

Black Feminist Collective Statement

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History

The Combahee River Collective offered a glimpse of the then-current state of Black feminism in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black nationalist movements. While inspired by their work as part of these movements, the Collective said that “It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men” (1977). Racism, sexism, and classism form an unholy trinity that hinder Black women from having the ability to bring their full selves to the academy on their own terms (Gregory, 2001).

Forty-seven years later, this disillusionment continues to be present for Black women who are faculty members at colleges and universities across the country, whose struggles are different from those of white women as well as both white men and men of color (Garrett et al., 2022, p. 530). As we attempt to examine how institutions can support Black women faculty, we have to take a look into the past.

Within the academy, Oberlin College was the first in the nation to accept Black men and women into their programs. As the Civil War raged on across the country, Mary Jane Patterson graduated from Oberlin with a bachelor’s degree, the first Black woman in the nation to do so (Bell-Scott, 1984). Patterson’s life offered a glimpse of the “race-gender linked fate” that sees Black women leading the way for others to have an opportunity to pursue their education (Butler, 2021). She used her education to help others through her work at what is now Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the first HBCU (Cheyney University; Garner, 2010) as well as the first public high school in the nation for Black students (Garner, 2010).

Among those to follow in her footsteps was Mary McLeod Bethune, born in the midst of the Reconstruction era. Inspired by her earlier work in the academy, she opened the Daytona Literary and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls in 1904 (Bethune-Cookman University). The predecessor to today's Bethune-Cookman University, another HBCU, the curriculum initially focused on educating women to be a housekeeper for their own families (Edghill-Walden, et al., 2018, p. 6), which was a focus for many women's institutions of the era (Bell-Scott, 1984, p. 9). It was the rejection of a sick Black student from a white hospital that led Bethune to expand the programs to include opening a hospital and offering courses for Black nurses (Edghill-Walden, et al., 2018, p. 6).

These are merely two of the schools that not merely accepted Black students, but focused their institution to serve Black students. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 saw land grants and federal funding given for the formation of colleges (Grant et al., 2024; Rogers, et al., 2022). The states who wanted to keep segregation in place skirted the requirement for equal admissions through the formation of separate schools, leading to the formation of many HBCUs that remain in existence today. (Rogers et al., 2022, p. 80). However, we must acknowledge the reality that as important as these institutions have been for the growth of Black Americans, HBCUs have long struggled with receiving funding below that of HWIs (Grant et al., 2024, p. 3), a stark reminder of the historical centering of whiteness in American education.

The echoes of whiteness at the center of American education continue to be felt today. When the academy expects Black women faculty members to fit into their preconceived standards and fails to account for the knowledge they offer, the minimization of their contributions to the academy results in attaining a lower status, finding it difficult to go beyond the constraints contingent faculty face in colleges and universities (Boss, et al., 2021; Collins,

1989). This limitation occurs in spite of the fact that Black women faculty members are more frequently expected to offer additional labor in order to be mentors for students as well as other faculty members (Walkington, 2017, p. 54). Such frustration is also felt by Black women students, who are the fastest growing segment of students in spite of the reality that institutions often do not offer sufficient support for these students (Butler, 2021, p. 3). This is echoed in the reality that, as of 2018, less than two percent of full professors across the country were Black women (Garrett et al., 2022, p. 527). Meanwhile, the persistent higher levels of Black women as contingent faculty has endured since the 1970s, causing Gonzales et al. to say that “colleges and universities have become complicit in the (re)production of labor injustice” (2018, p. 522). This is additionally felt in the lack of attention on the concerns of these faculty members by their peers and administrators, whether done intentionally or due to circumstances beyond their control (Boss et al., 2021, p. 85).

The Combahee River Collective said that “Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters” (1977). It is the persistence of Black women that “draws attention to a rich legacy of collective action against anti-Blackness in higher education” (Butler, 2021, p. 3). As important as it has been to recognize those who came before, now we turn our attention to the current state of Black women faculty members and figure out where we can go from here.

Theories and Frameworks

In order to support and uplift Black women faculty, as well as work to dismantle the systems of oppression that impact them, understanding theories created by and for Black women that speak to Black women’s experiences, disruption, and activism is vital. For the purpose of this statement, the three primary theories grounding this work are Black feminism, Womanism,

and Intersectionality. In the context of this paper, the authors will discuss how these theories, and those intertwined with them, apply specifically to the population of Black women faculty and their experiences in higher education.

All three theories grapple with the reality that Black women experience sexism and racism. This conversation is wholly left out of research and political movements, save for those driven by Black women themselves. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of Intersectionality is itself an example of research and activism created by and for Black women, addressing not only the double jeopardy that Black women experience, but also the other various identities they might hold (e.g. sexuality, [dis]ability, gender identity/expression, religion, socioeconomic status, etc.).

As research, dialogue, and stories of Black women's experiences are published and become more widely available to other Black women and the general public, conversations about these various identities, intersecting with the identities of being Black and a woman, illustrate the complex experiences of Black women and femmes. Though, no matter how unique individual experiences are, the thread connecting Black women is their experiences of being Black women. Butler describes that "more than other groups, Black women generally see their opportunities in life as tied to other Black women...[linked fate] centers more on providing Black women with mutually beneficial opportunities and using the notion of group solidarity to explain this behavior" (Butler, 2021, p. 4).

Black feminism, Womanism, and Intersectionality, though different in their approaches, work together as epistemologies, theories, and conceptual frameworks to critique and deconstruct the systems of oppression that deeply impact Black women. They also offer Black women the space to validate their experiences, stories, and emotions and provide opportunities to enact radical resistance. Regarding the first two frameworks, "while there are distinctive

dimensions to Black feminism and Womanism, they are not entirely separable in intent...” (Brewer p. 92, 2020). Though the theories have shifted from their original form as younger generations continue the tradition of disrupting and dismantling the interlocking systems of oppression, both help understand how Black women and femmes have and continue to resist. Additionally, these frameworks continue to be vital in how co-conspirators can learn how to challenge the systems, especially (but not limited to) when they are in positions of privilege and power, in support of Black women.

Throughout this course, discussions focused on how Black women, specifically in higher education, have implemented these theories simply through their existence and success in spaces that were not originally created to include them and haven’t been made to be more inclusive of Black women, still. These theories center on the cultural, spiritual, gendered, and racialized experiences of Black women, how Black women support one another, and how they radically resist (both intentionally and unintentionally). Brewer writes

Womanists and Black feminists articulate the ideas of the lived experiences of Black women, culture, self-definition, and self-determination. Black feminism propagates an intersectional analysis, which, as noted, catalyzes a series of organizing ideas that emphasize the multiplicity of oppressions. bell hooks (1984) defines this stance as opposition to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Indeed, radical Black feminists articulate an anti-capitalist praxis requiring dismantling the system before Black women’s oppression can be ended (Carruthers 2018)” (Brewer 2020).

Here, Brewer describes the differences specifically between Womanism and Black feminism. Though the former emphasizes lived experiences and the latter centers on an approach more akin to Intersectionality, these theories work as spaces for academic research and radical acts of disruption to take place. Additionally, Brewer describes the reality that Black women experience more than just racial and gendered systems of oppression, and that taking an anti-capitalist approach is necessary to dismantle the various systems that harm Black women.

In discussing social identities and intersecting oppressions, claiming those identities “becomes a frontline in the struggle to dismantle hegemonic legal, political, and social systems practiced in prejudice. Those who self-identify play ‘identity politics’; those who refuse to self-identify feign a morally superior neutrality and objectivity” (Leth et al, 2023, p. 158). Discussions throughout the course have centered on the experiences and various identities Black women hold, and claiming those social locations offers opportunities for joy and celebration (acts of resistance in and of themselves) and the ability to organize more formally to support other Black women and disrupt the systems. For folks who aren’t Black women or femmes, similarly understanding their identities and claiming those social locations better informs them of their privileges and ways in which they can support of Black women in various contexts. As Leth et al describe, choosing not to claim social locations inherently causes harm, as neutrality on any social justice issue is actively choosing the side of the oppressor and the systems from which and through the oppressors operate.

We recognize that there are several other theories that contribute to the work of Black women feminists as spaces for the celebration, recognition, and activism of Black women. As we discuss the experiences of Black women faculty and the critiques and recommendations of and for society and higher education, some of these other theories and frameworks better illuminate these issues.

The Experiences of Black Women Faculty

Overview

While there is much research on Black women faculty as a way to comprehend the experience, this collective shows a counterproductive, as we dive into the experiences from the lack of Black women faculty it is important to take a look at.

As the size of universities grows and are developing more diverse at universities it is important to have more of a diverse presence of faculty members to support a plan of equity and inclusion. To improve education and learning techniques, instructors need continuous support, and in addition to encouraging educator cultural diversity.

Nevertheless, present faculty statistics show an absence of diversity: “As of 2016, Black women occupied less than 3% of all faculty positions at bachelor’s degree–granting institutions” (National Center for Education, n.d). Furthermore, “The lack of Black women faculty representation is troubling given the impact faculty of color have on diverse student engagement” (Umbach, 2006; Zambrana et al., 2015). Research on race (e.g., Diggs et al., 2009; Stanley, 2006; Turner et al., 2008) and gender (e.g., Kosoko-Lasaki et al., 2006; Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Marschke et al., 2007) is typical, but exploring the intersections of these topics is not as typical in higher education scholarship. Black women have special hardships due to their race, gender, and other marginalized traits (Crenshaw, 1989; Griffin, 2016; Niemann, 2011). Moore (2017) and Pittman (2010) highlight the lack of attention given to Black women faculty in educational development both in theory and practice. Simply paying attention to the experiences of Black or women of color faculty members may hide important information about the identities, areas, and values of Black women faculty members. Universities can build more specialized tools and support for Black women professors as they undertake their approaches to instruction and learning in academia through gaining an improved knowledge of these women. Therefore, the emphasis of this research is on Black women faculty members' experiences with regard to other minority groups such as Arabs, Native Americans, Asians, Latinos, or Blacks.

Critical Racial Theory

In the collection "Critical Racial Theory: The Cutting Edge" published in 1995, the concept of "critical race feminism" (CRF) is explored, which focuses on the status of women of color. It highlights the position of women of color in the United States, including Black, Asian, Native American, and Arab women, as well as those from other minority groups. Women of color may be minorities in predominantly White nations like Europe, or majorities in developing nations. Regardless of location, they often face marginalization in politics, social class, economy, and education within their communities. The term "white" has been established and redefined to include or exclude specific groups of people, as even a basic examination of US law demonstrates. The easiest way to illustrate how race is socially constructed today is to consider mixed children to be "white," "black," "Asian," or "Hispanic" based only on their outward look, disconnected from their true origin. As an alternative, the heated debate among CRTs about whether Jews or even Asians can be considered "white" provides more proof that, unlike sex, "race" is a social construct with roots in social dynamics rather than biology. In addition, Griffin et al. (2011) revealed that Black professors, especially women, attempt to erase preconceptions, get involved in the community, and develop informal support groups to overcome racist surroundings. These aspects of the experiences of Black women faculty are elaborated upon in the following sections.

Invisible labor

Faculty of color frequently engage in invisible labor. This indicates that they serve students of color both formally and informally when they walk through their doors because they want mentors who are like them and can relate to their experiences. At a PWI where students of color may find it difficult to find individuals to relate to, many faculty members of color—especially women—feel that it is their duty to provide guidance to students of color.

Women professors of color are dedicated to helping students of color because they understand the life-changing effect of this kind of mentorship. Women of color are frequently requested to participate on all kinds of university committees, sometimes as window decoration and tokens since committee leaders feel pressure to show diversity on their committees. This is another aspect of the unseen labor that goes on. Colleges, however, infrequently recognize the potential impact that such a high volume of work may take on the mental and physical well-being of its female faculty members of color. Too frequently, this "multicultural diversity work" goes unnoticed or is given little credit, particularly in the context of academic tenure and evaluation. Even worse, this job interferes with the research necessary for a strong tenure file, which is why women of color are eventually stigmatized for accepting this kind of work when they frequently have no choice but to do it.

This struggle is by no means limited to PWIs. Rogers et al. conducted a qualitative study to discern how Black women faculty are treated at HBCUs and the results there are also troublesome. The same lack of resources, expectations of unpaid labor beyond the teaching and research expected as a faculty member, and inequities in recognition and salary are all present for Black women faculty in HBCUs as well (Rogers et al., 2022).

Torres (2020) says,

“The burdens women of color face in academia, doing their best to meet and often exceed tenure requirements as they also struggle to survive in a context of white supremacy, macro and micro aggressions, sexism, and classism, can be overwhelming. It is imperative that all of us do our part to acknowledge and fight to dismantle the racist and misogynist structural barriers which continue to impede women of color faculty. These issues need to be addressed at every level of the university particularly in terms of “color blind” and “gender blind” policies and procedures governing the tenure and promotion practices at most institutions.”

Critique and Recommendations on How Higher Education Institutions Can Support Black Women

The underrepresentation of Black women faculty in academe, particularly in the role of full-time professors, demonstrates the racial and gendered challenges Black women face in these environments (Walkington, 2017; Roberts et al., 2022). The National Center for Education Statistics indicated that in 2019, Black women faculty were wholly underrepresented in faculty roles, only comprising 1.63% of full professors, despite them encompassing more than half of the 13.4% population in the United States of America (Roberts et al., 2022). This underrepresentation of Black women faculty in the academy explains and supports the academy's current Eurocentric epistemology, as its lack of diverse faculty seems to perpetuate a dominant narrative in these spaces. It further brings to bear questions around the recruitment efforts of Black women within the academia, as the lack of hiring Black women faculty could suggest that diversity is not what a university is interested in achieving, thus their abysmal attempt to recruit Black women at all (Roberts et al., 2022; Logwood et al., 2023).

Moreover, Black women faculty also encounter racial discrimination in the form of pay discrepancies. As a result of not having other Black women to converse with about salary negotiations, in most cases, Black women receive lower pay than their white counterparts (Walkington, 2017). Understanding that tenure-track positions are challenging to come by due to the lack of jobs, it is especially challenging for Black women to secure tenure-track positions for many reasons (Fries & Kelly, 2005; Walkington, 2017), and when they acquire these positions, they still earn lower salaries than other non-Black faculty in the professoriate (Roberts et al., 2022; Womble, 2018). Thus, pay inequity remains a severe issue that the academy needs to take

seriously and implement changes to remedy financial inequity among its faculty (Womble, 2018).

Additionally, attention should be directed at how the academy constantly leans on Black women despite their other obligations (Logwood et al., 2023). For instance, Black women faculty are sought out as individuals who are apt to help in any manner necessary despite their other obligations (Logwood et al., 2023). Again, this is the academy's complicity in leaning into the stereotype of the Mammy, known for her caring and nurturing temperament (Roberts et al., 2022). "Negative stereotypes also impact Black women's faculty placement in over-worked and lesser appreciated race-specific courses" Walkington, p.54, 2017). Moreover, in academia, it is not uncommon for white colleagues to bring attention to the culturally centered research of a Black female faculty member, increasing her reputation to hypervisibility at certain times while concurrently devaluing her work (Roberts et al., 2022; Walkington, 2017).

Much has been written on the harmful effects of the academy regarding its treatment of Black woman faculty; even less has been divulged with regard to actionable steps aimed at correcting and assisting Black women who are in these spaces. We'd like to begin by offering our first recommendation, and that is to begin listening to Black women prior to any implementation of policies. As mentioned by Fries & Kelly (2005), the academy needs to start by centering their stories and experiences first, realizing that that is only the first step, as support alone isn't enough to change matters in academe. Additionally, Black women faculty did not create the systems that oppress them and should not be held accountable for dismantling them.

Next, after an effective support system has been created, then a support system that necessitates policy change in the form of providing additional financial support to Black women faculty should be enacted immediately (Logwood et al., 2023). As mentioned in the critique

above, there are disparate financial inequities that exist as it relates to Black women faculty making less than their peers. Thus, in a definitive manner, rendering financial support to Black women faculty will bring financial equity to them in a manner that is meaningful, and it will help rectify the unpaid support that results in them being chosen to serve on many boards of service without financial restitution (Logwood et al., 2023). As research has shown, Black women are not always compensated for taking on those additional service roles.

Lastly, again understanding that Black women faculty are not responsible for the systems they exist in professionally-- and outside the academy. However, there are ways to mitigate some of the harm they experience during their tenure. With regard to their mental preservation, we recommend that Black women faculty seek out support from other Black faculty. If that kind of support is unavailable to them on their campuses, we suggest becoming a part of a professional Black women's group that centers on Black women. West (2019) states that these groups are intentionally centered on like-minded Black women and their experiences. These spaces are created and cultivated to be safe landings for Black women, a space that is reflexive regarding the academy but also professionally enriching. Ultimately, these spaces are founded to bring healing to other Black women faculty, which is a much needed respite from the barrage of microaggressions they experiences regularly (West, 2019).

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