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## White Profession, Black Professional: Working under the Whims of White Authority in the Contemporary Workplace

Authors	Ukpabi, Ifeanyichukw
Citation	Ukpabi, Ifeanyichukw. "White Profession, Black Professional: Working under the Whims of White Authority in the Contemporary Workplace." 2022. Dissertation, Georgia State University. <a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/30335615">https://doi.org/10.57709/30335615</a>
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.57709/30335615">https://doi.org/10.57709/30335615</a>
Download date	2026-04-13 02:52:38
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/13918">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/13918</a>

White Profession, Black Professional: Working under the Whims of White Authority in the  
Contemporary Workplace

by

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Under the Direction of Tomeka Davis, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2022

## ABSTRACT

My dissertation utilizes semi-structured interviews with Black professionals (N =25) across various industries to explore discourses of racism within professionalized workplaces. My dissertation forwards systemic racism theories by considering the emerging arguments of racial capitalism to investigate the relationship between racial hierarchies, job authority hierarchies, and racialized valuation in professionalized work. My research finds that the hierarchical structure of professionalized work grants Whites in positions of influence authority to define the conceptual boundaries of what constitutes a racist action or expression and the ramifications of such actions/expressions. With the power to define, White managers and supervisors continuously render behaviors that Black professionals see as racist as behaviors needing no institutional consideration or intervention. As such, many Black professionals avoid making their experiences with racism public because they understand that Whites will use their discretion to dismiss their concerns or harness White racial frames to taint their career prospects in fields dominated by peer evaluation. White professionals' structural authority over what constitutes racism - and the distribution of resources to deal with racist incidents -only reify their preferred stance that racism does not exist within their workplace.

A central theme of my research is the absence of institutional support in contesting racism and racial inequality in the workplace. The continuing maintenance of predominately White authority centers influences Black professionals to conceal their experiences of racial inequality to be evaluated as ideal workers by White leadership. My research calls for institutional efforts that challenge the persistence of White systemic racism and market-

dependent individualism to provide the collective support necessary to counter the collective issue of anti-Black racism in the workplace.

INDEX WORDS: Racism, Race, Class, Intersectionality, Work, Professions

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2022

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August 2022

**DEDICATION**

I dedicate my dissertation to all the Black people simply doing their best in an unequal world. I see you, and I believe you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank the Southern Regional Education Board and the Graduate School at Georgia State University for supporting my dissertation through their grant programs. I would not have been able to complete my dissertation without the financial support and the space to grow as a writer through the SREB Scholar grant and the Provost's Dissertation Fellowship.

I am grateful to my sharp dissertation committee for supporting me through my dissertation process. I want to thank Deirdre Oakley for the professional development she provided throughout my graduate career. Without your support and opportunities, I would not be able to enjoy the trajectory propelling me forward in my career.

I owe my entire graduate career to Tomeka Davis, my thoughtful and ever-present dissertation chair. I truly appreciate the physical and intellectual space you provided that laid the foundations for my abilities as a writer and scholar. I hope my dissertation reflects the magnificent work that you always knew I could achieve. I am forever grateful.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Through a particular perspective, Justin's career trajectory exemplifies the opportunities and possibilities opened to Black professionals due to the victories of the Civil Rights movement. After graduating from Morehouse College in the 70's, Justin worked an internship with the Department of Defense before securing a 34-year career with a top tier energy company in the South. While he credits his own individual work ethic, Justin is cleared eyed about the significances of Affirmative Action policies in helping him secure his career status. Despite having no intentions of becoming an engineer, He was enveloped in a program that explicitly sought to increase the number of Black engineers beyond a paltry 1% by granting students scholarships and funding their education. Throughout the 70's and the 80s, Justin was a success story at his company, later becoming the first Black supervisor of an IT related job, the first Black person in IT management, and the first Black person in marketing management at his workplace. Justin's career successes illustrate the promise of the Civil Rights era that if Black people are granted the opportunity and support to successfully integrate into historically racially exclusionary institutions, Black people can build a life for themselves and thrive within a society with a deep racist past.

But a closer investigation into Justin's career trajectory complicates the narrative that the inclusion of Black professionals into predominately white workplaces is enough to challenge the deep racialized hierarchies that have structured work in the United States since its inception. Justin had always felt that race played a central role in how he was evaluated at work. But like many of his Black professional peers, believed his high-quality performance spoke for itself. But the last ten years of his career brought him face to face with the power that Whites in positions of workplace authority can hold in the workplace. After 24 years of doing intellectually challenging

yet meaningful work, Justin found himself relegated to a marginalized role that did not reflect his expertise. More importantly for Justin, the position was too marginal to receive the evaluations necessary to warrant promotion into an executive position that he always dreamed he could achieve.

When I asked him what changed, that a decorated Black professional who had achieved so many accolades and had the experiences to warrant an executive position could be arbitrarily relegated to marginal work, he simply told me that he crossed the wrong White people:

I had been a critical of IT, before moving into IT. And there were people there that knew that and remembered that. I actually even butted heads with them frequently because they were our service providers, and we were trying to implement things. And so, and then you know, probably some element of racism as well at that, you know, they didn't like being told what to do by a Black guy.

As Justin moved up in rank, he gained more respect and influence, and he used his workplace influence to speak his mind about the problem he saw in his workplace. He made critiques along technical grounds against colleagues to ensure the highest quality work prevailed. But he also made critiques about the seemingly arbitrary decisions that predominately white executives and leadership made about cutting staff. He recounts many times when he cautiously stood up for Black colleagues who he felt faced disproportionate criticism and cuts that did not happen for Whites of similar technical proficiencies. All his actions were acceptable within the bounds of professionalized work and Justin's job authority rank. However, scholars of racism highlight how the legacy of systemic racism has created a contemporary racial landscape where Whites hold disproportionate power and influence over the structures of the workplace, and thus disproportionate power and influence over the workplace experiences of the Black professionals who work under them (Acker 2006; Moore 2008; Harvey Wingfield 2020). As such, Whites in the workplace can react punitively against a Black colleague. Justin, as a member of a workplace

unwilling to acknowledge their racialized past and present, must accept these conditions or leave. Justin, faced with a stalled career and an illness, decided to retire from his distinguished career. He never “achieved” the executive position that many thought he rightfully earned through a career of excellence.

The stories of Justin and the other Black professionals I interviewed highlight the ways that specific racialized practices and processes continue to structure professionalized work in the contemporary era. Due to the tireless efforts of Civil Rights Era activists, contemporary Black professionals can access and work within historically exclusionary, majority white workplaces once guarded by the most overt racist segregationist tactics and traditions in U.S. society. As members of these white professions, Black professionals reap economic benefits like favorable labor conditions, earning higher than average incomes, and having the potential to reach job authority ranks unimaginable by previous generations. Black professionals also reap symbolic benefits associated with professionalized work that has been established as the apex of achievement, merit, and social worth within U.S. culture. But the privileges that Black professionals accrue through their inclusion within predominately white workplaces have not granted them with racial equity within their workplaces. Fundamentally, contemporary Black professionals work within exclusionary, economically privileged, majority white workplaces that have not fundamentally challenged, disrupted, or overturned the racial hierarchies that maintain these workplaces as white controlled, defined, and privileged.

As such, Black professionals find themselves occupying what I term a *racialized contradictory status*. Yes, Black professionals have obtained the social, economic, and cultural capital necessary to land and maintain employment within exclusionary and disproportionately white professions. But the actions and disproportionate authority of Whites within the workplace

specifically and the United States more broadly perpetuate a racial hierarchy that devalues and denigrates Black professionals' material and symbolic standing. Despite discourses of "merit" and "opportunity," a racial hierarchy remains in professionalized work that is reified by the actions, inactions, and beliefs of disproportionately white executives, managers, and colleagues who decide that the racial status quo is desirable to an alternative that would acknowledge and wrestle with the racial inequality that Black professionals face in the workplace.

It is the racialized position that Black professionals experience due to the actions and disproportionate authority of Whites within predominately white workplaces that animates my research. It is in the interest of white professionals and leadership to ignore the racialized experiences of their Black colleagues to uphold the ideas of meritocracy and equal opportunity that paint them and their workplaces in a positive light. But how do Black professionals fit into this picture as workers who are simultaneously denigrated and privileged by their inclusion within White professions? As theorized by systemic racism scholars, Black professionals have racial interest to highlight the racist norms, values, and mechanisms that depreciate their individual and social value within the workplace. But Black professionals also benefit materially and symbolically by being members of predominately white professions and workplaces. So, they also have incentives to accept their positions within professionalized work to maintain the privileges of professionalized work. It is this unique status within a racist structure that animates my exploration of Black professionals in majority white workplaces.

By focusing on the racialized experiences that Black professionals face in predominately white work, I can pose my overarching research questions: *what racialized practices and frames do Black professionals utilize to navigate and make sense of their racialized status within majority white workplaces? And what do the racialized practices and frames that Black*

*professionals utilize reveal about the present state of race and racism within professionalized work?* To make sense of my research question, I utilize an approach that is sensitive to both 1) the macro structures of systemic racism, and how macro racist structures intersect with capitalist relations to produce a contemporary reality where Black professionals can suffer from a racialized contradictory status and 2) the everyday experiences of Black professionals with the specific meso-level racial structures of the workplace that continues to perpetuate racialized experiences for Black professionals. My dissertation utilizes a macro to meso to micro approach to truly appreciate how Black professionals' struggle with racial inequality in a contemporary white workplace deeply intertwined with the legacy of systemic racism and capitalist relations that has denigrated the classed realities of Black communities.

In chapter 2, I seek to contextualize the experiences of the Black middle class by illustrating the intertwined macro racist and capitalist structures that have influenced the social realities of Black professionals. I begin with an elucidation of the macro level theoretical frameworks I use to make sense of the intersections of economic and racist stratification that contribute to the contemporary lived experiences of Black professionals. I then utilize my theoretical framework to craft a historical overview of the Black Middle Class to highlight the intersecting centrality of White actions/authority and capitalist relations in structuring the socioeconomic realities of Black communities. Despite the racial inclusion project won by the Civil Rights Era activists, the actions of Whites and larger economic relations perpetuate a racialized class position for the Black middle class.

In Chapter 3, I turn to conceptualizing the everyday micro experiences of Black professionals within the organizational level structures of predominately white workplaces. I begin by highlighting the foundational class inequalities of the workplace that concentrate

authority and resources in disproportionately white leadership/management that forwards White interest and maintains the racial status quo of their institutions. However, a key tension arises as professionalized work is central to the elevated socioeconomic status of Black professionals who have economic interest to maintain the boundaries of their work. This is only further exacerbated by the reality that professionalized work reflects and contribute to wider racial stratification and inequality. Within this context, I pose my research question *what practices and ideological frames do Black professionals utilize to navigate their racialized class status within majority white workplace?* I end with a discussion of my methodology.

### **1.1 Significance of Research: Macro to Meso to Micro**

Ultimately, I wish to complicate structural racism analysis by arguing that Black people are embedded within racist *structures* – both at the macro population level and at the meso level of the workplace. While individuals racialized as Black are theorized to face similar macro-level racist structures, many racism scholars are beginning to critique the racism scholarship for focusing most of its analytical attention on aggregate level Black populations, to the detriment of examining the various spaces Black people can now access post-Civil Rights era (Valdez and Golash-Boza 2016; Hughey 2015; Ray 2019). I argue that the heterogenous class situations of Black people will have a significant effect on the face-to-face experiences that Black people experience within work organizations. With greater access to high prestige credentials from formerly racially exclusionary universities and institutions, Black professionals now can enter majority white workplaces at unprecedented levels, and the racial structures they experience within the workplace and the racial ideologies they form as a result deserve their own attention and theorization. Therefore, my research is an attempt to examine the unique experiences that

racial structures create for the micro level classed realities of Black professionals in the contemporary era.

The purpose of this research is to examine the work experiences of Black professionals in majority white workplaces to uncover the relationship between racist white interest and the experiences, ideologies, and identifications of Black professionals. The goal is to better understand the various and unique ways Black people are affected by racism to create more nuanced research on how Black people experience racism and class inequalities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **2 BLACK PROFESSIONALS AND THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY**

Before considering the experiences of Black professionals in predominately white workplaces, it is crucial to contextualize the unique racialized moment that contemporary Black professionals find themselves within. Black professionals working in the same workplaces as their White peers while demanding, and allegedly receiving, a similar level of humanity is a post-Civil Rights era reality in United States history. For most of U.S. history, the workplace functioned as a site of racist exclusion or inferiority where Black workers were either barred entry due to workplace discrimination or marginalized to inferior positions with lower wages, status, and influence than their White peers (Roediger 2008; Harvey Wingfield 2008). It required the active Civil Rights era activism of Black communities and anti-racist allies to contest the racist hierarchies of the U.S. and grant contemporary Black professionals the opportunity to access historically “White-only” workplaces.

The activism accomplished *racial inclusion*, allowing Black people the opportunity to escape the spatial disadvantage created by racial segregation and enter racially exclusionary

spaces (Anderson 2012). But the racial inclusion project did not eradicate racial inequality; the racial inclusion project only allowed Black communities the *opportunity* for inclusion. The racial inclusion project was also incomplete, as only Black communities of relative socioeconomic privilege could obtain the social, human, and economic capital necessary for inclusion.

Ultimately, the racial inclusion project did not foundationally overturn racist hierarchies that grant White communities disproportionate advantage and authority to maintain racial inequality in the workplace and the broader U.S. society.

This chapter takes a macro-structural approach to argue that, while the racial inclusion project fundamentally altered racial structures in the United States, it did not overturn the foundationally racist hierarchy that continues to grant White communities the disproportionate advantage and authority that contributes directly to racial inequality. I begin by outlining the conceptualization of racism that guides my research. I craft an understanding of racism that is systemic, historically contingent, and intersecting with capitalism that provides the theoretical foundation for my understanding of contemporary Black professionals. I then provide a historical and empirical overview of Black professionals in the Black middle class to illustrate that, despite the vast change in their experience, racial inequality persists due to the legacy of systemic racism and the continuing actions of Whites in a capitalist society. Thus, while the Black middle class now can access and even succeed within historically exclusionary workplaces, Black communities continue to be disadvantaged by a legacy of systemic racism that grants Whites disproportionate authority to dictate their social realities.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework: Racism as Systemic, Historically Contingent, and Intersecting with Capitalism**

The conceptualization of racism that guides my exploration of Black professionals in predominately White workplaces is influenced by the traditions of *Systemic Racism Theory*, proposed by Joe Feagin, and the *Racialized Social Systems Theory*, proposed by Bonilla-Silva. The purpose of highlighting these traditions is to anchor a specific definition of racism that is systemic, historically contingent, and intersecting with capitalist relations. By systemic, I follow the tradition of *Systemic Racism theory* to argue that a historical legacy of racist practices and policies constructs a white supremacist racial hierarchy that continues to structure U.S. social relations into the present (Feagin 2006; 2013). By historically contingent, I follow the tradition of the *Racialized Social Systems theory* to argue that while there exists a persisting racial structure that unequally distributes material and symbolic benefits along racial lines, the expression of the distribution is historically specific (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2015). By intersecting with capitalism, I forward race and class researchers to argue that the class status of Black communities cannot be understood separately from the racialized realities of capitalist relations (Robinson 1983; Bowser 2007; Wilson 2012 & 2010; Brown 2013;). I also utilize specific concepts within these traditions to focus my analysis of Black professionals. I now move to explicate the specific parameters of these theories and their contributions to my research on the contemporary racialized work experiences of Black professionals.

### ***2.1.1 Racism as Systemic and Historically Contingent***

Systemic Racism Theory, as proposed by sociologist Joe Feagin, argues racism is not a problem of individual malice or a societal aberration in U.S. society, but a “foundational, large-scale and inescapable hierarchical system of US racial oppression devised and maintained by

Whites and directed at people of color” (Feagin 2006: 19-37). The systemically racist relations of settler colonialism - characterized by the genocide of native Americans, the enslavement of Black people, and the racist exploitation of racial/ethnic groups- provided the foundational racist hierarchy that structures social life in the United States into the present (Feagin 2006; Wade 1997; Omi and Winant 2015; Glenn 2015). Systemic racism scholarship pushes us to view racism as a hierarchical structure that is embedded in all major U.S. institutions that fundamentally shapes the material, social, and ideological realities of Whites and people of color within the United States and abroad (Feagin 2006). The maintenance of the foundational racist hierarchy is perpetuated through the actions of Whites and the ideological rationalization of racial inequality through the white racial frame (Feagin 2006). The maintenance of a racist hierarchy through the actions and ideologies of white actors helps me to focus on the enduring racial inequality that Black middle-class communities face into the present.

The Racialized Social Systems Theory, as proposed by Bonilla-Silva, influences my understanding of racism as a social structure that changes over time. The key theoretical tension between Feagin’s and Bonilla Silva’s work is their disagreement about the rigidity and consistency of the foundational racist hierarchy and its associated racist frame throughout history (Harvey Wingfield & Feagin 2012). While Systemic Racism theory points us to focus on the unchanging and resilient racist hierarchy that structures U.S. social life, The *Racialized Social System Theory* is insightful in highlighting how racist structures, while consistent, alter in their expression overtime. Bonilla Silva accomplishes this by theorizing “racial contestation.” He argues that white people have *racist group interest* in maintaining a racist society to maintain their privileged position in society. Black people, therefore, have an opposing shared racial group interest in overturning a racist hierarchy that denigrates them (2010). The opposing group

interest and actions of White and Black communities creates *racial contestation* as White collectivities seek to maintain the racist structure that privileges them while Black people and other racialized groups seek to change their denigrated status in a racist caste system (Bonilla-Silva 1997).

Racial contestation is thus inevitable in a racist society where Whites are invested in maintaining white advantage and Black communities are invested in changing their denigrated experiences in a racialized society. Black collectives and their allies in racial justice have secured victories over the course of U.S. history, such as the abolishment of Chattel Slavery and the end of Jim Crow Segregation, that have radically altered the racial position of Black communities in U.S. society. As a result, racial contestation between whites and Black People/People of Color creates historically specific *racialized systems* in which Black people experience unique racist structures and racialized experiences within specific socio-historical moments (Bonilla Silva 2015). This theoretical insight elucidates how Black communities are still experiencing racism and racial inequality, despite their experiences not mirroring the worst eras of racist white oppression and authoritarianism in U.S. history. The changes in Black communities' experiences do not reflect progress, but a change in the racialized structures of the U.S. through racial constation that, nonetheless, maintain the unequal distribution of resources along racial lines (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Ray 2019). Through a Racialized Social Systems approach, my review of the Black middle-class highlights that, despite changes to the racial structures of the U.S., racial inequality persists that continues to distribute resources unequally to Black communities.

I think the theoretical tension between a racism that is foundational and a racism that changes over time both hold truths that influence how I will analyze the experiences of Black professionals in the current era. My literature review supports the systemic racism argument that

white supremacy, as a societal system of persistent White-on-Black oppression granting white advantage and Black disadvantage, has been an omnipresent reality for Black communities throughout the history of this country. But, as racialized systems theorists posit, Black professionals have continuously and consistently contested white interest over time in a way that have fundamentally altered the racist structures they experience within the country. Thus, I wish for my dissertation to keep these theoretical tensions in mind because I believe they reveal truths about a Black middle class that has simultaneously altered its position within a racial structure while still suffering from racial inequalities.

Before considering my literature review on the Black middle class, we must consider a key dimension of social stratification that structures work generally and professionalized work specifically – capitalism. The works of systemic racism theorists do consider the structural relations of capitalism within their work by explicating how white advantage is a foundationally material phenomenon. They underscore how the United States is the product of racist projects that explicitly sought to create a white supremacist site of wealth accumulation and elevated symbolic status for those of white racial status (Feagin 2013). When we consider this fact, it becomes difficult to understand the construction of capitalism and class relations as a separate phenomenon from racist ideologies and hierarchies. However, these Racism theories lack specific theorizations of the structures of capitalists' relations and the consequences of these relations on the material and ideological dimensions of racial inequality for Black communities (Roediger 2007; 2017) My perspective must forward the structural racism theories by more explicitly theorizing the ways that capitalist accumulation and exploitation influence the workplace experiences of Black professionals. To accomplish this, we must borrow from the

emerging theoretical framework of *racial capitalism* to construct a theoretical framework sufficiently sensitive to the intersections of capitalist and racial stratification.

### ***2.1.2 Racism as Intersecting with Capitalism***

Racial Capitalism is a school of thought that forwards a critique of the Marxist understanding of capitalism by arguing that racism and capitalism are co-constitutive phenomena that have fundamentally shaped the creation of the modern world (Robinson 1983; Steinberg 2001; Roediger 2008; Kelly 2017; McMillian Cottom 2020). The Marxist tradition argues that stratified class structure is the consequence of a capitalist economy where a property class exploits and extracts from a laboring class to maintain their elevated class position. In a capitalist society, the means of production are owned by the capitalist class while workers must sell their labor for wages to the capitalist class who own the means of production to earn a living (Marx 1976). Marxist theorists, however, obscure the centrality of racialization and racism to the foundations of capitalism and capitalist class formation. Cedric Robinson's text *Black Marxism* argues that the construction of "the negro" was an "ideological construct" central to the construction of capitalist relations, and thus the creation of western modernity (1983). Early capitalist relations in the United States and Europe depended upon the racialization of socially constructed inferior racial groups to maintain the scale of labor necessary to ensure the efficiency and profitability of capitalism (Robinson 1983; Steinberg 2001).

As scholars have noted, Black Marxism is not a sociological text; Black Marxism is a project with aims towards creating a liberatory philosophy for Black people in the United States and abroad (Kelley 2017; Robinson 2000; McMillian Cottom 2020). But many researchers have utilized the foundational ideas that racism and capitalism are co-constitutive phenomena to forward sociological works that influence my research. Benjamin Bowser (2007) highlights how

Marxist thinkers' focus on the class struggle between a ruling capitalist class and laborers ignores the significance of *the Black enslaved* to the development of capitalist relations. Systemic racist relations are fundamentally tied to the historical and contemporary capitalist exploitation that ensured the subjugations of Black laborers throughout U.S. history.

Through a racial capitalism framework, we begin to question the professionalized workplace as a site of co-constitutive oppressions of racism and capitalist exploitation/devaluation. Eric Wright, reflecting Neo-Marxist theorists, underscores exploitation as the central social relation in a capitalist society. The owners of capital exploit and extract the surplus of workers' labor to exchange on the market to make profits for themselves (Wright 1997; Wright 2002). Capitalist relations thus incentivize exploitative relations where an ownership class is extracting more labor effort than what workers are willing to expend to ensure optimal profitability (Wright 1997; Wright 2002). But a racial capitalism lens will push us to consider the racialized characteristics of capitalist exploitation because white supremacist racism and capitalism are fundamentally simultaneous structures. The systemically racist and capitalist relations, augmented by racist segregation and historical exclusion from white institutions, laid the foundations for the formation of distinct, racialized class formation for Black people (Browser 2007; Brown 2013). The racialized class formation is not comparable to the class locations of their white peers, and the unique position of the Black middle class within racist and capitalist structures is key to understanding the contemporary racialized class location of Black professionals.

Understanding racism as *systemic, historically contingent, and intersecting with capitalism* serves as my foundation for understanding Black professionals throughout U.S. history. As such, my literature review of the Black middle class pays close theoretical attention

to issues of systemic white racism, the changing nature of racist structures, and the intersections of racism and capitalism. This theoretical grounding helps me to illustrate that we cannot make sense of the contemporary experiences of Black professionals in predominately white workplaces without considering the foundational inequalities that are forged by the intersections of systemic racism and racial capitalism.

## **2.2 Racist Segregation and the Contradiction of the First Black Middle-Class**

Despite the abolition of Slavery, the governments of the Reconstruction era upheld a racist hierarchy by failing to fundamentally overturn the white supremacist social order that structured race relations in the United States (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 2008; Anderson 2016). The failure, and in many cases actions, of U.S. governments allowed Whites to reinstate an overtly racist labor system that elevated Whites while denigrating Black communities back to the bottom of a white supremacist racial hierarchy. White landowners utilized their absolute authority to structure labor relations around oppressive, exploitative, and extractive conditions that eliminated the possibility of an autonomous and equal Black community (Wilson 2012 & 2005). The racist structures of the labor market perpetuated inhumane working conditions for Black workers under white racist authoritarianism and many Black workers labored in arduous work relations that reflected the stratification of the earlier slavery era (Blackmon 2008; Feagin 2006; Anderson 2016). In rural and urban regions, many Blacks worked as “farm laborers, sharecroppers, tenant farmers, other small farmers, laborers, or domestic workers and other servants” (Feagin 2006: 128). Black women were concentrated into domestic work for white families, mirroring their roles as mammies in the slavery era (Hill Collins 2000). A racist hierarchy that granted labor rights to white men eliminated the ability of Black men to find stable

work as laborers and Black communities experienced with chronic unemployment or underemployment (Feagin 2006).

For many Black people, the only hope to escape the authoritarian will of White people was to uproot their lives and move North. Black communities, particularly those of relatively higher economic means, left the racist terrorism of the white authoritarian south in hopes of a better life in the North. Fleeing the oppressively exploitative sharecropping hell of the South, Black communities and households of means evacuated the South in large numbers to migrate to the newer but more unsteady urban labor markets of the North (Wilson 2010). Thus, urban areas saw an average increase in their Black populations from 20% in 1890 to around 50% in 1940 (Wilson 2012). The socio-economic rewards incentivizing Black people to move north were profound, as Wilson lays out:

in the 1920s, Black women, who contributed vibrantly to household income, could earn between \$12 and \$18 a week in Chicago factories (the equivalent of approximately \$248) compared to \$2 to \$4 in the South (Equivalent to approximately \$50).

Black people saw vast improvements in educational and white-collar opportunities. By the end of World War I, some 500,000 Black people moved from the South to the North in *The Great Migration* to achieve a life that was unattainable within the white racist society of the South (Anderson 2016). But the idea of the North as a refuge for Black communities masks the intense racist segregation across all societal sectors that white actors institutionalized to perpetuate white advantage and Black disadvantage (Blackmon 2008; Anderson 2016). The North was not a panacea of equality, but it did offer some Black communities their first opportunities to live a middle-class life unlike any time in the past.

The Great Migration and White propagated segregation created market space for the formation of a relatively isolated Black middle-class poised to cater to the consumption needs of

segregated Black communities (Stuart 1969; Hine 2003 and 2005; Landry and Marsh 2011; Summers 2013; Wilson 2010 and 2012). With the end of Slavery, the United States was embedded within two socio-historical moments: the rise and fall of the Reconstruction era and the beginnings of U.S. consumer culture. The Reconstruction project therefore did not only want to include Black communities (men) into American citizenship through enfranchisement, but also as citizen consumers because consumption was heavily linked with the ideal American citizen (Wilson 2012, 2010, & 2005). Despite the failure of the Reconstruction era to integrate Black communities into mainstream white society, the consumer needs of segregated Black communities provided opportunities for market success and profit for some in the Black community. The Great Migration created a large, concentrated, and uneven Black consumer community with purchasing power, altering the rate of consumption from “\$3,055,000,000 in 1920 (equivalent to \$33.3 billion) to \$10,290,000,000 by 1943 (equivalent to 129.5 billion) (Wilson 2012; Weems 1998). But the failures of the Reconstruction era presented a problem for the U.S. capitalist class and its system of capitalism – Blacks, unfettered from the fixed racism of slavery, were now potential consumers and thus necessary for the expansion of capitalist markets (Wilson 2009; 2012). However, Whites still wished to maintain racial dominance in a racist hierarchy, and such dominance required Black subjugation.

Thus, the racist system of Jim Crow segregation substituted the racist social relations of Chattel Slavery while altering Black communities’ experiences with expanding capitalist relations. The work of geographer Bobby Wilson serves as a great entry point for understanding the intersections of racism, capitalism, and consumption for Black communities in the segregationist era. Wilson argues that, unlike the racist social relations of the slavery that constructed Black people as inferior property, the segregation era disadvantaged Black people

more through their position as actors and consumers in a capitalist economic system (2010). Yes, Black people were allowed to participate in their newly formed status as consumers, but they had to conform to white supremacist actions and consume in segregated parts of town that had institutions and resources that were inferior to whites (Wilson 2012). The racist society valued whiteness over Blackness in the market, and whites use their elevated market value as owners and consumers to exclude Blacks from consuming in white markets (Wilson 2012). Jim Crow segregation, therefore, allowed the expansion of capitalist markets and a freer exchange and consumption of commodities while simultaneously reinstituting a racist structure that privileged whites over Blacks (Wilson 2010). Legal and informal segregation guaranteed that labor and consumer markets acted as a ‘whites only’ space that afforded whites the greatest economic opportunities while excluding African Americans. Thus, we see the perpetuation of racist stratification linked to Whites continual authoritarian control of the racial hierarchy that depresses the economic realities of Black communities.

But the existence of racially segregated market created new economic opportunities for relatively economically privileged Black people to profit by serving the desires of a newly formed Black consumer class. Racist segregation ensured that the newly educated Black professional class lacked access to white controlled markets. Racist discrimination in the workplace, along with racialized pay and wage gaps, racist lending practices, and capital constraints ensured that Black people experienced a depressed middle-class experience (Silverman 2011; Feagin 2006). Black people were therefore forced into an *economic detour* by selling exclusively to Black consumers in a segregated Black only market away from racist whites (Stuart 1969; Silverman 2011). Black people also worked in industries that focused on the “Black body” such as hairstyling and funeral services, because of whites’ racist ideas of Black

contamination that left those markets open (Silverman 2011). Thus, the co-constitutive forces of racist segregation and capitalism created a more open opportunity structure for certain Black people to earn wages beyond subsistence and a chance for upward mobility (Landry and Marsh 2011). But the market opportunities were dependent on Whites' desires and institutionalization of racist segregation that maintained a racist hierarchy that depressed the economic statuses of Black communities and excluded them from the American social and political body.

The formation of segregated Black communities with consumption power and opportunities for profit and upward mobility institutionalized class and status hierarchies within the Black neighborhoods and communities. E. Franklin Frazier was one of the early sociologists to write explicitly about the social characteristics and relations of a Black middle-class in his book *The Black Bourgeoise* (1957; Landry and Marsh 2011). Frazier argues that the socioeconomic statuses of Black people were severely limited by white racism. Therefore, the Black middle-class turned towards conspicuous consumption to challenge Whites' racist ideologies about Black people (1957). The behaviors and actions of the newly formed affluent Black status communities disappointed many Black intellectuals, who felt that affluent Black people did not do enough to become leaders and challenge white supremacy. W.E.B Du Bois first popularized this notion of the Black middle-class becoming leaders through his *Talented Tenth*, contrasting Booker T. Washington's emphasis on industrial training to argue that the newly college-educated Black people should lead the Black community to advancement (1903; Landry and Marsh 2011). Frazier echoed similar sentiments, and much of his disappointment with the Black middle-classes' "world of delusions" and conspicuous consumption stemmed from what he saw as a lack of leadership and a focus of the frivolity of consumer life (1957).

Contemporary researchers critique Frazier's argument as being dependent on weak methodology and evidence (Landry and Marsh 2011). However, other researchers have provided fair critiques of the cultural consumption patterns of the Black middle-class of this era to elucidate how classed and gendered hierarchies frequently created interracial conflicts in Black communities. Chambers argues that Black Greek Letter Organizations, founded between 1906 and 1920, created a segregated privileged society that perpetuated the racist attitudes of white society while also rejecting social activism to maintain their prestige and status (2017). Summers (2013) argues that Black men conceptualized their masculinities in tandem with their citizenship rights and sought to marginalize working-class Black and middle-class Black women to hoard their newly found rights as the leaders of the Black community. This line of research challenges the ideas that there is homogenous racial interest within Black communities by highlighting how the various class locations within Black communities created new hierarchies and classed interests that complicated the political ideologies, commitments, actions of Black people.

The intersections of white racism and an open opportunity structure created by capitalist markets laid the foundation for a Black middle class with unique relations to the larger white society. Historically, African Americans faced total exclusion from a middle-class position due to Slavery, which racialized them as property and not people. Just a generation removed from Slavery, it is understandable that the newly minted Black middle-class would turn to conspicuous consumption as a cultural politic in a racist society foundationally structured by an overtly white supremacist racist hierarchy. In fact, African Americans' saw their ability to reflect the consumption practices of Whites as its own form of *respectability politics*, as Summers notes "class formation, in other words, was evidence that a segment of the African American population had developed an appreciation for the bourgeois values of thrift, industry, sobriety,

regularity, and a public-private organization of gender within the home and community” (Summers 2013). Thus, Black middle-class communities used their consumptive powers to illustrate that they too could embed themselves in American capitalist culture and were, therefore, equal to whites.

But the Black middle classes’ success in segregated labor and consumer markets could not overcome the severity of white racist segregation, and therefore did not relinquish a shared racial interest for racial inclusion for full equality. Despite the critiques against the frivolities of consumption and respectability politics, Black middle-class collectives did use their segregated social institutions to fight for racial inclusion and equality. Many critiques of the Black middle class focused on cultural expressive institutions; like extravagant social clubs, jazz and disco spots, and fraternities/sororities; while ignoring the instrumental associations that Blacks joined to push forward their political interest (Woodard 1986; Hine 2003). Historian Hines argues that the Black professional class constructed parallel organizations, such as the National Medical Association (1895) and the National Bar Association (1925) that provided social networks and the opportunities to discuss and highlight the tensions between “parallelism and integration” (2003). Without political work done within segregated parallel Black institutions, Black communities would have lacked the institutional and organizational power necessary to challenge and combat the white supremacist regime of Jim Crow segregation (Hine 2005; Landry and Marsh 2011).

Black people, through the newfound political power, sought to integrate themselves into the America socio-political body through the Civil Rights Era. White communities resisted Black communities’ will to assert themselves as American citizens deserving the right to middle class life through racist terrorism and white flight away from Black communities in geographic space

(Lipsitz 2006; Kruse 2005; Anderson 2016; Taylor 2019). But Black communities persevered and challenged white supremacy through active organizing and contestation of white racism, and their efforts culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Federal Housing Act of 1968. The passage of these racially conscious laws sought to uphold the aspirations of Civil Rights activists for a racially integrated society by ending the overt racist segregation that characterized the Jim Crow Era (Harvey Wingfield 2010). By barring the most overt racist segregationist tactics of housing, retail, and labor discrimination, civil rights activists hoped that Black communities would finally achieve integration into white society.

The racial inclusion of Black communities into white society would theoretically link Blacks to the material and symbolic benefits afforded to whites throughout U.S. history. But the thesis of racial inclusion failed to anticipate how a persistent racist hierarchy and racialized capitalist order would continue to depress the classed realities of Black communities broadly and in the workplace specifically. The Racial Inclusion thesis thus failed to anticipate how the inclusion of (some) Black communities into white society would not overturn a racist hierarchy but create a racialized contradictory status for Black people who earned relative yet depressed success within labor and consumer markets but must wrestle with a racial hierarchy perpetuated by the actions and ideologies of Whites.

### **2.3 Racial Inclusion and the Disadvantaged Black Middle Class**

The successes of the Civil Rights Era and the emergence of a stable Black middle-class sparked a debate in the social science literature about the new realities of economic and racial inequality in the United States. William Julius Wilson's work popularized this social science debate with his work *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). He argues that urban deindustrialization created vast disinvestment in majority Black communities, rapid deterioration

of essential social institutions, and altered social networks (1978; 1987; 1997). Wilson posits the *out-migration thesis* that argues that the Civil Rights era integration project created a mass exodus of middle-class Black people and jobs out of segregated urban neighborhoods. The migration, while great for the opportunities for the Black middle-class, left behind a Black underclass in urban neighborhoods ripe with concentrated poverty, joblessness, and social dislocations like crime and disrupted family structures (1987). Thus, urban deindustrialization has created what he terms *hyperghettoization* where a Black underclass resides, facing the brunt of economic inequality in society. In this formulation, the economic dimensions of inequality are given greater importance in understanding the plight of Black communities in the United States over racial stratification.

Scholars have challenged the out-migration theory, and its implications that economic inequality is more significant than racial inequality, by highlighting the persisting racial stratification that continues to structure the lives of the Black middle class. Sociological research has since highlighted that racial segregation acts as the central perpetuator of racial inequality in the United States (Lipsitz 2007; Gotham 2000; Massey 2015). The mass evacuation of whites to the suburbs, along with the legacy of redlining and institutional discrimination, reinforced an urban environment of poverty and racial segregation that depressed the life opportunities of Black communities. (Massey and Denton 1993; Kruse 2005; Massey 2008; Rugh and Massey 2010). Patillo (1999) highlights the importance of racially segregated housing markets and downward mobility that creates an “inbetweenness” where the Black middle class is segregated from poor Blacks and Whites. Despite the variation of incomes within Black communities, outmigration has not allowed the Black middle-class to separate spatially very far from poor Black people and Black middle-class communities live with white residents that have lower

levels of incomes and wealth (Pattillo 2005; Alba et al. 2000). Black middle-class neighborhoods consist of “considerably more poverty, more boarded-up homes, more female-headed households, and fewer college graduates” compared to their white peers and their proximity to poor Black neighbors also decreases the value of their neighborhoods, preventing true residential parity with whites of similar income levels (Adelman 2004; Moore 2009; Pattillo 2005).

The Black middle class also must contend with white racist frames that stigmatize their neighborhoods and further diminish their economic standing within the United States. George Lipsitz argues that spaces, just as social groups, are racialized and placed in a racist hierarchy where spaces marked as white are elevated and receive material and symbolic rewards, in direct economic and symbolic denigration of spaces marked as Black (2007). Persisting racial segregation create a contemporary racist reality where White communities are confined to white spaces that allow for the accrual of economic resources, while Black communities are relegated to Black spaces that do not afford them the necessary economic and symbolic resources to thrive in a capitalist society (Anderson 2015; Lipsitz 2007). The percentage of Black people within a neighborhood, and the percentage of young Black men specifically is significantly correlated with how people perceive a neighborhood’s crime problem (Quillian and Pager 2001). Middle-class Black residents are not as capable of transmitting their social status to perceptions of their wider neighborhood context as whites and their neighborhoods are often perceived as lower status than their economic class would suggest (Moore 2009). Racially segregated communities were targeted by subprime loans during the Great Recession that disproportionately depleted the economic livelihood of Black and Latino neighborhood (Rugh and Massey 2010). Thus, Black Americans’ advancement towards racial economic equality has stalled and even eroded because

of their continued embedment in neighborhoods that suffer from racial segregation and economic disinvestment (Sharkey 2013).

The experiences of the Black middle-class are thus still confined by racial stratification. Black people are not as able to live in neighborhoods that reflect their preferences, and the residential attainment of high SES Blacks falls below those of low SES non-Hispanic whites (Pattillo 2005; Browner 2007). Even when Black middle-class people can move, they suffer from *contextual mobility* where they continue to live in economically stratified neighborhoods in their own lives and intergenerationally (Sharkey 2013). Research supports the thesis that the Black middle-class is not comparable to the white middle-class and that the Black middle-class is more comparable to the white working-class in terms of neighborhood characteristics and services (Browner 2007). Economists Hamilton and Darity argue that the out-migration thesis ultimately makes a culture of poverty arguments (lack of financial literacy, personal choice, poor spending habits, etc.) to explain racial inequality while ignoring the economic circumstances and racist discrimination that disadvantages Black people (2017). Thus, conceptualizing racial stratification is central to understanding the lives of Black people across class status.

My research thus forwards the work of sociologists who argue that systemic racism intersects with capitalism to produce unique effects on Black communities. Sociologist Eric S. Brown (2013) critiques the ‘declining significance of race’ thesis by arguing that Black middle communities were formed due to a *racialized class formation* process. The foundational legacy of racist oppression and hierarchy in the United States has fundamentally shaped the class formation of Black communities across socioeconomic status (2013). A racialized class location that conditions the experiences of Black communities has historically shaped “what kinds of jobs they get, who their clients are, what kind of neighborhood they live in, what kinds of civic

activities they are involved with, wherever they face discrimination in the workplace, and how and why they become involved in the political system” (2013; 18). So, the significance of race has not declined, it is fundamentally intertwined with the larger economic trends that continues to depress the socioeconomic stability of Black communities.

#### **2.4 Persisting Racial Disadvantage in the Neoliberal Era**

The persisting racial disadvantages faced by Black communities coincides with the rise of the economic project of neoliberalism. Embedded in the backlash against large governmental initiatives like the New Deal and the Great Society, neoliberal ideology is the belief that the most optimal way to organize economic order and development is to structure all markets as open, competitive, unregulated, and liberated from state interference (Brenner & Theodore 2002). Neoliberal policies were understood by many in the economic and political elite as the best way to counter the global recessions of the preceding decade that they argued to be the consequence of the greater institutionalization of a post war welfare state (Harvey 2007; Brown 2015). Neoliberal thinkers and advocates were successful in representing the state and markets as diametrically opposed and sought to discipline public and private industries through deregulation, the reduction of corporate taxes, privatization of public services, and the greater flow of international capital flow (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Harvey 2007).

The neoliberal alterations to the economy have had a drastic effect on labor and work in the United States. The greater emphasis of deregulation has heightened the powers of the employer to structure their workplace around greater profitability for shareholders and executives over the welfare of their employees. Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019) argue that a significant way this has occurred for organizations is through the implementation of severe cuts to organizational cost to generate significant profitability for those in managerial, executive,

and shareholder positions. As a result, the composition of jobs on the labor market has moved from considerable number of full-time work options with high wages, benefits, and autonomy to a sizable number of part-time jobs with low salaries, fewer benefits, low levels of worker protections, and nonexistent ability for career mobility (Harvey Wingfield 2020). While restricting employees' ability to organize is illegal, the U.S. has seen an influx of policies that have curtailed employees' ability to organize, contributing to the fall of union membership from 20 percent in 1983 to 11 percent currently (Wingfield 2020; Rosenfeld 2014).

The neoliberal economy has had a devastating effect on U.S. socioeconomic statuses due to widespread precarity that pervades contemporary work relations. Scholars have presented numerous ways that neoliberal policies have widened the gap between the wealthiest corporations and Americans and everyone else (Stiglitz 2012; Piketty 2013; Boushey, Delong & Steinbaum 2017). Neoliberal policies have "hollowed out the middle class, worsen economic inequality, and created more instability for many U.S. citizens." (Harvey Wingfield 2020). Neoliberal policy has further segmented the labor market by reducing the number "good jobs" with career mobility and replacing them with "bad jobs" that present a "jungle gym" where workers are forced to change jobs multiple times to achieve success in their careers (Kalleberg 2003; Harvey Wingfield 2020). Employees have faced the brunt of costs from the neoliberal restructuring of work. The employed are more responsible for settling "external costs" like retirement and health that were once the responsibility of employers (Acker 2006). Across socioeconomic strata, households have reported higher levels of anxiety, stress, and emotional distress due to their incomplete adaptations to the pressures and uncertainty of work in the current era (Cooper 2003; Chen 2013).

Neoliberal alterations to the economy have only exacerbated persistent racial inequality in the U.S. and have left Black communities in a particular bind in the post-civil rights era. The legacy of systemic racism has created a staggering racial wealth gap that makes Black communities particularly susceptible to the lack of state intervention and support characterized by neoliberalism (Darity and Hamilton 2017). Large disparities in the racial wage gap persist and have been connected to the exacerbation of union decline, elite social closure, and racist employer discrimination that have increased with neoliberal policies (Royster 2003; Roscigno 2007; Rosenfeld 2014). The neoliberal changes that have declined unions membership and lowered wages for workers have worsened racial wage disparities for Black professionals and workers (Western and Rosenfeld 2011; Rosenfeld 2014). The neoliberal restructuring of public sector work, once understood as a panacea for Black workers in the labor market, has led to a rise of a *new governance* structure that has had profound depreciating effect on racial wage inequality for Black professionals (Wilson and Roscigno 2016). The proliferations of a labor hierarchy of “good jobs” and “bad jobs” have only further concentrated wealth in the wealthiest households, making it virtually impossible to close the racial wealth and wage gaps that afflicts Black households (Shapiro 2004; Kochhar and Cilluffo 2017; Harvey Wingfield 2020). The neoliberal era has only confounded the legacy of racial inequality that continues to depress the economic standing of Black communities across socioeconomic statuses by further concentrating power and wealth within the disproportionately white elite.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate the centrality of systemic racism and racial capitalism in structuring the socioeconomic realities of the Black middle class into the present. By understanding racism as systemic, historically contingent, and intersecting with capitalism, I

can illustrate that, despite the racial inclusion of Black professionals into predominately white workplaces, there is persisting racial stratification that creates a unique racialized class position for the Black middle class. Despite the success of Black communities in challenging a white social order, a racist hierarchy persists because of an intersecting legacy of systemic racism and racialized economic relations that maintains racial disadvantage for Black middle-class communities in the United States.

This chapter provides the macro structural foundations for me to argue in the next chapter that contemporary Black professionals working within historically racially exclusionary institutions suffer from a racialized contradictory status. This chapter provides three key points based in the three specific theoretical understandings of racism discussed in the theory section. Through a systemic racism perspective, I consider how a historical legacy of systemically racist relations contributes to the contemporary experiences of racial inequality for Black communities generally and in professionalized workplaces specifically. Through a racialized systems perspective, I highlight that, despite a persisting racist hierarchy, the experiences of Black professionals within racist structures have changed over time. Through a racial capitalism perspective, I note that despite the Black middle classes' relative 'success' in capitalist labor and consumer markets, racial inequality persists that continues to depress Black professionals' socioeconomic and market positions in relation to Whites.

The macro understanding of racism also influences my exploration of contemporary Black professionals in their predominately white workplaces. Through the systemic racism framework, I seek to examine the workplace as a site structured by the foundational racist hierarchy that White actors maintain through their actions and the ideological white racial frame. The maintenance of a racist hierarchy through the actions and decisions of white actors,

particularly those in positions of influence, will help me to focus on how racial inequality perpetuates within a social site understood as meritocratic and free from racism. Through a Racialized Social Systems approach, I wish to examine the racialized experiences of Black professionals as the result of the specific racialized moment of our time. Thinking about the racially unequal distribution of workplace resources along racial lines as the result of contemporary racialized expressions and actions will help me to focus on how contemporary professionalized workplaces may present racist structures that are unique to the current era. Through a racial capitalism lens, I forward questions that seek to theorize the specific racialized ramifications that work, as a central relation of intersecting capitalist exploitation and racist hierarchy, will have on Black professionals. How do exploitative work relations differ between Black professionals and their White peers? How are these differences due to racist ideologies that racialize and disadvantage Black people while concentrating privilege in White collectives?

While the macro understandings of racism help me to conceptualize a specific racism, I still require a lens that is sensitive to how racial stratification presents within the specific parameters of modern professionalized work. Thus, chapter three explores the workplace as a specific site of racial and class inequality. As such, chapter three seeks to theorize and make sense of the contemporary realities of the racialized contradictory status that Black professionals experience within predominately White workplaces. The macrostructural realities of systemic racism will thus serve as the theoretical foundations by which I consider the specific racialized relations of contemporary professionalized work.

### 3 CONCEPTUALIZING BLACK PROFESSIONALS IN THE WHITE WORKPLACE

When considering the contemporary experiences of Black professionals in majority white workplaces, it is important to remember that the occurrence of Black people working in the same workplaces as whites and demanding a comparable level of respect and humanity is a recent social phenomenon in U.S. history. Despite the racial inclusion project of the post-Civil-Rights era, a legacy of systemic racism creates a contemporary social reality where Black professionals must work in workplaces where whites have disproportionate authority and advantage to structure the workplace. Whites utilize this disproportionate authority to reify white interest that mark workplaces as free of racism, despite the racialized experiences that Black professionals have within them.

The purpose of Chapter III is to present my conceptualization of Black professionals and their racialized contradictory status within the specific context of the predominately white workplace. I accomplish this by first outlining the workplace as a site of classed and racial inequality. I illustrate that workplaces uphold inequality through the presence of legitimized workplace hierarchies and elevated workplace classes who participate in *inequality regimes* that maintain classed, racial, and gendered inequality to sustain their privileged positions in the workplace (Acker 2006). I then move to argue that workplaces, influenced by a legacy of systemic racism, act as *white institutional space* that further perpetuates racial inequality through the normalization of homogenously white workplace demographics and the delegitimization of Black racial interest. Thus, the inequalities presented by elevated and disproportionately white workplace classes concentrate authority and resources in disproportionately white inequality regimes that forward white interest and maintain the racial status quo of their institutions.

But the existence of the unequal workplaces does not eliminate the reality that professionalized workplaces are desirable comparatively to other forms of work in the United States. As such, professional workers have economic interest to maintain the boundaries of professional work to maintain its associated benefits. This is also true of Black professionals, despite their racialized class status. But the intersecting and contradictory interests presented to Black professionals in professional work is even more complicated by the reality that professionalized workplace present both economic and racial inequalities. The structural bind of Black professionals seeking to maintain or elevate their socioeconomic status through workplaces characterized by white racial and workplace class hierarchies animates my exploration of Black professionals in predominately white workplaces. I conclude with a discussion of my methods that guide my exploration of Black professionals.

### **3.1 The Workplace as a site of Classed and Racial Inequality**

Sociological researchers have a long history illustrating that work is not simply the economic exchange of effort for wages, but an organizational arrangement characterized by legitimized authority, power, and resource inequities (Marx 1976; Acker 2006; Wingfield 2020). Workplace inequality is directly caused by the hierarchical relations between occupational positions within workplace organizational structures (Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). The foundational relational inequalities within workplace organizations constructs workplace “classes” that perpetuate systematic differences in the distribution of and access to pivotal workplace resources necessary for success within the workplace and beyond in one’s socioeconomic life (Acker 2006; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014).

Workplace classes conserve workplace inequality and their privileged positions through what Acker (2006) describes as *inequality regimes* that utilize their outsized organizational

power to participate in “interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings” that maintain class, racial, and gendered inequalities. The hierarchical relations within organization therefore contribute to systemic disparities between members by dictating who can interact with and control the most prized organizational resources within the workplace – “goals, resources, outcomes, workplace decisions, opportunities for promotion and interesting work, security, employment benefits, respect, and workplace pleasures (Acker 2006). These inequalities do not only exist in the workplace; workplace inequalities also reflect and contribute to wider racial, class, and gendered inequalities that structure and reify inequities in our wider society (Acker 2006; Ferguson 1984).

Workplace classes intersect with larger racial stratification to reinforce racial inequality for Black professionals within workplaces. As outlined in chapter II, the legacy of systemic racism and racial capitalism produces a contemporary racialized landscape of white socioeconomic advantage and Black disadvantage. This legacy is reinforced by the contemporary actions of Whites seeking to maintain and increase white racial group advantage, perpetuating the legacy of systemic racism and racial capitalism in depressing the life experiences and outcomes of Black communities (Brown et al. 2003). Work and workplaces, as central institutions in capitalist society, perpetuate societal racial inequality by producing racial disparities through differential treatment for those successful in gaining entry and exclusion for most Black people (Brown et al. 2003; Acker 2006; Moore 2008; Wingfield 2020).

A key argument of my dissertation is that the foundational class inequalities of the workplace concentrate authority and resources in disproportionately white inequality regimes that forward white interest and maintain the racial status quo of their institutions. I support this argument by utilizing the theoretical framework of *Institutional White Space* (Moore 2008;

Moore and Bell 2017) that extends the work of Systemic Racism theorists to the realm of organizations and everyday experiences. The theory, by Wendy Moore, problematizes the idea that homogenously white workplaces could ever be racially neutral within a society structured by white systemic racism. White institutional space refers to a social space whose social structures, everyday practices, cultural norms, and ideological/discursive frames are organized by a deeply entrenched racist hierarchy that maintains and reproduces white advantage over generations (Moore 2008; Moore and Bell 2017). Through an examination of colleges of various socioeconomic statuses, Wendy Moore uncovers how whites utilize racialized institutional, ideological, and cultural practices to mark universities as sites for the maintenance and accumulation of white power and privilege “without the need for enforced racial exclusion or open racial animus” against Black people (Moore 2008:28). To understand how this occurs, Wendy Moore constructs two overlapping arguments that consider the 1) historical development of white institutional spaces and 2) the contemporary reproduction of white institutional space through the white racial frame.

She begins by arguing that the historical exclusion of people of color from institutions laid the foundation for Whites to utilize white racist frames to interpret the absence of Black people as the expected reality of elite institution (Moore 2008; Moore and Bell 2017). The legacy of racist exclusion contributes directly to the contemporary whiteness of institutions, but the legacy is erased and the cultural norms, values, and beliefs that were forged due to racist exclusion become the template by which these institutions are recognized as legitimate (Moore and Bell 2017). The homogenously white demographics of these spaces, the absence of Black people in positions of power, the accompanying white racial frame that neutralizes and normalizes the absence of Black people, and everyday racialized practices all work together to

ensure that spaces perpetuate a social reality where whiteness is normal, natural, legitimate, and superior to spaces marked as Black (Moore 2008). All signs of Blackness, included resistance to the pervasive racial ideologies and practices, are delegitimized to ensure that the racial status quo remain unchallenged and thus continues to function in the racial interest of white people.

Through Wendy Moore's framework, I argue that majority white workplaces function as white institutional spaces. Majority white workplaces are similarly structured by historical and contemporary exclusionary practices that perpetuate disproportionately white demographics (Acker 2006; Wingfield 2020). Despite the Post-Civil Rights Inclusion project that has made it possible for Black people to enter majority white workplaces, Black people continue to be underrepresented as workers and in positions of power within these workplaces (Harvey Wingfield 2008; Ferguson and Koning 2018; Wingfield 2020). And the racial segregation that characterizes these workplaces are persisting; Recent research suggests that U.S. workplaces are experiencing more racial segregation between establishments than they were a generation ago, and that the declining segregation within establishments is due to factors separate from integration, such as turnover rates (Ferguson and Koning 2018). Workplaces that can be considered as diverse still hold a persisting racial hierarchy characterized by white management and people of color clustered in low wage occupations within the establishment (Ferguson and Koning 2018). The persisting racial exclusion of Black people from positions of authority ensure that disproportionately white inequality regimes have absolute power to forward white interest and the racial status quo within the workplace (Acker 2006; Moore 2008).

The racial status quo of the workplace is legitimized by the seemingly race neutral ideology of *meritocracy* that maintains homogenously white demographics and racial inequities by asserting itself as the result of hard work. Meritocracy is the ideology that asserts that "all

citizens- regardless of the social stratum from which they start- should aspire to, and in fact can attain, the height of social and economic success” within the United States (Kwate and Meyer 2010). The practices of the workplace – from hiring to assigning responsibility to promotion – are structured by an alleged meritocracy where the best workers fill into the most necessary positions and each filled position reflects the talent of the person who fills said position. However, it is impossible to completely disentangle merit from race. Baez argues that merit is “an institutional construct and that it does not- indeed, it cannot- exist outside the institutions that use it” (2006: 997). Karabel argues that understandings and enforcements of merit always reflect larger unequal distributions of power and inequality in society (2005). Thus, definitions of merit will be intertwined with larger, racist, definitions of Blackness as underserving of elite status work (Feagin 2012). White people disproportionately understand Black people in elite spaces and workplaces as undeserving and the beneficiaries of affirmative action policies (Moore and Bell 2017). I therefore agree with Amy Liu, who concludes that merit is foundationally a subjective category and any attempt to delineate the boundaries of merit would be objective would not withstand critique (2013). One cannot disentangle merit from a racist hierarchy that frames white people as possessing more merit than their Black peers due to their racialized status. Merit thus reflects color-blind ideology that obscures the existence of racial inequality in society through frames of equality and fairness that does not reflect the unequal racial realities of the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

The professionalized workplace, as a site of historical racist exclusion and white ideology, perpetuates racialized dynamics for Black professionals by affording Whites disproportionate authority to structure the workplace to reify white interest. Professionalized work is increasingly governed by social networks and relationships, and in many high-status

occupations, candidates will not even be considered without social connection to key organizational actors (Gershon 2016; Rivera 2013). This is particularly troubling for Black professionals, as many researchers have highlighted that Whites have racially homogenous social networks, and the predominance to self-select within one's network ensures that workplace continue their predominately white demographics (Embrick and Henrik 2013). Therefore, central social relations necessary for career success – peer evaluation, networking, hiring and promotion, etc. – are often completely controlled by predominately white actors who can maintain homogenously white organization through white racial framing (Acker 2006; Feagin 2006).

The reification of racial inequality by the actions and decisions of disproportionately white inequality regimes has direct consequences for Black professionals' workplace experiences. Whites' widespread belief in the white racial frame leaves Black professionals perpetually susceptible to racist narratives that associate them with ideas of moral inferiority, poor intellectual ability, and criminality (Feagin 2006; Anderson 2012). As a result, Black people in white space must repeatedly prove that they 'belong' and engage in what sociologist Elijah Anderson terms a *dance* where "individual Blacks are required to show that white racist frames of "the ghetto" do not apply to them" (2015:13). Black professionals also must restrict their emotional affect within the workplace to avoid white racist associations from their white peers. Harvey Wingfield (2010) illustrates that there are "White only" feeling rules that limit the range of emotions that Black workers can express that reinforce racial differences between whites and Blacks. Evans (2013) illustrates how systemic racism intersects with emotional labor and feeling rules to structure what is possible for Black workers to feel and do in relation to their white customers who, overtly and covertly, do not respect Black people. Black people therefore

constantly deal with the perpetual stress of their inferior racialized status and consistently negotiate how they should behave in white space to avoid or limit their racist treatment.

But the dance that Black professionals perform rarely evades their white colleagues' white racial framing of their workplace performance. Mong and Roscigno (2009) illustrate how Whites applied racialized discretion to their evaluation of Black men that made it easier to justify not promoting them or firing them from their positions. Roscigno (2007) showed that Whites utilized office rules in particular ways against Black women that were more rigid and harsh when compared to others that ensured they were more likely to leave their jobs.

Despite the workplace being structured by relations that maintain class, racial, and gendered inequalities, researchers highlight that racialized professional workers have interests in maintaining some of the structures of the workplace because of the material and symbolic benefits it provides for them. In the next section, I utilize the work of Erik Olin Wright to highlight the contradictory class status that Black professionals face being economically privileged professional workers in predominately white workplaces.

### **3.2 Intersecting and Contradictory Interests: The Racialized Contradictions of Black Professionals in Professionalized Work**

Historically, sociological researchers differentiated professional work from other form of work, but there is now consensus that it is no longer necessary to draw sharp distinctions due to the prevalence of shared features and forms (Olofsson 2009; Evetts 2013). Thus, what differentiates professional work is simply that it is knowledge-based, service oriented, requires a period of education and training, and is “associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies” that creates the need for specialized knowledge (Evetts 2013). There is also the process of professionalization that is central to the elevated status of professional work that

creates and maintain social closure to ensure the boundaries of practitioners' status, authority, and material rewards (Evetts 2013; Abbott 1988; Larson 1977). So, while professionalized work has special properties, it is still structured by organizational inequalities that maintain race, class, and gendered inequities both within their professions and in the wider society.

Erik Olin Wright's concept of the *contradictory class location* helps us to conceptualize the contradictions between privilege and exploitation embedded in professional work in the United States. Wright notes that professional workers have a more complicated location in a class structure due to their access to 1) expertise and knowledge and 2) authority and domination to other workers thus, Wright categorizes these class locations as *professionals* and *managers/supervisors* respectively (1997). As a result, professionals, managers, and supervisors occupy what Wright characterizes as a *contradictory class location*, where they have interest in line with both the capitalist class and the broader laboring class. Despite having shared interest with the capitalist, professional workers nonetheless experience fundamental exploitation that depresses their economic standing within a capitalist class structure (Wright 1997). However, as neoliberal work relations continue to exacerbate the division of labor into clear "good jobs" and "bad jobs," professional work is highly desirable when compared to the other forms of work in the United States (Wingfield 2020). As such, professional workers have economic interest to maintain the structures of professionalized work to maintain its associated benefits. However, professionalized work is still structured by organizational inequalities that maintain race, class, and gendered inequities within its boundaries and in the wider society (Brown et al 2003; Acker 2006; Moore 2008; Wingfield 2020).

The contradictory class location serves as a theoretical foundation for my understanding of the racialized contradictory status of Black professionals. By forwarding the works of racial

capitalism scholars, I argue that there will be a racialized component to the class phenomena of the contradictory class location. To parse this phenomenon out along economic lines, we can hypothesize that 1) Black professionals will have economic interests in line with the broader laboring class in challenging and changing the class structure of the workplace and 2) Black professionals will have economic interests in line with the capitalist class in maintaining the class structure of the workplace.

But how does this phenomenon look when we consider the racialized realities of Black professionals? A central consequence of the legacy of systemic racism and racial capitalism is that most Black professionals must work in predominately white professions to maintain or elevate their socioeconomic status. Most Black professionals simply wish to work in these spaces to fulfil their economic interest in a capitalist society, but this not possible because of the racial, classed, and gendered inequalities embedded within work (Acker 2006; Tomaskovic-Devey 2014). It is not possible because inequality regimes uphold the workplace as a site of capitalist exploitation and extraction of workers, a process that has only been exacerbated by neoliberal relations (Wright 1997; Wright 2002; Acker 2006). It is also not possible because a legacy of systemic racism ensures these places exacerbates white group advantage and uphold normative whiteness that legitimizes a racial hierarchy that diminishes Black racial interest while marking whiteness as legitimate and superior (Feagin 2006; Moore 2008; Bonilla Silva 2015).

The structural bind of Black professionals seeking to maintain or elevate their socioeconomic status through workplaces characterized by intersecting workplace class and white racial hierarchies animates the central questions I wish to explore in my research. Black professionals' status in white professions has material and symbolic rewards that, while never as great as those afforded to whites, are enough to seek to maintain and rationalize. As such, I pose

the question - *what practices and ideological frames do Black professionals utilize to navigate their racialized class status within majority white workplace?* This is foundationally a question about racist power – I argue that Whites within disproportionately white inequality regimes space have disproportionate power to influence the racialized occurrences within the workplace. The assertion of the workplace as a neutral, impartial, and meritocratic space masks the power relations that elevate white people and grants them unequal ability to dictate the social realities that are possible within the workplace (2008). This is only exacerbated by legitimized workplace hierarchies that grant those in elevated workplace class authority over the distribution of material and symbolic resources (Acker 2006).

My analysis of Black professionals' ability to practice agency in a workplace structured by racialized and class power relations will consider how Black professionals utilize racial ideologies to make sense of their racialized workplace experiences. Racial ideologies are the “racially based frameworks used by actors to explain, justify, or challenge the racial status quo” of their workplaces (Bonilla-Silva 1997). I argue that Black professionals construct racial ideologies particular to their circumstance in majority white workplaces to makes sense of the racist distribution of resources and treatment in the racialized workplace. However, how prominently, if at all, will the white racial frame, or the “broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives” that rationalize white racial hierarchy influence the thinking of Black professionals in white space (Feagin 2013)? How possible will it be for Black professionals to practice anti-racist counter frames or “the perspectives, ideologies, and epistemologies that challenge the prevailing racial hierarchy and its legitimating white racial frame” within the workplace (Harvey Wingfield and Feagin 2012)? My research, through the method of semi-structured interviews, will seek to explore how racial

ideologies provides Black professionals with racialized scripts for behaving in the racialized workplace (2012). However, theories of racial ideologies constructed by racism theories lack a consideration of class dynamics within their theorization. Therefore, A key conceptual thrust of my research will be to seek to overcome this limitation by considering how racial ideologies/white racial frames function within the workplace class structure of professional work.

Do Black professionals internalize white racial frames to help themselves further integrate into predominately white workplace? Do Black professionals resist the whiteness of the workplace through the active use of anti-racist counter frame that may have debilitating effects on their career trajectories? Or do the racialized and classed dynamics of the professionalized workplace create new ways of interpreting inequality that are unique to the racialized contradictory class locations of Black professionals? It is with these questions that consider the intersecting class and racial inequalities and interest that I begin my exploration of Black professionals in predominately white workplaces.

### **3.3 Exploring Black Professionals through Semi Structured Interviews**

I turn to a discussion of the methodological concerns of my research on Black professionals in predominately white workplaces. I begin with a discussion of my selection of the qualitative semi structured interview approach to collect data on Black professionals. I then discuss the sampling techniques I utilized to select my research participants.

My research is guided by qualitative methods, or the “research that is characterized by data that cannot be quantified, focusing instead on generating in-depth knowledge of social life” (Chambliss and Eglitis 2018). I eschewed quantitative data in favor of qualitative data because I wish to generate an analysis of the consequences of a racialized and classed workplace on the

beliefs and racial ideologies of Black professionals. Qualitative methods are also important for my research on Black professionals because of the socially constructed nature of race and its associated cultural meanings. A systemic racism perspective understands racial categories to be the consequence of socio-historically specific ideologies and circumstances (Bonilla-Silva 1997). I therefore rely on qualitative methods to ensure I collect data on the racialized meanings involved in racial thinking, identification, and differentiation.

Specifically, I utilized the qualitative research method of *semi-structured interviews* to guide my research. Semi-Structured in-depth interviews is a form of qualitative research methods that are “generally organized around a set of predetermined open-ended questions” to elicit rich descriptions of social experiences and processes (DiCocco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006; Weiss 2004). As a scholar critical of racism and its deleterious effects on the lives of Black people, I seek to privilege the voices of Black people as legitimate sources of data in my research. Black professionals have unique perspectives and needs that are not present in the hegemonic cultural narratives and institutions of a U.S. society structured through white supremacy (Delgado & Stafancic 2012). Racism scholars understand that white supremacy is reproduced in research efforts by maintaining racist relations that elevate white researchers as more objective voices over research participants of color (Kelly 1997; Young 2008; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). While I am not white, I can still perpetuate ideas associated with whiteness, such as a false sense of objectivity that paints me as the wielder of absolute knowledge (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Therefore, centering Black professionals seeks to empower the oppressed while simultaneously creating a holistic understanding of inequality within social life (Williams 1991; Matsuda 1995). A semi-structured interview method influenced by critical race theory will therefore guide my research.

I will now discuss the demographic parameters I used to select the participants for my study. My study concerns Black professionals who work in majority white workplaces. Therefore, I will select research participants who are Black. Black, of course, is a socially constructed racial category whose definition can vary quite widely along geographic region and historical time. So, I define 'Black' in respect to how it has been constructed as a racial category in the United States context-those of African descent. This of course includes Black people who descended from Slavery, Black people who descend from African migrant or recent African migrants themselves, and Black people who descend from the Caribbean or the West Indies. I seek to select from all of these racial/ethnic categories, as they all will present unique facet of the Black experience. I will be sensitive to the racial/ethnic diversity of the people that constitute the racial category of *Black* and seek to tease out unique aspects of the racialization process on those who differ by ethnic location.

The next important attribute for my research is *professional*. The professional class is defined as workers who work in fields with specialized knowledge that usually require advanced degree (Harvey Wingfield 2013). My focus on professionals is influenced by Erik Olin Wright's understanding of class; I will be thinking through a *relational* understanding of class. I will not use the standard *gradational* understanding of class that defines class by income or wealth but used a Marxist sensitivity to one's standing in relationship to the means of productions within capitalism (Wright 1997; Brown 2013). The focus on professionals is important because of the unique position professionals have in capitalist class structure due to their exclusive, and exclusionary, possession and control over expertise and credentials (Wright 1997; Brown 2013). I therefore selected my research participants based on their fields of work and I utilized the schema presented in Harvey Wingfield's research on Black male professionals to divide

professional fields into 4 broad fields: medical professionals; legal professionals; banking and finance professionals; and computer, engineering, and science professionals (Harvey Wingfield 2013).

The last dimension of my demographic group is *working in a predominately white workplace*. I understand this distinction in two ways. Firstly, I understand this in purely numerical terms, Black people who work in spaces where white people are in the majority workers. The second way I understand this is in terms of power. In a Weberian sense, Power is defined as “the ability to mobilize resources and achieve goals despite the resistance of others” (Chambliss and Eglitis 2018). Therefore, one can be in power and not necessarily be the numerical majority, as we can see in the structure of the workplace. For example, Black people could be the numerical majority of workers in a workplace, but they may be concentrated in lower status and paying positions. The white people may be in the numerical minority in the workplace but be concentrated in higher status and paying positions of the managerial and ownership class. Therefore, while Black people are in the numerical majority, they are in the power minority, and are thus viable subjects for my study. I will be paying attention to differences in power when selecting my research participants.

I paid attention to other demographic concerns outside the specific demographic parameters of *Black, professional, and working in white majority workplaces*. It is still important to keep note of other demographic characteristics of my population, mostly considering *gender*. Gender is defined the “behavioral characteristics that differentiate males and females based on culturally enforced and socially learned norms and roles” (Chambliss and Eglitis 2018). Because gender roles are enforced onto male and female bodied individuals, gendered relations affect the ways one experiences racist and status-based inequality (Baca Zinn & Dill 1996). Therefore, it is

important to have equal representations of men and women in my sample to determine how the racist relations of white space differently influence the lives of men and women in the workplace. While sexual orientation is not gender, one's sexual identity affects the way others understands one place in a gendered hierarchy and is thus also important to understanding white space

I used snowball sampling for my research. Snowball sampling uses research participants to choose other research participants as a source of systematic observation for the researcher (Chambliss and Eglitis 2018). There are limitations to snowball sampling, it is not random sampling and therefore cannot be used to generalize about the population at large. However, as a qualitative researcher, I am interested in understanding meanings and framing as a way of understanding an experience, and not particularly a generalizable report that would require random sampling. My sampling seeks to find respondent who reflect a gamut of experiences with racism in white space. Thus, what I seek to exemplify is *saturation*, not *generalizability*. With the characteristics I've noted above, I seek to sample until different narratives and experience repeat themselves in the data. I make note of any problems or issues that arise in my data.

The snowballing recruitment process of participants can be understood through two categories: *personal connections* and *professional networks*. As a Black doctoral student, Black professionals are overrepresented in my own personal social network. I will begin there, targeting people who I know to be Black professionals and giving them the recruitment letters. I will also use my wider weak social ties through social media, posting my recruitment letter online to catch professionals online. When considering professional networks, I will target Black alumni networks of schools that serve Georgia students – UGA, Emory, Georgia Tech, Georgia

State, Georgia College & State University, Morehouse/Spellman, etc. I will get in contact with these organizations and give them my recruitment letter to send in their emails. Because professionalized work requires an advanced degree, I believe this to be a very useful way of hopefully catching Black professionals who wish to participate in my study.

I ultimately conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 Black professionals. I interviewed a total of 13 men and 12 women. The Black professionals I interviewed came from various industries of education, government, banking, corporate sectors, etc. In the next chapters, I will discuss my findings concerning Black professionals in predominately white workplaces.

#### **4 WHITE AUTHORITY AND THE RACISM DISCOURSE OF PROFESSIONALIZED WORKPLACES**

When Bryant, a public health official, made clear that he had experienced racism in the workplace, he immediately described a situation where a boss associated him with racist stereotypes during the interviewing process for a new member for their team:

I had a boss at [workplace] who was from Puerto Rico, but you know, I guess you consider a white Puerto Rican. I had a meeting with him and another coworker of mine where we are doing actual interviews for some positions, we are trying to fill for my group. And my coworker was talking about the neighborhoods he lived in Atlanta. He lived off of Ponce de Leon by, I forget the name of what it's called. It's at the rapidly gentrifying area, it used to be primarily Black. There's a Kroger over there they call like "the Murder Kroger" or whatever, he pretty much mentioned it. And then my boss said something to the effect of, well I wouldn't, I wouldn't want you walking by my car at night, looking right at me.

Hakeem, a manager at the corporate wing of one of the largest food service management companies in the United States, also recounted an experience where a white colleague made a racist association that was particularly upsetting to him:

Um, there was a guy, real strong Catholic guy, we were at a working dinner and there was this wine that came by and I don't drink wine. And this particular one I really didn't like. And the dude across from me, the Catholic white guy, says to me "well, if it was in a Brown paper bag. Would you like? What'd you like it better." [Wow.] I laughed it off. [Wow.] I looked at him, I laughed it off, but I kind of like stare at him and my boss was right next to me and he's like, yeah, Dez, it's a jokes, jokes, joke.

Through a Systemic Racism Perspective, both white work colleagues express *white racial frames* to invoke racist imagery concerning Black men and legitimize racist ideologies that paint Black people as inherently criminal. The white racial frame supports the naturalization and legitimization of the vast levels of racial inequality that structures the lives of Black communities in the United States (Feagin 2006). In the workplace context, White racial frames legitimize the racial status quo and devalues Black professionals like Bryant and Hakeem by racializing them and marring their value within the disproportionately white workplace.

These experiences of overt racism within the workplace raise significant questions concerning what Black professionals do in response, and what those responses mean for the contemporary racial politics of the United States. Systemic Racism Theory, with its emphasis on the ideological and structural dimensions of racist inequality, grants us a theoretical lens by which to analyze these moments in the workplace. Sociologist Feagin and Harvey Wingfield theorize that the *racial dialectic*, or the relationship between the racism legitimating white racial frames and anti-racist counter frames, structures public discourses of race and racism in the United States (2010). Counter-frames involve the “perspectives, ideologies, and epistemologies that challenge the prevailing racial hierarchy and its legitimating white racial frame.” Within a systemically racist nation, one should expect white racist framing to occur and shape the workplace experiences and trajectories of Black professionals within the workplace.

But Systemic Racism theory highlights that a strong culture of anti-racist counter framing will help to challenge racist narratives, associations, and interpretations of their white peers and

make clear that racist actions or expression are intolerable. Institutions that make space for anti-racist counter framing can also begin a process of restitution to help counter the white racial framing in their organization. Most importantly, a workplace culture of anti-racist counter framing would allow Black professionals to work in their structural racial interest as Black people, fundamentally challenging racist actors, actions, and ideologies that cause individual and social harm to both them and their careers.

However, little empirical work has been done to investigate the relationship between white racial framing and anti-racist counter framing within the professionalized workplace. When I explored the experiences of Black professionals who recounted experiences of racism in the workplace, a core finding is that there was no institutional or cultural space for Black professionals to counter-frame against the White racial frames they experienced in their workplace. What I found instead were Black professionals who avoided making their individual acknowledgment of racism public due to the belief that their white peers would not legitimize their experiences of racism. This is exactly how Bryant felt when he explained why he decided to not respond to his boss overt white racial framing:

Yeah, typically I won't say anything. I tend to avoid conflict at work because I know there's a work code and there's a street code. If this were said outside of a work environment, um, I would handle it a lot differently. I would definitely approach, I would definitely address the situation, be very vocal about it. But at work I sometimes think like these things, if I'm being vocal about it won't change anything at all, honestly.

Bryant's honest response highlights how the context of the professionalized workplace influences Black professionals to act against their racial interest and avoid anti-racist counter framing in response to racist incidents in the workplace. Many of my participants did not act in their racial interest, as Systemic Racism Theory would suggest, and counter frame against overt expressions of the white racial frame. Like Bryant, many of my participants experience

*individual acknowledgement of racism*, or individual level recognition that they have experienced a racist event. Yet, when deciding on how to respond to acutely racist moments, Black professionals consider the specific context of their professionalized workplaces and determine that it is best to not respond.

In this chapter, I argue that this is because individual acknowledgements are never enough, and have never been enough, to mark that racism has taken place. Racism is a social experience that requires social legitimacy to reify. *Within this framework*, “experiencing racism” cannot gain legitimacy without the authority of elevated social actors within the particular social context in which the racism has taken place. But how does one legitimize their individual acknowledgements of racism within the social context of the predominately white professionalized workplace? The legacy of systemic racism ensures that most professionalized workplaces are led by predominately *white centers of authority* who have white framed relationships to racial inequality and racism. It is thus in their white racial interest to continue racial inequality because of the benefits it provides. As workers within predominately white professions, Black professionals are a part of white collective with a white framed center of authority. So, while Black professionals have racial interest to counter frame, they must consider the white interest of white colleagues who have racial interest in maintaining and perpetuating white racial framing naturalizing the racist status quo within the workplace.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the ramifications of the absence of an anti-racist counter framing core to the racial discourse of the professional workplace. A legacy of systemic racism ensures that white actors exert a disproportionate influence over the race and racism discourse of the workplace. As such, many Black professionals concede to white racial interest by avoiding making their individual acknowledgement of racism public within their

workplaces. To make sense of why Black professionals are largely conceding to white racial authority over the racial discourse of the workplace, we must augment our systemic racism lens to consider how the specific status and authority hierarchies of the professionalized workplace intersect with racist hierarchies to produce the unique experiences of Black professionals. Along the status dimension, we must consider that professionalized work is dependent upon the evaluation of peers and workplace superiors for career mobility and success. Along the authority dimension, we must consider that many professionalized workplaces are governed by strict job authority hierarchies that heavily structure the experiences, autonomy, and success of those in lower job authority rank. The status and authority hierarchies of the professionalized workplace intersect with racist structures to grant White colleagues the ever-present potentiality to devalue Black professionals' workplace status through the white racial frame.

As such, Black professionals adopt a racialized stance that seeks to avoid white discretion of their actions and preserve their status in the eyes of their white colleagues at work. While many Black professionals paint this response as a smart career move or something they are doing on their own volition, I argue that Black professionals are doing this under the influence of white authoritarian discretion. The legacy of white supremacy and systemic racism ensures that most professional workplaces are governed by white centers of authority. The status and job authority hierarchies legitimized in professionalized work grants these white collectives' power to dictate and order the racism discourse of their workplaces. In other words, white centers of authority maintain the racial dialectic in the interest of whites, erasing, and delegitimizing the experiences of Black professionals with racism in the process.

Black professionals are hyper aware of the threat of white authoritarian discretion and organize their workplace behaviors to avoid the white framed evaluations of their white

colleagues and workplace superiors. Black professionals see it as in their own workplace interest to avoid damaging white framed expressions and evaluations – such as race baiter, aggressive, lazy, insubordinate, etc – that could lower their workplace value in the eyes of their white colleagues and damage their career trajectories. However, this avoidance means that they must accept these racist moments, relinquish the possibility of restitution, and leave these racist actors in place. The avoidance ensures that the anti-racist aspect of the racial dialectic is weak, and that the racial status quo continues to disadvantage and devalue Black professionals in the workplace.

This chapter is organized around two sections that illustrate two prominent ways Black professionals avoid responding to racialized experiences in the workplace. In the first section, I explore the experiences of Black professionals who expressed that they had experienced racist moments in the workplace. All these participants registered clear individual acknowledgements of racism, where they understood the white framed expressions and actions of their colleagues to be racist and emotionally damaging. Despite this recognition of racism, many of my participants consider how whites will adjudicate away their complaints of racism. They also believe that the discretion of Whites may possibly damage their careers, as they firmly believed that White authorities would adjudicate in ways that mar their workplace value. They thus avoid the discretion of Whites by letting the incidents go, looking for work elsewhere, or responding on the individual level without expectation of institutional reckoning.

The second section of this chapter explores the experiences of Black professionals who expressed that they had not experienced racist moments in the workplace. My findings in this section illustrate the conceptual limits that identifying experiences as “racist” holds for many Black professionals in the workplace. Like their peers who recounted individual acknowledgments of racism, this group also defines only the most overt and emotionally

damaging moments as racist. Although the impact is profound, my participants indicate that overt, emotionally damaging racist moments are rare in their workplaces. Consequently, the hyper focus on the overt and emotionally acute ensures that it is virtually impossible to have a socially legitimate experience of racism in the workplace. The socially set high threshold that racist events must be overt and acute, and not the actual existence of racist actions or expressions, ensured that “racism” is rare in the workplace. I also argue that the focus on the overt and emotionally acute favors white interest, as it makes it very difficult to contest many expressions and actions that perpetuate racial inequality in the workplace and leave overtly racist actors unchallenged.

Identifying actions and expressions that perpetuate disproportionate harm to Black people as “racist” is an important first step to tackling racial inequality head on. But my research highlights that the current structure of the racial dialectic in the professionalized workplace restricts such discussion to the overt and obvious, minimizing what can constitute as “racist.” A strong anti-racist counter to the white racial framing of Whites would provide a necessary challenge to the ways that White evaluations, decisions, and actions can simultaneously disadvantage Black professionals while advantaging their White peers. But my interviews with Black professionals illustrate that the anti-racism position within the racial dialectic of the professionalized workplaces limits the tools available to Black professionals to challenge the omnipresence of white racial framing and racial inequality in the workplace.

#### **4.1 I Have Experienced Racism in the Workplace**

Many of my participants who discussed experiencing racism in the workplace disclosed an internal conflict when considering what they should do in response. When I asked Hakeem how he responded to the racist incident that began this piece, He expressed a stance that

highlights the struggle between one's individualized hurt from a racist incident and the trouble of making their individual acknowledgements public for social or institutional acknowledgment:

I'm like, he should have felt something for what he said. Like, physically. Part of me, you know, the, the hood part of me is like why did you let that happen? With no consequences? But then professional side of me is like, you know, you're handling the best way you could. Because you know that you would have been, even if you just had gotten in an argument, you would have been perceived as more of the aggressor, you would have been wrong for being aggressive. Yeah, what he said would have been wrong, but my reaction would have stood out. My reaction, not what he said. It would have been my reaction. And I know that and that's that, uneven piece that I can't, I can't stand, like people can say whatever they want. Like they may get the hand slap for saying it, but if you react a certain way, now they remember more of what you say, how you said it, then what, what triggered you. You know, and I always have to have that in the back of my mind.

The experiences of my participants highlight the tension of trying to get institutional acknowledgement of one's individual acknowledgement of racism within a predominately white workplace. The Black professionals who identified racist moments like these clearly acknowledged an experience of racism. Hakeem's emotional hurt from the incident is so strong that he believes physical violence should have been rendered against the white racist framer.

However, Black professionals do not act upon their individual acknowledgement of racism because they recognize the professionalized workplace as a specific social context that requires a specific set of behaviors that reflect the ideal worker. Black professionals thus adopt a *racialized professional frame*, that considers their intersecting racial and socioeconomic statuses as Black professionals within a predominately white workplace. I use racialized broadly, as specific racial groups would have to consider the specific racist ideologies that structure their experiences. Black professionals thus adopt a *Black professional frame* to deal specifically with anti-Blackness. My participants largely understood that their racial status made them potential victims to racist marring by white colleagues and workplace superiors. White colleagues have access to white racist frames, like narratives of Black aggression and incompetence, that they

could utilize to devalue their Black colleagues' workplace value. Thus, many Black professionals I interviewed utilized a Black professional frame to anticipate the potentiality of racist devaluing. The reframing of their initial individual acknowledgements of racism allows for Black professionals to maintain an idealized worker status in their predominately white workplaces.

A common way Black professionals utilize a Black professional frame is through the creation of a binary between how one should behave at work versus how one should behave in the workplace. Bryant, for example, creates a binary that creates a "work code" and a "street code" that would require two separate responses. The racialized professional frame that influences his "work code" values conflict avoidance and timidity in the face of acute moments of racism, values that are not expressed in the "street code." We also see this bifurcation with Hakeem who creates a separation between the "hood part of me" who would have used violence against the racist offender and the "professional side of me" that categorized his nonresponse as "handling it the best way you could." The bifurcation of one's identity makes sense because professionalized work is dependent on the evaluation of peers and superiors for career success. As such, many Black professionals must value White peer evaluation and avoid conflict that could mar their colleague's estimation of their worth in the workplace.

But it is important to note that this is specifically a racialized performance. Despite their racialized hurt, many Black professionals understand that their workplaces are led by white authority collectives that have the final say in legitimizing their individual acknowledgments of racism. Those who are structurally aware of racial inequality may hope that workplaces have the wherewithal to grant institutional acknowledgment to Black professionals' experiences and start the steps towards restitution for racist actions. But Black professionals believe their racial status is more likely to elicit white colleagues' racist claims about their workplace performance or

emotional affect. They believe this because their experiences in predominately white workplaces underscore that White colleagues will adjudicate racialized conflicts in line with white interest. Thus, they avoid the evaluation of a white authorities who they believe will not grant their racist harm any legitimacy.

Hakeem particularly struggles with the prospect of white authoritarian discretion judging his response to the racist episode in his workplace. Hakeem understands that his white peers will read his reaction through the white racist frame that will paint him as aggressive and confrontational, values contradictory to that of an idealized professionalized worker. As such, Hakeem struggles to figure out how to respond in a way that will not be white framed by his colleagues and workplace superiors as aggressive. Hakeem understands that it would be his reaction to the racist joke, and not the racist joke initiated by his workmate, that would have drawn the attention of everyone else at the party. He is sure to point out how much he dislikes the racist asymmetry in how his reactions would be judged when compared to his white peers. He understands, like many of his Black professional peers, that the most he can hope for as a form of censure is “the hand slap for saying it.” Thus, we can begin to see the ways that the threat of white authoritarian discretion disincentivizes Black professionals from making public claims about their individual acknowledgments of racism. Despite wishing that he could have “handled it,” the threat of his White colleagues’ collective evaluation of his response incentivizes Hakeem, as it does with so many other Black professionals, to let the incident go. Thus, we can witness how Black professionals act against their own individual acknowledgements of racism and structural racial interest to remain idealized workers within predominately white workplaces.

Black professionals may feel hurt and shame about their responses to incidents of racism, but their decisions to avoid the discretion of their white peers maybe warranted when considering

the ramifications of being white framed can have on one's career. Cory, a banker, constantly felt that his supervisor and colleagues white framed his workplace actions as incompetent, despite his meticulous preparation to avoid such framing. Cory also frequently felt that his boss treated him in racialized ways, but often kept his feelings to himself as to not offend the racial status quo of his workplace. But when Cory decided to tell his boss that he felt he was experiencing racialized treatment, she interpreted his emotional hurt through the white racial frame as aggression and fled in tears.

As a result, Cory unwillingly provoked what many Black professionals expressed they feared and sought to avoid at all cost - being white framed as aggressive by a white coworker and superior. Despite his conscientious approach, Cory was unable to avoid the white reactionary wrath from his white boss. Cory recounts how his career at this specific banking branch was virtually derailed after being white framed as aggressive by his boss:

I got written up. I had got written up for that. At that time I was considered a great banker. My numbers were really good and I had no complaints when it came to customers. {How long were you there after that?} Probably maybe about three, four more months. I got an opportunity with [another bank]. Because I had to get out of there. You don't survive when you get written up, you don't survive. And in banking, you don't get any more promotions and stuff like that. So, I had to get out of there. There was no reason for her to do that. No reason at all. To do that, calling corporate security as if I was a threat, I never threatened her. There was no arguments. She asked me a question and I was just explaining to her like I was taught as a manager. There was no need for her to cry and then call corporate security, I had to explain myself and then feel uncomfortable after that. I felt very uncomfortable, uncomfortable working with her because I don't know how to talk to you. I don't know how to communicate with her. You know writing me up for being insubordinate. Where was I being insubordinate you know?

Cory's punishment highlights the trouble Black professionals face when they wish to contest the white framed expressions and actions of those of higher workplace authority ranks. As noted, the career trajectories of professionals are very dependent on positive evaluations by those in superior positions. Cory decided to contest his perceived racialized treatment, but the elevated

job authority rank of his boss buttressed her racialized narrative that Cory was aggressive. The allegations are also granted credulity through racist cultural ideologies that paint Black men as inherently criminal and violent.

Cory chooses to seek social legitimacy for his individual racist harm, but his actions are interpreted through a white racial frame, and he suffers retaliation as a result. Cory decides to leave because there is no way his career can survive being written up for insubordination. He was lucky enough to secure a position elsewhere. But Cory's story gives weight to the fears that Black professionals have of being marred by white framed evaluations in the workplace. There is thus institutional incentive to accept racist treatment to ensure one continues to be evaluated positively, or risk reactionary action from predominately white colleagues or leadership instead.

Some of my participants did decide to intervene and even interlock with white peers over expressions of the white racial frame. But the Black professionals who choose to intervene and speak up did not make their experiences public or seek institutional remedies for their racial harm. Instead, these Black professionals believed an individualized response to the racist moment was the best way to deal with racism in the workplace. We see this with Daryl, a consultant at a mid-tier software company, responded passionately to a racist encounter at work:

For some reason this guy decides to go, do you guys want to hear a racist joke that's not really racist? There were about three Black people around and two of us said no, like it was a definitive no. The third one said no, and then she said, but I am curious what it is. But then she was just like, you know, like when someone's like indecisive, like their interest is piqued but they're really like, no. So they're like, no, but I kind of want to know. But no. And it was after that last, no, he was like, um, I like my coffee the same way I like my slaves. Guess how I like my slaves? And so I think? So, the initial thought is like Black and he's like, no, it's free. Hahahaha. And I remember there was a, a lady and her friend, a Black lady and her friend that were sitting at an adjoining table. And when he told his joke there, they almost had whiplash when they looked, our eyes met. Right when I had said, cause I didn't even dignify this person by looking at him and I said this, I said, don't you ever say that shit again. And I said it just like that. And for me, I didn't necessarily curse that much at the time in the workplace because I still knew I'm fairly new in my career. But when I said that, everyone kind of looked at me and were

like, Oh damn, Daryl. And the other Black folks were like, yeah, don't ever say that again.

Through the white racial frame, the white colleague associates his three Black colleagues with racist imagery of chattel slavery. It is yet another example of how white men utilize alleged humor to imbue workplace interaction with hard racism. Daryl makes it plain that two of the three resolutely say no, they do not want to hear the joke at all. But the white colleague bypasses the consent of the Black professionals in question, as many white colleagues do in these moments, and expresses the racist joke anyway. Daryl is furious at the encounter, and simply tells him to “never say that shit again.” But, again, the response is passionate yet individualized. As a result, there is no rectification for the horrid racism. The person can simply persist in the organization, where his racist animus can continue to influence the experiences of Black professionals in the workplace.

The individualized responses to these acutely racist moments are understandable, but by leaving these encounters at the individual level, the claims of racism never get the institutional scrutiny that could theoretically make changes for the future. Being a victim of a racist encounter can be an emotionally devastating moment, so it is completely reasonable that Black professionals react as individuals and not agents of structural change. We should never require individual victims to absolve the problems created by institutions. Nonetheless, there cannot be institutional reconciliation for white racist actions and expressions without any individual or collective push to seek redress.

The inability to contest these racist moments leave white racist actors present in the institution unchallenged. As unchallenged actors, the racist actors can utilize their white racial framing to possibly perpetuate racism in the institution through hiring practices, promotions, distribution of work, etc. We saw this with Bryant, whose boss made a racist association at

Bryant's expense during the interviewing process. The use of white racial framing is troubling considering the institutional power that this boss has within the organization. It should be questioned if a person who makes such casually racist associations within the organization can be trusted to wield institutional power free from white racist framing. But the institutional hierarchies of the workplace grant him authority, further disincentivizing Bryant from counter framing against the racist encounter. It is not clear what institutional pathways Bryant would utilize if he wished to make his experience with racism an institutional matter that needed to be addressed. But again, the possibility that Bryant's racialized hurt would need to stand up to the scrutiny of his white peers dissuades him from moving forward. Thus, Bryant decided as many Black professionals do that the best course of action is to do nothing.

Of all the Black professionals who recounted racist workplace experiences, only one had an experience that ended with some sort of redress. Matthew, a process supervisor at a real estate bankruptcy firm, recounted an experience where he corrected a white supervisor's mistake in front of his coworkers. He was surprised by her response:

She answered the question incorrectly, to say the least. And I corrected her answer. And, you know, she got a little belligerent like, on the floor, like she just got Actually, I say, belligerent, but she really just got extremely loud on the floor like, you know, don't you dare! I don't even remember what she said, but just, you know, loud, like it was yelling and I'm just sitting there. The following day like, comes in. And of course, you know, our manager is also White and happens to be her friend. She watches his dog and they hang out and stuff like that. So, they all return is like from wherever they were doing, I guess, PTO or something and come back the next day. And they've organized a meeting for all of us to meet. It's like so I get into the meeting and I have been accused of being disrespectful to the White female lead, and I was also been accused of, and I quote, turning all of the processors against her.

Matthew's correction is interpreted by his supervisor as insubordination in need of immediate hostile correction. The fact that his correction is interpreted by his white supervisor as an injury worthy of intervention and reprimand underlines the trouble that Black professionals can find

themselves in when they are interpreted as aggressive. But Matthew's experience differs because the response to his supervisor was collective in nature:

I'm sure she was written up or admonished is like, because one of the things that all of the subordinates had done without my knowledge, was submit the supervisor emails of the previous day's altercation where she was basically yelling at me on the floor. So I mean, and the reason I call it a racism is because of the all of the people she said weren't doing what she told them to do were Black is like there's only one other white lady on that team and that was the person try to say that basically, I was bad talking or is like, or talking bad about or something like that when I'm notorious to not engage anyone at work. So, yeah, it's like I think that's probably the only racist altercation I've had at work and I say racist. Because she could have done it with anybody she did with me and had the expectation that I was going to be the one that I guess, got in trouble for lack of a better term.

The collective response from Matthew's workmates separates his experience from those of the other Black professionals I interviewed. The experience was not kept between the white racial framer and the individual Black professional, other workers expressed their shared poor experiences with the boss. The collective response of the employees made it difficult for the bosses' white framed accusations to be accepted at face value. Despite this moment of triumph, Matthew notes that the racial dynamics of his job makes challenging the predominately white management rare in his workplace. Thus, Matthew is "notorious to not engage anyone at work" because the discretion of whites unfairly structures racialized conflicts in the workplace.

Despite Matthew being protected from a possible career derailment due to collective action, it is unclear if his boss was admonished for her belligerent workplace behavior or abuse of her workplace authority. The lack of institutional reckoning with moments of white racist harassment highlights a workplace environment where workplace superiors, shielded by a predominately white management, can act in inappropriate ways that do not require acknowledgement or restitution. Thus, many Black professionals consider the lack of

consequences as proof that constataion is futile and will inevitably lead to nothing. They should just therefore accept the treatment, let it go, or look for work elsewhere.

But these are not simply individualized choices, but racialized responses to the legitimacy of white authority in the workplace. Black professionals are aware that their racial status is more likely to trigger negative evaluations influenced by the white racial frame rather than offer restitution for racist actions. So many Black professionals simply avoid the evaluations of white authoritarian discretion, which they believe will not grant their individual claims of racism the legitimacy needed to make positive changes in their favor. Others individualize their experiences of racism, ignoring the institutional ramifications that leaving an overt white racist actor could play for them or other professionals of color in their workplace. Others, unfortunately, decide to leave their workplaces altogether. because the racist actions are too much to deal with. While my participants understood this as an individual choice, I hope to highlight that this “choice” is influenced by white racial preferences exerted by white discretionary authorities.

In the next section, I explore Black professionals who recount that they have not experienced racism in the workplace. The purpose of the next section is to elucidate how Black professionals’ relationship to the white authority collectivities of their workplaces influences how they identify and respond to racist moments. I argue that even when there is a lack of an acknowledgment of racism, or the presence of overt and emotionally damaging racism, Black professionals are influenced by white authorities and their white racial framing when determining how to act during and after racialized moments in the workplace.

#### **4.2 I Have Not Experienced Racism in my Workplace**

In this section, I explore how the Black professional frame, and its white-framed influences, are present within the experiences and narratives of Black professionals who express

that they have not experienced racism in their predominately white workplaces. Some of the Black professionals who believed that they had not experienced racism in their workplaces reflected the feelings expressed by Stephanie, a lab animal researcher at a prestigious university. When I asked about her experiences, she spoke fondly of her white peers before acknowledging the ways they inject racialized expression and ideologies into their interaction with her:

The people OSU have actually been very welcoming, and they've been very great. I haven't had really any experience with someone treating me differently because of my skin color. But there are things that are said, like comments that people say subconsciously that I mean they're probably just not used to having a Black person around and they don't really think it's offensive to begin with.

Stephanie holds an interesting tension that reflected how many Black professionals in my study discussed their relationship with white peers in their workplaces. She notes that her coworkers have been great and welcoming people who have never treated “me differently because of my skin color,” before immediately admitting that her white colleague sometime express sentiments or behave in ways that could easily be considered offensive by Black people.

A Black professional frame helps Stephanie to contextualize her white colleagues’ offensive comment by acknowledging that many of them were not socialized around Black people. Her contextualization helps her to empathize with her white peers and embed her more comfortably into the white collective of her workplace. However, Stephanie’s level of empathy and understanding for her white peers is asymmetric to the level of empathy that her white colleagues express for her. She notes examples of racialized insensitivities from her white colleagues – like a white coworker referring to themselves as “hood” because they could figure out how to hotwire a car. But as a member of a white collective, Stephanie utilizes a Black professional frame to alter her initial reactions to these white framed insensitivities, empathize with her peers, and remain an idealized worker in a predominately white workplace. So, while

Stephanie does not interpret her experiences as racist, we see how her racialized status and the white racial framing of White colleagues incentivizes her to reframe her experiences within the workplace. The reframing helps her to remain an idealized worker within a predominately white workplace.

I repeatedly found examples of Black professionals recounting not directly experiencing any racism to only describe events where a Black professional frame was necessary for reframing the white racial framing of White peers. Brandon reflects this tension as well as he recounts his experiences at his prestigious southern university. When considering his experiences at his law school, Brandon was sure that he had not experienced any racism:

Not directly. I'm trying to think of someone that I know that has had an experience like that. I can't think of anything. I could be forgetting something that may have happened. I think outside of like the, the reminders as you walk through campus like if you walk through.

Brandon notes that his prestigious southern university has cultural signifiers that represent the old south, a racist legacy that the university has not institutionally wrestled with. Thankfully, he notes that his law school experiences have been free of racism.

However, when we discuss his relationship to his white colleagues in his law school, he recounted an anecdote that underscores how “racism” as an identifier may lead Black professionals to minimize their experiences of racial inequality in the workplace. Brandon recounted a story where he had to settle a very heated disagreement between a white male law student and a Black female law student. Brandon told me that this was not an uncommon experience. Brandon’s predominately white faculty frequently placed him in racialized positions by frequently sending him to resolve racial conflicts between whites and people of color in the student body. But Brandon’s experience illustrates how white authorities influence Black professionals’ behaviors, even in the absence of overt hard racism:

I had a conversation with him and he was, he actually brought up the race and gender differences and how that could be a, make this, that whole situation even more problematic than it probably would have been otherwise. Um, I didn't bring that up. He brought that up and if I'm being perfectly honest, I tried to stay away from it because in my circles like as you bring it up too much and it's almost like you run the risk of being labeled, (sigh), I feel like race baiter is lazy. But I mean that's, you know, I don't know another way to put it. So I have to balance that. I have to balance, like, understanding that there is no way that you can look at me and not know that I'm a Black man, but it's almost like I'm expected to only bring that up when it is, for lack of a better word, like blatantly warranted. You know what I'm saying? If there is another way to, like with that situation. When I had that conversation, like it was totally two totally different conversations that I had to have with both of them. Like with him, it was like I had to not bring it up in the, and he'll bringing it up, gave me the opening to talk about it. But even when I began to talk about it, I was very deliberate about not being over the top with it one.

The conflict entrapping Brandon reflects a particular racialized struggle that is unique to his racial status as a Black professional in a predominately white workplace. Brandon understands that avoiding the white framed epithet “race baiter” is essential to his success because being perceived as a race baiter could damage the esteem that his white colleagues hold for him. The professionalized racism discourse creates racist asymmetry governing Brandon’s adherence to color-blind actions and expression, so much so that he depends on his peers’ white privilege to access the racial ideological terrain that is the source of the conflict. Most importantly, Brandon use of the Black professional frame is directly influenced by the centrality that white discretion has on the potential trajectory of his career. He captures the absurdity of his adopted color-blind stance by acknowledging that he had two different racialized performances - one for the white man and another with the Black women – to maintain his position within a racialized structure.

Brandon later describes that this dance to avoid white discretion is emotionally exhausting and taxing endeavor:

Yeah, the, the song and dance is, it's exhausting man, like, it's exhausting because you have to do those things. But at the same time, it's like I felt like if I say the wrong things, I say the wrong thing to either group, like, you run the risk of damaging a relationship. So I'm like, how I handled the whole situation yesterday could have, how I handled the conversations with the male could have been, could have been offensive to someone of

color. Like they probably would've looked at it as like, you made some {huh?}. You're, you know, you're not being aggressive enough as far as like handling this issue. But my thing is like, look, I'm you have to understand the position that I'm in, you know, I understand your frustration. I understand why you're frustrated, but I can't address it like you want me to address it? I have address it that would not, you know, way that would handle the issue and not damage the relationships on both sides. And that's a fine line to walk. You know, that's a, it's a line that is, it can be, it can be exhausting to walk.

Brandon understands that his relationship to a white authority collective who have a different relationship to race and racism is central to his status within his professionalized field. He thus relinquishes expressing his own opinions, opinions that would make his racial position in a racist hierarchy clear, to cede the racism discourse to the imposed ideological preferences of white authorities. By avoiding the white racist epithet of “race baiter” or being interpreted as aggressive/insubordinate, he protects his status within a white collective and avoids further diminishing his already devalued racial status. But he must suppress many feelings to maintain this position in the white collective of his workplace. Brandon must perform this racialized “song and dance” that acknowledges his racialized position while not damaging the white racial discretion of his workplace superiors. The dance is racially unequal – the white racial interest of masking racism is granted priority over the racist hurt experienced by the Black colleagues within the institution. Brandon is keen to highlight the unique yet exhausting position his racial status places him in the predominately white workplace. However, he does not interpret this stressful position as “racist.” Again, his framework is not able to interpret this racially asymmetric and isolating experiences as “racist.” They are just understood as par for the course of work in predominately white workplaces.

Morris, a dean at a for-profit university, expresses similar ideas about not experiencing racism in the workplace. When we broached the topic, he told me:

(Long Pause) No, no (Ok) and I, I haven't what I have been characterized as is which is sad as a Black person that doesn't take care of their fellow Black person.

Morris is firm that he has not experienced racism in the workplace, but over the course of the interview, he describes negative experiences that are unique to his racial status. For instance, Morris acknowledges that as one moves up the job authority hierarchy of his workplace, the whiter it becomes:

Once you get to get past this third level or you know, moving up, it just trickles out. And, you know, a lot of the rhetoric that we receive is and I and I can only speak for myself this is that, well, you know, you're very aggressive. And it seems like every organization that I've been into, and I've, I've actually had this told to me before, and just about every place if you were a white guy you will be so far, so much further along in the organization, because of how you operate and what you do. And there are Caucasian people that may operate like I do. And it's not viewed as threatening.

Morris is frustrated because he believes the racialized judgments of his peers have halted the progress of his career. Unlike Brandon, Morris could not avoid being white framed as “very aggressive” by his white colleagues in his evaluations. Morris believes that the negative, white framed evaluations have halted the trajectory of his career. He notes the racial asymmetry between how aggression is interpreted within the workplace, as he reiterates later in our interview:

I mean, it angers me. Again, I'll go back to the statement that I said before that, you know, every place that I've gone, I've always excelled. But every place that I've gone, I've had to work 10 times harder. Then the Caucasian person over here, that by just the sheer nature of who they were, they didn't have to walk through the door in, quote, unquote, prove themselves.

Morris understands that his racial status devalues him in the eyes of the white authorities who consistently white frame him as aggressive, and thus unideal for positions of leadership. He notes how his white colleagues' whiteness grants them a credential that Black professionals must work “10 times harder” to achieve (Ray 2019). But white authorities rarely grant Black people the evaluations they require because their discretion is influenced by white racist framing. The unequal distribution of accurate and career necessary evaluations could rightfully be considered a

racial inequality. But Morris' framework, influenced by the Black professional frame, does not interpret these inequities as racist.

In this section, I illustrate that Black professionals who expressed not experiencing racism nonetheless can recount experiences that reflect a racially devalued status in their workplaces. Black professionals are often aware that their racial status creates unique and negative workplace experiences, but their framework for understanding racism does not characterize these experiences as racist. Black professionals describe the racialized positioning they must do to maintain the positive evaluations of white authorities in their workplace as emotionally taxing, isolating, demanding, or career stifling. Despite these detriments, their frameworks for understanding racism do not evaluate these experiences as racist because they do not rise to the level of the overt and spectacular. Thus, I begin to highlight the limits of the overt and spectacular because they mask the day-to-day racial inequality that Black professionals experience in the workplace.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight how Whites' authority over the racial dialectic influences Black professionals' navigation of racialized events within the professional workplace. Systemic Racism Theorists posit that a racial dialectic relationship between white racial framing and counter frames structures the race and racism discourse within the contemporary racial era. I agree and posit that we must consider the structural perspective that Systemic Racism Theory offers to comprehend the experiences of Black professionals within the modern professionalized workplace. However, my interviews with Black professionals found that they rarely act, as systemic racism theory would phrase, in "their racial interest" by contesting white racist expressions and actions with counter frames. For systemic racism theories

to truly understand the experiences of Black professional within the workplace, we must augment concepts of racial structures to also include the meso-level hierarchies of status and authority within professionalized workplaces.

A strong anti-racism, counter framing core to the racial dialectic of the professionalized workplace could be a powerful tool in making lucid the ways that white discretion can simultaneously disadvantage Black professionals while advantaging their white peers. However, my interviews revealed that there was no such strong counter framing core for Black professionals in their workplaces. This is influenced by the lack of anti-racist tools that Black professionals can utilize to understand what experiences lie within the conceptual landscape of “racism” governed by white authorities. Both the Black professionals who recounted experiences of racism and those who recounted that they had not experienced racism both are influenced by the authority of Whites to adjudicate in ways that limit illuminating racism and racial inequality in the workplace.

I argue that the theoretical dialectical relationship between the white racial frame and counter frames must reconsider the specific meso hierarchies of the professionalized workplace to better reflect the experiences of Black professionals. The meso-level hierarchies of status and job authority strengthens white authorities’ ability to adjudicate racialized conflicts in ways that maintain the racial status quo that obscures the realities of racial inequality. Thus, an imposition of white authority in the professionalized workplace creates a specific racial dialectic – one between white racial framing that forwards white interest and a racialized Black professional frame that must accommodate white authority to maintain an idealized worker status in a predominately white workplace.

But the hyper focus on the overt and the acute ensured it was virtually impossible to have a socially legitimate experience of racism within the workplace. The need for racist moments to be overt and acute, and not the actual existence of racist expressions or actions, ensured that “racism” is rare in the workplace. It is important to ask at this juncture who it serves that many experiences of racism cannot be rendered socially legible without the existence of overt and acute harm. Identifying actions and expressions that perpetuate disproportionate harm to Black people as “racist” is an important first step in tackling racial inequality head on. But the current racism discourse of the professionalized workplace restricts such discussion to the overt and obvious, further minimizing what can constitute “racism.” When considering the wide range of actions and expressions that cannot fit within the racism discourse of the professionalized workplace, I argue that it currently functions to reflect white institutional preferences that seek to minimize and ignore the racist harm that Black professionals can experience in the workplace

Instead of helping Black professionals identify and challenge racism, the racism discourse of the professionalized workplace minimizes and erases Black professionals’ acknowledgments of racist harm. Black professionals can be aware of this fact. I return to Bryant, whose experience with a racist event begin this chapter. He discussed how the “subjective” nature of calling something racist influences him to never seek to make his individual harm public in his workplace:

Because it's so subjective, you know, they might always say no, I didn't mean it that way. Or if it's just two people involved in the conversation. My word against their word, and they're leadership and I feel like their word going to be taken more, more over mine anyway. So I typically just, I'm in a very non-confrontational mood at work.

As this chapter makes clear, even racial events that reflect the overt and the acute are still minimized and erased by white peers and workplace superiors. Bryant experienced a clear incident of racism when his boss made racist association between him and the racist myth of

inherently criminal Black men and dangerous neighborhoods. But despite the clarity of this racism, this experience was still rendered subjective. What subjectivity discourse discounts, however, is that someone's subjectivity is granted legitimacy above someone else's. The rendering of these experience as subjective is not inherent, it is imposed by a white authority collective, who have racial interest in maintaining a racial hierarchy that benefits them. The white authority collectives' discretion that their workplaces are free of racism is imposed and granted more legitimacy than the individual acknowledgements of racism by Black professionals. The white authority collectives' subjectivity that their workplaces should be non-confrontational space matters above Black professionals need to contest their racialized treatment.

It is not that the white authorities are correct in their assessment that racism does not exist in their workplace, or Black professionals are incorrect that they are experiencing individual racist harm. It is that the white authorities have the power and the authority to make their assessment of the absence of racism in the workplace the reality. Black professionals must follow this structurally racist imperative and bend their subjectivities to this racially imposed truth. If not, they must look for work elsewhere and try their luck at a workplace they hope to have better racial politics.

## **5 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENDER TO RACIALIZED WORKPLACE EXPERIENCES**

When Brianna, a mental health fellow in an organization that serves military personnel, recounted her racialized workplace experiences, she made clear that her racial status and her gender status greatly influenced how she managed her behavior in the workplace:

Well, I feel like I'm bringing my Black and woman self to everything that I do. So I'm always cognizant of how other people perceive me, and whether or not they're perceiving me as competent or incompetent. I feel like I'm always mindful of how I'm presenting myself. And you know whether I'm acting. Whether I'm being more overtly BLACK, OR, or NOT, like, you know, like code switching and stuff. I'm always cognizant of how I'm showing up in spaces, but my Blackness is, is always something I'm thinking about.

Brianna is hyper aware that she embodies two statuses that are called into question within a professional landscape that concentrates white men as employees and in positions of authority – Black and woman. Brianna is not alone in making gendered distinctions about her experiences in the workplace, most of the Black women I interviewed concretely and openly considered how their racial and gendered statuses would influence the experiences they expected to have in the workplace and how they would navigate their careers as a result. For the Black women in my study, describing the racial diminishment they face was not enough to fully paint the picture of inequality that they face in the workplace. Black women must also contend with sexist structures that question their competency and marginalize them outside of the contours of the ideal white and male professional worker.

Systemic Racism theory makes clear that both men and women suffer from systemic racism through racist structures and a legitimizing white racial frame that concentrate privilege and resources within white social collectives. While the theory recognizes gender, its arguments do not concretely theorize a central fact of racism –gendered subjects perpetuate white racist expressions/actions and that racist expression/actions are perpetuated against gendered subjects. As such, systemic racism theory must be augmented with intersectionality theories to help us understand how racial and gendered status influence how work is experienced by both Black men and women professionals. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) Collins theorizes oppression and hierarchy through a *matrix of domination* lens, where oppressive structures of racism and sexism intersect with other forms of social inequality to create unique experiences of

marginalization for Black women. The purpose of this chapter, thus, is to forward this line of thinking from Black Feminist Thought to illustrate the unique experiences that Black women have with racist and sexist marginalization in professionalized workplaces.

In this chapter, I highlight the significance of gender in producing unique racialized experiences for the Black women professionals in my study. I accomplish this by highlighting how Black women's workplace experiences diverge from the Black men professionals who share their racial status, but not their gender status. I begin by considering my participants on the individual level of gender identity. I found that Black women understood their workplace marginalization by considering their racial and gender status, a distinct difference from the Black men in my study who mostly understood their workplace marginalization without consideration of their gender status. Women in my study also recognized and identified the sexist discrimination they experienced as women in the workplace, which influenced them in some circumstances to find solidarity with other women. Thus, a gender status helped the Black women more readily identify experiences of workplace marginalization in a way that was distinct from the Black men in my study.

I turn next to gendered relations between Black professionals and white professionals. I illustrate the centrality of Black professionals' gender status to how their white peers interpret them through the white racial frame. The one exception I found where Black men utilized a discourse of gender to describe their workplace marginalization was through their experiences with White women colleagues. The Black men in my study expressed cautious when dealing with White women because they were aware that White women would utilize white racial frames that paint Black men as aggressive to mar their status in the workplace. Black women dealt with their white peers who interpreted their performance of femininity as outside the lines of idealized

professional white femininity. While Black men and Black women dealt with the unique gendered white racial frames, the racist meanings both had the consequence of legitimizing exclusion and negative evaluation that diminished their status in the workplace.

I then conclude with a discussion of the existence and formation of gendered collectives in the workplace and their consequences for Black women in the workplace. I illustrate that women are more likely to experience the formation and persistence of institutionalized or ephemeral collectives that augment their recognition of workplace inequality. I also illustrate how the existence of exclusionary white women collectives made clear to the Black women the marginalization that they face in the workplace.

### **5.1 Black Women and Gendered Distinctions of Workplace Marginalization**

A key difference I found between the women and men in my study is that Black women frequently made gendered distinctions concerning the experiences of marginalization that they faced in the workplace. Black women, in comparison to their male counterparts, concretely and openly considered how their racial and gendered statuses would influence the experiences they expected to have in the workplace and how they would navigate their careers as a result. We saw this with Brianna in the introduction of the chapter, but other Black women in my study made these gendered distinctions as well. Natalie made note that she cannot consider her racial marginalization without considering her “double minority” status:

I mean, I think that just to be like in, to be a woman at that, a double minority, right? So I wake up every day and I know that there is a target on me. I know that I have to fight harder than anyone else. I know that even going through the grocery store line or whatever, I might not get as many smiles as the next person get. You know what I mean? Like it's kind of my hard knock life but it is what it is. I've been Black all my life, so I'm used to it, you know what I mean?

With her usage of “double minority” Natalie is making a gendered distinction that highlights that the inequities she faces in the workplace and beyond are because of her racial and gender status.

The majority of women in my study made sure to clarify that they are Black and women, and that being members of these marginalized groups in the workplace must be understood together to make sense of their experiences of workplace marginalization.

The women in my study made racial and gendered distinctions because their differences along these salient statuses made clear to them that they were outside of the two dominant social groups that concentrate power and authority in the workplace – white people and men. Tiffany, a public health official at a major organization, understood that being a Black woman professional meant being a member of two underrepresented groups in the workplace and that those with influence will treat her differently as a result:

I think that certain professions you have a harder time, just because you are African American, or even just being a woman too. You don't fit whatever that job typically is. And so, you know, you have to be so good and just so appropriate for that job to say, look at me, I really am quite good and I can do very well in this position. And you have to hope that somebody will give you that chance. So yeah. I would say it impacts everything. Cause even if I say, well I don't identify as Black, that doesn't really matter because other people identify me as Black. That's really what the issue is.

Tiffany highlights that as a member of a racial minority and a gendered minority, she must contend with the racist and sexist reality that her mere presence defies a structural logic that continues to perpetuate disproportionately white and male workplaces. The lack of Black women in professional fields serves as evidence for white racist frames that paint Black women as incompetent and sexist ideologies that paint women as unideal for leadership positions. As a Black woman, she cannot simply ignore these ideologies because those in positions of authority reify them through their selection and differential treatment of her in the workplace. She must therefore conform and work at a higher standard of quality to be deemed “appropriate” for her job. But she does not simply reinforce the “Twice as Hard” motif that both Black men and women perform in reaction to white racist framing. She highlights that her standpoint within a

marginalized Black women status means she is more susceptible to ideologies and practices that further marginalize her in comparison to others.

The men in my study rarely made the same sorts of gendered distinctions that were so integral for the women in my study to understand their place at work. Yes, many of my male participants would identify as “Black men,” to make clear the racialized difficulties that they face in the workplace. But the usage of “man/men” was rarely used to reflect a distinct dimension of experience that would not include Black women. What I mean is that if they used “Black person,” or simply “Black” instead of “Black man,” it would oftentimes not have fundamentally altered the meaning they wished to convey to me. To be clear, when men in my study were identifying with being a Black man, they were often distinguishing two groups of people – white people and Black people. The only time when Black men in my study were demarcating another group of gendered significance, it was often concerning their relationship with white women. This is largely due to the white framed narratives of sexually and physically aggressive Black men that influenced how Black men behave around women in their workplaces.

However, when women identified as Black women, they could be demarcating between many groups. Yes, they could be distinguishing between Black people and white people, like my male participants. But they also could be distinguishing experiences that they believe are distinct for only other Black women, like the reflections that we have already discussed in this section. But they could also be distinguishing between white men and women generally, as Tiffany does below:

I think it's mostly just been challenging from the perspective of recognition. In never knowing, am I not being recognized because I'm Black or am I not being recognized because maybe I'm not performing as well as other? In my current job, the group that I work for is predominantly female. There are some guys, but I would say almost 70% women. When you look at the big kind of recognition that has been given to people, there's only one type of person who's received the recognition and they are white men.

Not to say that they're not deserving of any recognition, but it is statistically very challenging that every single big recognition goes to a white male because there's like 10 of them. So that's when it becomes like, are you serious? I don't think so.

Tiffany is making a gendered distinction to notate the ways gender differentiates and marginalizes those in her workplace. These distinctions are important because it highlights just how many different salient groups that Black women belong too – Black women, women, Black people – that are sites of differentiation and marginalization from a workplace power center that concentrates white men. Tiffany highlights her marginalization as a Black woman, but she acknowledges that she shares marginalization with other women who cannot gain the same recognition and opportunities as White men. Gendered distinctions are thus important because they highlight how many different salient groups that Black women belong too – Black women, women, Black people – that are sites of differentiation and marginalization from a workplace power center that concentrates White men.

Considering that Black women occupy multiple salient marginalized groups helps us to understand why Black women sometimes compare the racism and sexism they experience in the workplace. When Alia, a chief of staff to a high-ranking Democrat, was recounting experiences of inequality she faced while assisting her boss, she made a distinction between racial and gendered inequality:

But I think you could even see it. One example even though this is not a racial example, but even with gender, like when you look at the state legislature. So we elected the largest number of women that have ever been in the Georgia legislature this year. And so then, in the Senate, they had the largest number of women that they've ever had. But what happened? The lieutenant governor who presides over the Senate, changed everybody's committees, so women who had been head of powerful committees, they weren't in charge of those committees anymore.

For Alia, the genders of the committee members are more salient for the inequality that she is discussing. Yes, it is true that many of these women were women of color. A Black feminist

perspective would argue that these women are suffering from intersecting racial and gendered marginalization by white men in positions of influence. But it was common for my participants to utilize this separation of racism and sexism when it felt clear to them that one mattered more than the other. And the inequality in this circumstance found its salience for Alia through the group who were marginalized, which in this case were women. This is significant because Alia does not require a shared racial status to acknowledge an inequality is taking place. She can recognize an inequality by her shared gendered status with these women, and thus bring another vantage point by which to recognize the inequality in her workplace.

The multiple marginalized groups that Black women occupy in the workplace granted Black women multiple vantage points by which to recognize inequality, but the salience of sexist marginalization could supersede the salience of racial marginalization as a result. For example, Melanie, a curriculum specialist, considered that the marginalization she faced in her workplace was more due to her gender than her race:

For me, Ifeanyi, it is more sexism, that's what I think more so. They look at my color, but I feel as if, I'm faced with more sexism than anything else. I am always having to prove myself for Black men and white men, both alike. The white females, I feel they side with the Black males and the white men. But I feel like I am marginal, I feel like I'm on the outside I don't feel like I'm a part of the bigger industry, I just feel I feel marginal. That's largely due to the fact that I'm always having to prove myself. Over the course of my career, I've seen where people have been chosen over me, and I just feel marginal. I don't see the work ethic the same work ethic I have. But other people, they get recognized. And I really think it's because it has something to do with my color. But for me, I feel with the men, it is definitely sexism. And the sad thing about it, is I'm not just getting that from white men, I'm getting it from my own men, Black men.

Melanie recognizes that her racialized status contributes to her marginalization, but ultimately decides that it is sexism that contributes the most to her workplace devaluation and marginalization. This appears to challenge intersectional Black feminist thinking, that argues that

sexism, racism, and various other structural/institutional expressions of inequality act simultaneously in a *matrix of domination* to oppress Black women.

But when we consider multiple group membership perspective, we see that Melanie feels this way because she is diminished and marginalized by Black men and white men alike. Therefore, we must consider group membership because it is the language my participants utilize to experience, acknowledge, and explain their workplace marginalization. Melanie use of a “sexism over racism” discourse is due to her membership within social statuses that are diminished by *men*, Black and white alike. She is marginalized by men, so she notes it as sexism. From her retelling, Black men and white women do not experience the same marginalization that she experiences. The marginalization that Melanie experiences reflects the reality that her intersecting status as a Black woman is producing a unique experience that is not felt by others. So, for Black women, sexism produces a unique experience that differentiates them from Black men, and thus creates a need to differentiate their experiences from Black men. At least within the workplace context, I didn’t find evidence for the reverse. Men never utilized a discourse of “gender over race,” because no concrete experiences made this discourse salient. So, I think that a “gender over race” discourse does not disprove theories of intersectionality, it highlights the significance of gender distinctions caused by group membership and sexism that affect women but not their male counterparts.

The purpose of this section is to illustrate how a group membership perspective highlights the significance of Black women making gendered distinctions about the marginalization they face in the professionalized workplace. As Black people and as women, Black women occupy multiple salient social groups that are marginalized and diminished in the workplace due to structurally racist and sexist acts that maintain beneficial workplace resources

within white male collectives. The multiple groups also illustrated to my Black women participants from multiple vantage points how others shared similar workplace hurdles and marginalization. So, while the Black men and Black women in my study oftentimes reflected on their racial group status as Black people to understand their experiences of marginalization or exclusion, the Black women had other perspectives that also highlighted many ways in which they could be experiencing marginalization or exclusion.

The Black women in my study could tell they were experience inequality because fellow Black people were also being marginalized or excluded in the workplace. But the Black women in my study could also understand they are facing inequality because other *women* are facing inequality or tell they are facing inequality because other *Black women* are facing inequality. The gendered distinctions thus illustrate the social vantage points by which Black women come to recognize the workplace as a site of inequality and consider their own experiences of marginalization and inequality.

Group membership is often about identification, but gender does not only function as a source of identification. Gender is also a behavioral performance of cultural meanings, norms, and values attached to men and women (Risman and Davis 2013). But the professionalized workplace, as a site where racist meanings percolate, meant that the ways in which my participants expressed their gendered selves were often assessed and surveilled by white colleagues through the White racial frame. The next section seeks to explore the consequences of white interpretations of Black gendered behaviors.

## **5.2 White Racist Interpretations of Black Masculinity and Femininity**

Many Black professionals in my study were made aware of racial inequality in their workplace because white colleagues utilized white racial frames that had consequences for how

they expressed their masculinities and femininities are perceived by whites in the workplace. We can understand masculinity and femininity as the set of cultural norms and roles that shape expectations for normal behavior for men and women respectfully (Risman and Davis 2013). However, the workplace is a site of white racial hierarchy where performances of masculinity and femininity are evaluated by white cultural norms. As such, my participant had to be hyper aware of how their performance of masculinity or femininity diverged from white cultural norms. But their caution could not overcome that many white colleagues, particularly white women, would interpret their behavior through a white racial frame and associate them with racist ideas about Black men and women, no matter their performance.

This was especially true for the Black men in my study; when the Black men spoke at any length about their gendered selves, they were almost certainly discussing their actions in relation to white women. This is because my Black male participants understood their genders most saliently when considering how the presence of white women or non-Black women held different gendered expectations about how they should behave in the workplace. We can see this understanding of different gendered expectations when we consider how Bryant notes how he cannot express himself in the same way that his non-Black coworkers behave in the workplace:

What I've noticed about the white people in my group, they are very touchy feeling. They're in each other's personal space all the time. And I feel like as a Black man, I cannot be that person because I don't want to have somebody misconstrue my niceness for some type of sexual advance or aggression. Cause I've had one experience where I was actually training this new employee. So I, when I was explaining things, I kind of use my hands. I may have touched her one time. Um, she didn't say anything at that point, but the next day when I saw, I walked past her and I, I kind of brushed on the shoulders and said Good Morning. She all behind me, approached me. She said, pulls me to the side and says that just gonna let you know that I don't like to be touched. And that really, that really did something to me. I make a point not to touch. People, not getting into their personal spaces at work. And the one time I did it, I was called out for it. Oh. But I've seen her interact with other people and other non-Black people and they've touched her and there has been no issues with that or no obvious sense of tension. So, I felt like that's something that's probably happened to a lot of Black people at work, a lot of Black men

at work and this is the reason why we don't tend to interact with them on that level because of perceived sense of aggression or harassment or sexual advances and things like that.

The gendered salience of the encounter helps Bryant to recognize that his racial status is central to how his colleagues react to him in relation to his white peers. From a systemic racism perspective, the sexually aggressive Black men imagery is the consequence of a legacy of white racist framing that makes contemporary Black men susceptible to white framed accusations of sexual impropriety. But this white racist framing cannot be separated from the gendered racism that make this a unique positionality for Black men in relation to white women peers. The sexually aggressive Black man imagery fundamentally alters how Bryant behaves in the workplace by influencing him to disengage from sociality within his predominately female workplace. But the gendered salience of his racism helps him to form solidarity with other Black men who he believes must also be hyperaware of how their white peers will interpret their advances through a white racist and gendered frame that paints Black men as sexually aggressive. Thus, we can see how the gendered salience helps to make the racial acknowledgement more concrete.

White women's white racial framing of Black men did not always paint men as sexually aggressive, But Black men understood the racist myths that paint White women as morally pure and adjusted their behavior accordingly. But racist myths that paint white women as morally pure and innocent also ensured that Black men were cautious in their interactions with them. Cory, for example, understood that he must be cautious and manage the white framed expectations of his white female peers who can easily paint his passion as aggressive:

Especially if you work under a white woman, you can't come off as too aggressive you come off as too aggressive you come off a too opinionated, as a Black man working, you come up as too aggressive, you come up as being disobedient or being disruptive which just leads to firing or get him off my team and stuff like that. So even as a Black man,

you know, I have to work a certain way because I work under a white woman. So there are certain things I can't even move my hand gestures because it may come off as aggressive or may come off as threatening to her. Even if I have a difference of opinion, I have to find a certain way to express that opinion and not coming off as that angry Black man type of situation. So it's it makes it a little bit easier, when you work with Black women you, that guard can be let down a little bit more, you can breathe a little bit more you can explain yourself better you know it.

Cory understands that he must pay close attention to his action at work when working with white women or he will face the consequence of being white framed as aggressive. Cory understands that being understood as opinionated with white women can easily be furthered into being understood as disobedient and disruptive. This is important because the social evaluation by white women superiors means that white framed representations could lead to him being shut out of opportunities that will stymie his career. Cory was particularly sensitive due to the account explained in the previous chapter, where he loses his job because of a white women's framing of his actions. He is also clear that this racialized performance is for white women, as he feels he can "breathe a little bit more" when he is working with Black women. We see how the specific racialized myths of white femininity and the actions of white women create specific consequences for Black men in the workplace. White women racialized expressions and actions creates racial moments with gendered salience for Black men that created the rare moments of a gendered discourse for my Black male participants.

The Black women in my study also highlight how racist interpretations of their performance of femininity created barriers for them in the workplace. Janet, a teacher, discussed how a White woman boss questioned and policed her behavior primarily due to racist myths about larger Black women's bodies:

I think because she was pretty racist. I'm a big Black woman. And to her that looked like lazy. And you know, just like coming into my room after hours and digging through my things and I had to go print some copies in the copier outside my door. I got wrote up, you know, so little things that shouldn't happen, happens. Now, I will say I did very well

that year. And she ended up leaving the school and having a heart attack. She did not die. But she did end up leaving the school. And I think that in getting sick and I think that that really slowed down some of the feelings of aggression that she had towards people. But she was known as somebody who came in and cleaned up and I was just a person that she thought she was going to get out of that school. I mean, she was successful with some people, some people lost their teaching license.

Janet's narrative highlights the centrality of weight to the interpretation of Black women's morality and behavior. Sociologist Sabrina Strings (2019) argues that fatphobic stigma is the consequence of racist and eugenic ideals that paint larger Black women's bodies as culturally inferior while simultaneously painting idealized thin white women's bodies as morally superior and civilized. The racist ideologies framing larger Black women's bodies help to legitimize ideas that paint them as lazy, uncouth, and in need of moral discipline (Strings 2019). The white woman can utilize these racist ideas to legitimize her surveillance of Janet's behavior because of the authority vested within her by workplace hierarchies. As such, Janet suffered her bosses' harassment with no ability for recourse.

Ultimately, many of the Black women in my study had to fundamentally manage their performance of their femininity because of the racist controlling imagery of the "angry Black woman" that heavily contrasted the ideal presentation of professional femininity in the workplace. Imani, a fraud analyst at a major bank chain, felt she was blackballed because her white colleagues frequently interpreted her behavior as outside of the bounds for acceptable feminine presentation in the workplace. But she stood firm and vowed not to change her preferred style of presentation in the workplace:

I'm being blackballed for being authentically me. You know, I've been I've had one of my managers at a different job, call me a chia pet before because of how my hair was. And he was, he was old, gay and white. So I've had people misunderstand my personality because of the whole angry Black woman situation. Because I talk with confidence, I've get the, you're arrogant or you're angry. It's just, it's a lot of things that go into being a Black person in a typical professional setting. So essentially, you just either have to suck it up, complain about it or work around it. For me, is I've just gotten to the point where I

just don't give a damn. And I do what I want. I say what I need to say and especially if I feel like I'm being targeted or judged or anything like that, but I've definitely been blackballed before as far as like, I'm not gonna say opportunity. But it's more so just as a target. And it was to the point where I had to have a conversation with the higher up like, what we not about to do, is that. So and I've also taken like a personal leave as well, to that extent, because I felt like it was just too much.

Imani recounts how she must consistently contend with the backlash of her white colleagues because she does not perform racialized and gendered notions of professionalism. The sexist concentration of white men within professionalized work reifies gendered ideals that hold rigid expectations of the performance of femininity within the workplace. Throughout my research, I have heard countless stories of white men violating norms of professionalism, but they are granted leniency or no rebuttals because racist and gendered myths of white male freedom legitimize their behavior in the workplace. But Imani's confidence and willingness to challenge those in positions of influence violate gendered ideals of a compliant ideal worker. These are magnified by racist and gendered white-framed imagery of Black women as angry and aggressive. Imani thus finds herself "blackballed" for being herself, even driven to take a mental health leave because of the actions of her white peers. As seen in the last chapter, Imani mirrors the actions of many Black professionals and understands her treatment on the individual level and decides to push forward regardless. But with the centrality of positive social evaluation for career advancement, one must wonder if the standstill she is experiencing in her career is due to how her colleagues utilize white racist and sexist frames to interpret her behavior in the workplace.

The purpose of this section is to highlight the consequences of white colleagues utilizing white racist frames to interpret their gendered Black peers. The men in my study discussed a rare gender discourse in reaction to white women and non-Black women who utilizes gendered racist frames to interpret them as sexually or physically aggressive. Black women dealt with their

white peers who interpreted their performance of femininity as outside the lines of idealized professional white femininity. While Black men and Black women dealt with the unique gendered white racial frames, the racist meanings both had the consequence of legitimizing negative evaluation and exclusion that prevented them from accessing the beneficial resources necessary for career mobility.

The final section returns to gender as a structure that creates the possibility of group formation. But it contends with this reality by acknowledging the racist hierarchy that ensures that the most beneficial groups within workplaces are disproportionately White and male. This had differing consequences for the Black men and Black women in my study.

### **5.3 The Significance of Gendered Collectives in the Workplace**

A significant way that gender was salient for the racialized experiences of my participants were through the gendered expectations that culturally dictate the formation of workplace relations and collectives. A central gendered social norm is the expectation that individuals should preferably form platonic bonds with those of the same gender. This norm intersects with the social context of the professionalized workplace that incentivizes networking with and accessing key social collectives to achieve career advancement. But the legacy of systemic racism ensures that the most beneficial collectives for one's career will be disproportionately white and male. The social collectives also reinforce their homogenously white demographics through white framed evaluations and selection of others that elevates and reifies white colleagues as ideal and legitimate. A core example of this in my study is the much-discussed Old Boys Club, consisting of a network of white men who select their elite peers to reify a white elite concentration of men in positions of leadership and authority. Overt and covert concentrations of white men in these positions of authority rely on race and gender as credentials

for selection, marginalizing others while hoarding workplace benefits within their collectives (Ray 2019).

While Black men and women fall outside of the dominant white male racial group, Black men share a gender status with white men that could present an opportunity for inclusion and career advancement. Adia Harvey Wingfield (2013) theorizes this phenomenon as *partial tokenization*, or the possibility of Black men being able to access predominately white social network through their gender, bounding as men to further their careers. I only found one participant who highlighted experiences along the lines of partial tokenization. Hakeem found it very difficult to form friendships with his colleagues as one of the few Black men in a position of leadership at his company. But it was not uncommon for his White colleagues to try and utilize their shared gendered status to form a bond with him:

Um, it's, it's lonely sometimes. It gets a little lonely because the reason why I use the word lonely is because I can be around ton of folks and I still know that I am different than anybody in here. The conversation is different, you know? Except for when they try to include you in the conversation, I hate that.[Can you give me an example?] Oh man, they tried to use like stuff that they probably seen on BET or like little sayings rap sayings and stuff like that. Like, What's up dog? Dude, I ain't your dog man, like. And then they'll try to like talk like there trying to talk like they're Black, like they're part of the culture and it's, you know. Yeah. Half the time I laugh it off, but yeah. So that's a little frustrating. [Is that common or] it's ah, I see that more common with white men. I've never seen, now that I think about it. I can't remember seeing, this from any other gender. Definitely. It's always white males. I don't know what it is. I've been trying to figure it out, but you know, it happens a lot. I think it's like a way, Like they're trying to bond like, I guess man to man, because I'm a Black man. So they're trying. But it's a, I mean it's, different ways we can bond. And honestly, who says I want bond with you? Let's just do what we gotta do. But sometimes they'll, they'll kinda like keep pushing, you know, what's wrong man, you're not saying anything. No, I'm good man.

With probing, Hakeem can recognize that white men exclusively seek to bond with him through their shared gendered status. The need for bonds is strengthened because of Hakeem's high authority rank in upper management. However, the white men frequently seek to create bond through white framed imagery and language from media that simplifies and dehumanizes

Hakeem and other Black men in the process. Hakeem thus rejects the opportunity for partial tokenization that could be potentially beneficial for his career because he acknowledges the racist undertones of such attempts. He remains “lonely” in his position because the social bonds necessary for career satisfaction and achievement are to be found with White male colleagues who hold racist views.

In contrast with their male peers, the Black women in my study highlighted many experiences where they were presented with opportunities to form gendered collectives across racial lines in the workplace. A history of workplace feminism has contributed to a current widespread acknowledgement that women are underrepresented in positions of leadership and that something must be done to counter such imbalances (White, Rumsey, and Amidon 2015). The successes of workplace feminism, however, have mostly been felt by white women, and they have filled leadership roles and changed the workplace with their presence and authority (Tambe 2020). There are thus more opportunities for women to convene as women and discuss issues that pertain to the underrepresentation of women within their companies. Many women in my study discussed being aware of, or even being members of, women centered Employee Resource Groups that sought to provide support to women employees so they can “succeed” within the workplace. Catherine, for example, was on the board of the Women’s Network while working as an executive assistant. While the men in my study sometimes discussed Black centered ERGs, no men in my study discussed male centered ERG. But this is because there are no male centered ERGs; the purpose of ERGs is to foster workplace diversity for those who are not equally represented in centers of leadership and authority, and men are not underrepresented. Thus, women often have opportunities to convene as women within women centered ERGs and sometimes to even convene as Black women or women of color in ERGs that center women of

color. I wish to highlight this not to make the argument that men should have access to male-centered groups, but to make the sociological point that the existence of women centered spaces grants the Black women in my study more opportunities to form gendered collectives in the workplace and experience the gendered salience of workplace inequities.

But women didn't need institutionalized structures like ERGs to form gendered collectives, they also could experience ephemeral gendered alliances and solidarities that were the result of shared experiences of sexism in the workplace. Pauline, a pharmacist turned benefits manager at a burgeoning health insurance company, discussed an encounter where a Jewish attorney, recognizing their shared gender status in a predominately white and male environment, sought to prepare her against the backlash she will receive from white men who were not as keen for organizational change as she was:

So I feel like because I came in with this attitude of "Let me see what I can fix." Because I came in as an employee, and now I'm a manager. And I knew there was a lot of things that needed to be fixed, but I got a lot of questions on why, like, why now? But I feel like, why not now? I actually had the Jewish attorney that I worked with, she was a female, she came to me. And in here mind, she was coming to me as a female. And she was like, I want you to understand that everyone is going to wonder why you want these changes. I was hearing her, being a Black person and a female. She was a White female; she wasn't seeing the tension as Black and white. But I saw it that way. I see everything as Black and white.

The attorney wished to alert Pauline that the white men will interpret her desire to "see what I can fix" through a sexist frame and be resistant. The attorney therefore wanted to form a gendered alliance to alert Pauline that she must recognize the burden her gender will present and figure out a solution as a result. Pauline understands that the attorney is doing this because they share a gender status, but Pauline knows she is a Black woman, and will receive even more pushback than the attorney suggests. While the racial distinction is very important here, the moment of gendered collectivity still helped Pauline to recognize that she will need to alter her

behavior to ensure she is able to accomplish her desired goals. The fleeting alliance still has gendered salience that alerts Pauline to the marginalization and differential treatment she will receive in the workplace.

Black women also had opportunities to witness shared experiences of sexist marginalization with other women that raised their awareness of workplace inequality. Tiffany consistently saw how her workplace recognized white men over not only Black women, but all women in her workplace. This even occurs even though her workplace is approximately 70% female:

Not to say that they're not deserving of any recognition, but it is statistically very challenging that every single big recognition goes to a white male because there's like 10 of them. So that's when it becomes like, are you serious? So there will be all these women, there's Asian women, white women, Black women, they don't get these awards, but these white guys it is. But things that are just in my opinion based here, they just did a good job and showed up. One woman has been here for six years and she quite phenomenal. She's an Asian woman. But she's phenomenal and everything that she does and she was up against him and she lost it. I'm sorry, I am no longer invested in this award process cause I see where does this is headed.

The hoarding of recognition in white male groups made it difficult for Tiffany and other women to be recognize for their work. The lack of recognition ensures that many women in her workplace do not receive the social capital necessary for career advancement. The shared acknowledgement that women suffer from sexist marginalization in her workplace helps Tiffany to distance herself from a process that is overtly unfair. When Tiffany is later offered a position as a manager with more responsibilities but no additional pay, she cites her previous experiences of racial and gendered marginalization and deny the position. She told me that what she decides to do is persevere and turn her attention to starting her family with her spouse, which she knows is a more useful exertion of her efforts.

While Black women were presented with opportunities to form cross racial gendered collectives, they also recounted many examples where they were excluded from women groups because of their racial status. Many Black women found it difficult to form gendered collectives with white women who oftentimes convened in homogenously white social groups. Alia is hyper aware that the difficulties she faced seeking to form bonds with white women were due to her racial status:

It can be difficult because in general white women aren't friends with women of other races just in general and then if they are, they're friends very assimilated, right. So I think a lot of times there's this very narrow viewpoint of the world in general, just, vast lack of knowledge about the experiences of other women. And with white women, I think because they have always been placed on this pedestal, like there's no expectation of them to be amenable to, or more open to, or even have the desire to learn anything about anybody else. Right? So but then too I think a lot of white women are raised with a certain behavioral set, like if I don't get my way, I cry right? or I'm gonna tell on folks, because they're are good at that too. or i'mma pout until I get my way so these traits may learn other things that white women interactions with each other have a very different dynamic than Black women's interactions with each other.

Alia is aware that white women tend to have the some of the most racially homogenous intimate relations, and that awareness alters the ways she interacts with them in the workplace. Despite sharing a gender status, Alia's workplace experiences lead her to conclude that white women's elevated racial status means that any conflict with them will certainly lead to dire consequence for her and her career. She thus decides that it is better to advance her career by herself than seek to rely on a gendered bond with white women.

Despite the sexist marginalization of white women in many professionalized fields, the reality is that white women can be just as devastating to Black professionals' careers as their white male peers. This dissertation has highlighted countless examples where white women unfairly wield their authority to diminish the careers of their Black peers. Natalie recounted how one of the longest racialized harassment campaigns she received in the workplace was due to a

white woman. The harassment campaign was even more stark because of how her treatment differed from how the supervisor treated other women in the workplace:

She just hated me. It was her goal in life, it seemed, was just to make me miserable. Because she was higher up than me. She was an older white woman. And I think that age matters. She just didn't like me; her personality type is that she's just like very controlling and she doesn't like people that have their own opinions. She felt threatened by it. And because of that we had a lot of issues. I think a lot of it stemmed, and this is just like from my experience talking to different people about my personal interactions with this woman, she doesn't like a lot of different types of people. However, if you look like her and if you have blue eyes, you are a female and if you got blond hair then you're set, you know, you're gonna be rated outstanding. And that just the reality of the situation. If you're a minority, if your man is, you know, it's just, it sucks to be you. But if you're like one of these girls, then you're good to go. And that's just, everybody recognizes that. We talk about it and we joke about it, they'll make complaints about it and nothing happens?

Natalie recounts how for years, she suffered from unfair marginalization and conflict with a white woman in a higher authority rank than her. The white woman can utilize her job authority rank to run her division with authoritarian judgement. Natalie cites that it was common knowledge that she had favorites and the racist exclusion from the all-white women group made the inequality more salient for Natalie and her colleagues. All of Natalie's colleagues were so aware of the boss's behavior that they made jokes and tried to report the behavior to those in higher positions. However, her colleague never faces any consequences for her behavior, she is even able to retire with an untarnished record while Natalie suffered abuse and stalled career because of her racialized harassment.

The purpose of this section is to highlight the prevalence and consequences of gendered collectives in the workplace. One of the essential expectations of gendered relations is that individuals should socialize with those who share their gender, and these expectations exist in a professionalized workplace centered on social relations for career stability and advancement. The Black men in my study rarely discussed their genders when it came to the possibility to form gendered relations. But the experiences of the Black women in my study illustrate the vast

possibilities that women must form gendered collectives that highlight issues of underrepresentation in the workplace. This, however, did not always shield Black women from racist or racialized treatment in the workplace that left them excluded from all white women groups.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the centrality of gender to how Black professionals experience racialized events in the workplace. I extend Systemic Racism theory by dealing concretely with the ways that Black professionals make gendered distinctions concerning their experiences with racist structures and white racial frames. I accomplish this by highlighting how Black women, in comparison to their male counterparts, frequently made gendered distinctions concerning the experiences of marginalization that they faced in the workplace. The women in my study made racial and gendered distinctions because their differences along these salient statuses made clear to them that they were outside of the two dominant social groups that concentrate power and authority in the workplace – white people and men. As such, Black women had to form discourses and practices that dealt with the way that sexist relations intersected with racist marginalization to stymie their workplace experiences and career trajectories.

I thus use this finding to argue that Black women occupy multiple salient marginalized groups within the context of the workplace. When Black women identify as Black women, they could be demarcating their membership within many salient social groups – Black people, women, and Black women – who are marginalized outside of a workplace power center that concentrates White men. However, the multiple group membership that Black women occupy meant that they sometimes ranked their oppressions, sometimes using a “racism over sexism”

discourse or “sexism over racism” discourse. At first glance, this may appear to question the conclusion of Black Feminist theory, that argues that oppressive social relations like racism and sexism intersect in a matrix of domination that are simultaneous and not additive (Hill Collins 2000). But the discourses that my participants utilize simply highlight that Black women occupy multiple salient identities that I argue grant them more opportunities to recognize inequality in the workplace.

The existence of multiple salient marginalized group membership also ensured that Black women could form social collectives with other women along nonracial lines. This is buttressed by ephemeral and institutional structures that incentives women to form social collectives that recognize gender inequality in the workplace. Despite this possibility, it is also important to highlight that White women were also the source of many of the racist experiences that my participants recounted. As such, some Black women may have the opportunity to form social collectives with white women that grant them another vantage point for recognizing inequality, others faced white racist harassment from white women mar their workplace status. All in all, Gender is a central facet to understand the racialized experiences of Black professionals in the workplace.

## **6 BLACK PROFESSIONALS AND THE RACIALIZED MERIT CONTRACT IN PRIVATE, PROFIT CENTERED WORKPLACES**

### **6.1 The Racialized Merit Contract and the Neoliberal Promise of Racial Permeability**

Hakeem, by many accounts, is exemplar of the *promise of racial permeability*. He started his job at a global food service company in 2001 as a temporary employee straight out of undergrad. Like many of the Black professionals I interviewed, Hakeem sought to achieve

financial success by working his way up the corporate ladder of his private, profit centered workplace. Many saw the private sector as uniquely capable of granting them financial stability, high pay, autonomy, and a sense of fulfilment that were not possible in other lines of work. Like many of my participants, Hakeem is not naïve about how being a Black man will impact his ability to succeed in a predominately white workplace. Throughout our interview, he told me countless examples of how his racial status had ramifications for his career. However, he spoke admirably about his first interview, and how his career aspirations of greater career success were inspired by the success of Black men who were already working and succeeding at his future company:

I remember my first job interview to get a job. I started with the company as a temporary employee. Back at that point I had a temp service. So, I graduated 2001 December and then January of 2002, I started as a temp with the company. So I worked for one week as a temp and then I was offered my first grill cook job. I remember at that point my interviewer asked me, where do you see yourself if you join the company? And I was like, I want to be one of these people that signs certificates and all that stuff. You know, you get these certificates, you don't know who signed them. And I want to be one of those guys. And I remember one of the reasons why I wanted to be at the company was I saw an African American guy at the career fair, and he was in a top HR position. Matter of fact, he ran the staffing service, and at that point I'm like, okay, this industry, you know, as a chef I'm looking at an African American male, you know, relatively high up in the company. And I'm like, that's somebody I want to work for. If they can help him get to where he wants to be, sure they can help me as well.

Hakeem saw promise in the existence of an African American man, a man that share his racial status, in the top HR position within the company. The existence of a high-ranking African American man acts as evidence that Hakeem could also climb his way to the top of his company and be another example of a successful Black man in a predominately white corporate company. And to an extent, this did happen for Hakeem, as he is now one of the few African American managers in his global corporation. From his own words, it was his individual efforts that helped him achieve such a magnificent feat of permeating the still predominately white corporate elite.

Since the end of de jure institutionalized segregation, Black professionals have been able to achieve a high levels job authority and rank within predominately white workplaces that were completely unheard of in the past. The copious examples of Black executives, CEO, and other high-ranking employees present what I term the *promise of racial permeability*, or the idea that historically all white and racially segregated center of power can be integrated and permeated by historical oppressed racial groups. When analyzing the narratives of Black professionals I interviewed who worked in private, profit centered workplaces, I was met again and again with ideologies of racial permeability, that they as Black professionals could reach heights in their corporate environments because they had so many examples of high-ranking employees like Hakeem or other Black professionals succeeding in their fields.

But my participants largely did not think this climb would be easy, they understood quite clearly that their racial statuses as Black men would present difficulties to their idealized climb up the corporate ladder. David, for example, knows that his racial status would present an obstacle for his rise in his company:

So part of it means to me that I know, I'm not dumb. I have to work harder than others. Right. And I've known that since says I started working at [company], right? In order for me to get to the same place that some people have, you know, it doesn't take them that, it is not as hard for them to get there. I have to work double, you know, twice as hard in order to make sure that I, they recognize that I'm somebody, I'm a bright individual that deserves an opportunity to work on different things, right.

David is clear, his racial status will influence his career trajectory at his fortune 500 company.

David, as many of participants, thus presented a *racialized merit contract*, where they must put in extra effort to overcome how white colleagues would perceive their racial status in the workplace. Black professionals, influenced by the racialized merit contract ideology, understood that they had to work “twice as hard” to get to the same place in their career, and that it is not as “hard for them to get there” as it will be for them to find success in their workplaces. David is

quite vague about the “them” that he is referring to, and it takes some probing throughout the interview for him to reveal that he is talking about white people. I will discuss this later in the chapter, for now, I want to make clear that David believes that the reality of his racial status means that he must work harder to ensure others understand that he is a “bright individual that deserves an opportunity.” The focus on his own labor effort to convince his predominately white workplace superiors that he deserves equal treatment is a central belief shared with many of the Black professionals and a central tenet of the racialized merit contract.

Cory was also firm in our interview that his racial status would have ramifications for him within the predominately white and “conservative” finance industry:

Just a little bit that plays a role when it comes to promotions and stuff like that. Because of you know, it's still conservative, the financial industry or workplaces, still very Conservative when you walk through a finance department in a corporation it's majority Whites you may have a couple your Asians. let's say you have a couple of Asians or something like that but a lot of this is mostly white. like my firm we mostly white.

Despite this acknowledgement, Cory still believed that it was up to his individual efforts to overcome this structural issue and achieve racial permeability. But the belief and practice in the racialized merit contract to achieve racial permeability can have negative consequences on how Black professionals frame and interpret their own perceived career successes and failures. Cory expressed ambivalence when I asked him how he felt about the particular place he was in his career, wishing that he could be a “senior financial analyst” by this time in his career. When I asked why he felt he was not as senior as he believed he should be, he quickly acknowledged that “some was done because of me. My own doing,” before plainly stating that the “finance industry is dominated by white men.” Again, and again, I saw Black professionals painting a “both-and” picture when discussing the difference between their ideal career position and realities of their current career positions.

But with the absence of a larger workplace policy toward racial equity, many Black professionals have no other choice but to focus on their individual merits in hopes that their effort will be enough to fairly gain workplace rewards and benefits. Repeatedly, I heard narratives from the Black professionals working in private profit centered workplaces that doubled down on merit and effort to deal with the problems of racial inequality in the workplace. David, for example, expressed that hard work was his response to the stigma that his racial status created for him:

So I had to take advantage of every opportunity, whether it is networking with people. Making sure that my name is being brought up in certain rooms while I'm not there. Getting a mentor and just working just working harder. Sometimes I have to stay late at work. I have to stay later than my manager, for him to understand, oh, this guy, this guy really wants it. So he's, you know, he's showing me that, you know, he wants his job. He wants to learn more. And he wants to succeed. So maybe that, you know, my thought was that maybe he'll it'll work, you know, my manager will recognize that.

The problem of being Black in a predominately white workplace is not understood as a structural problem created by white people and their racist actions and evaluations. A belief in racial permeability and the practice of the racialized merit contract helps David and many other Black professionals to double down on individual effort, merit, and exceptionalism. David can use every opportunity that is presented to him as a site of transaction to build his human capital within the organization. Building human capital through networking, finding a mentor, even working later hours to illustrate that he is not bound by the racist stereotypes that paint Black people as lazy and indifferent to work ethic (Anderson 2015; Feagin 2006; Brown et al 2003). Within this model of individual effort and human capital, merit is understood as a transactional capital that can be traded fairly with workplace superiors for more opportunities. Opportunities thus can be earned and spent as capital to help to Black professionals ascend higher in their companies. So, while these Black professionals understand that racism, or their lack of a white

racial status, could diminish the initial evaluations of their value in the workplace, extra effort can help to extinguish racist doubts and allow them rightful ascension in their companies.

But the idea that meritocratic work can be traded fairly for favorable evaluation and rewards contradict heavily with the immense power of private, profit-centered workplaces have in structuring their workplaces in any way they see fit. My interviews with Black professionals underscored a central reality of private, profit centered workplaces as organizations of legitimized hierarchy and exploitation. Thus, my next section explores the ways that private workplaces are structured around an absolutism of authority that undermines the individual efforts of Black professionals wishing to be treated fairly in their workplaces.

## **6.2 Private Absolutism: The Absolute Authority to Structure the Employment Contract**

One of the central problems of utilizing a racialized merit contract to structure one's career trajectory is that it obscures the reality that executives and management have absolute authority to structure the employment contract. Within the United States, the employment relationship is forged under an employment contract that grants employers large amount of *authority*, or "legitimized workplace control of human and organizational resources," and almost complete control over the domain of their enterprise (Anderson 2017). Through my interviews, I saw that private workplaces are largely organized around what I term *private absolutism*, or the institutional logic/structure that concentrates all authority within a small group of private executives and their associated managerial staff. This authority center expresses their power through 1) unilateral and unaccountable authority to define legitimate levels of profit accumulation and 2) uncontested mobilization of human and organization resources toward the goal of the greatest accumulation of profit and share value possible. With the neoliberal turn towards less regulation of corporate entities, corporate entity has been granted even greater right

to structure their places of employment around the expression of private absolutism (Anderson 2017; Brown 2015). The neoliberal turn has also had corresponding deleterious effects on employees in terms of depressed wages and precarious employment conditions that privilege larger profits over the welfare of employees (Harvey Wingfield 2020; Harvey 2007). It is within this context that I examined the conflict between Black professionals working through a racialized merit contract and private, profit centered workplaces with the authority to structure the employment relationship towards the greatest accumulation of profit possible.

One of the things that became very clear through interviews was the absolute power of executives and their representatives in management in defining acceptable profit, and their absolute authority to control human, financial, and organization resource to uphold their definitions of acceptable profit. Mostly, the absolutism to dictate the appropriate boundaries of “legitimate profit” resulted in very intense employment conditions that severely undermine the welfare of their employees. Executive and their managers utilized their absolute authority to structure the employment relationship to maximize their ability to extract as much productivity from their workers to ensure the highest profits possible. The focus on the extraction of the most productivity possible resulted in rather exploitative employment conditions for many of my participants.

Matthew, for example, was recently promoted to a supervisory role, a position that initially excited Matthew as an example of moving up within the company. But his dream of better work opportunity was quickly eclipsed by longer hours, the absence of overtime, and greater responsibilities in producing favorable yet privately defined profits for the company. Matthew describes his relationship with higher management as “rocky” because the production expectation that they had set for his department were “unrealistic.” Matthew simply did not have

the manpower to produce the number of legal documents that were expected by his management. However, the profit absolutist stance of his upper management demanded the productivity nonetheless:

It's the irresistible force meeting the unmovable object. [How do you deal] I make happen, what I'm capable of making happen. And every month they are disappointed. They have been disappointed in me not being able to give them the number that they want specifically. I've been in my position, what, three months now. So the first two months, were easy to account for why we didn't make the goal because they cut staff in those two months. So they had the expectation that they weren't going to make that number because we cut staff. But on the third month, which is this past month, they had the expectation that they were going to get that number. And of course, our reality is, hey, you only generate this much per person. For every eight hours, this many days per month, like you're only getting this many, where are you getting the extra from, even if I put in the overtime hours myself, I couldn't generate half of this. So, you know, all you can do is produce as many as you can, and try to get as close to the numbers you possibly can and move on. And I've taken an attitude of, I'm not going to frustrate myself.

Matthew's dilemma's underscores the tension between the belief in individual effort to accomplish workplace goals and the larger structural constraints created by an executive/managerial center obsessed with higher productivity and profit. Firstly, we note the clear impossibility created by the expectations of capitalist accumulation that affect private workplaces. They are solely interested in profits, so they structure the employment relations to ensure they reach what they have privately defined to be the greatest potential for profit. On one hand, they lay off workers that they define as excess to guarantee less is being paid out and raise their profit margins. However, they still need their larger goals of production met to ensure that they maintain the same profit margins that they had before the cutting of staff. There is thus a production contradiction that always wishes to produce more to reap greater profit while reducing staff that limits their ability to produce. Matthew's experiences reveal to him that this is simply impossible, he knows "you only generate this much per person" and the expectation requires more workers and more resources. However, the absolute authority of higher

management to dictate unrealistic production outputs cannot be challenged because they can simply fire Matthew and find someone else to fill the position. Matthew reveals later that his employment relation is a source of unending stress. He cannot produce the numbers, but he must because of the bottom-line dictates of private industry.

Many Black professionals echoed the ways that perceptions of “productivity” by higher management created employment structures that damaged their wellbeing. Daryl’s work as a consultant exemplifies the problems that a profit focused absolutist stance presents for him as a consultant for his mid-sized company. The managerial structure at Daryl’s workplace determined it was having “sales pipeline issues” because their self-defined profit goals did not reflect their aspirational peers – fortune 500 companies. Instead of reimagining their profit aspirations by pursuing the business of smaller companies, his company decided to they would pursue a business strategy of “charging less than a [Fortune 500 company A] and [Fortune 500 Company B] and trying to undercut them” to appear more favorable in the consulting market. While this goal achieved the financial goals of receiving bigger clients, it severely undermined the equitable employment conditions of consultants like Daryl at his job. To continuing undercutting the competition, Daryl’s employer granted their clients absolute authority to structure the employment relation in ways that exploited and extracted as much effort as possible. The resulting highly extractive employment relation created unending stress for Daryl.

The extractive employment relation also created a highly precarious employment experience where the client had a lot of power to terminate if their productivity goals were not met. Daryl’s employers never challenged the employment conditions because they wished to remain in the good graces of their clients. Thus, Daryl and his fellow consultants had to weather the intense profit focused employment relation on their own. Daryl described to me the

ramifications of these extractive and exploitative conditions on the day-to-day experiences at his workplace:

Within two months, one of our clients had got rid of a number of our consultants and it wasn't just our company, they did it across a number of the different firms that they worked with. And so it was curious to see, you know, we're looking around as consultants, we're like, okay, if we're not billable, you guys don't make money, so what are you going to do now that you're going to have about 30 consultants on the bench. And so folks were afraid of getting let go, which in turn they were people who were getting let go, two folks who were just promoted maybe a couple months before. One person I was still new and he was talking about becoming a toastmasters because the company has its own toastmasters club on a Monday. We were talking about that apparently by what Wednesday, Thursday they fired him. In the past couple of months, they just, it's like if you don't have a value, if you don't have value by making them money right away, they're firing you no matter what. So for instance, one of my colleagues, his work was, according to him, mischaracterized, right? I'm going back to what I was saying with the clients, people not responding to emails. He's pushing and pushing. There's only so much you can do. And at a certain point in time the client was just like, oh, he's not doing what he's supposed to do. And they took him off the project and he, his first day on the bench, which was this past Monday, they let them go.

If the companies cannot extract “value” or extractable productivity that can reap profit from the consultants, they immediately let them go. In turn, if employees are not employed by a contracting employer for an arbitrary and difficult to ascertain length of time, they are terminated by their host company. This creates a climate of fear where people are not able to predict their futures in their company and drives them to accept ill-treatment because of the uncertainty of their employment status at any time. What standard is used to make these judgments are unknown. Daryl gives the story of an employee whose work is mischaracterized, but that does not matter. Companies have the authority to make life-changing decision about their employees’ employment status with no accountability to serve their privately defined profit goals.

A decisive way private companies expressed private absolutism was by executing massive changes to their employment structures if they self-defined that the financial health of their companies are in jeopardy. Brandon initially enjoyed his work at his private, profit centered

workplaces for a reason similar to my other participants – the pay was great, telling me that “there are not many companies in Georgia that offer you know, from the private sector being stability and the financial benefits and healthcare and all that stuff.” But he felt everything changed when his company perceived it was having issues with their sales and profit margins:

The business model was one thing that really changed. We were in the middle of, for lack of a better term, downsizing, closing offices and eliminating hundreds of jobs. My job was safe. But I could tell that the company was moving in a different direction and if you were not necessarily mobile, in regards to being able to move to a different city or in being, willing and able to take on another job and another work area that you may not be familiar with, both of which I was willing to do. But you know, as far as there was a big change, there was a big change, the culture, like I had to deal with deal with more, more policies that I was not necessarily happy with. Decisions that were being made that affected me and my team that I didn't have control over.

Brandon's experiences reflect how many profit centered workplaces act by downsizing, closing offices, and eliminating “hundreds of jobs” to maintain their self-defined profitability goals of their companies. The decision highlights the clear hierarchy that places the perceived financial health of the companies above the welfare of one's employee who must endure the arduous journey through unemployment. Brandon understood his job was safe, but the massive changes also altered the very foundations of his employment. He would have to perform a completely different job and accept the possibility that he would have to uproot his entire life by moving to another city to satisfy the profit concerns of his company. These decisions, while difficult, were considered by Brandon as par for the course and, as a young man in the beginning of his career, even expected to show higher management that he has the merit to succeed because he can make personal sacrifices for the larger financial health of the company. However, what truly bothered Brandon was the changing of policies that would alter his decision-making abilities within the company. He had to surrender more and more of his professional expertise and agency to fit

more and more into the narrow confines of growing corporate policy. But the hierarchy is clear, the privately defined margins of legitimate profit matters above all other concerns.

The executive-managerial center has the authority to act in their privately defined profit with no accountability or dissent from their workers. As a result, professionals must accept the authority of their executives/management or seek employment elsewhere. Morris, a dean at a for-profit University, told me about meetings that are held between the workers in his organization and the executive members. The meetings are painted as opportunities to address the issues that workers may have in the organization, however, Morris understands the true meaning of these meetings is to quash dissent:

They come in like, oh, this is how the organization is doing. Okay, what questions do you have? And, no lie, people have said, listen here, Don't ask no dumb ass questions. What they mean by dumb ask questions is, don't ask questions that's gonna make the executive look stupid. Don't ask questions that are going to make the executive look racist. Don't ask questions that are going to say anything that's out of the norm. So you're going to ask the basic run of the mill questions. So where do you see the organization going in the next two to three years? You know, BS questions like that, as opposed to saying, Hey, listen, first of all, you know, we got this whole so called reorg that's going to be happening. What are we doing to ensure that more minorities are going to be in decision making positions what I like to call our enterprise positions. from a business standpoint, enterprise decisions come with a financial attachment, meaning that they have to make financial decisions. The problem is, is that we don't have enough minorities in those type of positions. We have minorities that are in so called executive positions, but they have no financial implication. If you have more minorities that are in roles that have financial implications that's the first start that we need, but we don't have enough minorities that are in roles like that.

The executives wish to be as accepting of dissenting views about the organization but enforce their authority by controlling what can be said to them. They restrict dissent, only listening to the smallest disagreements that allow for them to continue to be seen as unassailable. Morris has real dissenting views from what he calls the executive suite. He is aware that minorities are missing from central financial and decision-making positions that could have a true effect on the racial/ethnic inequalities of their workplace. However, the resources dictating what discourse is

appropriate is sculpting and enforced by the private authority of the executives and every else must simply accept it or find employment elsewhere.

### **6.3 The Authority to Marginalize: Diminishing the Value of Employees**

The absolute authority of Private workplaces to mobilize resources towards greater profit accumulation over employee welfare creates a structural reality where the individual efforts and value of employees are diminished and undervalued. There thus exists a conflict between the Black professionals who wish to exercise their technical expertise to solve problems they have been trained to solve and the absolutist authority of private management structures that diminish one's expertise if it falls outside of their privately defined and unaccountable profit concerns. Daryl's expertise, developed with an MBA from a top tier business school, were undervalued by an executive-managerial structure that privileged their own privately defined legitimate business. Daryl sought to influence operations by suggesting that pursuing mid-sales companies could create a niche space for their company in the market. This employee centered suggestion would also alleviate the heavily extractive and precarious employment relations that the consultants find themselves within by eliminating the need to undercut, thus overwork, them with clients. But upper management does not even consider his suggestions:

I feel like I have "I'm stupid" written on my forehead. I may give an idea about something, or I may ask a legitimate question and the response that I receive is condescending or it is as if the question was just absolutely ridiculous. So it's that constant need of having to push back and get people to understand what it is that I'm asking, or ask it in a different way so that they can take a step back and truly process it. Process What I'm saying or what I'm asking before, just responding. I think that has been the frustrating piece and I don't think people recognize that they do it and I don't necessarily think that they mean to do it. But you can see how when it's other folks that are asking this question, you're giving them time. You may ask follow up questions for context, but when it's me, you take it at face value and completely condescending.

Daryl's exasperations illustrate how private absolutism and legitimize job authority hierarchies diminish the perspectives of those in lower ranks. Daryl's white peers do not have to consider

Daryl's suggestions because his lower rank within his workplace legitimizes the diminishment of his ideas, and Daryl feels this marginalization through ridicule. The devaluing of Daryl due to his workplace rank is compounded by his racial status; Daryl feels his suggestions are devalued more compared to his white colleagues and it is difficult to separate this phenomenon from a white racist frame that paints Black people as intellectually inferior to their white peers (Feagin). It is difficult for Daryl to challenge because the hierarchies of his private workplace, supported through absolute authority, legitimize his treatment. And this treatment exacerbates the racist hierarchy that exist in his company, leaving Daryl and other Black professionals particularly susceptible to devaluing and marginalization.

Hakeem echoed Daryl's frustration that his racial status and workplace rank altered the way he was valued in his workplace. Hakeem enjoy a higher rank in his workplace, which alleviate some of the inequality, but acknowledges that his management does not consider his expertise when it comes to changing policies, even though he is in charge of such operations:

I think for the most part they, they value the fact that I can deal with certain stuff. They don't have to deal with because I'm there. [Can you give me an example of that? I'm sorry.] Um, so there was one of the programs that I run, nobody wants to run. [Oh, (laughs) Why not?] It's a logistical nightmare. And you know, I've talked to my boss and my boss above me about like a lot of the challenges there, you know, they know the challenges and it's like, man, I don't want to be you, at all. And I know they wouldn't want to deal with the challenges that I deal with and you know, I make it work every time. But I think they value that. They value the fact that I get stuff done. I can work with anybody. But do they necessarily value my input and my suggestions. I don't think they do. They don't, they don't take a lot of things that I suggest seriously. The back of your mind, the first thing he says, because I'm not pale and male, you know, if I was pale and male, they're like it, they're like what I just said, they don't really look into, you know, what I'm suggesting or what I'm proposing or whatever.

Hakeem's work involves handling what is widely known at his company as a "logistical nightmare, and his bosses appreciate that he is able to "make it work" by dealing with a problem that no one else is capable to handle in his workplace. In this way, Hakeem's work falls in line

with the privately defined profit concerns of his company and is thus supported. However, when Hakeem tries to leverage his expertise to improve or change the process, he is ignored. Hakeem is quite aware that his racial status influences how his bosses understand his input and told me he confirmed this fact when he fought to change a process that long needed to change. He acknowledged that it would “rock the boat a lot” but “we need to rock the boat because we need to change this process to make it better for everybody” but they ignored him and put his complaint to the side. However, when someone of higher rank and white pointed out the same problems with the process:

Boom. All of a sudden the company, Hey Keem, we need change the process. And I'm like, I've been saying this for the longest. But now that somebody else says it, somebody else's mad, their boss are mad, bosses that happened to be high powerful people who are not Brown, Black. Now that they're upset, now we got to make this change that Keem has been talking about for two, three years. So, you know, I can speculate all day as to why they don't take some of the stuff I say seriously, because it's not like anything that I've been saying has been proven wrong. I didn't probably say it at the right time to the right person and it probably didn't come from the right person.

Hakeem acknowledges that it is “frustrating to say the least and it makes you, uh, makes you just say, forget it, why even say anything, you know?” Hakeem frustrations are mirrored by many of the Black professionals I interviewed. The private workplace absolutism conditions their employees that they should simply carry out actions and not exercise their individual judgment and expertise, particularly if it contrasts the pathways put forth by the company.

The diminished expertise works in tandem with the ways that private management hold unilateral power to overwrite the authority of their employees if they simply decide it. Brandon talked about his frustrations towards the end of his six-year career at his private company that would revoke more and more of his responsibilities as it moved further and further into downsizing and restructuring:

I was on a hiring committee that was onboarding a position that didn't directly report to me, but I had to train this person. And we interview I think somewhere, between six and seven applicants and we passed over a woman. In her previous job, it was damn near the exact same job with a different company, to hire someone who did not do that same thing. It had customer service experience but nothing like what we did in my office and I was supposed to train this person. And the woman that we've passed over was a Black person. Uh, and you know, I felt like that was a little bit of race involved in that, but I wasn't sure. And obviously this takes a lot of work to prove those different charges and accusations. And I didn't even want to go down that route. I could have, but I didn't. Um, but that was one of the last struggles like, and before that. But like I said, well the politics involved, but, um, that was when decisions were being made. They had already been made before and like, and I can deal with them cause I had a great boss, but this part is to take the position reporting to someone that wasn't my boss, but I was still in charge of training this person so I felt like what my voice was being sort of diluted. When I felt like I should have been listened to.

Brandon's authority granted to him by his hiring committee position was undermined by larger workplace politics that granted the position with less experience within the role. Brandon was frustrated not only by the undermining of his authority, but that the undermining worked against a Black woman. As discussed in the previous chapter, Brandon reflects the feelings of many Black professionals who feel accusations of racial inequality are impossible to prove due to the racial structures of their workplace and decided he "didn't even want to go down that route." He thus, as we saw in the last chapter, let it go to continue with the structural imperative of his workplace and maintain his position within his workplace. Brandon's experience illustrates the epistemic inequality that workers face when confronting issues from management. Private Management has no accountability to their employees and do not have to share information that led them to decisions such as hiring one employee over another. When Brandon did try to talk rather politically about why the Black woman maybe a better candidate, he recalled that they simply felt "at the end of the day, I hear you, but this is my decision". Thus, employees must decide to simply accept the arbitrary and private reasoning of their upper management or find

employment elsewhere. Brandon did, deciding that going to law school was better than continuing dealing with the increasingly arbitrary authority of his private workplace.

#### **6.4 The Authority to Select: The Limits of Merit within White Selection Structure**

Despite the naked inequality reflected in their experiences, my participants double down on the racialized merit contract based in the idea that individual effort and proficiency can be traded with employers for positive evaluations and promotions. Many of my participants expressed faith in the merit contract because many interpreted their own career successes as the product of the merit contract. Hakeem spoke of the merit contract when he told me how he became a manager for a highly acclaimed position in his company:

[Is there any reason why you were targeted for this position?] Because I'm great, (laughs) Um, one, one of the reasons why I'm in this position? The hiring manager, the guy that was creating this team. So, so the team I'm on had never been created in any region. So this was the first time North American was creating the team, like the one that we have now. And the person that was building that team was one of my old district managers. Um, so he had seen my work firsthand. Um, I used to be the executive chef at the federal reserve bank downtown and he was my district manager there. So he got a chance to see a lot of what I could do there. I think he was my district manager when I was there, [Name] conference center downtown as well. Um, so he's seen me in a lot of different applications and dealing with a lot of different customers and clients and employees at different levels. So he felt I'll be perfect for the job that he was creating.

Hakeem firmly states that he good at his job, and that is a central reason way he was chosen for this position. I do not doubt that Hakeem's merit was central to why he was chosen, but his clarification about how his relationship to the district manager cannot be ignored. Hakeem was able to achieve merit through positive evaluation from a superior who had the power to create a division and use his authority to promote Hakeem. The merit is not sufficient for the promotion of Hakeem or any other professional, it is the authority of the promoter/evaluator that matters the most. Hakeem only received this opportunity because he was lucky enough to be executive chef in a team that had evaluator with the authority to create a new division within their company.

Thus, the social relationship is central to the promotion. But a belief in the merit contract helps Hakeem reinterpret his success as a result of his individual effort and minimize the social relationships essential to his career success.

Many of my participants understood excelling when granted an “opportunity” as central to moving their careers forwards and achieving greater job authority and pay. However, many of the Black professionals I interviewed were aware that their predominately white management structures utilized biased methods to select who they would grant “opportunities” to within their workplaces. Receiving an opportunity was thus a social relationship that depended as much on it being granted by someone in power as it does on the effort and excellence of the worker. Reggie, for example, told me the pathways that he had seen over his 34-year career at his workplace that illustrates the inequality of who gets to be chosen, developed, promoted:

I knew a Black VP at [company where I work] and he told me something very interesting. He told me he would have these discussions with executive VPs all the time. That you can make somebody better than me, right. You have two people, they come in with the same skill sets the same background, same academic background, but this guy is someone you choose for the special projects, right? This is the guy you choose for whatever little things you have going on. So then two years later, and it's time for promotion. Guess who gets the promotion? This guy. And so that's some of the stuff that still isn't being addressed in this in a significant way, I don't think. Because people have certain biases, they have certain reasons why they wanted to choose person rather than this person.

Reggie understands that an ideal worker that deserves a promotion is selected and crafted by a management structure that has the resources to develop that person. Private managements have the power and authority to decide how they will mobilize resources to develop whoever they want. Thus, the relationship that structures who can ascend the corporate ladder has less to do with one’s individual effort, but if that effort is recognized and developed by a management structure. It is only with the recognition of a management structure that allows for resources like

opportunities to be marshalled to specific individuals who then can succeed in very specific ways that are unavailable to others.

Reggie understood the importance of being selected by one's workplace superiors are for obtaining higher job authority and rank within his workplace. I probed and asked what the reasons that would lead the executives to choose one person over the other, and he echoed the centrality of relationships to who is selected, groomed, and promoted:

Could be because well, at [Company], we're very much a relationship-oriented company, sometimes their kids play together, or their kids grew up together, or some are, related by marriage, or something like that. You know, sometimes it could be that, you know, I mean, a lot of times, people would make assumptions about this guy, this guy didn't get the same benefit of.

Reggie can see how it is not truly merit derived from the individual outputs that help to propel people towards higher job authority and rank, but from social relationships with those with the authority to select. He understands that assessments and assumptions can more favorably guide authority committees to pick someone that they like or dissuade them from picking someone that they do not have enough social connections with. However, White people tend to have very racially segregated social networks, families, and social contacts (Embrick and Henricks 2013). So, while this may not appear to be on its face racially neutral, the whiteness of upper management will only be perpetuated if social relationship continues to be a legitimate way to exercise selection authority within workplaces.

Many of my participants gleamed that their racial status would present a problem because those who were selecting were primarily white and elite. Matthew let me know that when it comes to executive leadership, race played a significant role in who was selected and granted opportunities for greater job authority:

Race has no effect on who they'll hire into the lower levels of the workplace. I do think race has some effect to who they allow to be in management. And that's proven by the fact that there are no minorities in upper level, mid or upper-level management.

Black professionals are again presented with the reality of racial hierarchy; they often work in workplaces where the management is majority white and can often have no minorities in the ranks. Other echoed this concern, calling attention to the staying power of the predominately white *Good Ol' Boys* system in their workplaces that reaped so many workplace privileges in their private workplaces. Cory, for example, express some disappointment in his career trajectory because he felt he should be a senior financial analyst by this time in his career. When I asked him why he felt he had not reached senior status in his career, he did acknowledge that there are just not many Black men in the finance industry dominated by white men. He also said that “it can be a little bit hard, promotions as well can be a little bit hard because [finance] is a good ol' boy system:”

The good boy system is about who you know is, all about. If I know this person's family and stuff like that, me having my educational background, my experience background doesn't always mean anything. A thing, if, you know, the hiring manager knows a family member that's son just coming out of come right out. Son coming out of college and getting into that system. So, it comes off as more so kind of white people don't trust Blacks with their finances, or they'll think, you know, sometimes. I get that indication.

Cory echoes the theme that one cannot expect to be evaluated equally within his private workplace because of systems like the Good Ol' Boys club that favor those who have social ties to management. But Cory also understands that there is a larger white racist framing that whites hold that paints Black people as untrustworthy or incompetent to deal with their finances, and this racist understanding is legitimized by how few Black people work in finance. He thinks the racism is particular to Black people, as Asian Americans do not face such hardships because they have recognizable numbers within the field. So, through Cory's point of view, the finance field is “conservative” because race plays a factor in promotions and other workplace trajectories.

While Black professionals are aware that selection for higher job authority does not work in their favor, they do not necessarily understand the powers to select as an example of racial inequality. Matthew, for example, also understood the ways that social relationships with management can have a significant effect on who is evaluated positively and promoted, but he does not internalize this reality as negative:

You know the old saying, it's not what you know it's who you know there is definitely a group of I'd say like corporate stars in our company and those that are within said group get promoted the fastest, the highest, and have the most longevity. And those that are without you know, they just are. And one of those people happen to be in charge of making the decision. I think the first time I went out for leadership, and rather than choose me, you know, he had it, was his discretion. He chose an external hire, who happened to be a friend of his that used to work there, but you know, left the year prior. And I to certain extent, I've never fault any management for using, I've come to learn that you can't fault management for using their discretion because it's their right. I just know when I get there, I'll exercise it the way I see fit, and have the same expectation that no one tell me how exercise it.

Matthew recognizes that the promotion trajectories at his job are heavily influenced by the social relationships one holds with management. Even in his personal experience, he recounts an incident where he is passed over for a leadership position because the person in charge used his discretion to choose a friend, a complete violation of the norms of fair evaluations of one's work based on their performance. However, despite these violations of meritocratic beliefs, Matthew does not register this as a problem, framing it as "their right" to make decisions based on discretion that disadvantages those without social connections to higher management. The reasoning that Matthew uses is that when he eventually rises to upper management, he too will exercise this unequal power to make discretionary decision in his own interest. However, such a perspective depends on Matthew rising up the ranks to join upper management, despite the fact that Matthew acknowledges that there has never been a Black man in higher management since his time at the company. Matthew's faith in meritocratic perseverance helps him to justify an

unequal system with hopes that he too will be able to exercise the same unequal power. Matthew is eventually laid off from his position, and thus is never able to exercise the power that he believed he would be able to if he was granted a full career in his workplace. Thus, the authority center remains the same, biased towards the predominately white social networks of those already in power.

Ultimately, the racialized merit contract places too much emphasis on individual merit, minimizing the centrality of selection by disproportionately white leadership in determining success in the workplace. David tells me that in the beginning of his career he did receive promotions that allowed him more authority and pay. David worked in customer service where he was selected and evaluated positively by superiors who were able to help him move up the job authority ladder. David was vague, so I had to probe to ascertain that “look like me” meant that they were Black. David, like a number of people I interviewed, owed their promotions to Black people who were in higher ranks than they were. I then followed up by asking if David thought that if it were not for these high-ranking Black employees knowing him, did he think he would have been as high in job authority within the company as he was. He replied:

Not as high as I would have. But I think I still would have moved up, because I still can network with whomever it is, doesn't really matter if you're Black, White, you're Asian I don't care. If I know that, that there's a possibility of utilizing and being able to get into your network handing you let's say, give me advice on certain situations. But then also not just befriending you and just being friends. regardless of race, I think I would have gotten to a great point. Probably not as high as I did, but a great point. Or maybe I would have been able to transition to another way. You know, go a different route in the company.

David at once acknowledges that Black people being in higher positions probably helped him to move up in the company while also doubling down that his individual merit matters a lot as well. David understands that social relationships are important, so he present his ability to network across racial groups as examples of a merit that he would have been duly rewarded with job

authority and its associated benefits. Thus, the existence of the importance of social relationships is minimized by presented networking as a particular skill that can be performed proficiently and reap justified benefits.

Many fundamentally agree that the solution to this problem is to continue through a neoliberal-approach and simply work harder to achieve respect and merit. Cory exemplifies this approach when he talked to me about the ways he had to earn respect in his workplace through hard work and perseverance:

They do because I mean that they ask for my opinions into it, especially on projects and things of that nature. They understand now that I'm experienced, so they will ask my opinion. But it took me a long time to do that. I had to go in and prove myself. Having a couple projects become successful based off my opinions. I think I am happy. I don't think white people have that, have to go through that have to go in and prove myself that I know what I'm talking about. I want to prove myself to know that I can achieve just simple things like handling several tasks at the same time. You got to prove. But I don't think my white counterparts have to do that. You know, you don't have to go in and try to prove something. I have to go and prove if that I know what I'm doing and then back it up. Like I said, they second guess you on everything you have to be ready. You pretty much have to have a damn near a journal of everything. And I do, I have a journal. I have a journal when I go into the office when I go into my boss' office or I will go to his office with my journal. So, when something comes back up, I can repeat that where you said on this certain day, I even have a file of all my work. So they come to the point of Cory, when it comes to my evaluation. This is all my work that I have done. So just you have to go an extra mile just to you know, to protect yourself.

Cory's rigor goes beyond what his white counterparts do at his job; he records everything to be more precise in his workplace assessment but also to protect himself from the inevitable inequality he will face as a Black man doing high end finance work. He understands that his peers will utilize white racial framing to negatively evaluate his performance, so he overprepares with documentation that clearly marks the work he has accomplished. This level of protective detail surely contributes to the high-quality expertise he can exemplify at his job but his belief in the racialized merit contract makes him susceptible to the hyper exploitation/extraction present in private workplaces. He wants to prove himself to a field and staff that is skeptical about the

performance output of their Black colleagues, so he does extra work, sometimes handling multiple projects and task to show he is an excellent worker. However, this extra work furthers his exploitation under a private-profit centered workplace that is designed to extract as much labor as possible from its employees to reach their ceaseless profit goals.

David also put in extra work, believing that his extra effort would be honored by his white peers, help him be noticed by powerful evaluators, and bring forth more opportunities to prove himself and rise the ranks in his company. However, his actions allowed his company to further exploit his labor, as he recounted to me with exacerbation:

I was mad, to be honest with you. I was really upset because I'm like, You know, I'm doing three different jobs at one time. You can visibly see that I'm tired, but I'm still going to continue to do my job because this is my job. Right. I've had several conversations with him about my pay, given the fact that the jobs that I were doing were outside of my stock option accounting job. The other two jobs that I were doing were, at most, two to three pay grades above what, what my pay grade was, right. So, if I've been doing this for six months, very well, doing it for a year very well, to a year and a half very well. Why aren't you compensating me? All right. Why don't you recognize, Why don't you expressing your gratitude for the work that I'm doing? You know, it started to just be [name] you know, this is just what he does, right? Like, no, I'm doing it for purpose. But every time I try to have a conversation with you, especially or mid-year review our year-end review, and I'm telling you. Hey, the job that I'm doing are way above my pay grade, and I'm not even asking for a huge increase. But I'm asking at least, I need about \$10,000 more. I need I need a title change as well. Right. And it got to a point where he started kind of ducking me. [Oh wow], as it pertains to that conversation. And I will even say this, I had to and I didn't want to, but I had to go above his head. I mean, I finally got it. But I think me doing that created a situation where he felt slighted. And I'm like, yeah, I get that you feel that way but if you and I had a conversation I have been talking about this for a year. After a while, I'm not going to believe anything you say. Because what I think you're doing is you're using me as free labor. Right? If I'm going to get used, you're going to have to pay me for that. Yeah.

David's legitimate anger at what he had to do to simply receive the pay that his labor would suggest underscores the exploitation central to private-profit centered workplaces. David's aspirations to move up in rank led him to do tasks outside of his pay and title as a way to impress a manager and receive the evaluation necessary to move up. However, the evaluator used his

authority to simply believe that this is what “David does,” to legitimize not paying him more for the extra labor. David expressed anguish about why he was not being “recognized” or receiving any gratitude for the work he was doing. The simple answer is that this not what the manager is incentivized to do, they are incentivized to extract as much labor from David and other employees as possible for the least amount of pay possible. David wanted to negotiate hire pay and a change in title, but his manager simply avoided him. There is little incentive to paying David more if they can reap the same labor and effort from him for the same pay, as that keeps the profits higher for the larger company. David even concedes this when he acknowledges that he is simply going to do the work because this is what is supposed to happen within the framework of the merit contract. When he was not receiving the answer that he wanted, he decided to go higher in the job authority hierarchy, where he eventually received higher pay. But this usurpation of the power of his manager to get the pay that David feels he deserved created a strain his relationship between them. Social relationships are so important for one’s career health within these workplaces, so the severed relationship could have had deleterious effects on David’s career. I will shortly be discussing lays offs as an essential experience of private workplaces, and David was laid off from this job. It is difficult to explain why he was laid off (partially because workplaces do not owe their employees explanations for why they laid off) but a severed relationship with a superior certainly did not help, as no one may have been presented to protect David. Thus, he did receive what he was owed, but at what cost?

This exploitation is racialized because Black professionals feel that they must put in extra effort to combat the racialized evaluations of their predominately white peers. Thus, there is a racist exploitation that workplaces can take advantage of due to Black professionals’ feelings

that they have to work harder to achieve the same positive evaluations of their merits and accomplishments that their white counterparts can sidestep due to their white privilege.

#### ***6.4.1 The Unselected and the Persistence of Individual Merit***

One of the most consequential powers that private workplaces expressed was the authority to terminate the employment contract with no explanation or accountability to their employees. Unfortunately, three of my participants had first-hand experiences with being laid off. All were given little information about why they were laid off and given no recourse to challenge the decision that would have huge ramifications for their socioeconomic lives. Wayne and his supervisor, for example, were terminated at a previous job abruptly with little explanation for the decision. To this day, Wayne has no idea why he was terminated from his employment contract:

It was two people working, 12-hour shifts, right. We got the job together. So, the girl [the woman is his supervisor] the woman I was with. She gets fired, she's Black too, she gets fired. and they take her to a room talk to her. And the reason she gets fired, she says, wasn't a real reason why she could get fired. A couple of weeks go pass. A new guy comes in, he gets a position, I don't. Then the next day and whenever I get fired, I tried to find out why I got fired. My supervisor, and then another guy. And I'm trying to find out, like hey you know, alright, so why did I get fired? And she goes to try to tell me, and then he cuts her off and says, we can't talk about this. You know, you just give me a call later and I'll tell you what happened. So, then I call them later and then he still doesn't want to tell me why I got fired. And he just says, like, you know, you could apply for unemployment. We're not going to say you can't get unemployment, but you know, it's the end of the job. So, I don't know.

Even after a persistent search for information concerning his firing, his former employer never provides a clear answer as to the circumstance surrounding his termination. His former supervisor also tells him that she was fired for no real reason. However, the employment contract as currently constructed grants employers this absolute right of termination. Before his termination, Wayne's supervisor is replaced with another man, even though Wayne was the natural successor for the position. But again, employers have the absolute authority to select new

employers and structure workplace hierarchies in their favor. Thus, Wayne is overpowered by the intense authority hierarchies of his workplace and must accept the decision and seek employment elsewhere.

David also experienced a sudden termination of his employment contract that he neither foresaw nor received upfront notice from his employer. His previous company instituted a restructuring and decided to lay off employees to achieve their privately defined financial stability:

The reason I left is because the company was going through restructuring. And in the past, what they would normally do is that they all the managers would kind of get together and determine who would stay and who would go based on performance. This time around, they brought in a third-party vendor that did the assessment of everybody. The third party determined based on whatever algorithm they had, who met a certain threshold was at certain threshold above, and who was below that threshold based on what they thought, you know, the performance was or the key performance indicators to determine who stayed in who go essentially. So, I was one of those that was below the threshold.

David's experience further exemplifies the power of private absolutism to fundamentally alter the employment structure of their companies with little accountability from their employees. David thinks the process was fairer in the past when managers would decide and not third-party vendor, but that process did not eliminate his company's absolute authority to terminate with no recourse. The parameters of the third-party vendors utilized concepts like "key performance indicators" and "thresholds" to reflect the values of objectivity about their determinations of who is terminated and who was not. However, the system of knowledge cannot be objective because it is free from accountability. David cannot challenge the assessment because he does not, and cannot, know what constituted the indicators and why he fell beneath the threshold. But because his profit centered workplaces are making the decision in support of their profits, they are able to terminate, and David is the one who has to determine where he will go next.

While these participants experienced the blunt force of private absolutism and companies' absolute power to terminate, the same participants interpreted their termination through a neoliberal stance that minimized the authority of their companies and maximized their individual characteristics. Wayne thought it was wrong that he was terminated with no explanation and agreed that "whatever I'm getting fired for is not legit." However, when I probed Wayne to see why he believed he could have been fired, he provided an individualist perspective that absolved corporate of racial inequality:

I mean, I like I said, I've tried to be more of a 'give the benefit of the doubt' that it was something else and then just saying, oh, everything that happens. It must have been because of this. But, you know, that situation around me getting laid off was sketchy, but it could have been just because the company was sketchy, you know, at not just because I was a Black guy.

While Wayne is the one who volunteers the detail that all the people who were laid off were Black, he does not consider, and seems like he will not consider, that there could have been racial implications for these firings. Wayne is correct that he cannot simply assume that his racial status was the cause of his termination, however, the lack of information makes it impossible to know that racism or racialized criteria had any influence on the decision to terminate. The authority to terminate without accountability erases the ability of Black professionals to challenge racial discrimination and racialized particularistic decisions, and thus presents a huge roadblock to achieving racial equality within the workplace (Anderson 2017; Anderson 2015; Acker 2006). But Wayne's position of giving "the benefit of the doubt" to a corporation that already has the legally sanctioned benefit of the doubt from employment law eliminates his desire to seek any recourse.

David also understood his termination through a neoliberal influenced individualist lens.

When I asked David if he ever discovered the threshold that determined his termination, he simply told me he did not care:

Well, because I think, you know, for me, I was looking at the bigger picture. Maybe two years before I said, I probably need to start making moves anyway. But personally, I just got comfortable there because [Company] is a world recognized brand. They were, you know, I got paid very well to do my job. I felt great there because I started there right after I graduated from college. I graduated in 2006, started in 2007. And then I just worked my way up in the business. Right. But, you know, I think after 10 years of being there, sometimes change is necessary. At that point, I was like, you know, it's not that it wasn't a big deal, it was a big deal, but then again, maybe a month or so after I left I was like, this is probably the best thing that happened to me at this point.

Through a neoliberal lens, David can reinterpret his firing as the next step in his career and not as an exercise of corporate power that he could not defend himself against. Specifically, David has internalized neoliberal ideologies of human capital that see himself and his career as a site of continuous accrual of value. When one place does not appreciate his value, one must go someplace else to reap the financial and social products of one's human capital. However, human capital theory has been challenged by many scholars that highlight the ways one's value is not the result of their merit and credentials, but racialized evaluations of one's worth by predominately white leadership (Harvey Wingfield 2010; Moore 2008). David also highlights how many of my participants felt – they were privileged to even have this opportunity, so when it was time to leave, he should be grateful and move on. While the reframing maybe necessary for the mental health of a person who gave 10 years of their life to a company that simply terminated him with no explanation or recourse, the reframing absolves the company who utilize corporate power to terminate with no accountability. The reframing also disincentivizes individual or collective actions to challenge such corporate power.

#### ***6.4.2 The Disillusionment of being Selected into White Authority***

I wish to end by discussing the experiences of Black professionals who doubled down on a racialized merit contract and achieved permeability and stability in their companies. These Black professionals were able to achieve highly ranked positions, exercise job authority, and reap the financial privileges unheard of in other niches in the job market. Despite this success, many expressed disillusionments with the reality that success meant further entrenchment into a predominately white authority center set on maintaining their privileges of authority and control. Morris, for example, expressed disillusionment with the reality that moving further up in his company would mean further integration with a majority white executive order that wished to influence greater aspects of his social life. When I asked him if he saw continuing to move up in his company, and he responded bluntly:

Not in this organization. [Okay, why not?] I mean, it's not that I don't want to, I don't see myself getting near because of the fact that again, when I see across the stage, it's a bunch of white guys. I don't play hockey. I don't watch hockey. I mean, and that's usually how it is that you know. And so now that goes back to a previous question. This is where you're forced to try to open yourself up, you know, when I say open yourself up, you got to diversify yourself to say that okay, you know what, I got to watch damn hockey, so I can start throwing around some hockey names when I'm with any of those personnel.

When Morris observes the white men that make up the executive suite of his company, he feels an intense racial and cultural alienation that he cannot see himself bridging. We discuss the cultural hegemony of the executive suite that is represented by the leisure they take in hockey, a predominately white sport, at the exclusion of other sports. Morris, understanding the importance of social relationships in moving up ranks, tried to take an interest in the activities of his predominately white leadership, like going to hockey games. But he soon realized the “lack of cultural sensitivities” by executives who privilege hockey in a cultural hierarchy over all other forms of leisure. However, because this group has power, it is up to Morris to merge into their

cultural milieu and not vice versa. It is the role of these Black professionals to *permeate* the centers of power, not diversify or alter.

Hakeem also hit a wall when it came to the social relationships, he would have to maintain with those in power. Hakeem did not much care for the level of sociality that was required for him in his position. As someone within the upper management structure of his job, there was a greater expectation that Hakeem socializes and be a part of the social lives of his fellow executives. But Hakeem heavily resisted, in one story, he told me that he has consistently deleted the social media friend request of someone in higher management, for the friend request to reappear, to be deleted, to reappear again. When I asked him if he felt him avoiding the social scene of his company may be a detriment to his continual climb at the company, he told me:

So now I keep my distance from that person. This is someone whose higher up. So could it hurt me later that I'm, distant cause in corporate America, like I said earlier, relationships matter. But when opportunities come up, kind of like the opportunity that I got. I was on somebody's mind when they were developing this thing. The further away you are from those decision makers, it could put you in a position where you're not being thought of when they had those opportunities because you're distant. And I've had this conversation with somebody about how I pulled away from these guys, he's like when something comes up man, you know? You got to be close enough to, you know, want to think of I'm like, if this dude is like pushing this hard, I don't even know if I want to be that close. I don't even know if I want to work that close to him if another opportunity comes up. So, it's definitely had an effect.

Hakeem, like my other participants, understands that relationship with management are important because they can determine your pathway towards greater workplace authority, rank, and financial rewards. However, Hakeem takes a unique stance by arguing that he wants to choose authentic relationship and will avoid relationships that he does not want. This autonomy that Hakeem articulates is influenced by his workplace rank – Hakeem is already in management, so can express more autonomy in deciding who he wishes to associate with or not. However, he notes that when he received the opportunity to move up in workplace authority, he

was simply “on someone’s mind,” and that simply fact had strong ramifications for his current career trajectory.

But the expectation that Hakeem had to maintain close relationships with management to continue to reap opportunities for upward movement clashed with the reality of growing clashes with management over the course of his career at the company. Over his 17-year career, Hakeem has fought with company over pay, his journey to brand himself as a celebrity chef, and numerous incidents of racialized hurt around issues of racism and racial inequality. Maintaining a career with an authority center rife with social and racial inequality has left Hakeem despondent at the thought of moving further up in his company:

Honestly that's, that's one of the reasons why I don't want to, at this point. I don't want to move up. Stay where I am, do what I'm doing continually be proficient at what I do to get better at what I do. But I don't want to progress in anything beyond this, at this point, because for one thing like, the workload, work-life balance. I don't want to get into all of that stuff where it's costing me more personal time stress levels and all that stuff. But on top of that, I do feel like, if I move up more, I'm going to have to deal with more of this stuff. And, even there, there was a global position came up. I didn't want to deal with that because, some of the people that on our global team, like, Nope, there was nobody on our global team. I think it's one-person, Black lady. But other than that, there's nobody else. And I'm like, there's no way I would want to be there. It'll be, it'll be freaking torture. There's nobody up there like me think like me, rationalize like me, anything like that. And so that's one of the reasons why at this point out, I don't want to move up.

Hakeem wishes to end his ascension up his company’s ranks because of the labor and racial ramification that being in the center of power would mean for him going forward. From a labor perspective, Hakeem would take on much more work that would further interfere with the current work-life balance problems already plaguing his family life. Ultimately, the racial dynamics of the centers of power are the most worrisome developments. He notes that there is only one Black woman on the global team, and Hakeem describe the reality of being another token in the team as “freaking torture.” Thus, rather than experiencing further alienation, he has

decided that the best course of action for him would be to stay where he is and continue to gain proficiency at the task that he is already assigned.

Thus, I gathered that the disillusionment that these professionals feel underscores the ways that the racialized merit contract will eventually reach its limits within a private workplace structure around private absolutism and profit. Reggie maintained aspirations of becoming an executive over his 34-year career at his company. As an exemplar employee and oftentimes the first Black person in many management positions, he thought “the writing was on the wall” that he would one day be an executive. However, this day never came to pass. Over the course of his career, the executive-managerial centers of power continuously and arbitrarily changed the structures of their authority distribution that repeatedly diminished Reggie’s chances of career ascension. As a rising star in the 80’s, there was a corresponding affirmative action push to bring more people who were not white men into management. But as the push for more diversity increased, there was less of a focus on Black men like Reggie and more of an emphasis placed on recruiting and promoting white women:

And I'll say this when the affirmative action [program] first got its first big push in terms of management, and that was in the 80s. You know, these people are not stupid. You know what they did? They promoted women. there was like, all of a sudden there was all these women going into major positions. And this was under the old program where you didn't even know a job was open, but to meet your numbers, they say, Well, you know, Black people and white women. And so that's how they met the goal. And it's kind of like what the, what the courts ruled long ago is that, you know, sometimes discrimination is not, I don't like you because you're Black. Sometimes there's de facto discrimination based on the fact that well, you got 100 management jobs here and none of them are Black. surely there are some Black people qualified for the jobs. So that's the de facto or systemic discrimination. So [Company] decided, in the 80s, decided to answer that, the issue of what are their numbers by promoting women. I mean, there was tons of white women.

When pushed by legislation to alter the predominately white and male centers of authority, Reggie’s company decided to promote much more white women to satisfy their goals to

diversify. Reggie's experience is supported by research that illustrates that white women have been the group most likely to reap the benefits of affirmative action or affirmative action influenced policy (Tambe 2020). In the early 2000's, the management again exercised arbitrary and unaccountable authority to change their preferential promotion treatment towards those in their 30s, disadvantaging older managers like Reggie.

But what ultimately stalled Reggie's career was the fact that being selected into management never stop the continual climb, the growing scarcity and fierce competition with whites as the job authority ascension continued. The reality of all these workplaces is that, even if they were perfect meritocracy, there are not enough highly desired, highly ranked positions for all the people with merit within the company to receive. Thus, there is fierce competition, hoarding, and undermining of key positions constantly. Reggie spoke of this structural reality to me and the ramifications of scarcity for his career:

Well, one thing about it is that [Company] had a way. Um I'm probably going to overstate this, but they had a way of making people fearful for their job. Right. So, when you are in position, sometimes they would do what it would seem like to be arbitrary things to move people or demote people. And so, sometimes we had very strong, Black people in management and supervisory roles or any executive roles. There are other times the people that, we're looking over the corner or the looking over their shoulder all the time. And I think that was because of their scarcity, a lot and as well as the way that they will be treated because, I mean, I've been in positions where people would seem to take, I mean, if I said something, or did something, it would be talked about or thought of in the most negative possible way. I mean, as opposed to, it's like trying to find why do you wear that yellow shirt with that? Trying to find things that you did wrong. Right. And so it was that kind of environment for a lot of people.

I had to probe for Reggie to tell me that this was also his experience, but only for the last 10 years, as the first 24 years he told me he was unassailable because "my performance was, you know, speaking for itself." But his meritocratic performance could not protect himself again an arbitrary move to IT, a position where he felt like a dispatcher and where he could not use his

stellar technical skills because it was outside of his expertise. Such an arbitrary and unexplained move essentially stalled Reggie's career:

It changed because like I said, I had been a critical of IT before moving into IT. And there were people there that knew that and remember that and then I actually even butted heads with because we they were our service providers as we were trying to implement things. And so and then you know, you know probably some element of racism as well as that, you know, didn't like being told what to do by a Black guy.

Despite it being Reggie's job to have criticize IT, that did not erase the ways his colleagues reacted with spite and retaliation. The racialized dimension of a Black man in power receiving retaliation cannot be understated here, and his racialized status compounds highly competitive and vindictive relations created by the scarcity of highly rank position within companies. The combination of ill treatment, a stalled career that would never get him to the executive, and an illness influenced Reggie to retire. Reggie is proud of what he was able to accomplish within his company, but all his hard work working through the merit contract simply did not reap him the executive status that he believed he earn. No level of hard work can overcome the structural realities of the private, profit centered workplace.

## **7 BLACK PROFESSIONALS AND THE LIMITS OF MEANINGFUL IMPACT IN PUBLIC WORK**

Melanie's passion for the work she does and the community she serves is exemplar of the ways mission-based work matters for Black professionals employed in the public sector. Over the course of her 25-year career, Melanie has held many positions related to curriculum creation – from being an instructional coach, a teacher, a professional learning coach, and her most recent position as a teacher specialist. Melanie has served a long and glorious tenure, with goals to retire after going the full 30 years. When I asked how she feels about the arch of her long career,

she expressed something that is foundational to how many Black professionals find resilience within their chosen public work: “teaching is a profession. You have to love the kid. You gotta love the students. If you don't love the students, it is not the profession for you.” Melanie, like the majority of the Black professionals I interviewed in public work, defined love for what she does and the population that one serves as integral to her professional identity as a professional worker. Melanie made her complete devotion to her job extremely clear by referring to her work as “my calling, this is what God wanted me to do.” While the other Black professionals in my research did not invoke religious imagery, the majority expressed similar idioms to underscore that they did not simply understand their work as the exchange of effort for wages, but something greater, something more meaningful.

Repeatedly, Black professionals in public, mission-based employment recited that serving a community in need was integral to the work that they do. Tiffany, a public health professional, referred to her work as “kind of the dream job per se. It’s what I set out to be and this is what I am” illustrating how many in public work have long aspired to make meaningful impacts within professions that allow them to be agents of positive change for communities in need. Bryant, a fellow public health professional, agreed that the highlight of his work was his ability to help those in need:

I really like my work. I support people who can't afford care and treatment for HIV and AIDS. So, it's a very mission, mission driven, like passionate organization. So, we definitely provide service to people who need the services. So, I am pretty fortunate in that, that my job does has a direct link to people and our clients. So, I really like my work.

Bryant enjoys that his work has a concrete link to communities in need of public health intervention. Bryant expressed that he felt “fortunate” that he has the privilege to work within a mission driven and passionate organization that provides services to those in need. Thus, we see

how service to a community in need served as an anchoring idiom that attached Black professionals strongly to the work they complete.

When the community in need was abstract, many of the Black professionals I interviewed made appeals to symbolic values about progress towards some greater good. Stephanie, an animal medicine researcher expresses symbolic values of progress when she discussed why she decided to do her line of work:

I really enjoy it. I feel really passionate about it. I really like the fact, I feel like I'm making a difference in animal medicine as well as human medicine. There's a lot of a lot of medicine and medical devices that have come from animal research. So I think that progress cannot be possible without lab animal medicine. I feel really passionate about it, really passionate to help the animals and make sure that their sacrifice for us is well worth it and that they're not feeling any pain or sickness. Something that I enjoy doing that I've wanted to do for as long as, when I started vet school. I'm glad I have the opportunity to do it.

Stephanie's work provides her an opportunity to feel she is making a difference for not only animal medicine, but human medicine that is dependent on the advances in animal medicine. Through her focus on her contributions to the symbolic value of progress, Stephanie can manifest a dream she's had since she began vet school while making a meaningful impact within the medical field. Brandon, a highly ambitious law student, also appealed to symbolic values that reflect his line of work by appealing to the "rule of law" as a way to make change in the world:

As long as we, I know this is going to sound real corny but, I mean, I don't know any other way to express it. As long as we are a nation that still, for the most part, respects the rule of law that really abides by the idea that lawyers have a very high-level responsibility to uphold justice and speak for people who can't speak for themselves. It's probably one of the best ways to go about making that change. It's my job to take the time that was handed to me or that it will eventually be handed to me and just push it forward as much as I can and hand it off to somebody else when it's time.

While he understands that many may see the focus on symbolic values as "corny," he notes that upholding justice through law legitimately allows him to make an impact on the lives of communities who are marginalized and cannot speak for themselves. Thus, the appeal to

symbolic values grants him the opportunity to feel he is making a meaningful impact by pushing forward change, an opportunity handed to him by a lineage of lawyers who believe as he does in change. Over and over again, Black professionals who work in public focused work upheld values that reflected the meaningfulness of their work for a community or some abstract sense of progress towards a greater good. What was important for all of these professionals was the opportunity to make a *meaningful impact*, to use their expertise and autonomy to affect some change towards something greater for a community or abstract notion that could make positive changes for those in need.

What was considered valuable about the work my participants completed for wages varied quite drastically between those who worked in public, nonprofit centered work and those who worked in private, profit centered work. While the Black professionals I interviewed in private work sometimes expressed feelings about loving their work, not one of them expressed a narrative that linked their work to a meaningful impact on some sort of community, or abstract appeals to symbolic values. In contrast, the vast majority of my participants in public work framed their motivation for choosing and remaining in their chosen professions around the concept of meaningful service and impact. David, who lost his job at a private workplace before reentering the workforce as an accountant for a public organization, illustrates the difference between the values that animate those in private work versus public work:

The work I'm doing here is geared to, you know. I feel good about it because of we're contributing to help other individuals get to have a place to stay, a nice place to stay. And a decent neighborhood. They're able to have a roof over your head, right? As pertaining to like I said with [private firm], it was more so I was I felt good because I was contributing to the to the company's bottom line, making sure that they were profitable because when they were profitable, I was profitable as well as far as begin a bonus check at the end of the year. Right, so it's kind of two different two different feelings of feeling good.

Black professionals throughout my study learned to internalize different values concerning what constituted an “ideal worker” that were dependent on their workplaces’ relationship to profitability and capital accumulation. Black professionals in private, profit centered work internalized the values of profit accumulation because their individual success was linked so intimately with how those in the authorial center viewed them in relationship to the larger profitability of the company. However, those who worked in public, mission focused work neither espoused values of profitability nor did they express an ideological focus on profits as my participants in private work did so relentlessly. I posit that this is because the norms and practices of profit accumulation exerted less institutional pressures on the organizational structures of public workplaces. David illustrates that his value within his current public workplace depends more on his ability to support the greater mission as defined by the authorial center more concerned with providing a meaningful service over profitability. Institutional pressures thus alter what is considered valuable and differently structures how individuals choose to animate their career trajectories.

My participants’ commitment to making a meaningful impact was amplified by the legacy of systemic racism that places Black people disproportionately within resource-deprived communities that are in particular need of aid. Melanie’s fervor and devotion to her work as a curriculum specialist is heightened because she serves predominately Black students in a Title I district who are particularly underserved by a systemically racist education system. Her desire to make sacrifices of her time and effort is directly linked to the reality that if she does not make these sacrifice, she is hard pressed to see who would make such sacrifices:

I want them to get the best, and I don't think they always get the best, because they are Black. I think the teachers teach down. You're not increasing the rigor because you don't think they're capable. You don't think they can, but they can.

Our interview together spent considerable time thinking through all the ways Melanie believe white and Black teachers fail Black students by not giving them the rigorous education she believes they need and deserve. Melanie believes teachers simply give up rather than push, as she pushes, to make sure Black student are given the opportunity to succeed. Jonathan echoed similar sentiments as he battled with his predominately white teacher base who frequently evaluated their predominately Black and brown students through a white racial frame that diminished their worth:

It's challenging sometimes. Primarily because I'm an emotional person when it comes to these students and kids. And I'm also very emotional when it comes to the injustices and inequities, um, that a lot of our Black and Brown students face. Um, so when I hear teachers making comments along the lines of, Oh, I've never seen their parents, they don't really value the education, like, no. Before I cuss you out, I'm just going to back away for a second. Because a lot of those stereotypes are grossly biased. They don't look at the fact that a lot of times a lot of Black parents have to work two jobs just so they can afford this, do this to be in the, in school or to have the luxuries of public education. When I say luxuries I'm talking about the things that aren't necessarily the things that are extra, like all the extra school trips participating in band, participating in any other arts, participating in athletics, all that stuff costs. Um, so if a parent is not running in the school, every time the door opens, it may not because they're not invested. It may just be the fact that they are working two jobs over their child can be there. Um, or when they say things along the lines of, well, I can't really stand those kids because they have behavior issues. But what do you mean those kids, I mean, they're kids and if I have behavior issues, maybe your lessons are boring, so maybe you should look at that.

Jonathan highlights the emotional toil and challenge of reframing the racist white racial frame that white teachers utilize to see Black and brown students. Jonathan focuses in on how white teachers see Black parents as absent and negligent and reframes to point attention to how racialized socioeconomic inequality causes many Black parents to not be able to present caretaking in ways that white middle class teachers deem appropriate. Jonathan status as a Black man knowledgeable of racial and class inequality illustrate the significance of Black professionals who can present the racial sympathy necessary to counteract anti-Black racism. Jonathan is aware of his special position, and concludes that he, and fellow Black teachers, are

needed to ensure Black students are granted the humanity that they deserve. Thus, many saw being a Black professional in public work as an opportunity to serve a Black community particularly underserved by a racist country.

Other Black professionals who did not particularly serve a concrete Black population still understood the underrepresentation of Black people in their fields as a problem they had to tackle by helping Black people who seek to enter their field. Thus, Black professionals like Stephanie understood helping other Black people access the field as an opportunity for meaningful impact:

I feel like it should put more pressure on someone, those of us that have made it to like that we need to go back and talk to these minority kids actually want to be in the science field. And even if they aren't veterinarian, anything that they want to do in the science because we are underrepresented, underrepresented in the sciences as a whole.

Alia, a chief of staff to a high-ranking Democrat, also felt that her opportunity for meaningful impact involves helping other Black people to enter her field. When I asked her how she plans to move forward in her career despite all the racial disparities she pointed out to me in her profession, she believed it was her duty to get more Black people in her profession rather than feel depressed about the tough racial inequalities:

I kind of feel like it is what it is and don't feel depressed about that. I understand like, Okay, this what we are dealing with. So, let's plan. In terms of navigating these spaces. Like for me, I'm all about putting other people up. Right? I don't want to be the only one in the space because I can't stay there forever. So, I want to make sure that there's a pipeline. Somebody could come and take my place. So that's kind of how I view it. Like, for some reason I've been chosen to be on this board, or on this committee in this work environments or whatever it is. I'm not going to be here forever. So let me reach down and pull somebody up, and prepare somebody up, prepare somebody to come up and take my place because this number might not expand, but I can make sure it doesn't go to zero.

Thus, more Black professionals in public work understood how racial inequalities produce fewer Black people in their decided profession and that it was on them to correct such imbalance in any way they could. Thus, meaningful impact was an anchoring frame that gave Black professionals meaning and helped them feel value in their chosen workplaces.

This ideal construction of what it means to be a Black professional in public, mission-based work differed sharply from private work, reflecting the different institutional pressures and the different ways the ideal worker is constructed in these spaces. While Black professionals hold the ideal of meaningful impact dearly, it is important to note that the ability to make a meaningful impact is highly dependent on the organizational structure of their public workplace. As I will show in the next section, the ability for my participants to make a meaningful impact is structured by hierarchy and inequality. Executives, who are predominately white, elite, and male, hold considerable power to determine what constitutes “meaningful impact.” As a result, many Black professionals in public work struggled with how their internal construction of meaningful impact differed sharply from how their organization defined and mobilized resources to make a “meaningful impact”

### **7.1 The Authority to Define: Hierarchy and Inequality within Public Work**

One of the central problems with the narratives of *meaningful impact* is that it obscures the reality that serving a community occurs within the institutional context of a workplace structured by authority and status hierarchies. While meaningful impact was very important for many Black professionals in public work, it became clear in our interviews that one’s individual understanding of “meaningful impact” did not always reflect how the authorial center of their workplaces defined “meaningful impact.” Due to the exclusionary legacy of systemic racism, many of the public workplaces were helmed by executive boards that were predominately white that had an exclusive ability to define what would constitute the “meaningful impact” that their organizations would execute for their target populations. All the Black professionals I interviewed who worked in public work were not a part of the authorial centers who had the authority to define the parameters of what effort would be considered meaningful. As a result,

they did not have the power to authorize the mobilization of organizational resources necessary to legitimize their conceptualization of meaningful impact.

The tension between how an individual Black professional defines meaningful impact versus how the larger institution defines and executes meaningful impact was a recurring struggle for my participants. The tension was very stark for Brianna, who works as a mental health researcher providing mental health services to soldiers within the military. Brianna had to square her position as someone who offers mental health support to soldiers within a military context that was surely contributing to the mental health problems of soldiers:

My general mission is, I'm on a team that studies behavioral and social health outcomes program. And what we do is like we evaluate the behavioral and social health of soldiers on different bases. And we have a specialty in suicide. Like if there is an uptick in the number of suicides on a on a base. The leadership bear my desire to reach out to us to come and see what's happening and do a field investigation on base to see what's causing soldiers to commit suicide at higher rates. So, but we're supposedly we also focus on other behavioral and social health issues besides suicide, that's the main one we work with. So I think, I think I think it's good work, I like the idea of it good work to be to be exploring, you know, what soldiers actually need to be healthy. However, it's a different story, whether or not it's actually, if the stuff is actually used, like the results that we produce are actually used and, like, within the military itself, whether there can be like, a healthy soldier population, when we're talking about this Imperial, you know, force, who uses young people of color specifically to carry out its imperialist intentions, you know, abroad and stuff. So, how I feel about the work is that, you know, we should care about the soldier's health. But in the broader sense of things, I'm not sure how much we're actually doing.

Brianna work in identifying and intervening with soldiers who need mental health services is admirable, and she notes that it is “good work” that theoretically should be done. But she critiques the institutional structure by which the exercising of her expertise occurs. Brianna fundamentally questions if a “healthy soldier” as she would define it can exist within an imperialist institution that subjects its employees-soldiers to environments that surely cause mental health problems. However, what is considered “meaningful impact” is defined by organizational leaders who will insist through the mobilization of resources that this is how their

soldiers will be supported. Brianna must therefore support the mission as defined by leadership or find employment elsewhere.

Even those who had more autonomy in their immediate work environments still struggled with practicing their internal constructions of meaningful impact. Jonathan, a music teacher at a Georgia county public school system, spoke about how much he loved teaching because it provided him an opportunity to provide a music education grounded in the cultural expressions of Black people. He therefore understood his meaningful impact as his privilege to socialize and teach a new generation of Black and brown children in the rich musical traditions of Black cultures. However, he oftentimes felt pushback from his predominately white teacher base who expressed discomfort with his attention to Black centered expressions and experiences:

So, before I started the club I talked to a couple other teachers about the club and a couple of other Black teachers and they were like, Ms. Young is not going to go for that. She's not going to allow you to have that club. I was like, [Ms Young is the principal?] Yes, she's the principal. And I was like, I don't understand why, why, why she wouldn't want me to have this club, like it's for Black and Brown students. And they were like, because the PTSA here, which is largely White females, you know, anytime they feel like you're giving the Black kids an advantage or the Hispanic kids an advantage, they want to figure out a way for their students to be involved in as well.

Thus, Jonathan found that forwarding his internal meaningful impact of helping Black students contrasted with predominately white social actors who wanted to relate to student in a color-blind way. He described these moments as “polarized” and expressed how often he has to fight to assuage the feelings of white teachers and parents to ensure he can continue his mission to enrich Black and Brown students. Because of the autonomy afforded to him as an esteemed music teacher, he was able to contest, but it is always a battle, and he admits that he shrinks his own mission many times to appease the ways white actors believe he should be making a meaningful impact for his students.

The organizational definition of what was considered meaningful or valuable impact always reflected how the organization received funding as well as those who filled positions of executive leadership. Within governmental work, the influences of a majority white governing bodies picking mainly straight white men to fulfill leadership positions were not lost on Tiffany, a public health professional. In her work aiding communities suffering from HIV/AIDS, she clearly saw the contrast between those who defined “aid” and those who were receiving the aid:

I would just say that in my profession the focus is always talking about vulnerable populations and target populations and all this stuff.. First of all, the people who are giving the funds for these programs don't look like or don't have any kind of background in or delve in or any of that. Like the population that they're trying to serve with these programs. Like all this HIV AIDS work, those are all straight white guy that are going gonna get rid of HIV/AIDS in the Black gay community. You know what I'm saying? So in general, I think that's the case across the board because of how funding is, you know, coming down from Congress. Congress pick these top people, people who look like them. And so then those people get to pick their people and their people look like them. And so when it gets further down to where people can't pick per-se, you know, then you start to get a little bit more color, maybe a little more diversity. Um, but you've got to get down in there to get the color.

Tiffany’s workplace, like many of those I interviewed, is structured by a predominately white authorial center that made decisions for a population who did not reflect their social position in society. Black queer communities, of which Tiffany is a member, are not a part of the authority center that decides how funds are distributed and which programs and interventions are needed to make an impact on communities in need.

The Whiteness of the authorial center and their exclusive authority to define meaningful impact ensures that the institutional mission perpetuates white racial framing. Tiffany discussed her frustrations with the ways the exclusionary whiteness of the authorial center of her workplace created a discourse that further stigmatized Black communities:

I think until we actually hire Black people in leadership, the way we talk about [the health problems facing Black communities] won’t change. Because my profession talks a lot about race, you know, and one of the things that I did notice, I did a detail in another

center. We're trying to change the conversation because a lot of the data that we have is talking about Black people have bad health and just, you know, Black people die early. Black people smoke more, Black people have more diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, you name whatever the disease is. Black people are greater impacted than in comparison to whites. And so the conversation is like not necessarily about the fact that Black people are impacted this way cause it starts to perpetuate that there's something wrong with Black people, in general. Like you have a condition cause you just can't seem to stay healthy when really the root cause or the problem are the institutional racism and structural racism.

Tiffany sees a relationship between the lack of Black people in leadership and the ways her organization discusses the health problems facing Black communities. While her workplace has an accurate understanding that Black people have worst health outcomes, their interpretation of those realities are understood through a white racial frame that present Black people a “problem community” without considering the ways institutional and structural racism creates problems for the way Black communities access healthcare in this country. While it is commendable that her workplace seeks to change the narrative, one has to consider the damage that a renowned public health organization has already done by missing such an essential insight into the unique health outcomes of Black communities. Researcher have highlighted the ways Black people express hesitancy in seeking medical intervention due to a medical establishment that historically and contemporarily perpetuate racist treatments inequalities (Matthew 2015). Tiffany’s workplace has continued the perpetuation of this inequity, but, once again, they have the authority to define “aid” as they please and Tiffany cannot intervene in ways, she wishes without risking her status as an employee.

I have discussed so far that many Black professionals are drawn to public work through their internal construction of “meaningful impact”. However, I have outlined that the way these Black professionals commonly construct meaningful impact contrasts with the way their larger workplaces define and execute their construction of meaningful impact. As a result, some Black

professionals struggle with the distance between what drew them to public work and what their workplace defines as meaningful through the mobilization of organizational resources. A way to contest this discontent maybe for these Black professionals to work their ways into the authorial centers of their workplaces and alter their definition and execution of meaningful impact.

However, Black professionals in public work, particularly Black women professionals, are acutely aware the predominately white authorial center will evaluate them lower than their peers because of racist ideologies that they hold.

## **7.2 Merit and (non)Selection in Public Work**

A sharp difference between my participants who worked in public work and private work were their expectations of what they believed merit could achieve for them in relationship to career mobility in their workplaces. To quickly summarize, my participants in private work thought merit was the only way they could achieve career mobility, but also understood that their racialized status would hamper how their predominately white workplaces evaluated their merit and value. As a compromise, they presented a racialized merit credit, where they sought to work “twice as hard” to counteract racist evaluations and achieve the same level of success as their white peers. But when I turned my attention to those in public work, their relationship to merit did not exist in the same way. Yes, many Black professionals still internalized the idea that they would need to work twice as hard to be evaluated fairly. But merit was not understood as something that would earn someone a promotion and its associated higher authority position and financial benefits.

Public Black professionals rarely interpreted merit as a credit contract because of the different way selection occurs within their workplace. Merit functions differently in public work because selection was bound by bureaucratic guidelines and not by the informal preference of

those in predominately white authorial centers as it occurred private work. The most common institutional practice for selection was a tenure system, where the longest serving employees enjoyed the highest levels of job authority and financial benefits. This was the clearest in governmental work, as Bryant explained to me:

So the right now, I'm just an individual contributor and I think that for on the federal level you get to a point where you noticed that, I mean this is kind of how it works in general, it's not a system based on merit. So you're not being promoted based on merit, but based on tenure. So person who's been there longer than you will probably have a little bit more, they're getting paid more because they've been there longer, not because they're taking on more work than you. So I'm doing the same amount of work that a person who's paid a degree higher than me cause I'm on a team of people who are paid grade. Or pay very higher than but I'm doing the exact same work that they're doing. So if the opportunity presented itself, like I should get a different position, making more money, doing more work and have more responsibility, I'd be happy to take that on.

Many of my participants in public work, like Bryant, knew that merit was disconnected from promotions into higher job authority rank. While the tenure system structured the job authority hierarchies in governmental work the most strictly, tenure-based hierarchies existed for those in public work outside of the government as well. Jonathan, for example, told me about the difficulties of diversifying the teacher based at his high school because many teachers never left their jobs, creating an unofficial tenure-based system:

So hiring is literally based on the principal, so your principal can hire whoever they want. I think she does a good job of trying to diversify the population of the teachers there. When openings come open, but people don't leave [County in Georgia]. So we have teachers at our school who have been teaching there for 20 plus year. And they're not going to leave because it's a really good school and it's a really good school district, so they're not just going to look up and leave.

Theoretically, the principal has a lot of authority to hire whoever they see fit, but they rarely get to exercise such authority because teacher do not leave their post. Over and over again, the career trajectories of public professionals were structured by systems that altered the relationship that professionals had with merit in their workplaces.

The tenure system provided a level of workplace stability that was not found in private work. Natalie, for example, discussed that she did not have to face selection and competition in her work until she reached her current rank:

Well, I'm 35. I just turned 35 in May. I am a GS-13, which means that I had to compete for the position that I'm at. Everything else at my agency it's like, it's kind of guaranteed. It's like from, I was hired as a GS-7, so from GS-7 to GS-12, it was just like normal. Like as long as you're doing your job, you're gonna get your increase. But when I get to the 13, I had to compete for it.

Natalie points out that as long as workers are doing their work, it was pretty much guaranteed that a worker would move on to the next rank. This was different from my participants who worked in private work, who felt that they needed to constantly prove their merit to achieve selection into higher job authority rank, or at least avoid a layoff that could occur because the financial whims of the authority center. Black professionals in public work still did internalize the idea that their racialized status would diminish their value at work. However, their construction of working twice as hard was less about being selected for a higher authority position and more about being seen as an equal member of their teams executing the institutional mission as defined by the authority center in a competent way.

The institutional mechanism structuring authority hierarchies reduced the existence of private absolutist selection within public workplaces. The tenure system in public work weakens an authority center's ability to make private and unaccountable selections for career ascension that was so prevalent in private work. My interviews of Black professionals in private work highlighted how private selection, strengthened by severe rank hierarchy and the dictates of profitability, created a career mobility structure where there was always a *possibility* of upward mobility if one is so lucky to be selected by someone with the authority to do so. Thus, the private absolutism of private workplaces reified a speculative market around merit, where the

possibility of selection was enough to influence private Black professionals to understand their merit as credit, to be earned through hard work to be eventually traded to persuade those with authority to select them. Despite the fact that this rarely happened for those who I interviewed, it was the possibility that anchored them to put their efforts up for speculation in a market that would reward them fairly if they put down a greater labor down payment to overcome their racial status. Essentially, the existence of institutional mechanism eliminated the speculative market around for those who worked in public organization. This altered public Black professionals' relationship to merit, and their expectation of what merit could achieve for them in their workplaces.

On one hand, the reduction of selection and its associated speculative merit market meant that the Black professionals in public workplaces were more likely to experience a sense of stability within their workplaces. There was not much of an expectation that merit could help one achieve racial permeability into the highest ranks of their workplaces through meteoric yet unaccountable selection for a favored individual's career. However, this sense of stability was not always experienced positively, as many felt a sort of immobility in their own career trajectories. Here is Natalie again, discussing how the sense of stability turned quickly to immobility in her career:

Realistically speaking, I thought that I would be further along in my career, but I know that that really has to do with the nature of how the government works. Um, we don't have a lot of opportunities for more promotions and things like that in the [city] area. If I wanted to like proceed and get a 14 or 15 or whatever, I would probably have to leave my agency, or move to like the DC area.

In the beginning, the stability of Natalie work was comforting, but the stability soured when she learned that she had been virtually shut out of promotion and career mobility in her workplace.

There were no opportunities for promotion in her city and she would have needed to be proactive

and moved to DC to compete for the competitive, allegedly merit-based positions. This was not tenable for Natalie because she holds so many family obligations in her home city, thus, she felt that the opportunities for promotion have passed her by and she feels stuck in her current position. The tenure system, while offering a sense of stability and greatly reducing biased private selection, still created problems by not offering many with opportunities for advancement in their career trajectories.

While institutional mechanisms of selection did reduce private absolutist selection, selection norms that reified inequalities were still embedded in ways that stalled the career mobility of public workers. For instance, Preference for veteran status has been implemented into many governmental jobs, a preference that Tiffany believes has stalled her career:

I've gotten kind of promoted along the way. Not maybe as I should have been, but I definitely have gotten promoted along the way. [Why do you think you haven't been promoted as you should have been?] Because I guess what the federal government is very different than like a private company. So, it is a lot harder to get certain positions at maybe the appropriate time where you personally have the right skill sets and ready to go. But if you apply, so for example, the job that I have, which is a public health advisor 6-85 position, those positions when they post on USA jobs, they are blocked out for people who have military experience or who are veterans. So, a lot of times you don't even get the opportunity to interview for positions because you just don't have enough points and even if you score like 100% on your resume or whatever. Your perfect. If a veteran comes in and wants the job, they can get it over to you. [Yeah, Very Hierarchical in that way] Right. So, it is set up that way for a reason and a purpose. So that's why like, you know, it, it delays a person like myself who even out a veteran, it delays my progression process a lot slower than if I had, if I had been in there.

While rigid tenure system reduces the ability of authorial centers to select, they can still reify inequalities through preferential treatment. Tiffany reveals later in our interview that she is “the lowest person technically in the organization” and that is due in part because she lacks the adulated veteran status that is preferred in her workplace’s employment hierarchy. The veteran status acts as a legitimized exclusionary preference. The hierarchy has slowed Tiffany’s career trajectory and we see that the hierarchies that do not appear as sharply unequal as those found in

the private sector nonetheless can cause problems for those who wish to climb the job authority hierarchy in public work.

While private absolutist selection did not structure public work as it did private work, exclusionary selection tactics are foundational to how Black professionals entered the field. It was clear to some of my participants that the reason why Black people were underrepresented in their workplaces was due to a legacy of systemic racism that has excluded Black people since the beginning of their professions, as Tori expressed to me when I asked why she thought there were so few Black people in laboratory animal medicine:

I really think it's because, they traditionally. Like starting from when the first vet school was open, Black people just were not allowed in. Like, even now most of the vet school have what they call diversity committees. And they have those, because they realized that there was such a big problem with like having no minorities in their programs. And the factor in the fact that all of these schools have to have a Diversity Committee to make sure that they're actually considering people that aren't white. I mean, it really speaks a lot as to how they basically just shut us out. So if you can't go to vet school, you can't become a vet, you can't specialize so they shut us out of that. At that level and you really have nowhere else to go. It's kind of getting better now, like most schools let in like one or two nonwhites per class, but it still pretty terrible. I think Tuskegee is like one of the biggest graduating schools for like minority vets They put out most of the Black, Latino students. Most of them come from Tuskegee.

The racial demographics of professionalized fields are dependent are racially unequal pipelines that continue to reify predominantly white professions. The introduction of mechanism like diversity committees, while acting as tacit acknowledgement of racial inequality, have not made enough of a dent in the underrepresentation of Black people within their professions. The underrepresentation continues because these professions are still selecting in ways that reify the cumulative advantage that whites gain from a lifetime living in privileged, resource concentrated, and exclusionary white neighborhoods and spaces (Harvey Wingfield 2020; Acker 2006; Lipsitz 2006; Brown et al 2003). Brandon pointed this fact out to me when he considered the pipelines that structure entrance into top tier law schools:

I can't really describe it, but I would say that the best sentence I can give you all the laws, I said there's the, there's no pipeline there that is equipping up African Americans to get into these spaces, these spaces that are the spaces like UGA law or Georgia state or Emory that translate into well paid jobs in the legal industry. You know, without that pipeline going back to grade school and high school. You know, the, the dependence, heavy dependence on standardized test, like the LSAT, I think that that plays a big role in it. So I think you see peak, I think you see schools now going away from the traditional model because you have schools like Harvard, Georgetown, Stanford, that will take other tests like the GRE. Depending on like what type of degree you trying, if you're trying to get a joint degree. Yeah. I mean you see changes like that being made, but until it is like a sweeping change, an institutional change, I mean you've got to continue to see the lack of numbers.

Standardized testing therefore performed the exclusionary selection even before Black people could enter the field, thus continuing to reify these professions as predominately white spaces. These schools are not incentivized to rid themselves of these exclusionary selection tools because their prestige is reflected by how many students are denied entry (Liu 2013; Baez 2006; Karabel 2005). So even before Black professionals can begin in these fields, they have already experience selection and exclusion that limits their ability to reach level of proportional representation.

While explicit unequal selection was reduced by institutional mechanisms, selection still also occurred when authorial centers mobilized institutional resources towards whites in high authority ranks. Tiffany's experiences in government illustrates that even with more resources, workplaces still mobilize them in ways that reify inequality and hierarchies. Tiffany's job has specific mechanism in place to order how employees are distributed to different teams in her agency. Despite this system being in place to encourage an equal distribution of workers to fulfil needs, those in leadership positions use the system to ensure they hold the most employees:

So basically your division gets a certain number of FTEs and then the division just decides how many of those FTEs are pushed to which group. Now within your branch you can decide eight people are going to be on team A, five people are going to be on team B. You can decide that, you don't have to get approval to move somebody from a different team. But the branch chief, who is a white man never saw fit to say hmm, I have

an overabundance of staff over here, I have an under staffing over there. Let me move my other staff and you know, my own overages to my under. Not once, did that occur or happen. And when we were going through the process of like people leaving and having vacancies, the white team lead never ever had a vacancy. When his team had a vacancy, they would always fill it, like likkity-split. These other team leads. They're begging and begging - positions don't get filled, That's, and again. It could all just be a big old coincidence, but it's a whole lot of coincidences You could say it's a coincidence, but at some point, if it walk like a duck and it talk like a duck.

This experience highlights how those in authority positions can take advantage of their authority over resource by hoarding human and organizational resources. On the surface, there is a bureaucratic system of FTEs that equally allot workers/workloads to where they are needed. Those rules are undermined by a branch chief who can exploit the system to fill his staff to the detriment of others who need more human resources to complete the tasks that need to be accomplished. The branch chief is therefore able to reify his position in a false meritocracy by ensuring he has more human and organizational support to complete his task while other teams appear less capable and accomplished. Tiffany highlights the racial dynamics of the abuse of this system, as white leads can fill their teams in ways that Black team leads are not. Thus, white leads will always complete their missions more quickly with higher competency due to more resource, reifying ideas that Black people are not as capable as their white peers. she reflects many Black professionals in my study who feel the need to give white people the benefit of the doubt, but she is clear that the “coincidence” appears to often to ignore how race is central to who gets the staff that helps them accomplish task and appear competent and who does not.

This section highlights how the explicit and implicit mechanisms of selection in public work contributed to racial and status inequities for Black professionals. Black professionals in public work had a different relationship to merit and value due to the existence of institutional mechanisms that greatly reduced private and absolutist selection. However, the presence of formal, established criteria did not remove disparities in rank and authority. In fact, systems like

tenure and preference for specific statuses perpetuated predominately white authority centers. Many Black professionals also felt they were experiencing career immobility due to the lack of opportunities for promotion within public work. The Black professionals that are lucky to filter through the exclusionary pipelines still face inequality in promotion. In the final section, I discuss how Black professionals decide to orient themselves and their career trajectories within the realities of immobility in public work.

### **7.3 Resilience in the Face of Institutional Inequality**

Throughout this chapter, I have illustrated the hopes and challenges for Black professionals working in predominately white workplaces tasked with supporting the public through mission-based work. Many Black professionals enter these fields because they aspire to make a meaningful impact, where they can make a positive change for either communities in need or progress towards an abstract goal. However, many Black professionals in public work struggled with how their internal construction of meaningful impact differed sharply from how their organizations defined and mobilized resources to make a “meaningful impact.” Without selection, many Black professionals are denied access and influence that would be necessary to alter the institutional practices of their workplaces. Public workplaces were also structured by formalized rules for selection that, on their face, seemed fairer than the rampant private and unaccountable selection occurring in private work, but still reified predominately white centers of authority. I wish to end this chapter by considering how these Black professionals respond to the unique inequalities of public work. I found that, while some did come to conclusions that created disillusionment with their work, Black professionals oftentimes formed resilience frameworks that anchored them within their workplaces.

Due to rigid selection mechanisms and overall career immobility, many of the Black professionals I interviewed did not see a way to heighten their authority rank. Some did aspire to move into leadership positions but did not see a path forward because resources rarely dictated the possibility for career mobility. As a result, some reflected Bryant's position that they would like to move into leadership, but there were no resources or a position that would support such a career move:

I've talked to my boss about moving into leadership within the next, at least two to three years or so, and she thinks that I'm definitely I'm very ready to do that. It's just a matter of timing, the amount of funding for other opportunities as well. So, in the federal government, you really can't create positions. You have to wait, You have to wait for somebody to retire or get a whole new batch of funding to kind of create new division, create new positions. So right now, it's supply and demand.

Bryant highlights how, despite having the training and approval of a director, it was unlikely he could move up because of the funding structures of the federal government. We see the consequences of a rigid tenure system where the only possibility of upward career mobility is to wait for someone else to retire. He could also hope for a new batch of funding to create a new division, but that also did not seem likely from Bryant experience within the organization. Therefore, Bryant, like many Black professionals in public work, found themselves stuck in their rank position with little possibility of authority rank mobility. Bryant presents the disparity as a rational "supply and demand" problem, but the rigidity has created a reality where predominately white executives are making policies to "end the epidemic with Black men who have sex with men." Bryant agrees that having "representation from groups of people who understand those issues in the community would definitely push the needle forward in actually getting us to our goal," but structurally there is no support or incentive to raise Bryant, the only Black and gay person on the team, to leadership. Thus, the institutional mechanisms for selection and career

mobility are closed, making it virtually impossible to get the authorial center to reflect the community they are serving.

Others saw the career immobility as an opportunity to distance themselves and reframe what they believed to be the purpose of their work. Brianna, the mental health professional working for the military, was influenced by the rigidity of her career trajectory to reframe her relationship to her work:

Well, I feel like that's the par for the course too. Like, I'm not surprised by it. I honestly don't have any desire to, like, penetrate that level of leadership or be the one who you know, infiltrates the leadership ranks or whatever and tries to change it from the inside out and blah, blah, blah. It just is what it is. And I honestly view jobs as they're only going to get so much energy from me. And they're only a means to an end, which is to pay my rent and you know, have the basic necessities. So, I'm not really invested in trying to change it or anything like that. It is what it is. And it's so this job will serve these purposes for as long as I need it. And then I'll move on.

Brianna told me she had no ambitions of achieving racial permeability and joining the ranks of those above her. She thus reframed her career immobility as a way to achieve financial stability until she is able to work someplace else. Over and over again, Black professionals utilized the phrase “it is what it is” to accept that their institutions were organized by rigid racial and social hierarchies and that they would need to alter their expectation about what positive change could happen for them and the communities they serve. Brianna’s acceptance of the rigid hierarchies of her workplaces pushes her to be content with her authority rank and critique a racial permeability stance that may propel her to double down on merit to exchange for fair evaluations from a predominately white authority center. Her acceptance helps her to see clearly her exploitation within the employment relation, disinvest her efforts, and put forth the minimal effort to serve her purpose as a mental health professional. While this is completely understandable from an individual perspective, it also leaves the institution unchallenged to perpetuate racial inequity in demographic representation and the soldiers served by her institution.

A few of the Black women I interviewed saw the employment relationship with white authority centers as foundationally racist and sexist and saw entrepreneurship as their only way of escaping the prejudice of the workplace. Here is Brianna discussing how being and entrepreneur would free her from the racist diminishment of the employment contract:

I think it gives me more of a choice. Like, I feel like with employment, when you're, when you're employed by someone else, your kind of dependent upon them, and their whims and their prejudices. But being self-employed, would give me more control. Like, you know, this person is racist, I don't have to work with him, I can go get another client or whatever. So I feel like it gives me more control. And, and makes me like, less subject to someone else's whims and prejudices.

Brianna sees the employment relationship as responsible for subjecting her to the “whims and prejudices” of predominately white centers of authority and evaluation. For her, the only way to escape the white racial frame that will diminish her is to be self-employed, the only relation that would grant her true choice and freedom. Alia felt a similar way. Before working as an aid for a high-ranking Democrat, she worked in the private sector, where she experienced fist-hand intense sexism and misogyny that influenced her move to public service. But the career immobility and the lower pay of her public work made her reconsider going back to the private sector. She told me she did not “know if it would be an improvement. I just want a check. I’m at a point in my life when I need more money. My child is twelve, he needs things. I’m trying to fund his education.” She was now in a bind that she believed could only really be solved with self-employment:

The world of sport is so like, sexist and misogynistic why do I want to., I won't say open myself back up to all that again, but go back into that? Like, I knew what it was at that age. But it was a lot to deal with. So that's what I think well you know, I’m older, I'm different. I think owning my own business, would that be different from working in an athletic department. I'm sure it would. But it's just, thinking about the sting of those past experiences like is that an environment that I want to really to, re-enter? I don't know.

Alia's experiences in the private and public sector highlights that the sexism and racism Black professionals face is embedded within the employment contract and while public work may hold some advantages, it still leaves many disillusioned and unhappy.

While many felt stuck and a few contemplated self-employment, the majority of my participants utilized resilience frames to anchor them within their workplaces and persevere with their work. Those in the beginning of their career more often presented resilience frames that highlighted enduring the racial and social inequalities for the moment, pushing through until they reach a better labor experience in the future. Brandon utilized resilience frames to help him endure the current stressors of being a law student in a predominately white university:

I mean, nah, I have to push through. I have to. Understand that it is going to be difficult, but I can't give up so you deal with it. I mean, I try to exercise where I can. Try to do things to maintain my sanity. I'm mean, it is stressful, but you gotta push through it.

When the discussion turned to the unchangingness of the racial disparities that structure his profession, Brandon was able to utilize a resilience frame that presented the racial inequality as simply the reality of being a Black professional in a predominantly white institution. He feels his actions cannot overturn an institution that has suffered from racial inequality since its inception, so a resilience framework helps him to focus on individual self-care that will help him to endure the racialized inequality and racist events of his workplace. Stephanie, also a student, shares the same hope that things would improve when she is allowed to work within the profession:

So, I'm happy that I was fortunate that I was able to go straight out of vet school, into lab animal medicine, but I am ready to be done with residency and might be, I guess you would call it soaking the world. make real, real adult money and not the resident salary. So, I think I'm ready to be finished.

As student, they share hope because they are still opportunities for selection into higher job authority ranks. The lack of disillusionment is a finding I also found in private workplaces; Black professionals in the early stages of their career experience the inertia as something they can

overcome with merit and resilience, and this hope is tied directly to the possibility of selection that could grant them career mobility into higher authority ranks and greater autonomy.

But others who had been in their professions for some time did not express the same hope that they could be selected into positions where they would be granted more influence or autonomy. Black women in particular have accumulated many experiences of racialized sexism that have left them disillusioned about the reality that their institutions could change. When I probed Tiffany about how she felt that others, particularly those who are white and male, were constantly selected over her for recognition in her workplace, she expressed the foundational example of a resilience framework tinged in disillusionment:

No, it does [bother me]. But at the same time, I have been Black my whole life, so this ain't the first time and it ain't going to be the last time. So that I would have learned that, and it's kind of sad, but you have learned to live with those micro things that people do to you or say to you, you kind of live through it and you just try to stay resilient, keep your back, your mind and get it. Because if you get too crazy then you know, angry Black person. So, and you get nowhere and now you're going down, your stock is going down. When you start really pointing out certain thing.

Tiffany, like many Black professionals, statement that “she’s been Black all her life” makes clear the simple reality that her status as a Black woman ensures that this is just how it is when working with white people. It is thus up to her to be resilient and learn how to deal with white coworkers and workplace superiors because no one will help her navigate these spaces. Moreover, she will be punished by the racist white framing of the “angry Black person” if she behaves in a way whites will consider “too crazy.” She understands that a predominately white authority center, influence by the white racial frame, will lower her perceived value if she contests, reflecting the findings of my first empirical chapter that contesting racist experiences will only harm how others evaluate you in the workplace. As a result, it is simply better to learn how to deal with these experiences rather than trying to challenge or contest them.

Melanie also felt that resilience was the necessary to persevere in her career despite the current challenges of her workplace. When I asked Melanie about her career ambitions of moving into a higher job authority rank, she focused more on her ability to survive the day rather than her future career mobility:

Honestly, Ifeanyi, I'm just praying everyday that god keeps my mouth shut. I have to pray really hard about that, just keeping my mouth shut and doing my work. Like right now. I have two things that do need to be done. Because I am, I'm actually at a school and I am teaching. So you told me that supporting students now takes precedence. Okay. So lesson plans. Yeah, that's still important. But I don't have it done yet. So, i've stop stressing, I'm going to get it done. But it takes time. Just like it takes time to build a good library of resources. It takes time to build good lesson plans. I'm not just gonna put anything out there with my name on it. You know, so yeah, so that's one. That's one. It's not stress. For me. It's just pressure. That's one thing that pressuring me that I've got to get done. So I'm going to get it done. I've got four days done. So I'll just submit four days and finish the other four days. You know, I'm not going to stress that. And the good thing is that the teachers are behind, they're not even caught up where I am, I'm at a good point. Most of them are not even where I am. So, yeah.

For Melanie, the never-ending institutional pressure to complete an overwhelming amount of task with little support occupies her focus, nullifying a focus on career mobility into a higher rank. Ultimately, her focus on resilience helps her to refocus on her drive to make a meaningful impact, which translates to producing quality curriculum materials to support students who are underserved by the system in which she works. But a resilience framework that incentivizes perseverance influences her to “keep her mouth shut” rather than challenge a racialized status quo that undermines and diminishes her. As an individual with little authority to make institutional change, this pathway seems to be the safest and most effective way Melanie believe she can make the meaningful impact that brought her to this profession.

While resilience frames help Black professionals to persevere, resilience frames also function to help Black professional accept that their individual efforts can rarely effect the institutional changes necessary to alter their employment conditions. When Natalie consider the

that she had effectively met the end of her career trajectory in her workplace, she was able to reframe through a resilience frame tinged with acceptance. Natalie acceptance of the social realities of her workplace, however, was not grounded in critique, but an acknowledgement of the financial benefits her current work status affords her:

They pay me on time and every other Friday. There's so many great benefits. Like I can tele-work pretty much whenever I want to, I get annual leave, sick leave and everything. I can earn quite a time. I get bonuses. There is so many different perks that I have and I really enjoy it. Like I told you, I have really, really, really good days where I just really love my job. And then there's some days where I'm just like really cannot stand it. I feel like this position that I have, the job that I have, I'm very grateful for it and I really appreciate it for what it is. I think that I'm very realistic and knowing what the job is and what comes with being in this job, whether I'm in Atlanta or DC or Texas or whatever else, you know, and I mean like I'm very much aware of it and I think that that's the best thing for me. I appreciate all the like, the work life balance and the benefits and everything that it gives me. But at the same time I just kind of know where it's gonna lead me and I'm happy with it for now. And I think it's important for everyone to know that, you know, it's your decision to stay where you're at, you limit yourself essentially, you know what I mean? So things are like great with your job then that's fine. If things aren't so great[] it's my responsibility to just kind of like take control of that situation. So I'm happy. That's why I can rest easy at night because I don't feel like anybody else can really take anything away from me that what I've earned already.

Natalie's internal struggle concerning her job reflects the complexity of occupying a relatively privileged employment status structured by racial inequality, devalorization, and exploitation.

Natalie is keen to highlight all the ways her job anoints her with financial benefits that are unheard of in many other sectors of the labor market. As a result, she feels grateful and appreciative to work at a place where she excels and sometimes loves. But there are many drawbacks, as she has faced racialized hurt and feels stalled in her career with little to no opportunities for career mobility. So, she copes with an acceptance framework that give her "control" through awareness of her autonomy of her current employment situation. She has done the cost benefit analysis and to her, the financial benefits and stability of her job outweighs the career immobility and history of racist, sexist, and/or generalized inequality. No one can take this

decision away from her, and she will continue to make this decision until the circumstances change. A resilience framework helps Natalie, and many Black professionals, come to the difficult decision to stay put within their fields structured by inequity and false meritocracy.

But a resilience framework can influence Black professionals to see racial inequity as an opportunity to help other Black professionals access their exclusionary professions. Brandon, for example, states that the continuing racial disparities in his profession leave him with no other choice but to help his fellow Black professionals seeking to enter the field:

So, where does that leave me? For me, it's doing what I can to make sure that if those that want to be a lawyer, those that want to be that I'm doing what I can to make sure that they can meet the right people like whether it's the people in admissions and [University] or you know if they get into law school and if I can make a phone call to sort of grease the wheel, to get them in. Get them an interview or something like that or get them a second look. like that's, you know, that's this little small stuff. Now, I mean, I haven't really thought about big, larger stuff. [I understand that] You know what i'm saying? That, where does that leave me? You know, my job is to do for others what's been done for me, you know, which is, like, making sure that, you know, making phone calls on my behalf. You know, that's what been done for me. That's where that leaves me like. Yeah, you understand. It's a bleak way of looking at the outlook. I get that. But if you understand it, then it helps you cope with it, better.

Brandon believes that “even if you’re not yet in a position to work to make systemic change, you can do what you can” like helping those who wish to enter access to the right people who can get people the favorable evaluation necessary to enter the field. Brandon understands that this is “small” and acknowledges the bleakness of this reality but believes he can only be an agent of change by working within the structures of his profession. Again, we see that awareness of one’s circumstance helps to give Black professionals a sense of control and autonomy within a profession that is structured to maintain racial, gendered, and status inequality.

An acceptance framework also influenced Alia to focus on how she can help other Black professionals persevere and succeed in predominately white professions. When we discussed the continuing racial disparities of her workplace, she told me she felt “maybe resigned is the word

like, it's kinda is what it is. So just how do I navigate that space? ... Eyes wide open. This is just what it is. So how do I make it work for me?" The racist realities did very much bother Alia, but she sought to push forth and create strategies to navigate it in ways that reject despondency.

Ultimately, helping others to access her field gave her direction to continue her work:

Yes, so I think even when I look at the access that this current job title has given me to serve networks, like a lot of the professional development programs that I've been involved. Are definitely off the strength of my title at the capitol. Not to say that I don't think I'm great by myself. But, you know, it helps. And so I have been exposed to these many networks I know I haven't talked to or my Hey, did you know about such and such and such? I learned X, Y, Z in my program this weekend, maybe I can help you. So for me, it's just a spreading of the wealth. Like if there's something and learn they can help this person so let me call them soon as I get home and you know, drop this bug in your ear. and maybe And then two, recommending people for these programs, because there are a couple that have been in there like this program is strictly off of referrals. How's the regular person supposed to. [Yeah, yeah.] Get in? So for me is one or something Are you interested in this, let me refer you, Let me write you a recommendation. So it's been that type of resource to.

Alia understands that she occupies a very privileged position and can utilize her status to make a dent in a field marked by racial inequality and underrepresentation. Alia reframes the knowledge and networks she gains through her selection as “wealth” that she can spread through sharing the rewards of her status with others. Alia felt an urgency in particular to this because, while her job has not reached anything that resemble racial equity, she feels that any time, the rules can change, and she will see all the progress toward equal racial representation diminish:

That's why I tell people you go into these places where you have access, like you have to get everything that you can get out of it before the rules change. It's like an inside joke with some people that were like, we don't know how long we're gonna be here. But while we're here, we're going to try to learn everything. We can put some people in positions where we are. Until we're not wanted anymore. But it's true. Like even though we joke about it, it's I think it's true.

Alia still understands that, at the end of the day, her institution is run by elite white people who serve the career needs of the white elite. All the work she does can be overturned by the whims

of white people. However, she stays resilient and persevere to help others while she has the privilege to do so.

This section discusses the frameworks that Black professionals utilize to deal with the inequities and career immobility that characterize public work. The majority of my participants utilized resilience frames to anchor them within their workplaces and persevere with their work. Those in the beginning of their career more often presented resilience frames that highlighted enduring the racial and social inequalities for the moment, pushing through until they reach a better labor experience in the future. But others who had been in their professions for some time did not express the same hope that they could be selected into positions where they would be granted more influence or autonomy. While resilience frames help Black professionals to reframe the meaningful impact that drew them into their fields, by continuing to serve communities or helping other Black professionals access their fields. Thus, resilience frames are significant for helping Black professionals maintain their positions within public, mission-based work.

## **8 CONCLUSION**

During the week of March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022, The United States Senate held the confirmation hearing of Ketanji Brown Jackson. The Democratic party, serving the political interests of most people of color in the United States, nominated Jackson to uphold values of diversity by insisting that the judiciary reflect the diverse populations of its coalition. Jackson, like many Black professionals working in elite spaces, detailed her experiences of feeling lonely and othered during her time at Harvard. But she remembered fondly that a Black woman that she had never

met told her to be resilient and persevere. Now, Ketanji Brown Jackson stood before her peers to be confirmed as the first Black woman to serve on the highest court in the United States.

But Jackson's impeccable credentials could not protect her from a predominately White Republican party seeking to white frame her at any cost. Jackson frequently faced interruptions while Republican senators launched racialized attacks that painted Jackson as unqualified, despite the evaluations of legal experts to the contrary. The project to undercut Jackson's credentials was also shared by a conservative media sphere that began a campaign arguing that the public should be made aware of her LSAT scores. Republicans also sought to associate Ketanji with a willful misinterpretation of critical race theory, charging that she held shadowy political motives to other her as fundamentally unamerican. While Republicans were ultimately unsuccessful in undermining Jackson's confirmation, they were successful in launching racist attacks that further divided the electorate and created one of the most contentious confirmation hearings in U.S. history. The spectacle illustrates that no level of credential can protect Black professionals from White authorities seeking to use white racial frames to devalue and other them within institutions that grant Whites disproportionate influence.

While Democrats were unanimously supportive of Jackson, they did not offer much in the contestation of the racist attacks launched by their Republican peers. Sen Alex Padilla of California recognized what many Black people understood when he said that "people of color, particularly those who have the audacity to try to be the first, often have to work twice as hard to get half the respect." But Padilla only doubles down on Jackson's stellar qualifications instead of directly countering the racist attacks of his Republican peers. Rep. Brenda Lawrence of Michigan, a fellow Black woman, recalled being furious watching Republicans go on a racialized tirade. However, she told the Washington Post that she was "thoroughly impressed" by

Jackson's ability to remain composed as Republicans launched their racist attacks. In fact, all Democrats could seem to do was be impressed with how well Jackson maintained her composure against racialized attacks. Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey noted Jackson's "grit," "grace," and "extraordinary demeanor during the times where people were saying things to you that are actually out of the norm" before bringing Jackson to stoic tears by acknowledging her great sacrifices and the joy she would bring to the Black community. But symbolic recognition of what Black professionals can achieve through their willpower does not fundamentally alter the racist conditions of a workplace structured to devalue their status and contributions.

While the confirmation of Jackson is an elevated moment in a rarified and elite institution, it perfectly encapsulates the moment of *racist inertia* that grips the current racial order of the United States. I use the term *racist inertia* because there is partial acknowledgement, by people of color and many well-meaning Whites, that racial inequality continues to be an issue within the country. Despite this acknowledgement, there is simultaneously no authoritative body to provide the force or resources necessary to fundamentally alleviate the racial inequality that continues to depress the lived experiences of Black communities. My dissertation on Black professionals working in predominately White workplaces seeks to highlight the consequences of *racist inertia* for the experiences of Black professionals at work. My interviews with Black professionals highlight the general acknowledgement, among Black professionals and maybe even a few of their white peers, that racial inequality persists in their workplaces. However, despite this acknowledgement, the distribution of favorable labor conditions, opportunities, and evaluations remain racially unequal. The racially unequal experiences continue because job authority hierarchies grant disproportionately white leadership incontestable legitimacy to select and evaluate in ways that perpetuate homogenously White ranks. Racial inequality also persists

because little is done from those with job authority to alter the workplace in a way that would challenge the racialized hierarchies that continue to devalue Black professionals. With no support, Black professionals, like Kentanji Brown Jackson, have no other options than to be stoic, offer “grace and grit,” and hope that workplace peers offer the fair evaluations necessary for career mobility and fulfilment.

As such, Black professionals persevere and work with the understanding that they cannot rely on the actors of their workplaces to challenge the racially stratified order of their workplaces. Thus, Black professionals largely understood that, to make it work at work, the only effort they could rely upon is their individual effort. I began my dissertation theorizing the *racialized contradictory status* to frame the experiences of contemporary Black professionals who simultaneously experience socioeconomic opportunities unheard in U.S. history while also living in a society structured by systemic racism. Yes, Black professionals in a Post-Civil Rights era have had generations of greater racial equality, and many have been fortunate enough to obtain the social, economic, and cultural capital to land and maintain employment within exclusionary and disproportionately white professions. But the actions and disproportionate authority of Whites within workplaces specifically and the United States more broadly perpetuate a racial hierarchy that devalues and denigrates Black professionals’ material and symbolic standing within the workplace.

My research underscores how many Black professionals widely understood that their Black racial status would depreciate their workplace value. They understand that being Black would require they manage the white racial framing, evaluations, and expectations of their white colleagues and workplace superiors. But what other choice do they have as leadership in their workplaces continue to mobilize no resources to challenge the racially stratified pathways that

perpetuate racial disadvantage in their workplaces? Within this context, I pose my overarching research questions: *what racialized practices and frames do Black professionals utilize to navigate and make sense of their racialized status within majority white workplaces?* My findings illustrate some keyways that Black professionals navigate the workplace characterized by racial inequality and racist inertia.

## **8.1 Key Findings of Research**

Chapter 4 highlights how Whites' authority over the racial discourse of the workplace limits the ability of Black professionals to act in their racial interest and counter frame against white racial framing. A legacy of systemic racism ensures that most professionalized workplaces are governed by predominately White centers of authority who adjudicate racialized conflicts in ways that limit Black professionals' ability to illuminate the racism they experience in the workplace. I thus conclude that an imposition of white authority in the professionalized workplace creates a specific racial dialectic – where Whites forward white interest through white racial framing and Black professionals avoid anti-racist counter framing to accommodate white authority and maintain an idealized worker status. I argue that the racism discourse in professional workplaces currently functions to reflect white institutional preferences by minimizing and ignoring the racist harm that Black professionals experience in the workplace. Thus, Whites' authority over the racism discourse of the workplace maintains racist inertia by legitimizing the lack of intervention against widespread white racial framing that reifies white advantage and racial inequality within workplaces.

Chapter 5 highlights how the persistence of racial inequality in workplaces has specific ramifications on the workplace experiences of Black women professionals. Black women were hyper aware that they are members of two social groups – Black people and women – that are

marginalized outside of the white male groups where workplace power and authority are concentrated within their workplaces. However, by being members of multiple marginalized social groups, Black women possessed multiple vantage points by which to recognize and act upon the inequality they faced in the workplace. As such, Black women were more often than their Black male peers to acknowledge their racial diminishment and construct techniques to navigate their workplace marginalization. But their recognition of workplace marginalization could not contest the ways that Whites of all genders marginalized them in the workplace. So many Black women still had to rely on their individual effort within a workplace that provides no institutional support for their unique marginalization.

Chapter 6 focuses specifically on private workplaces to highlight how the valuation of profits over worker welfare created unique experiences marginalization and exploitation. With little recognition of their racialized plight, Black professionals hunkered down in the practice of a racialized merit contract, where they believed they must put in extra effort to overcome white colleagues' white racial framing of their workplace performance. So, while these Black professionals understand that racism, or their lack of a white racial status, could diminish the initial evaluations of their value in the workplace, the extra effort can help to extinguish racist doubts and allow their rightful ascension in their companies. But the idea that meritocratic work can be traded fairly for favorable evaluation and rewards contradicts the immense power their private, profit-centered workplaces have in structuring their workplaces to value profit over employee welfare. The practice of the racialized merit contract only made Black professionals more susceptible to exploitation. The exploitation is racialized because Black professionals feel that they must put in extra effort to combat the racialized evaluations of their predominately white peers. Thus, workplaces can exploit Black professionals' racialized reactions to White

racial framing that influences them to work harder to achieve positive evaluations. This exploitation is racist because their white counterparts can sidestep this due to their white privilege.

Chapter 7 focuses on the Black professionals who dedicate their careers to making a meaningful impact in public facing workplaces. But a central problem with the narratives of *meaningful impact* is that it obscures the reality that serving a community occurs within the institutional context of a workplace structured by White authority. What Black professionals individually defined as meaningful impact did not reflect how the predominately white authorial center defined and mobilized resources to achieve meaningful impact. Black professionals in public work expressed less of a belief that their individual merit could help them be selected into positions of authority that concentrated Whites. Thus, many practiced resilience frames that focused on their individual efforts, often becoming disillusioned in the process. The focus on individual effort was a consequence of the lack of institutional response that would help these professionals make the meaningful impact that initially drew them to their professions.

A major theme that connects my empirical chapters is the absence of institutional support in contesting racism and racial inequality. With the lack of institutional support, Black professionals became solely responsible for determining how to move forward in workplaces structured by racial inequality and inertia. The continuing maintenance of predominately White authority centers influences Black professionals to conceal their experiences of racial inequality to be evaluated as ideal workers by White leadership. It is due to the absence of institutional support that Black professionals must double down on their individual merit to challenge the racialized evaluations of their workplace performance. It is due to the lack of institutional acknowledgement of racial inequality that contributes to their decisions to persevere,

disillusioned, within their workplaces. It is due to the lack of institutional acknowledgement that many seek work elsewhere, with the hope that their future workplaces have more favorable racial politics.

## **8.2 Directions for Future Research**

Future research should continue to explore how the racial, classed, and gendered relations of the workplace create unique experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and inequality for Black professionals. Because my research is qualitative, it cannot generalize as to how representative the narratives within my research are to the general population of Black professionals working in predominately White workplaces. A quantitative research study would help us better understand more broadly how Black professionals seek to put forth the individual effort to cope with the absence of institutional support in professionalized workplaces. What I hope my research can provide instead is an entry point for conceptualizing the specific meanings derived from the experience of working in a workplace structured by racial inequality.

Future research can better theorize how variations in workplace composition or location could contribute to different experiences for Black professionals. For example, my research does not pay enough attention to differences in geographical context – how many different regions with specific racial histories uniquely contribute to the experiences of Black professionals within their organizations? Also, how does different composition of gender (in some non-profit sector, White women can be very prominent in leadership) or different expressions of job authority hierarchies alter the racialized experiences of Black professionals in their workplaces? Also, to better tease the racialized dynamics of predominately white workplaces, future research could compare Black professionals' experiences within workplaces that are predominately Black or have more representative racial demographics. A study that includes these racial demographics

would help to tease out how much of the inequality faced by Black professionals is due to White authority, or broader problems of the authority hierarchies found in professionalized work.

A key limitation of my research is the lack of engagement with the COVID pandemic and its monumental influence over work experiences and conditions in the United States. Future research should consider how the COVID pandemic has influenced the racialized dynamics of professionalized work. One may conclude that the shift to work-from-home would drastically alleviate many of the racialized experiences Black professionals face at work. Black professionals would theoretically encounter less overt racist actions/expressions and would also spend less time managing the white framed evaluations and expectations of their peers. However, my research focus on the lack of mobilization of resources to contest racial inequality highlights possible ways that Black professionals will still suffer in the work from home era. Issues of face-to-face racism can easily be replaced with racialized marginalization, where Black professionals could become even more peripheral in a workplace culture that values Whites over them. Also, many of the face-to-face interactions are replaced with digital ones, and these digital interactions are no freer from racialized dynamics than their physical ones (Daniels 2012). Further research is necessary to understand the specific contours that the COVID pandemic and its changes to workplace structures will have in altering or maintaining racial inequality in the workplace.

### **8.3 Towards Collective Solutions for Black Professionals**

So, what does this mean going forward? What can workplaces do to counteract the racial inertia that pervades their workplaces? A key starting point would be to acknowledge that the contemporary experiences of racial inertia are a consequence of the legacy of systemic racism. Workplace leadership needs to accept that the current landscape of the workplace is structured by

a history of racist exclusion that contributes directly to predominately white authority centers and the underrepresentation of Black professionals in their organizations. Recognizing this legacy would help workplaces to pay more attention to the historical mechanisms that contribute to racial inequality.

But the historical legacy of systemic racism is only a partial contributor to racial inequality, contemporary practices continue to concentrate workplace authority within White social groups that perpetuate racial inequality. To truly combat racist inertia, workplaces must acknowledge their contributions and put forth mechanisms to mobilize resources to alleviate the causes of racial inequity in the workplace. A first step would be to anchor one's anti-racist policies in research and the voices of Black professionals within the workplace. My research highlights how this would mean relinquishing control of the racism discourse and truly hearing the voices of Black professionals who highlight the racist harm and racial inequality they have experienced in the workplace. It also means being vigilant of white racial framing and having zero tolerance for racist speech and actions that mar the workplace value of Black professionals. My research also highlights that most of the racialized harm that Black professionals experience does not happen at one point-in-time, but over the course of their careers. Thus, workplaces must also be aware of the experiences of their Black professionals over time and instill measures that focus on retention, by again focusing on the voices of Black professionals.

But a key point of my research is that the racial inequality that Black professionals experience is not solely racialized but intersects with key capitalist structures that are embedded with work in the neoliberal age. The absence of workplace interventions into racial inequality will only be confounded by the greater emphasis on deregulation and severe cuts to organizational costs to generate profitability for those in managerial, executive, and shareholder

positions (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019; others). The greater expectations that employees should handle costs that were once the responsibility of employers coincide with the reality that Black professionals must also handle the “cost” of racial inequality on their careers as individuals (Harvey Wingfield 2020). As U.S. workplaces and greater society have withdrawn themselves from the welfare of employees and citizens, it is no wonder that many Black professionals have come to understand that it is up to their efforts alone to handle their racialized workplace issues. Workplace organizations would have to reject “market dependency” as the keyway to achieve individual freedom in the modern workplace (Konczal 2021; Meiksins Wood 2017). Only by rejecting individual reliance on the market can workplaces move to the collective aid necessary and provide the aid to Black professionals to counter the collective issue of racial inequality in the workplace.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Interview Protocol of Black Professional Participants

*This is a study about black professionals who work in predominately white workplaces and organizations. The questions I would like to discuss deal with issues associated with being a racial/ethnic minority working in a mainstream, white institution. Many of the topics discussed will require self-reflection and involve making personal assessments about your professional and personal experiences. Your participation in this study is strictly confidential. Interviews are normally recorded, but only to provide an accurate translation of the information discussed in the interview. The recording will be subsequently deleted after transcription, and your identity will remain anonymous. Your participation in this study is important. However, should you at any time wish to end the interview, you may do so. Please feel free to ask me questions about the interview or study at any time. Shall we begin?*

#### A. General Work Questions

1. Where do you work? How long have you worked at your current place of employment?
2. Could you paint a picture, for me, of a general day at your workplace?
3. How do you feel about your work?
4. How do you feel about the particular place you are in your career?

#### B. Racial Identity, Ideology, and Work

1. What does a 'racial identity' mean to you?  
How do you identify racially?
- 2a. How important is 'Blackness' to your racial identity?
- 2b. How important is your racial identity to your experience as a professional?
3. Is this the first time working in a majority white workplace  
How do you feel about the experience of working in predominately white workplaces?

4. Why do you think there are so few black people at your workplace?
5. What do you think should be done about the number of black people at your job?
6. How do you think the experience of working in a majority white workplace differs from workplaces that are majority black?
7. As a professional, how do you think your workplace values your expertise/what you do?  
How do you think race, if at all, plays a role in how you are evaluated?

### C. The Workplace as White Space

1. Workplaces can require their workers to alter themselves to ‘fit’ into the workplaces culture. Do you alter yourself to fit into your workplace?  
[yes] How so?
2. How do you think race, if at all, plays a part in who ‘fits’ in your workplace?
3. How would you characterize the racial climate of your workplace?  
[probe] with co-workers?  
relationship with clients?  
relationship with higher management?
4. Are there black people in higher management at your workplace?  
How would you describe your relationship with them?  
How do you think race, if at all, plays a role in who finds themselves in higher management?
5. How would you describe the influence that black people have on the day-to-day operations of your workplace?
6. Have you experienced any moments in your workplace that you would characterize as ‘racist?’

[If yes] How do you deal with moments that you would characterize as ‘racist’ in your workplace?

7. How would you describe how your workplace functions when dealing with racial issues?

8. How does your workplace seek to ensure that all of its employees are treated the same, regardless of race?

[if yes] How do you feel about these efforts?

#### D. Black Person, White Institution

1. How would you describe the contemporary racial climate of the U.S. in general? How does this climate relate to your understanding of your status in your predominately white workplace?

2. How would you describe your general feelings about the persisting racial disparities that exist in your profession?

3. How do you think your specific workplace fits into these issues of persisting racial inequality for black people?

4. How do you think your profession, if at all, should address this issue?

Have you seen evidence in your workplace that these issues are being addressed?

5. How do you think you, as a black professional, fit into this occurrence of larger racial disparities that afflict your profession?

**Appendix B: Name, Gender, and Occupation of Research Participants**

Name	Gender	Occupation
Jonathan	Man	Teacher
Bryant	Man	HealthCare Professional
Daryl	Man	IT, Business Consultant
Tiffany	Woman	Public Health Professional
Natalie	Woman	Defense Auditor
Alia	Woman	Chief of Staff for Politician
Justin	Man	IT Consultant
Hakeem	Man	Corporate Officer, Chef
Brandon	Man	Law School Student
Matthew	Man	Supervisor, Law Firm
David	Man	Accountant
Melanie	Woman	Curriculum Specialist, Instructor Coach
Morris	Man	Dean, For Profit University
Cory	Man	Financial Analyst
Stephanie	Man	Lab Research Assistant
Wayne	Man	IT, Sound Specialist
Brianna	Woman	Fellow, Mental Health Professional
Imani	Woman	Fraud Analyst
Lindsay	Woman	Ceramics & Sculpture Teacher
Catherine	Woman	Executive Assistant
Daniel	Woman	College Instructor
Nick	Man	IT, Project Manager
Alexandra	Woman	Director, Housing Agency
Janet	Woman	Teacher
Pauline	Woman	Pharmacist