headteacher should be a social justice leader whereby the status affords opportunities for activism for equity at its helm. The question, however, is whether this activism for equity is really afforded to all Headteachers. In other words, is it the *perception of power* by others rather than the reality of being constrained, externally, by one's intersections that truly determines whether indeed a Headteacher is entitled to lead and the extent of that activism (*Impact*, February Bailey-Morrissey 2021; Miller 2019)? The perception, by others, of a Headteacher's power is usefully described by as 'teflon-coated leaders who stand in the line of fire … the comic book concept of headship' (*The Guardian*, February 3rd, Grant 2015). The reality, however, for many Black women is far removed from the concept of 'comic book'.

Research by Vieler-Porter (2021) echoes earlier research into the challenges and issues faced by BAME leaders as they articulated 'their different experiences of surveillance, micro-aggressions, perseverance, promotion and leadership' (160). Taking a Critical Race Theory approach, Vieler-Porter found racism is a *central* rather than peripheral feature of a BAME leaders' tenure in British schools. Moreover, because of structural and local-level policy shifts that privilege whiteness, the under-representation of leaders from BAME backgrounds is by *design* rather than by chance or coincidence. The education system's deregulation of governance, mainstreaming funding so that schools have less opportunity to ring-fence budgets for equity issues, prescriptive leadership qualification curricula and evaluation that do not pay specific attention to issues of diversity and identity, and data collection ignoring opportunities to rectify the dearth of BAME leaders, constitutes a 'colour-evasive approach' (96). This is a shift away from assuming a colour-blind approach because 'it is a position that seeks to evade and deny its complicity in maintaining the racist tenure of activity at both a formal and informal level' (115). Vieler-Porter similarly paid some attention to gender illuminated through his interviewees with BAME leaders. The interviewees were acutely aware of their ethnicity *first* and then their professional status (a Black man/woman Headteacher), and that the design of leadership theory, development and practice was designed by and for white men.

In the US, Cyr et al. point out that, 'everyday racist events also occur at the macro (environmental) level where societal or political climate bears impact on the frequency of the micro or every day, aggressions' (Cyr, Weiner, and Burton 2021, 8). Dumas and Joseph (2016) provide evidence of social policy and wider American society's adultification of Black boys, whereby, Black boyhood is unimagined and unimaginable. They explain, Black boys 'are vulnerable to the material effects of racism [and] the narrow constructions of masculinity' (Dumas and Joseph 2016, 28) resulting, ultimately, in their dehumanisation. In England, no greater threat exists to Headteachers trying to weave anti-racist and social justice threads throughout their school, than having a report by a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities deciding that institutional racism no longer exists. Moreover, this threat is strengthened by the realisation that schools are no longer required to collect data on racist incidents in schools (*The Guardian*, March 28th, Batty and Parveen 2021), and government framing of concepts that help pupils understand (and not repeat inequities), is illegal.

What happens if you are a Black woman Headteacher? Do you get the same protection and support as a non-Black Headteacher? As Miller explains, "despite its espoused belief in equality and equity, the UK has created and reinforced a system of 'in group' and 'out group' along racial lines" (Miller 2019, 987). Barriers such as being a woman, and being a Black woman too (Mirza 2008) may present a Headteacher as 'other'. This paper seeks to delve deeper into the category 'Black woman' by disaggregating it further to examine the experiences of Wele, an African Headteacher. Moreover, the paper unpacks how misogynoir and Afriphobia collide with enduring white racial colonial logics concerning racial and gendered stereotypes of Black women as the *Mammy*, *Crazy Black Bitch*, *Superwoman* and the *Feisty Sapphire*. In so doing, the paper provides a more nuanced picture of the institutional racism that underpins the tenure of an African woman Headteacher in England.

Critical race feminism

Critical Race Feminism is an extension into a deeper interrogation of the experiential reality of Black and other women of colour. Emerging from Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the United States of America in the 1990s which itself grew from a lack of attention paid to the impact of racialisation in Critical Legal Studies. Each theoretical pivot towards scholarship that offers greater nuance to people's lived experience has brought with it a set of shared assumptions, but a quest to achieve greater theoretical and practical relevance and understanding to the lives of those impacted by interpersonal and structural levels of disadvantage. Examples of broader Critical Race Theory applications to the UK context can be found amongst the work on (Crawford 2019; Doharty 2019; Gillborn 2005; Gillborn et al. 2012; Joseph-Salisbury 2021a; Rollock et al. 2015; Thomas 2012).

Indeed, Antunes 2017, 100) explains 'in combination with Critical Race Feminism's understanding that an absence of women's and girl's narratives are often a central concern in regards to Critical Race Theory, counter-stories and narratives become even more important when associated with Critical Race Feminism'. Though a body of work in its own right, with clear evidence of its approach and analyses being utilised in the field of education, Critical Race Feminism does share the core assumptions of Critical Race Theory; these are: 'the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination . . . [such as] . . . race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent and sexuality; the challenge to dominant ideologies in educational discourses and institutions . . . [such as] . . . objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity; a commitment to social justice to eliminate all forms of oppression and marginalisation; and recognizing that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination' (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 25–26) Like, CRT, CRF is transdisciplinary in nature in order to move away from theoretical generalisations, and so draws on scholarly work from Black feminism, multicultural feminism, ethnic studies and women's studies.

Therefore, there is a case – here in this paper – and elsewhere for more gendered analyses of racism in education to pay specific attention to the role of misogynoir for Black women and misandry for Black men, which share similarities but must be acknowledged, too, for their differences. The former – misogynoir - according to Palmer is when racism and anti-Blackness converge in a "distinctive brand of hatred directed at Black women [which] produces a binary of 'good' White womanhood at the top and 'bad' non-womanhood for Black women at the bottom of this hierarchical structure of domination" (Palmer 2020, 512). The latter – Black misandry – according to Smith, Yosso and Solórzano, 'refers to an exaggerated pathological aversion toward Black men created and reinforced in societal, institutional, and individual ideologies, practices, and behaviors. Similar to Black misogyny, where one can harbor an aversion toward Black women, Black misandry exists to justify and reproduce the subordination and oppression of Black men (Smith et al. 2007, 563)'.

Consequently, we use Evans-Winters and Esposito's (2010, 20) definition of Critical Race Feminism to inform our theoretical and methodological approach in this paper:

- "Critical race feminism as a theoretical lens and movement purports that women of color's experiences, thus perspectives, are different from the experiences of men of color and those of White women;
- Critical race feminism focuses on the lives of women of color who face multiple forms of discrimination, due to the intersections of race, class and gender within a system of White male patriarchy and racist oppression;
- Critical race feminism asserts the multiple identities and consciousness of women of colour (i.e. anti-essentialist);
- Critical race feminism is multidisciplinary in scope and breadth; and
- Critical race feminism calls for theories and practices that simultaneously study and combat gender and racial oppression".

In Britain, the case for a gendered exploration of the myriad ways in which marginalisation, racial microaggressions and structural disadvantage run counter to policy discourses of education being a site of equal opportunity, has a long history of research and publishing in this area. More work, however, has been conducted on the impacts of schooling – and the opportunities – of and for Black boys (Demie 2021; Christian 2005; Graham and Robinson 2004; Gillborn and Mirza 2000; Sewell 1997).

That is not to suggest there has not been research on the experiences of Black women and girls in the British education system (Fuller 1980; Mirza 1992; Phoenix 2009; Rollock 2007); however, demarcating a bigger space for this work should be unapologetic and unashamed. As Childers-McKee and Hytten (2015, 402) explain, 'Critical Race Feminism adds a distinctly feminist lens to … explore the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression, even while largely centring the experiences of women and girls of color. Indeed, a focus on *intersectionality* is one of the hallmark features of Critical Race Feminism. Critical Race Feminism adds to feminism by helping to continue to disrupt the idea that there is an essential female experience (namely, that of White, middle-class woman)'. Though there are more women Headteachers than men in English schools (Gov.Uk 2021b) this paper disrupts the idea that a woman's experiences as leader is synonymous with being a White, middle-class woman.

One method that could be employed by researchers adopting a Critical Race Feminist perspective and which the writers have chosen as most appropriate for this paper is counter-storytelling. Drawing on CRT literature, from which CRF draws inspiration, counter-storytelling has 'significant value [because] many of us prize our heritages in which the oral tradition has had historical importance – where vital notions of justice and the law are communicated generation to generation through the telling of stories' (Wing 2003, 6). This approach becomes all the more important for Black women who are 'policed, controlled, and heckled, while at the same time a site of spectacle' (Evans-Winters and Esposito 2010, 20) because storytelling, then, becomes a source of *safety* for Black women to examine and centre elements of their lived experience whilst not exposing the specifics that may result in becoming a target for disciplinary action for bringing her organisation into disrepute. According to Bell (2003, 4), 'while stories about race and racism may derive from individual experiences, they also communicate cultural assumptions and habits of thinking that transcend the individual and idiosyncratic'. Thus, we concur with Bell that stories can be strategic because they allow the co-authors to 'critique the dominant group in ways that sometimes would not be safe to do more publicly' (p.6). This has been successfully achieved by one of CRT's founders, Derrick Bell (1987; 1992).

What follows is Wele's story, a Black woman Headteacher in an English school, followed by an analysis from a critical race feminist perspective supported by Joseph-Salisbury (2021b) racialised and gendered images of professional Black women in leadership roles as the analytical standpoint for understanding those experiences.

Wele's story

Understanding Wele's story requires some background on how she arrived at her current school. She was a deputy Headteacher of another local school and she had gone out with friends in the last week of the summer holidays. It was a Thursday and school was due to start the following Monday. She received a phone call from one of the Local Authority's school improvement officers. Inviting her to a meeting the next day to discuss the prospect of becoming Headteacher of the new school. She was to start on Monday in an interim capacity and it was fixed term for 12 months. At every level, the school needed 'fixing'. When Wele arrived at the school, it was a 'broken school' for various reasons: the school had performed poorly in its inspection four months before Wele's arrival; the Headteacher had left during the summer holidays because of a poor inspection outcome – the departure was sudden and the details surrounding it had never been overtly discussed with Wele. However, comments from governors and some members of staff who stayed indicated that she did not leave of her own accord. Moreover, the majority of the teaching staff had left. Again, as with the Headteacher's departure, colleagues who stayed told stories of former members of staff leaving because they lacked confidence in the previous Headteacher. Pupil attendance (one of the OFSTED measures of a 'good school') was extremely poor with persistent absenteeism being one of the highest in the country and middle leaders had mostly left. The school was experiencing falling pupil numbers as parents moved their children to more popular neighbouring schools, and this was accompanied by decreased funding from the Department for Education as schools are funded according to the numbers of pupils at school. Relationships between school and the parent community was poor as parents felt that they had been let down by the school due to poor outcomes for their children. The high quality teachers had gone! They had new staff who did not know them or their children and their needs. The Local Authority's admissions department placed a lot of pupils with significant educational needs at the school, but provided no *extra funding for them as they did not have education and health care plans*[4]*. This put even more pressure on the staff who had stayed, as they had to find creative ways to meet the needs of the children (some of which were very challenging). As that was not challenging enough, the school was on two sites as the infant building was demolished and it had to be rebuilt.*

As the gravity of the situation dawned on her, Wele wondered why she was approached to take a Headship role here and why did her Headteacher (her boss at the time) allow her to go at such short notice? Is it because Black women in the professional working environment are viewed as loyal servants who can ignore the glaring red flags signalling she would need support and development and instead sacrifice herself for the greater good of the school? What follows are the currents of whiteness that nearly took Wele asunder.

First current: strategic support and governance in absentia

It became obvious to Wele very quickly that she had taken on a big job, one that required personable and strategic decision-making combined. Moving from being someone who had not been a Headteacher before to being responsible for a larger than normal primary school with deep-seated personnel and systemic issues, was very problematic and challenging. There was an Executive Headteacher[5] *above Wele, who was supposed to be providing strategic advice. This person had two other schools (both very challenging) and Wele's school was the third. This meant that she was at different places at different times, and even though she was a good sounding board, she was extremely busy and not always available. Before Wele resigned from her previous position, there were times when she thought about going back to her previous job which was still open for her, but members of staff often said she was the only one holding the school – and them – together. She was informed by her colleagues that if she left, they would leave, essentially rooting her to lead by example and leaning on her strong sense of moral purpose.*

The human resource support from the local authority was poor. For a school that had so many problems, Wele could not rely on financial or structural support in the form of legal advice, or staffing to plug the gaps in the priority areas. Additionally, the staff team were deeply dissatisfied with the historical issues of the school and thus, more likely to raise complaints with their unions than following the school protocols. Wele remembers her initial address to the staff beginning with 'I come in peace'. This was because of the physical atmosphere in the hall during that meeting. The staff stood back, just stared and did not speak. The atmosphere relaxed when Wele said 'I come in peace'. Some chuckled, but at least, that was a reaction which was better than silence. Staff attendance was as poor as pupils and Wele understood very quickly that she would have to over-work to restore confidence in the school, but importantly, in her.

Second current: empty classrooms mean children are not learning

The initial challenge was to have teachers in front of classes. Then the challenge of getting the few members of staff who had stayed to buy into Wele's personal vision for the school which at the time was simple – having a team that wanted to make a positive difference for children in the school. At this point, setting this tone amongst the leadership team was key and so leading by example was crucial. That translates to: getting a good senior leadership *team in place, securing high quality teachers for the school, supporting the teachers with high quality training to be able to teach the children well, having an inclusive curriculum in place, having an inclusive school which is also a listening school, have pupils attending regularly and making good progress in their learning, and, having high expectations for all children. Wele and her inexperienced team had to quickly address the basic needs of the school such as, putting together a curriculum; assessing the pupils to have some baseline of where the children were at, and, providing training and support as necessary. Securing teachers for a school mid-year is never an easy task, as most schools do recruit staff for the following academic year by May. Wele managed to get a team in place, but needed to work in collaboration with two other schools to ensure that standards were maintained.*

Building and mending relationships between beleaguered teachers, disappointed parents and angry pupils so that the school could feel like a cohesive and nurturing community was an immense task weighing heavily on Wele's shoulders. Wele recalled how on her second afternoon during what was supposed to be 'meet and greet' at the end of the day, a parent (white male) called her 'incompetent' because she had reviewed a system at the end of the day so that pupils could be dismissed in an orderly and safe manner. He made some derogatory comments that could have been construed to be racist and when Wele later had a meeting with him to address it and discuss his behaviour as per the school's behaviour policy, his defence was, 'but I was born in the 50s so you don't expect me to speak differently. That is how I was brought up'. Parents were particularly challenging. There were many middle class families in the school community – some of whom were trying to tell Wele how to run the school. This mistrust, this view of Wele as a crazy (and incompetent) Black Bitch was a constant challenge hidden beneath a thin veneer of parents offering 'feedback'. Having clear policies and good communication in place helped address that situation.

Wele opened an email from a parent (white male) with the opening paragraph complaining that popular members of staff had left the school mid-year and describing her and another senior Black colleague as 'inconsistent and unreliable individuals'. He continued to complain about Wele parking her 'big car' on the school grounds. The content and language of the rest of the email made her flinch because of the sheer venom of this man's accusatory remarks, which actually read as a character assassination. She pulled herself together and rolled her eyes as if to say, 'yet again!' Wele quietly questioned whether it was necessary for him to write that, 'we do not value your type here and your big car'. What did he mean by 'your type'? Was it because of the way she looks? The fact that she is African? Or that she does not try to change her accent, and she wears her afro unapologetically?

Despite this, the result of Wele's resilience and sound leadership, the building work was completed after a year and the school came back together on one site. Pupils' test results at the end of years two and six (which is when standard assessment test are taken) had improved and the school had another Ofsted inspection, which was judged to be 'good'. The school had started to grow in popularity again in the local area which led to growth in pupil recruitment and local authority funding. In fact, persistent absenteeism amongst pupils was reversed from one of the poorest in the country to becoming in line with the national average within two years. In summary, Wele had met her key priorities and 'fixed' the school.

Third current: when whiteness determines your good just isn't good enough

Wele had been in post for two years when the position of substantive Headteacher for the school was advertised. There was a lot of external interest in the position from prospective candidates, and Wele was informed by racial minority parents in the school community that they had overheard white parents in the playground saying that they were looking for a Headteacher with 'strong British values' which they understood to be a white Headteacher this time. Wele felt unappreciated – she is very qualified (in fact academically more qualified than anyone she had worked for) she had proven experience as a school leader for several years, but there was always a ceiling for her and this time she felt that she must challenge it. Back to the substantive head position, Wele questioned where this (white) person was when the school really needed an experienced and competent person, or was the 'dirty work' only good enough for Wele? The rumours that a former Headteacher was in line for the post made Wele ask herself why she had done all the hard work and now, all of a sudden, there was competition? Where was that competition two years ago?

On the day of the interview, the particular candidate withdrew her application stating that she had another interview on the same day at another local school more suited to her. Wele wondered what would have happened if the candidate had not withdrawn her application or if she had not fought for her place.

Fighting for her place has meant getting the qualifications (including several degrees, the national qualification for Headteachers and her professional teaching qualification) above and beyond what was required to be a Headteacher. When it came to professional development, networking and those sometimes serendipitous moments that come from meeting others in your field for knowledge-sharing and learning, Wele learned very abruptly that those moments were orchestrated by (white) design rather than luck or fair opportunity. She came up against a big white wall of separate Headteacher cliques with their own invite-only WhatsApp groups, created to include only other white Headteachers. Wele discovered this from a few white Headteachers on the margins, who found themselves on the 'wrong side' of the wall because they were vocal about racial and social justice. But an example of this kind is significant for Wele's professional development and networking because these cliques would be invited to pre-conference dinners during the Headteachers' Annual Conference, for example. And have first sight at opportunities where other Headteachers, like Wele, were not invited.

It became clear that Wele did not know anyone who looked like her who was invited. Finding herself on the margins, Wele quickly sought out a network with more experienced Headteachers who looked like her or who were allies (did not look like her but were at the margins of the cliques or were overt about their views on racial and social justice). Joining the cliques was unattractive to Wele as that would have implied a certain degree of imposter syndrome – not that anyone went out of their way to let her in. These colleagues (mostly other Black heads and allies) have been supportive, engaging and willing to share ideas and just having that network makes the challenges of Wele's job doable. Being mentors and coaches to each other, sharing resources and just being sounding boards for each other makes a difficult job bearable.

Discussion

From the counter-story, Wele's experience as Headteacher is inextricably linked to her citizenship status, gender and racialisation, rather than simply being the best person appointed to the role in an equal opportunities' candidate pool. The beauty of CRF is its anti-essentialist nature so her story is unique to her and neither representative of all Black women nor all African Headteachers. However, the integration of Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008) work into the images that hinder Black women's career and leadership development, supports our CRF analysis by demonstrating the permanence of racism and misogynoir that persist for many Black women in senior roles. Wele's experiences are neither linear nor predictable: indeed the story oscillates between her positioned and read by others as the Mammy, Crazy Black Bitch, Superwoman and the Feisty Sapphire, and the analysis takes each one in turn.

On being a Mammy, Wele must draw on her strong sense of service despite the psychological and physiological toll of managing a challenging school with limited resources. The mammy is 'oftentimes placed in support-type positions … as she is viewed as the caretaker … both White and Black coworkers may turn to these women for comfort' (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 2008, 139) and we witness this in the story whereby colleagues unintentionally threaten the stability of the entire school by saying they would leave if she left, and Wele was the only person holding them – and the school – together. Whilst it may seem a measure of strong confidence in Wele that teachers and the wider school are putting all of their faith in her, the Mammy rarely escapes this position and there is no consideration of the impact on her. As Reynolds-Dobbs explain, 'although nurturing and caretaking abilities are positive qualities, they are not viewed as characteristics of influential leaders, thus hindering Black women's career development (139)' and the end of Wele's story is indicative of this: good enough to clean up – not good enough to enjoy, celebrate and strengthen the spoils of that labour.

Wele also experienced being read as a Crazy Black Bitch (CBB), 'the idea that Black women are hard to work with and unprofessional … because they are viewed as being unfriendly, unstable, argumentative and hard to work with, people do not want to assist them in their career development' (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 2008, 142). Parents view Wele as difficult and 'different'. Their suggestions for running the school actually demonstrate a mistrust in her capabilities and reveal the strong challenge they feel towards seeing an African woman in a senior role, outside of the (deficit) television charity campaign narrative – or the cleaner. Wele's 'expensive' car, her position in the school and the changes she is making to improve the culture and outcomes for pupils are read as an affront to what they expect a leader to 'look' like. The consequence of being labelled a CBB is that Wele, like many other Black women, defies this stereotype in favour of becoming Superwoman. Drawing on school policies helps deflect parents' anger away from her being the reason for upsetting the 'balance', but not always. This hostility is also felt amongst the teaching staff so much so that Wele's first introduction to colleagues was 'I come in peace!' There is a state of hypervigilance Wele must feel to guard against attacks whilst also being prepared for any and all eventualities – an impossible task.

In an ostensibly equal opportunities environment, Wele should not have to draw on informal networks to determine the best course of action to take in the absence of structural support. But this is what happens. Wele becomes Superwoman who can, and is expected to, do it all. As Reynolds-Dobbs et al. write, 'oftentimes, Black women in leadership positions are asked to go above and beyond the call of duty in the workplace with very little support' (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 2008, 143) and this is a very pressured and isolating experience because 'having little support, balancing both your work and cultural identity, and being perceived as unstable, make some Black women feel the need to excessively overachieve. Although being an overachiever is not necessarily a bad quality, it can be damaging when an individual is trying to live up to unrealistic expectations. In regard to Superwoman, they may feel the need to always be 10 times better than their White counterparts and when they are not able to fulfil these unrealistic expectations, people may view them as incompetent' (144).

Underscoring Wele's tenure, the expectations upon her and how she is 'read' by others, is the incessant fixation on the 'problem' of Black women under conditions of white male patriarchy and supremacy. Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison (2008) explain that the Feisty Sapphire encompasses how Black women are problematised in the workplace: 'because they are viewed as aggressive, they may be given tasks that other individuals do not want to do, which may create a stressful environment if coworkers and supervisors always expect Black women to do the dirty work. This stereotype also makes it difficult for Black women to show their vulnerability within the workplace because they are not looked at as being soft or vulnerable' (Golden 2021). As the parents trying to tell Wele how to run the school and rumours she would be ousted for a white Headteacher attests, 'people may begin to respond more to her behavior than to her performance, thus making her career short-lived' (Bell and Nkomo 2001; cited in Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, and Harrison 2008, 141–142).

Finally, Wele's position as Headteacher is precarious: balancing atop a cliff-edge when another strategic decision determines her contribution no longer necessary, we must ask: have Black women Headteachers in England really made it? Who really has the power to enact change at leadership level? And why does race, gender and citizenship status play such a crucial role in the experiences, trajectories and outcomes of senior leaders like Wele?

Conclusion

In this paper, Wele is 'stepping out of the shadows', (Blackmore 1993) except this time it is not simply out of the shadow of men, but out of multiple sites of barriers to tell her story, grappling with the issues of socially constructed power imbalances and interpreting her reality as a Headteacher. Her perceived power is not enough to protect her even as a Headteacher. In fact, the white racial colonial logics around Black womanhood continue to underpin *and undermine* a Black woman Headteacher's tenure. Specifically, Black women oscillate between strength and vulnerability – a sitting duck that anyone can attack if they choose to do so. Wele's story highlights differential treatment in leadership positions that an African woman senior leader experiences whilst trying to fulfil her role.

What is clear from the counter-story is that Wele has to be Superwoman doing it all, being successful and being content with her 'lot'. From strategic decisions about who will be placed in which (challenging) school, to the type of support (or lack thereof) Headteachers will receive, English school leadership is engaged in reproducing anti-Black racism and misogynoir. When the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report advances strategies that make racial minorities successful – self-reliance and resilience – what is missing is an account of the wilful neglect from the local authority and her senior colleagues that is at stake for Black women, like Wele, who have to sink or swim. The counter-story sheds light on Wele being a 'fixer' or a Mammy, good enough to clean up the dirty mess left behind by her predecessor, but having to rely on natural resilience in the absence of structural support and functioning infrastructure (echoed, too, in Vieler-Porter 2021). This itself is misogynoir in action: Black women have routinely been positioned as strong, which serves to ignore the psychological toll of not being able to ask for help to repair structural inequalities not of their making, whilst also facing barrages of criticism from the wider school community including white parents. And the further marginalisation-by-erasure of these women in government statistics, means that Black women Headteachers must suffer in **silence**.

A CRF analysis serves to demonstrate that Black women Headteachers' experiences specifically, need bringing out of the statistical, theoretical, methodological and experiential margins, because Wele's story is one of a successful Headteacher *in spite of* racist oppression. Whilst this story might not change individual minds about her capacity, the story does pinpoint structural decision-making that causes inequalities in school resources and pupil outcomes. And this is supported by other Black and racially minoritised Headteachers echoing the same sentiment: institutional racism exists and is thriving (Hill 2022).

Black Headteachers cannot give what they do not have: funding, qualified and competent teachers, extra academic and pastoral support for pupils who are struggling, and yet, as the 'face' of the school, it is on Wele's head the success of the school – or not – be it. This paper offers a challenge to the idea that Black women are impenetrable, that institutional racism no longer exists, and that racism and sexism are not only reserved for colleagues and school children, but even at the 'top' amongst those that have seemingly 'made it'.

Notes

1. Black women, particularly in senior academic roles, are also significantly under-represented – and face challenges shaped by racism and sexism (Rollock 2021).
2. Some schools in England receive their funding from their local council, county or district.
3. 'The fear of people and things Afrikan' (Sampong 2015).
4. This legal document outlines the pupil's special educational needs, the provisions to support them and the expected outcomes. More information is available here: https://www.sen-help.org.uk/the-system/ehc-plans/.
5. Executive Headteachers are in charge of more than one school and offer strategic advice and support to all schools within their remit. More information is available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/executive-heads.

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