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Trespassers? A narrative study of black women academics in science at a South African Universit

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2023
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/36905

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the narratives of black women academics in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) related fields in order to understand their experiences since their post-apartheid inclusion in higher education. The aim of the research was to explore the stories that black women academics in science tell about their early lives, and careers, and to understand how they negotiate the raced and patriarchal cultures of science disciplines and to study the disruptive possibilities they enable in the sciences. The study follows a narrative approach and uses intersectionality, Critical Race Theory and habitus as theoretical frameworks. Snowball and purposive sampling were used to recruit 10 black women academics between the ages of 25 and 65 who had worked as academics for at least three years and the data was analysed using thematic analysis inflected through the narrative lens. The findings indicate that despite most of the women growing up in working class homes, their parents valued and advocated for the pursuit of education. Some of the participants also attended Model C/private school which allowed them to build their cultural capital which they would later use to navigate the academy. Second, we found that black women academics experience hardships such as bullying, micro-aggressions, gendered and racist interactions that often lead to feelings of isolation, lack of support and limitations on other roles that they have. Lastly, we found that women academics disrupt through an insistence that the future has got be different and by remaining hopeful that attracting more black women into the science field and academia and epistemic rupture will alter the academy. This research extends studies on space, race and gender in higher education.

Keywords: black women, STEM, African feminism, habitus, higher education, race