

Disposable Black excellence: A book review of Sekile M. Nzinga's *Lean semesters: How Higher Education Reproduces Inequity*

Paris Wicker
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Although Black women's graduate degree attainment has nearly doubled since 2000, Sekile M. Nzinga's *Lean Semesters* provides a complex picture into this social reality in academia, with the central argument that American higher education operates as a hyper-producer of inequity for marginalized populations, particularly academic women of color. Additionally, since Black women are overrepresented both as adjunct faculty and as Black academics in the south, the author utilizes faculty interview data and national survey data to frame this issue as not only shaped by race, class, and gender but also a regional problem. *Lean Semesters* is a unique contribution to the critical university studies literature that reveals how Black excellence and Black education are also conceptions through which we understand Black labor.

Keywords: higher education, adjunct, faculty, inequity, Black education, labor

The reality that Black women's graduate degree attainment has nearly doubled since 2000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020) receives praise and attention in the media. And while the increase in educational attainment is good news, many scholars argue that the full picture of Black women's experiences in the academy goes far beyond degree completion (Banks, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The belief in education as "the great equalizer" or primary pathway to social mobility still pervades educational discourse despite the persistence of inequity of student experiences and outcomes (Colman, 2011; Reardon, 2016). Furthermore, higher education's embrace of capitalistic market-based policies that stress productivity and profits (Olssen & Peters, 2007) led to decreasing public funding of higher education, increasing private-public partnerships to fill in the gap, and the substantial increase of adjunct or contingent faculty to fulfill teaching demands. What does this all mean for the overrepresentation of Black women academics laboring as adjunct faculty? How do race and gender shape the benefits, costs, and consequences of higher education over time?

Sekile M. Nzinga's *Lean Semesters* provides an-

swers and a full complex picture of this reality in academia, with the central argument that "far from being a site generative of equality and opportunity, the university- whether private, for-profit, or not-for-profit- currently operates as a hyper-producer of inequity for marginalized populations, particularly academic women of color" (p. 2). *Lean Semesters* masterfully combines the often-distinct discussions around the adjunctification of higher education, gender inequity in the workplace, and the underrepresentation of Black scholars in the professoriate into one complex narrative that centers Black women. The author humanizes data statistics around Black women's education and compels the reader to see, sometimes in devastating detail, the harsh reality far beyond what numbers could alone reveal.

The introduction chapter highlights the lean semester experience for participant Vanessa Marr, who applies for weekend temp jobs, often forgoes lunch so that her kids can eat, and uses state-issued assistance to purchase food, all while working as an adjunct professor. Author Sekile M. Nzinga, a former social worker and tenure-track professor, noticed that the economic vulnerability of highly educated Black women adjunct faculty was eerily similar to that of her former social work clients (p. 3). Using interview data from thirty-one faculty participants (the majority who teach in the southern United States) and supported by large-scale national reports and intersectional feminists' frameworks, Nzinga presents bleak economic and material conditions and consequences of academic Black women graduate students, contingent faculty, and caregivers.

Paris Wicker (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6030-3757>), Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Paris Wicker, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 243 Education Building, #7, 1000 Bascom Hill, Madison, WI 53706. pwicker@wisc.edu

These are, according to Nzinga “three of the most vulnerable group of academics”, as they are less likely to receive graduate funding, more likely to incur significant student debt, need state/federal or partner support, and disproportionately hired as contingent faculty, often in under-resourced academic departments (p. 8). In a word, disposable. The national survey data supports Nzinga’s argument that this economic precarity for Black academic women is often the norm and not the exception due to racialized, gendered, and structural barriers.

The following four chapters employ labor market terminology (taken directly from participant quotes) to explicitly connect market-based practices to the ongoing exploitation of Black intellect and labor. For example, the first chapter — *Mortgaging Our Brains* — combines participant experiences of financing graduate education with the realities of reduced federal funding and few funding options for Black women, leaving many with subprime mortgaged degrees that are now worth considerably less than their price. While increasing student debt is an issue of concern for all college students, Black women carry the greatest educational debt and higher interest rates (Johnson et al., 2012) of any subgroup of doctoral students (Zeiser et al., 2013), compromising earnings and wealth attainment. As such, Nzinga argues that the long-term costs of advanced degree attainment are far greater for Black women.

The second chapter — *Ain’t I Precarious* — highlights the extreme vulnerability of Black women academics who labor as contingent faculty. The profit-driven business model hires and fires contingent faculty on demand, leaving many with uncertain teaching schedules or future wages. For example, Nzinga shares a devastating story of participant Wanda, who due to long stretches without teaching applied for unemployment. The state of Illinois then sued Wanda for what was classified as dishonesty and fraud. Nzinga argues that Wanda was forced to apply for public assistance because of the exploitative practices of higher education that left Wanda without earnings yet still technically employed. While Wanda’s experience may be more extreme, it perfectly exemplifies how current higher education practices constrain and force choices on women and mothers trying to provide for themselves and their families. The most crucial part of the author’s argument is that while adjunct faculty are contractually contingent (vulnerable to the whims of market demands) even tenure-track women are structurally contingent and disposable due to internalized racism,

sexism, marginality, and underrepresentation in the academy (p. 74).

The third chapter — *Families Devalued* — situates Black women’s narratives from the study within a “neoliberal cocktail” of labor restrictions, contingent academic exploitation, and federal welfare reform, to deepen our understanding of their impact on Black women, and more specifically, Black mothers and Black families. This chapter is most helpful in demonstrating how a non-intersectional approach will always create a myopic understanding of Black women’s realities. Nzinga explains that Black academic mothers have less access to family-friendly options in higher education, which focus on gender inequity but not how racial and class stratifications constrain choices for mothers. Additionally, Black women face several compounding challenges, such as racialized expectations of motherhood, and the expectation to mother their children plus “care work to a wide swath of others” (p. 116), such as student mentoring, advising, and problem-solving. This unpaid and underpaid labor significantly constrains Black mothers’ capacity, forcing many to request public assistance to continue school or teaching. As such, the author argues that broad-based reform is necessary and that “community-based support cannot be the official model for sustaining parents who are students or contingent faculty” (p. 137).

The fourth chapter — *Jumping Mountains* — and conclusion — *Statement of Solidarity* — take a different approach than the previous chapters to focus on how participants make meaning of their precarious situations as contingent faculty and what it means for true reform. The author argues that despite the struggles of exploitation, Black women academics have agency and continue to persist, resist, and utilize education to jump mountains to “enact social justice” (p. 141). Following intense (and at times, bleak) data findings from the first three chapters, a chapter that focuses on Black women’s strength and resilience comes as a welcomed relief, albeit woefully inadequate in comparison to the structural barriers faced. The author admits that community-based supports are not enough and calls for mass reform both inside and outside of the academy to refund public education, restore social safety nets, and restore workers’ rights for large-scale impact.

The final chapter shifts into an auto-ethnographic positionality reveal in which Nzinga, though never herself a contingent faculty, did experience structural contingency and disposability that ultimately pushed her out of the faculty profession. She shares her story to further amplify the experiences of the study participants with a call to action to listen, humanize, support,

and fight for Black academic women. As the book starts with Black women shamed into silence, the author ends with modeling how vulnerability and sharing stories are part of the reform and change process.

Lean Semesters shows the multiple ways that higher education forgets Black women's experiences, and how Black bodies and minds continue to be exploited in America's 21st-century society. This book shifts the conversation of inequity in American higher education to not only about access and representation, but also an issue of labor. This book is brimming with citation-worthy conceptions of Black women's academic experiences, from "PhD-to-food stamps pipeline", and "structural contingency", to "intellectual discount", these catchy idioms make it easy and clear to both understand and reiterate the study findings. Furthermore, the author quite masterfully infuses qualitative interview data and quantitative survey data to support her arguments around a Black feminist perspective on inequity in higher education. For example, coupling participant narratives of Black women using federal food assistance with the statistic that 25% of adjunct faculty receive personal benefits (p. 154) frames that problem as systemic with specific and individualized consequences for Black women. It is an effective model and template on how to enhance validity and trustworthiness for research findings that include qualitative data.

One main shortcoming of the book is the omission of methodological processes and information about participants. For example, while Nzinga writes that the full study contains interviews from 31 participants, the book only includes around 15 participant narratives. And while it is common to not include all narratives, I am curious as to how the remaining half of participant experiences compare with the ones featured in the book. Out of fear of being exposed, a third of Nzinga's participants did not want to be quoted directly (p. 10), however, a table in the appendix with participant names (or pseudonyms) and demographic information would be a useful reference while navigating the book. Furthermore, the participant recruitment and data analysis processes (e.g., qualitative coding and validation) are not present within the chapters or the appendix. Overall, the book is a bit light on methodological and theoretical processes which may be disappointing for researchers and scholars seeking such details.

Lean Semesters is a unique contribution to the critical university studies literature that reveals how Black excellence and Black education are also conceptions through which we understand Black labor. The author quite skillfully demonstrates that the fight for equity for Black women in American higher education is not

solely a race, gender, and class issue, but also a regional issue as there is an overrepresentation of Black women both as contingent faculty and as academics who work in the south. Given the interdisciplinary approach to *Lean Semesters*, it has the potential to engage a wide variety of audiences, from labor activists to academic leadership, and those within diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Future research could apply a longitudinal study analyzing the decision and meaning-making processes of Black women academics along those vulnerable crossroads within higher education as presented by the author. Furthermore, research inquiry that utilizes the author's structural contingency conception to compare the conditions and consequences of contingent and tenure-track faculty would further address the analytical lacunae of Black women's academic experiences. *Lean Semesters* is a stark and compelling reminder that no one is safe from structural disposability, and not even tenure will protect from the snares of the corporatized university. The fight for Black women's labor rights is also the fight for Black excellence, and sweeping reform is needed now more than ever.

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