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"Against a sharp white background": How Black women experience the white gaze at work

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Abstract

Whiteness is a pervasive context in (post)colonial organizations that maintains its enduring presence through everyday practices such as the *white gaze*: seeing people's bodies through the lens of whiteness. The white gaze distorts perceptions of people who deviate from whiteness, subjecting them to bodily scrutiny and control. Understanding how the white gaze manifests is therefore important for understanding the marginalization of particular bodies in organizations. We therefore center Black women's narratives to examine the following research question: *How is the white gaze enacted and experienced at work?* We conducted a critical discourse analysis of 1169 tweets containing the hashtag #BlackWomenAtWork and identified four mechanisms of the white gaze whereby whiteness is *imposed*, *presumed*, *venerated*, and *forced* on Black women's bodies. We conclude with a discussion of the white gaze as an apparatus to enforce gendered racialized hierarchies vis-à-vis the body and how foregrounding whiteness deepens our understanding of marginalization at work.

KEYWORDS
Black women, critical discourse analysis, critical whiteness studies, embodiment, white gaze

1 | INTRODUCTION

"I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." This imagery appears in Zora Neale Hurston's (1928) essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," wherein she discusses how she experiences her body as she entered majority-White spaces. Hurston realizes that she does "not always feel colored," especially during her childhood in a mostly Black town, but does when thrown against a sharp white background, as was the case when she enrolled at Barnard "[a]mong the thousand white persons" (Hurston, 1928).

Nearly one century later, Hurston's imagery resonates with many Black women across the diaspora, especially those living and working in predominantly white communities and organizations. For example, Claudia Rankine (2014) references Hurston's essay in response to the media scrutiny lodged against tennis prodigy Serena Williams, whose "body, trapped in a racial imaginary … is being governed" by a pervasive *white gaze* that determines which bodies are valid, legitimate, deserving, and civil (p. 29). It is only when these bodies are thrown against a sharp white background and fail to blend in that they are "deemed threatening and in need of containment" (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo, 2010, p. xiii). Thus, how bodies are gazed upon and evaluated depends on how (and where) they are situated in larger power structures.

This pervasive white gaze was also apparent when two prominent US Black women were thrust against a sharp white background on the public political stage. On March 28, 2017, Congresswoman Maxine Waters and veteran White House Correspondent April Ryan were chastised on national television. Then Fox News host Bill O'Reilly insulted Rep. Waters' hair, saying: "I didn't hear a word she said, I was looking at the James Brown wig" (Edes & Taylor, 2017). That same day, then Press Secretary Sean Spicer scolded Ryan for shaking her head in disagreement while he spoke (Edes & Taylor, 2017). Within hours, two White men scrutinized the bodies of two powerful Black women in professional settings. These events resonated with activist Brittany Packnett who felt like she was watching her own experiences with the white gaze mirrored on the public stage. Inspired, Packnett tweeted the following:[1]

After Packnett tweeted, #Black Women At Work became a trending hashtag on Twitter, generating over 200,000 original responses and reactions within 48 h of Packnett's initial post. With this hashtag, she encouraged thousands of Black women across the world to share their own workplace experiences on Twitter. It quickly became evident that Black women were keenly aware of—and eager for others to learn—how others perceive, scrutinize, and punish their bodies at work, especially in the context of sharp white backgrounds that characterize

so many organizations. Before long, Packnett's thread catalyzed an archive of narratives illustrating the many ways that the white gaze deems Black women's bodies "out of control" at work.

In this article, we analyze this emergent digital archive of Black women's everyday workplace experiences amidst sharp white background(s). We use an embodiment perspective and critical approach to understand how Black women's bodies are seen through the lens of the white gaze. Embodiment refers to our "being-in-the-world" (Young, 1980, p. 142), or how we experience our bodies across time, space, and place (Acker, 1990). Our sense of being-in-the-world is inextricably linked to how others view us, such as the white gaze (Fanon, 1986) through which Black women are often viewed. Packnett demonstrates how embodiment is essential for understanding which bodies are deemed "acceptable" versus "out of control" in contexts where whiteness is embedded and normalized. We therefore also use an embodiment perspective to help us understand how power is built and maintained in racialized organizations (Ray, 2019)—namely, by leveraging the white gaze to determine which bodies are safe versus threatening; worthy versus undeserving; valid versus illegitimate; acceptable versus deviant; valuable versus expendable.

The central research question guiding this work asks: *How do Black women experience the white gaze at work?* We contribute to theories related to embodiment, intersectionality, and critical whiteness studies in at least three ways. First, we use an embodiment perspective to advance what is already known about workplace inequality by demonstrating the integral role of the body in maintaining power relations and inequality. Specifically, we focus on whiteness as a system of power and identify the mechanisms and practices that maintain this racist system through regulation, punishment, and control of Black women's bodies. We therefore build theory about how whiteness permeates workplaces by advancing our understanding of the mechanisms and practices that authorize control over those who deviate from whiteness. Second, we use an embodiment perspective to expand ongoing research about marginalized employees' experiences. We build on theory about the embodiment of race and gender within multiple systems of oppression and implications for perceptions of people (and their bodies) in the workplace (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019a; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Smith, Baskerville, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019). Finally, we spotlight the often-invisible role that whiteness plays in the working lives of marginalized workers. By drawing on an embodiment perspective and Big Data approach to qualitative research (Bisel, Barge, Dougherty, Lucas, & Tracy, 2014; Mills, 2019) that centers Black women's experiences, we illuminate whiteness as an invisible yet pervasive force in contemporary organizations. In foregrounding the context of whiteness, we also theorize the white gaze as a set of practices by which whiteness regulates people's routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). Our aim in spotlighting the sharp white background against which non-White people are constantly compared is to better understand the ideologies and power relations in organizations that constrain Black women's bodies and, by extension, their agency and dignity.

1.1 | Black women's embodiment of gender and race in organizations

Embodiment refers to how we experience our bodies (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Tomkins & Eatough, 2013) as well as how we contend with others' perceptions of our bodies. Perceptions of people's bodies (e.g., how they look, dress, talk, move, etc.) are filtered through the lenses of racism and sexism. These racialized and gendered (mis) perceptions are deeply seated in settler-colonial dynamics that render Black women's bodies as "sites of contestation" (Guy-Shefthall, 1995, p. 359). Black women's bodies are similarly contested at work, at times in contradictory ways, such as simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility (e.g., McCluney & Rabelo, 2019a; Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2019). Black women's actions are also contested; they are perceived as more hostile when they display the same ambiguously aggressive behavior as White people (e.g., Duncan, 1976). These attributions reinforce the "Angry Black Woman" (ABW)" trope, one of many controlling images (Collins, 2000) that shape how others view Black women at work, and which in turn affect Black women's wellbeing (Jerald, Cole, Ward, & Avery, 2017). In this way, bodies are gendered and racialized texts that convey how emotions and actions are

acknowledged (or ignored), perceived, and evaluated. An embodiment perspective therefore helps elucidate how power is conferred and contested at work.

We draw on an embodiment perspective to understand how people experience marginalization in organizations via practices that control, regulate, and punish specific bodies at work. Perceptions of Black women's bodies in the workplace illustrate how norms are rooted in whiteness and therefore confer privilege and power to members of dominant groups. As a system of power, whiteness dictates how bodies are recognized, scrutinized, and evaluated in organizations vis-à-vis the white gaze. These hierarchies are rooted in white supremacy and benefit those with greater proximity to whiteness (Gualtieri, 2009). In the following section, we discuss how these hierarchies are enabled through everyday practices that are rooted in whiteness while often masquerading as universal.

1.2 | Sharp white backgrounds: Whiteness and the white gaze at work

Zora Neale Hurston uses the imagery of sharp white backgrounds in much the same way that contemporary critical scholars discuss whiteness. Whiteness encompasses "(1) a location of structural advantage; (2) a standpoint from which White people look at themselves, others and society; and (3) a set of normalized cultural practices" (Liu, 2017, p. 458). Black women deviate from whiteness given their (1) lack of structural advantage, (2) standpoint as objects (vs. subjects) of the white gaze, and (3) exclusion from normalized cultural practices. These exclusionary practices are taken for granted as conventional ways of doing or being (Bourdieu, 1977). Practices are learned through socialization yet often remain invisible, taken for granted as common sense, or normalized as the status quo. Such is the case with the white gaze, a set of practices that reflect and reinforce whiteness.

It is through these racialized practices that colonialism and institutional racism create enduring harm for marginalized groups (Nkomo & Ariss, 2014). Common manifestations of whiteness in organizations include the hoarding of power, reliance on binary thinking, and paternalism (Okun, n.d.). These practices are normalized and valued in many organizations, often evading detection as expressions of white ideologies (Ray, 2019; Sue, 2006). By masquerading as invisible and normative, whiteness is presumed to be neutral, universal, and preferred; yet, as Ray (2016) points out, the dominance of whiteness is exactly what enables its invisibility and perceived universality. Indeed, power enables White people (and those with greater proximity to whiteness) to maintain the role of the subject, and rarely if ever the object, of the white gaze in social institutions (hooks, 1992). Organizations often confer privilege and power to those with greater proximity to whiteness at the expense of marginalized people's agency and dignity. Thus, a focus on practices is important for identifying and understanding the processes through which the white gaze filters perceptions of, and treatment toward, Black women at work. We aim to identify specific practices by which whiteness is embraced and enacted in the workplace.

The white gaze is a set of practices that communicates whiteness and reinforces white supremacy. These practices are both discursive (conveyed and interpreted through texts) and social (enacted in everyday life such as workplace interactions; Fairclough, 1992). Through these discursive and social practices, the white gaze racializes people's routines, roles, and relationships (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017), which helps explain how whiteness manifests in organizations. As the lens through which all bodies are seen, the white gaze encompasses practices that reflect (and affect) how power operates. Erskine and Bilimoria (2019) describe the white gaze as "the ubiquitous system of surveillance, permissions, and exclusions" that render Black women as "guests or strangers in White spaces" (p. 320). In this way, the white gaze is a constant presence that projects whiteness onto Black women (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). Moreover, it reinforces whiteness by dictating how Black women are seen, what they are allowed to do, and where they are allowed to be. The white gaze therefore distorts how Black women are seen, often as both invisible and hypervisible (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019a). As a result, Black women must invest resources to contend with the white gaze at work. More research is needed to understand how the white gaze distorts Black women, how they navigate the white gaze, and at what costs. By centering Black women's work experiences in and

through their bodies (Tomkins & Eatough, 2013) we can understand how whiteness is enacted and experienced in organizations via the white gaze.

2 | METHOD

We draw on intersectionality as an analytic tool (May, 2015; Rabelo & Cortina, 2016) to understand how the white gaze reinforces interlocking systems of oppression. Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional framework suggests that Black women are subjected to unique forms of bodily scrutiny and harm given their positioning at the nexus of patriarchy and whiteness (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019a; Smith et al., 2019). Black women's bodies are routinely seen as deviant for not adhering to "ideals" of their racial group, gender group, and the "normative" bodies of White able-bodied men (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019a). To understand how the white gaze constructs this deviance, we center Black women's bodily experiences. This represents an *intracategorical* approach to intersectionality, which maps shared experiences within a social group as well as "differences and complexities of experience embodied in that location" (McCall, 2005, p. 1782).

Our method is also rooted in contextualization (Härtel & O'Connor, 2014; Rousseau & Fried, 2001). We view context as "opportunities and constraints that affect the occurrence and meaning of organizational behavior" (Johns, 2006, p. 386). Under this definition, whiteness operates as an "omnibus context" (p. 391) that informs whose bodies may exist within specific roles, occupations, or organizations, ultimately reflecting (and reinforcing) gendered, racialized hierarchies (Acker, 1990). In adherence with best practices for contextualizing organizational research (e.g., Härtel & O'Connor, 2014; Rousseau & Fried, 2001), we provide rich descriptions of whiteness and the white gaze to contextualize Black women's narratives and experiences.

2.1 | Data collection

Our unit of analysis was tweets that included the hashtag #BlackWomenAtWork. We accessed approximately 284,000 tweets through Document the Now's (docnow.io) digital archive of public social media content. The archive (curated on March 29, 2017) spanned the first 48 h that #BlackWomenAtWork was a trending topic on Twitter. The archivist (Jules, 2017) used Hydrator to collect tweets in four waves. Given our inclusion criteria, we focused on tweets captured within Wave 1 ($n = 8237$), spanning the first 12 h after the hashtag began to trend on Twitter. First, we excluded retweets (reposted messages) to prevent popular posts or spam from dominating our sample ($n = 6511$). Second, we excluded tweets written by bots or on behalf of companies, as well as tweets containing spam or trolling ($n = 378$). Next, we excluded 179 tweets that meaningfully engaged with the hashtag but did not describe a specific work experience (e.g., "Everything is in #BlackWomenAtWork; I'm too exhausted to write my own"). Following these criteria, 1169 tweets met eligibility criteria for sample inclusion.

2.2 | Data analysis

We use critical discourse analysis (CDA; e.g., Fairclough, 2001; Oswick, 2012) to understand the white gaze as an organizational phenomenon as well as illuminate the practices by which it regulates bodies at work. Our aim is to understand how whiteness is embedded within organizations via social and discursive practices (Fairclough, 1992), including routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). Therefore, a focus on texts as sites where meaning is conveyed and created is a valuable starting point for theory-building. CDA in particular is important for understanding the power relations that are (re)created through texts. We therefore use CDA to (1) interpret microlevel narratives (i.e., specific experiences of the white gaze described in tweets), (2) identify the
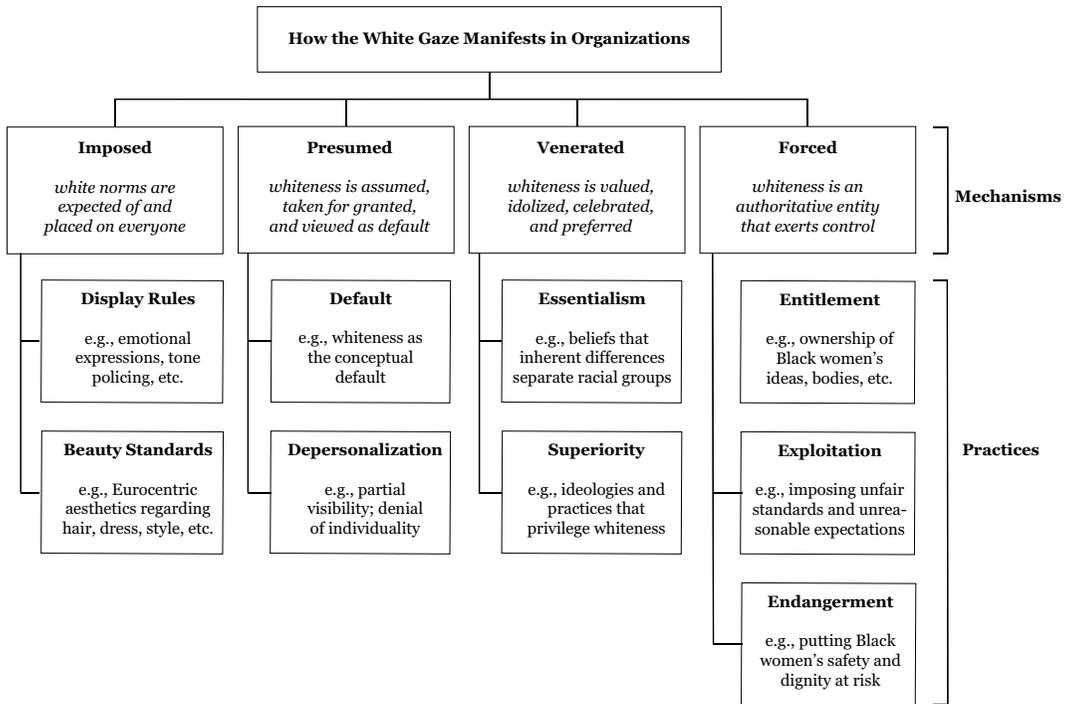
FIGURE 1 Mechanisms of the White gaze in organizations

social and discursive practices that sustain the white gaze, and (3) draw inferences about how the white gaze reflects and reinforces whiteness as an omnibus context in organizations. In doing so, we both bridge and challenge artificial boundaries across micro-, meso-, and macrolevels of analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Oswick, 2012).

We analyzed our data along three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 1992). For the text dimension of CDA, we used a fine-grained, inductive approach to examine the tweets. We used an iterative open coding process wherein all three authors read all of the tweets in the dataset, identified their literal meanings, interpreted their figurative meanings, and organized them into larger categories of embodied experiences. In the discursive practice dimension, we examined the textual dimension as a site of meaning-making, considering "who" produced the texts (as well as "when" and "where"). Black women strategically used a public digital space to inform others of how their bodies are (dis)regarded and controlled at work. By virtue of participating with the hashtag, Black women also amplified their collective voice that helped elevate their individual experiences into a larger public discourse. Finally, for the social practice dimension, we considered how whiteness as a context is embedded in the wider institutional and political landscape. #BlackWomenAtWork trended several months after Donald Trump's presidential campaign that was replete with racist rhetoric (Pérez Huber, 2016). We therefore considered how discursive practices inflicted on Black women's bodies reflected whiteness as a dominant ideology in workplaces. Synthesizing across these dimensions, CDA enables us to understand how whiteness configures Black women's bodily experiences in the workplace through the white gaze.

3 | FINDINGS

We conceptualize the white gaze as an apparatus through which whiteness is reinforced in organizations; therefore, we organize our findings around manifestations of the white gaze that affect Black women's bodily experiences

(Figure 1). Our CDA identified four mechanisms through which whiteness manifests in organizations via the white gaze. We find that whiteness is (1) imposed, (2) presumed, (3) venerated, and (4) forced through the use of the white gaze. Furthermore, we find that each of these mechanisms is associated with a unique set of practices, or everyday behaviors through which White and non-Black people of color mirror, uphold, and reinforce power relations, including racism and sexism (Adler & Pouliot, 2011).

3.1 | Whiteness as imposed

The first set of practices we discuss encompasses how whiteness is *imposed* at work, primarily through the adoption of Eurocentric standards as the basis for organization-wide norms and expectations. As a result, nonwhite employees are expected to conform to these white organizational norms and are sanctioned when they fail to accommodate the white gaze. We find that this mechanism of the white gaze is associated with two key practices through which whiteness is imposed on Black women: white display rules and white beauty standards.

3.1.1 | Display rules

This set of practices encompasses how whiteness is imposed via display rules, or the racialized feeling rules (Wingfield, 2010) that reflect white norms and regulate minoritized workers' emotional expression (Mirchandani, 2003). One common enactment of white display rules that we found in our data was the scrutiny of Black women's facial expressions. Several Black women were told things like, "Your faces are making me uncomfortable" and "Constantly being told to smile because I 'look mad' when I'm just neutral and minding my business." White display rules also affected how Black women negotiate the *ABW* trope, which is imposed to control Black women's bodies through tone-policing and labeling their general demeanor as "angry." Many tweets in this theme described times when Black women were acting calmly yet were perceived to be angry, such as "assertion being interpreted as aggression." Another woman recounted a time when a White man told her boss "he felt threatened by me because I sometimes speak with my hands." Sometimes Black women experienced the white gaze via ABW stereotyping when performing their job responsibilities, such as attempting to offer a different perspective or critical feedback (e.g., "Being told I was really opinionated while giving suggestions during a brainstorming meeting"). The ABW as an embodied stereotype further emerged in the language that Black women's coworkers used:

> My boss told someone she was scared of me, talking bout I look scary … Really!?

> Getting called words like "sassy" or even "scary" when I'm just chilling yet being firm. I'm 5′1, how am I scary?

> New coworker [White woman] comes up to me and says, "I was a little afraid of you when I first started." I'm 5′7, 120 lbs.

These tweets demonstrate how people use the white gaze to misread Black women's bodies as threatening and dangerous. Imposing the ABW stereotype negatively affected Black women's careers, including their job security and safety: "being the youngest & smallest at a job but sent [to] break up an altercation [because] I appear tougher by people who don't know me." Another woman shared how the ABW imbues the feedback she receives: "[I] don't shuck & jive and smile all the time, [so] I'm labeled bitchy and unapproachable in every [performance] review."

Aware of these potential consequences of the ABW stereotype, some women anticipated stereotyping and enacted strategies to manage stereotypes and scrutiny among their coworkers, customers, and managers such as, "Being more accommodating and less demanding to enhance one's career in fear of being discredited as the ABW," and "Having to be fake and play victim when you are disrespected to avoid being seen as angry and aggressive." These strategies carry costs for Black women's wellbeing and careers. Mindful of how ABW stereotyping affects others' perceptions, several Black women described how they refrained from voicing ideas, offering a critical perspective, or speaking up about mistreatment. For example:

> when you can't voice how you really feel so as not to sound "angry" or "aggressive"

> Feeling silenced. You don't want to ever defend yourself [because] you are well aware of the stereotypes people have of [Black women]

> Constantly having to choose between calling out some anti-black misogyny or losing my job

These tweets demonstrate how Black women's coworkers, customers, and managers leveraged the white gaze by scrutinizing how they speak and emote. These examples provide further empirical evidence for the "racialized display rules" (Wingfield, 2010)—in this case, sounding "white" and expressing a cheerful demeanor (Wingfield, 2010)—that many organizations enforce as acceptable and expected norms for Black women at work, even when they are harmful and counterproductive (e.g., Grandey, Houston, & Avery, 2019). We find that whiteness is imposed on Black women at work at the expense of their agency, safety, and resources.

3.1.2 | Beauty standards

Whiteness is also imposed through *white beauty standards*: norms that reflect and privilege Eurocentric aesthetics, including body shapes, skin tone, and hair texture (Kwan & Trautner, 2009; Robinson-Moore, 2008). Adhering to Eurocentric paragons of beauty, such as having long hair, light skin, and few Afrocentric features (e.g., wide nose), corresponds with favorable work outcomes regarding perceived hireability (Harrison & Thomas, 2009), professionalism (Opie & Phillips, 2015), and "fit" into the dominant work culture (Ainsworth, 2014). Whiteness is therefore imposed on Black women by privileging Eurocentric esthetic practices; these practices dictate which bodies are "acceptable" and valued at work.

White beauty standards were typically imposed via *body scrutiny*, which included comments, criticisms, ignorant questions, and unwanted attention Black women received for how they look, or are expected to look, at work. Several Black women reported enduring racialized scrutiny of their facial features and physique, such as one woman who shared: "A manager once told my coworker her lips were too big for lipstick. Few months later she wanted lip injections & braids." Other tweets described times when Black women were fetishized and demeaned, such as being told "You're pretty for a Black girl" and "Being seen as sexual concubines and objectified daily by [White men] … life of a broker." Ultimately, this sexualization reinforces deeply ingrained beliefs about Black women's bodies as available for others' consumption. These beliefs are rooted in the exploitation of Black women's labor through the system of chattel slavery (hooks, 1981) and persist to further justify the exploitation of Black women.

Most common were tweets that described how others scrutinized Black women's hair. Black women frequently received ignorant questions and offensive comments about their hair from clients, coworkers, and managers. One woman's manager told her, "I see you brought your pet to work." Fixation on Black women's hairstyles also affected their professional interactions:

> VP didn't speak to me at a meeting. Apologized later saying he didn't know I cut my hair. I'm the only Black lady?

> Being smiled at and treated with the utmost respect while I'm wearing a sew-in [a long, straight weave that reflects Eurocentric hairstyles], but "crickets" when my hair is natural …

Therefore, the imposition of whiteness undermines Black women's rights to privacy, autonomy, as well as equity. Black women's coworkers, clients, and supervisors enacted the white gaze to scrutinize Black women's bodies via different practices, including interrogation and exotification. Even people who had not recently experienced body scrutiny acknowledged the realities that other Black women experience in the workplace. As one person shared: "Feeling privileged to be able to wear my natural hair, knowing some 4Cs[2] can't in the workplace."

3.2 | Whiteness as presumed

The second mechanism through which the white gaze manifests in organizations encompasses how whiteness is *presumed*. This presumption of whiteness dictates whose bodies register as "legitimate" members of an organization or profession, especially in high status roles (Carton & Rosette, 2011; Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). Presumed whiteness is associated with two key practices: *whiteness as default* and *depersonalization*.

3.2.1 | Default

The first set of practices through which whiteness is presumed encompasses how White people serve as the conceptual "default" for employees in organizations. This included instances when Black women were presumed White in virtual communication based on their tone of voice; for example, the woman told that she "sounded so [W]hite on the phone." Whiteness was often the presumed "default" at the occupational level as well, which meant Black women's roles were not always recognized. As shared in one tweet, "your students [are] surprised you're their teacher because some of them have never had a Black female professor before." Even when others acknowledged Black women's roles, their intersecting identities remained invisible. As one woman was asked, "'So which do you think is harder: being a female CEO or a Black CEO?' … guess he didn't realize I am both." One woman recounted a time when she was "Delivering a training course. Leave the room and on my return to the room told that I'm in the wrong room." These experiences illustrate how the white gaze relegates Black women to particular occupations, roles, and strata when whiteness serves as the conceptual default.

3.2.2 | Depersonalization

Whiteness is also presumed via the depersonalization of Black women: the refusal and failure to recognize their individuality. Several Black women had been mistaken for coworkers ("Oh, I thought you were the other one. You all look alike"; "I am mistaken for the only other Black sub by students and faculty members. No one seems to want to learn the difference"). The white gaze depersonalizes Black women by stripping them of their names and personhood. As Vanessa Dickerson (2001) states, Black women's bodies often are disregarded as "not worth the effort of seeing. Such invisibility proves, of course, damaging and denigrating" (p. 197). The result is partial visibility:

expectations that Black women ought to occupy roles that are low in status, visibility, and compensation (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019a).

3.3 | Whiteness as venerated

The third mechanism through which the white gaze manifests in organizations, *whiteness as venerated*, includes practices that cast whiteness as both *essentialized* and *superior*. The white gaze views certain characteristics as inherent to different racial groups, and also regards those characteristics "inherent" to White people as superior. The white gaze reinforces the veneration of whiteness by viewing Black employees as incompetent, or presumed as such (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Flores Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). At times presumed incompetence resulted in undeserved negative evaluations. These low expectations also were communicated through astonishment upon learning of Black women's credentials and success (e.g., "I didn't know you spoke so well"; "You're an archaeologist? Really? How did that happen?"). One woman's boss told her, "Your intelligence surprised me. You're much smarter than I thought."

The white gaze was also enacted through subtyping, whereby people maintain essentialist beliefs by casting "counter-stereotypical" people as "exceptional" (Richards & Hewstone, 2001). Several women endured insults such as "You're not like other Black women" and "You speak so well. I can tell that you were raised different from the others." These statements imply a racialized hierarchy whereby White people and standards are venerated, and Black people are respected so long as the white gaze deems them suitable. At times subtyping was subtler and more coded, including comments such as "You're not like the others," "you're not like them," and "when I refer to 'them' of course I don't mean you!" Supervisors also engaged in covert racism: "I remember my old manager told me I'm not really [Black] because [of] the way I talk and how hard I worked." Evoking this "us/them" discourse creates a false sense of belonging in organizations so long as the Black women assimilate in accordance with the white gaze. Ultimately, subtyping serves as another form of control by narrowly defining what Black women are allowed to do while restricting their membership in White spaces as conditional.

Discourses of white essentialism and superiority also imply that Black women as a group share certain experiences with respect to family and sexuality. These comments overwhelmingly reflected controlling images of Black women as hypersexual matriarchs without partners. One person's White male coworker asked her, "Do you know your kids' father?" Similarly, another Black woman shared that when she was pregnant, she was asked: "Is this one with the same baby daddy as your daughter?" Other tweets reflected how others expected Black women to be single, such as one Black woman who was told "Didn't know you were married, I didn't think 'you guys' believed in that." These presumptions further serve to control Black women's ability for self-definition beyond the narrow, stereotypic images that the white gaze transmits. The white gaze also views Black people's interests and actions as a monolith:

"YOU'RE Black?! You don't 'talk' like a Black person!" & what exactly does a Black person talk like?

Co-worker walks past 5 other people to ask me about Madea's Halloween. Sigh.

"suggests a potluck" Coworker: oooooh I'll put you down for fried chicken Me: "stares into the distance and counts to 10"

Presumed essentialism also included expectations that all Black people know each other in a given organization or community. One person's coworker asked, "Do you know [fill in random name] … she looks just like you." Another person's boss asked her "Who are they?" in reference to a group of Black people congregating in the lobby; the woman answered "Not sure, I was with [you] all day." Through the white gaze, Black people are presumed to

possess and share common knowledge, experiences, and connections. Together, these practices reinforce "narrow imaginations of Blackness" (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019b, p. 377) in the workplace. The white gaze enables narrow imagination by dictating and constraining how Black people ought to be.

3.4 | Whiteness as forced

The fourth mechanism through which the white gaze manifests refers to how *whiteness is forced* upon nonwhite bodies at work. Specifically, white and non-Black people engage in practices that reflect *entitlement* to, *exploitation* of, and *endangerment* of Black women at work.

3.4.1 | Entitlement

Whiteness also manifests as entitlement to Black women's time, personal space, and bodies, often resulting in boundary violations. For instance, several women described times when they endured unwanted physical contact or assault (e.g., "… how many times my stomach was touched when I was [pregnant]"). Often this nonconsensual touching involved Black women's hair, such as one person's coworker who "grabbed a handful of [her] hair" and someone's supervisor who touched her braids, saying "I can't help but to touch."

This theme also included how people felt entitled to Black women's time, attention, praise, and ideas (when not centrally work-related). Together, these tweets illustrate the racialized nature of emotional labor (Grandey et al., 2019). One example includes the tendency of non-Black employees to assume rapport or overestimate closeness (Bell & Nkomo, 2001) with Black colleagues. As one woman asked, "Does anyone else notice how sometimes people drop professionalism around you and talk to you like a friend?" Often this assumed rapport relied on appropriating Blackness, such as assuming or mimicking caricatures of Black people and culture. One person was told, "Maybe you can help us with some sassy jargon for our marketing." Such attempts to foster cohesion largely failed (e.g., "You using slang is not going to make me like you. It's kind of insulting that you assume that's how I want to communicate").

Another way that whiteness was forced on Black women included entitlement to their time and participation in unwanted conversations about race. For example, Black people were often forced to perform racialized emotional labor, expected to answer questions or correct misinformation about Black culture and experiences, such as "being the only Black woman in a meeting [and] being asked did my school take my class on field trips when I was growing up." Another Black woman tweeted how she "had to explain white privilege AGAIN to colleagues." At other times, Black women were not explicitly drawn into conversations about race yet still felt hypervisible, whether "sitting through Black jokes" or "Sitting at the office xmas party while White people discuss inner city schools when [you're] the only [Black person] at the table." Situations like these left Black women wondering whether, and how, to confront their coworkers, including those with more power, such as this situation: "A boss once said to our lunch table that 'if Black women knew how to shut up they wouldn't have issues with the police.'" Being subject to racialized conversations further controls how Black women present their gender and racial identity in the work-place. Engaging in identity performances (Roberts & Roberts, 2007)—by explaining White privilege, for instance—to maintain one's employment and positive relationships with employees restrains Black women from expressing their individuality, especially when it may deviate from expectations mandated by the white gaze.

3.4.2 | Exploitation

Whiteness is also enforced through the *exploitation* of Black women and their work. Exploitation manifested as *invisibility*, or situations where their presence and/or ideas were ignored and overlooked (e.g., "Invisible until

needed"; "Just today, shared an idea w/white colleagues. They listened, paused, turned away from me & started discussing it w/o me").

Other exploitative practices upheld the *Strong Black Woman* (SBW) stereotype, whereby people viewed Black women as strong and invincible, and as having a limitless capacity to support or "save" others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). The SBW stereotype casts Black women as "servants," "mammies," and "superwomen," which controls how they are perceived when they make mistakes, ask for help, or need resources to complete their work. Several tweets illustrate perceived invulnerability, where Black women were expected to "put up" with unfair treatment:

> Being told by white boss that the "blacks don't deserve a raise for doing what's asked of them"

> Never respected but always called upon when the shit hits the fan

> Always expected to be accommodating despite being in a position of authority. Not your mammy or servant. Bye Becky!

> If it wasn't for her [a Black woman], that place would stay in a state of chaos.

Consequences of the SBW stereotype included overwork and exploitation. Several tweets used animal metaphors to represent the burdens of the SBW on Black women (e.g., "Constantly being seen as a mule"). Someone else shared how she is "Expected to know everything for everybody: to do everything and with a smile. To be a damn workhorse for everybody."

Black women also experienced SBW stereotyping when others expected them to be invincible and immune to stress (e.g., "when people assume you are not affected by 'Black Issues' because you have a decent job"). Someone else tweeted that Black women are "never supported but always doing the supporting." Others described the challenges of remaining resilient and persistent in the face of injustice, such as the difficulty of "going home after taking all those microaggressions and still having to be strong for your family." Collectively, the SBW exploits images of strength to control whether (and how) Black women can express their vulnerability and humanity. Moreover, the SBW is leveraged to minimize the role of structural inequality on health outcomes for Black women (e.g., Hicken, Lee, Ailshire, Burgard, & Williams, 2013), instead implying that Black women have control over, and ought to be personally responsible for, racialized disparities related to health and vulnerability.

Exploitation also includes having to work harder than colleagues without proper resources or recognition (e.g., "When you have to train a new employee to do a job they said you weren't qualified for"). Similarly, another Black woman described being "Expected to know all aspects, be able to do everything, step in anywhere, horrors if you expect credit or more $ for it." Working harder without additional compensation or promotion maintains subordination of Black women economically and professionally, thus controlling their ability to advance.

3.4.3 | Endangerment

Whiteness was also enforced through *endangerment*: instances of intimidation and abuse that put Black women at risk of harm. As someone shared: "My first job out of college I worked in a small rural town as a reporter. The misogynoir made my life hell." Another woman recalled, "I used to sell cars … they tried everything to get a reaction." Another woman shared: "A male coworker was yelling at me like a 5-year old. I asked in a calm voice to watch his tone. He kept yelling." Similarly, a reporter shared that her "editor had me cover a Tea Party Rally b/c he thought my discomfort would be funny." In these examples, the white gaze endangers Black women by disregarding their safety and dignity for others' entertainment.

4 | TOWARD AN EMBODIED UNDERSTANDING OF THE WHITE GAZE

An analysis of the #BlackWomenAtWork digital archive makes visible the "sharp white background" (Hurston, 1928) against which Black women are frequently cornered, compared, conditioned, and controlled in organizations. Black women face frequent and systemic experiences whereby they are viewed, interpolated, and evaluated through the lens of whiteness (i.e., the white gaze). The white gaze often manifests as a "constant presence" in the work lives of Black women, whether overtly (e.g., telling a Black woman she is angry) or covertly (e.g., Black women's pressure to exaggerate joviality in anticipation of tone-policing). The white gaze therefore functions as an apparatus by which whiteness is mandated and enforced in organizations. It is associated with a set of practices that manage and control the bodies that deviate from the prescriptions and preferences that whiteness demands.

Importantly, the white gaze *constructs* the very deviance that it sees. That is, when viewed through the white gaze, Black women are deemed to violate expectations that pass as universal yet actually reflect whiteness. Others responded to these violations by imposing, presuming, venerating, and forcing whiteness. These four mechanisms reflect and reinforce power dynamics in organizations—specifically, gendered racial hierarchies. The set of practices that comprise the white gaze ultimately build and preserve the power of whiteness in organizations and broader society. The end result is the regulation of Black women's bodies at work, most often through coercion, control, and punishment. This punishment—whether perceived or anticipatory—takes its toll. For instance, the white gaze often prompts Black women to monitor how they look, emote, talk, fit in, and lead. Black women must expend considerable resources (e.g., time, money, and energy) to face the white gaze and accommodate whiteness. Such accommodation results in the erasure, exploitation, and even endangerment of Black women's agency and dignity. In this way, the white gaze is a cog in the larger racist machinery. Colonizing discourses validate and privilege White people's voices and values while ignoring, subjugating, or even punishing the contributions of those who are marginalized (Bhattacharya, 2015). These colonizing discourses and practices remind certain "unideal" workers that they do not, and should not, belong in organizations.

Ultimately, the white gaze operates to create and enforce separation between those with power and those on the margins. Moreover, these mechanisms of whiteness are taken for granted or, in some cases, are tolerated or even condoned and encouraged. Thus, it is crucial that we continue to center Black women's experiences and make visible the ways that power—especially whiteness—is often invisible yet omnipresent. By extension, it is important that we also consider the organizational actors who are leveraging the white gaze as a strategy to serve their interests and satisfy their needs for comfort, amusement, reassurance, and dominance. It is primarily White people and those operating from "positions of whiteness" who used the white gaze to scrutinize Black women's bodies. Thus, those with greater proximity to whiteness build and maintain power at the expense of Black women's agency and dignity. Moreover, the invisibility of whiteness makes it difficult to "see" how its gaze permeates organizations, in addition to enabling people's refusal to notice, admit, or challenge their weaponization of the white gaze.

Centering Black women's lived experiences allows us to better understand how the white corporate gaze permeates organizational life, the discourses that reflect and enable this gaze, and the impact of this gaze on Black women's work, dignity, and wellbeing. As Williams (1996) states, "discourses are embodied, and social institutions cannot be understood apart from the real, lived experiences and actions of bodies" (p. 42). Analyzing Black women's workplace narratives enabled us to see these processes unfold in real-time. In addition to understanding how social institutions (e.g., whiteness) become inscribed on people's bodies, attending to the body also helps us understand suffering and mistreatment in new, more holistic ways. As George Yancy (2013) notes, "Black bodies in America … move through social spaces in ways that put White people at ease. We fear that our black bodies incite an accusation. We move in ways that help us to survive the procrustean gazes of White people." Our CDA illustrates how such fears are entirely founded; Black women's bodies at work not only "incite an accusation" but also

invisibility, scrutiny, exploitation, and even endangerment. We also illustrate how Black women resist and persist in the face of the white gaze. Although compliance with the demands of whiteness is often required for job security and survival, Black women also devised and enacted creative strategies for preserving their spirit against sharp white backgrounds.

5 | DISCUSSION

The viral spread of #BlackWomenAtWork demonstrated just how pervasively Black women contend with whiteness in organizations, often through the white gaze. This unobtrusive archival study used an intracategorical approach (McCall, 2005) to examine how Black women experience the white gaze and contend with whiteness. We also used an embodied approach to investigate Black women's experiences of the white gaze, and thus heed calls for "bringing the body back in to organization studies" (Mumby, 2006, p. 92). Our CDA indicates that the bodies of marginalized employees and groups—namely, those with lesser proximity to whiteness—are subjected to the scrutiny of the white gaze, rendering them as incompetent, unwelcome, or dispensable. Scrutiny of Black women's emotions, appearance, and actions illustrate how evaluations of Black women are "filtered through biased perceptual lenses" (Browne & Kennelly, 1999, p. 305). These lenses are the white gaze, and the biased perceptions are rooted in whiteness and white supremacy.

Our analysis of firsthand accounts indicates the centrality of race, gender, and embodiment to the experiences of Black women in the workplace. The embodiment of these identities subjects them to unique forms of surveillance, mistreatment, marginalization, and scrutiny at the intersection of overlapping systems of oppression. Using an embodiment perspective, we both spotlight whiteness and the practices that sustain marginalization, and decenter whiteness as we attend to the experiences of marginalized employees. Greater deviation from whiteness (Holvino, 2010) results in the entitlement, exploitation, and endangerment of Black women's bodies and the reinforcement of whiteness and white supremacy in organizations. The types of bodily regulation that Black women faced were fundamentally rooted in how others racialized them through a white gaze that attempted to control their bodies. This was most apparent when Black women endured ignorant questions about their hair, comments about their vocal tone, and even nonconsensual touching. Holding Black women to white display rules and beauty standards reinforces whiteness as the dominant and expected cultural norm of work environments. In this way, mistreatment and discrimination toward Black women operate to discipline and punish (Foucault, 1979) their bodies for deviating from the white default. We therefore deepen the study of marginalized identities as processes —as opposed to categories—that are implicated by systems of white supremacy in organizations (Carrim & Nkomo, 2016). Thus, our results provide support for how an embodiment lens can spark "ample opportunities for new theory and better practices" (Styhre, 2004, p. 111) of omnibus, invisible organizational contexts. For example, our decoding of individuals' firsthand accounts includes identifying the underlying ideologies and "micropractices of power" (Parker, 2003, p. 259) present in the otherwise invisible context of whiteness that shapes marginalized employees' experiences. This approach enables us to build theory about embodiment and whiteness by identifying the specific practices through which the white gaze bolsters whiteness as an omnibus context. In doing so, we begin to formulate a typology of the white gaze in organizations that helps illuminate the depth and scope of the gaze via organizational processes, structures, ideologies, and practices.

Although everyone is "seen" through the white gaze, how people experience gazing depends on how, why, and against whom it is leveraged. Our analysis demonstrates the considerable racialized esthetic labor Black women perform to satisfy the expectations of whiteness as well as the comfort of those operating from positions of whiteness, such as non-Black women. Organizations often manage diversity (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019b) in ways that prioritize White people's comfort (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019) without addressing deeper inequalities that affect Black employees (e.g., McCluney, Bryant, King, & Ali, 2017), particularly Black women (Parker, 2003). Understanding how employees leverage the white gaze is essential for challenging and dismantling white

supremacy. By identifying how whiteness is expected, embedded, and enforced in organizations, people can take measures to end the idealization and institutionalization of whiteness.

Our findings inform recommendations for confronting the white gaze. Managers and leaders could conduct internal assessments of how their current policies and practices reinforce whiteness and further subordinate marginalized groups. Trainings and interventions that address the imposition of white standards of beauty, emotional expression, and professionalism; the idealization of whiteness; and unfettered entitlement to Black women's time and bodies could permeate different aspects of organizational systems, including recruitment and hiring, onboarding and socialization, performance management, development and advancement. Importantly, these approaches focus on managing whiteness and injustice, rather than requiring that Black women adapt to fit white norms and expectations (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019b; McCluney & Rabelo, 2020). Coworkers and prospective allies can also engage in critical self-reflection (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019) to more effectively notice, then challenge, instances of white gazing at work. This self-reflection is important for understanding more overt forms of racism as well as the impact of seemingly positive statements, such as calling Black women articulate or expressing astonishment about their credentials. Each of these behaviors is rooted in racist hierarchies that limit Black women's agency and dignity. The #BlackWomenAtWork archive of tweets may be an excellent starting point for allies to read and reflect. As one person tweeted, "Get on #BlackWomenAtWork and JUST LISTEN."

Other practices people can enact (as well as avoid) to more effectively work with Black women include refraining from imposing white display rules and beauty standards; challenging how whiteness is idealized; and intervening when witnessing Black women's exploitation or endangerment. Our findings can also help people cement some of these practices into policy. For instance, the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural (CROWN) Hair Act is currently being adopted by states across the United States to ensure protection against discrimination in schools and the workplace based on Afrocentric hairstyles and texture that disproportionately affects Black women and girls (www.thecrownact.com). This legislation fosters accountability, or the process of taking responsibility for one's decisions as well as the consequences of those decisions (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2018), for organizations. Our findings illustrated how peers, superiors, and customers scrutinize Black women, evoke vigilance, exacerbate their stress, and undermine their ability to remain engaged at work. Thus, we need to raise awareness among, and provide corrective feedback to, employees regarding the ways they perceive and evaluate Black women's bodies. Organizational leaders and employees can benefit from our work by learning how to more effectively notice white gazing, intervene when it is happening, and hold employees accountable when they are enacting it.

Our study also points to benefits of emerging research methods including data mining, digital text analyses, and the use of social media as a form of big qualitative data. Importantly, this unique method enabled us to amplify the voices and experiences of Black women, who so often face intersectional invisibility in research as well as organizational life. Unobtrusive data collection measures, such as this publicly available archive, can help increase the representation of marginalized employees in organizational research. Additional research is needed to examine when and why people leverage the white gaze at work, as well as attending to differences among "subjects" of the gaze (e.g., White people vs. people of color acting from "positions of whiteness") as well as "objects" of the gaze (e.g., women of color).

6 | CONCLUSION

Zora Neale Hurston's (1928) encounters against a sharp white background mirror how many Black women experience the white gaze. The white gaze communicates whiteness through discourse and social practices. In organizations, the white gaze reflects and reinforces gendered and racialized hierarchies by imposing, presuming, venerating, and forcing whiteness. By identifying the white gaze as the mechanism by which whiteness manifests and its associated practices, we *reverse the gaze*—that is, invert it onto whiteness—to spotlight how racism frames

Black women's everyday work experiences and illuminate the otherwise invisible role that whiteness assumes in organizations.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Image description: A screenshot of three tweets posted by activist Brittany Packnett on March 28, 2017, that read as follows: "You know what? Let's do this: Today, we were told a Black woman's hair matters more than her voice, and our choices are under the control of others. This happens to [B]lack women [every day] at work. Share your Maxine and April moments, so people don't think this is rare. Use #BlackWomenAtWork."

[2] 4C is a hair type characterized by thicker coils that resemble an afro.

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