

Ain't I A Woman: Black Women's Endurance in Higher Education, the Implications of Linked Fate, and the Urgent Call for Greater Cultural Responsiveness

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National data on Black women in higher education has typically been presented through a deficit lens. General interpretations have suggested that in 'comparison' to white women, the rate at which Black women enroll in college or secure faculty appointments is less than ideal. While this data is intended to highlight systemic inequities in opportunities for Black women in higher education, too often it is (mis)used to justify the intellectual inferiority of the group. However, the same data—when examined through a critical lens—reveals something much more complex; which the present article attempts to unpack. Given the abounding obstacles Black women in academia experience due to the confluence of racism and sexism (and other interlocking systems of oppression), their perseverance, though painful at times, is rather remarkable and reason to pause and reflect; here's why. Black women's persistence is emblematic of our collective resistance to anti-Black structures, ideologies, and practices that are historically and deeply ingrained in institutions of higher education—namely, though not exclusively, predominately white institutions (PWIs). Beyond data points, Black women represent a collection of untold stories of struggle, advancement, and linked fate. When shared, stories provide strength, hope, and healing, and the courage to transform old systems and reimagine new academic spaces that recognize the humanity and value of Black women and their contributions to the academy. Given the importance of (counter)storytelling, the research highlighted within this current issue provides varied narrative and autoethnographic accounts of the lived experiences of Black women in higher education. Across each article are points for reflection and clear recommendations for action. More implicit, but nonetheless present, is an urgent call for greater cultural responsiveness in higher education. A topic that is introduced and explored briefly here in this opening article.

Keywords: Black women, Higher education, Linked fate, Culturally responsive practices

Introduction

When feminist acknowledge in one breath that Black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though Black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong—and that is simply not the case. Usually, when people talk about the “strength” of Black women they are referring to the way in which they perceive Black women coping with oppression. They ignore the reality that to be strong in the face of oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not be confused with transformation. ~ bell hooks (2015, p. 6)

Being Black in higher education, whether a student or faculty member, is certainly difficult; but being Black and a woman engenders a unique burden (hooks, 2015; Jean-Marie & Lloyd-Jones, 2011; Patton, 2009). Our intersectional identities heighten susceptibility to gendered racism (i.e., the intersection of racism and sexism) and other forms of oppression—especially, but not exclusively, at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Mawhinney, 2012). Often isolated, dehumanized, devalued, silenced, and pushed out; Black women are made to feel unwelcome and unsupported. Amidst these abounding obstacles, Black women persist. For many, persistence is a stance of resistance to the anti-Black structures, ideologies, and practices that have historically kept Black women from full participation—that is, excluding them from access to effective advising, meaningful professional development, and successful promotion and tenure—in largely white, male academic spaces. Despite (or in spite of) these oppressive practices, some Black women make a conscious decision to persevere, though painful at times, for reasons that extend beyond individual interests. Black women likely continue to endure because it benefits the group as a whole. When Black women serve on selection and search committees, they establish a pipeline for other Black women to access and enter higher education. Some might call this *othermothering* (Collins, 2000). Within the context of higher education, Strayhorn (2014) defines othermothering as “academic caregiving to students that facilitates their adjustment to the college environment, encourages retention, [and] fosters positive campus climates” (p. 125). While this definition of othermothering helps to capture ‘what’ Black women in higher education do for other Black women; it does not fully explain ‘why’ Black women do it. When an individual Black woman sees herself (i.e., her success and her constraints) as inextricably tied to the larger group of Black women, this is referred to as *linked fate* (Dawson, 1994; Simien, 2005). Whereas othermothering centers on an ethics of caring and personal accountability (Collins, 2000); linked fate is more focused on closing gaps in opportunity. Therefore, when examining the solidarizing effect of being Black and a woman in higher education, linked fate helps to explain in part why Black women may persist in the academy amid the perpetual discrimination they encounter.

There has been very little, if any research, that has examined the relationship between linked fate and the persistence of Black women in higher education; but perhaps the best

illustration of this possible correlation can be seen in the continued growth of Black women on United States (US) college and university campuses (Wilder et al., 2013; Shavers et al., in press).

A Demographic Profile of the Growth of Black Women in Higher Education

The presence of Black women in higher education has increased markedly since Mary Jane Patterson, the daughter of a slave and first Black woman to graduate from college, earned her bachelor's degree with honors from Oberlin College—a PWI and preeminent leader of racial coeducation during the period of enslavement—in 1862 (Slowe, 1933). Patterson, after graduating, went on to teach at the Institute of Colored Youth (now Cheyney University of Pennsylvania), where she would usher other Black women through the college pipeline. She was just one of many Black women pioneers to do so. According to Robinson (1978), it was common practice for Black women to identify and recruit other Black women in higher education. Decades later, their efforts would prove fruitful as the percent growth of Black women in higher education would rise to new levels.

Today, Black women are the fastest-growing population of students in colleges and universities across the nation. Between 1976 and 2019, the percent of Black women enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by more than 180 percent—growing from 563,100 (1976) to nearly 1.6 million (2019) (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). And while the representation of Black women faculty has remained proportionately low (constituting no more than 3% of the total full-time faculty positions), an indication of inequitable access to faculty appointments, the consistency in which Black women have held these positions is often overlooked. For example, since 1991, the percent of full-time Black women faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by more than 130 percent—growing from 11,460 (1991) to 26,397 (2018) (Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021).

When looking at the data on Black women in higher education it is easy to detect disproportional trends. However, in many instances, when the focus is exclusively on identifying evidence to locate inequitable patterns, there is a missed opportunity to use the data to reflect on the remarkable persistence of Black women in the academy. The focus on persistence does not dismiss the very real struggles and challenges Black women face in academia, but rather draws attention to a rich legacy of collective action against anti-Blackness in higher education.

What is clear from the data is that Black women do indeed persist and exist in academic spaces that have been, and continue to be, unwelcoming and unsupportive. Black women have been known to sacrifice their time, energy, and personal finances (Haynes et al. 2020), pushing aside individual agendas in support of the collective success of Black women in higher education. While it is well understood that Black women often provide academic caregiving through peer and/or faculty mentoring as a way to offer other Black women guidance on how to successfully navigate what has been referred to as “plantation politics of the academy” (Guillory, 2014, p. 362; Strayhorn, 2014); admittedly, there is less conceptual understanding about why these Black women behave in ways that elevate group interests over individual interests. This

type of solidarizing behavior, where Black women view their responsibility outside of themselves, reflects perceptions of linked fate.

Race-Gender Linked Fate: Persistence as Resistance

The idea of linked fate has been studied primarily within the field of political science to explain the relative homogeneity of Black public opinion (Dawson, 1994). Research on linked fate has traditionally informed behavioral patterns among Black voters—and by extension Black women voters. With attention to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), political scientists recognized the combined effects of race and gender on political thinking and behavior (Gay & Tate, 1998; Simien, 2005). For Black women, race and gender do not operate separately but simultaneously. The racial and gender identities of Black women are thought to be mutually reinforcing; which means that being a woman matters just as much as being Black (Gay & Tate, 1998). Experiences with racism and sexism have influenced and shaped a unique sense of solidarity among Black women. The perception that ‘what is good for the group, must also be good for the ‘individual’ tends to be a driving force in Black women’s political support of other Black women (Philpot & Walton, 2007). Some call this *race-gender* linked fate (Brown & Lemi, 2021).

Race-gender linked fate begins with a sense of belonging or closeness typically found among Black women. More than other groups, Black women generally see their opportunities in life as tied to other Black women. Beyond politics, this perception has often translated into varying degrees of support (e.g., role modeling, networking, advocacy, and/or leadership). Race-gender linked fate is closely related, but slightly different, than othermothering, which has received its share of criticism for perpetuating anti-Black-woman stereotypes that characterize Black women as self-sacrificial; failing to disrupt the negative topos of Black women as caretaker and mammy (hooks, 2015; Mawhinney, 2012). Race-gender linked fate centers more on providing Black women with mutually beneficial opportunities and using the notion of group solidarity to explain this behavior.

Recently, the implications of race-gender linked fate have extended beyond social science applications and into education. Scholars have used the concept frequently when discussing the lived experiences of Black women faculty, university administrators, and college students. A standard search for scholarly publications with the words “Black women,” “higher education,” and “linked fate” returned 294 references. Over half of these publications were produced within the past five years (2016-2021), indicating an emerging discourse on linked fate among Black women on college campuses. However, much of the extant research within this body of scholarship consisted mainly of narratives and autoethnographic accounts of Black women’s oppressive experiences at PWIs.

Using the method of storytelling to understand race-gender linked fate is more prevalent in education than in social science, which has traditionally relied heavily on quantitative methods, such as survey analysis. Education scholars’ choice of (counter) storytelling—stories from those “whose voice and perspective [and] whose consciousness has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412)—helps to unpack the complexities that

may not be readily visible in large-scale datasets alone (Bell, 1987). Although the stories shared by Black women in higher education are nuanced by time and location, researchers have consistently (though not always) found the theme of Black women's solidarity intertwined within the narratives from the group.

The continued growth and persistence of Black women in higher education is a possible illustration of race-gender linked fate. The convergence of a common identity and shared oppression among Black women operates as a unifying force against anti-Black policies and practices on US college and university campuses. Rather than disconnecting from the academy entirely, some Black women choose to remain at institutions that knowingly uphold white supremacy—embracing an *outsider-within* status as a form of resistance (Collins, 1986). Black women leverage this status to act as advocates from ‘within’ the system to establish opportunities for greater access for Black women who remain ‘outside’ these spaces. As shared earlier, this form of advocacy has potentially paid dividends toward the dramatic increase of Black women enrolling in college and relative growth of those securing full-time faculty appointments at degree-granting postsecondary institutions. When Black women serve on selection and search committees, they have a voice in who gets admitted into college and who gets hired in faculty positions. Having a greater presence of Black women is, in turn, mutually beneficial for students and faculty in academia as it fosters the propensity for coalition building around policy issues that directly impact the group as a whole. To fully realize systemic change, however, Collins (2000) offers this poignant reminder that the “struggles for institutional transformation are rarely successful without allies [co-conspirators]” (p. 204).

Reimagining Academic Spaces for Black Women: Building Cross-Racial Coalitions

Some of the most important social justice movements in the twentieth century resulted from the strategic mobilization of cross-race coalitions. Several Black feminists have argued that Black women’s unique struggles are not separate from the larger struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice for all people (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). Black women have long understood that the “demands of millions speak more powerfully than the pleas of a few isolated voices” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). It was Pauli Murray, the first Black woman (person) to earn a Doctor of Juridical Science (JSD), who said, “we on the other side of the color line cannot do it alone” (Caldbeck, 2000, p. 456). Speaking truth to power, Murray frequently asserted in her writings and her sermons that the removal of systemic barriers rests in the hands of the dominant group (Caldbeck, 2000). So then, white people who are responsible for maintaining, and even anesthetizing themselves, to the oppression of Black women should openly confront and work to resolve the injustices imposed on the group. To ensure the success of initiatives proposed by Black women aimed at greater equity, white people must be willing to step out of their places of comfort to join in solidarity with Black women to fight gendered racism in higher education.

To fully dismantle institutional oppression, Black women do not need allies; they need co-conspirators. Love (2019) makes this distinction:

Ally-ship is working toward something that is mutually beneficial and supportive to all parties involved. Allies do not have to love dark people, question their privilege, decenter their voice, build meaningful relationships with folx working in the struggle, take risks, or be in solidarity with others. They just have to show up and mark the box present; thus, ally-ship is performative or self-glorifying. (p.117)

Co-conspirators, on the other hand, take a very different approach, according to Love (2019). To qualify as a co-conspirator, requires action and not lip service. Co-conspirators leverage their power and privilege as a sign of their commitment to human solidarity and their stance against anti-Blackness (Love, 2019). Thus, co-conspirators know when to step in, when to step up, and when to step aside when working collaboratively with oppressed groups. The distinction between co-conspirators and allies is painstakingly clear; but in the academy, there has been a troubling conflation of the two concepts.

Given the rapidly changing cultural landscape in higher education, college and university leaders have been strongly encouraged to develop strategic goals around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI working groups, think tanks, and taskforce have been established, each having varying goals and expectations supporting the recruitment and retention of students and faculty of color. These efforts, while well-intended, are fundamentally flawed. For people of color, the amplified attention to DEI might have opened doors of opportunity to participate in certain academic spaces, but seldom provided a seat at the table—the place where high-level decision-making occurs. These gestures are merely performative acts with little (if any) substantive weight. To effectuate change on a systemic level, those in critical decision-making positions in higher education must look beyond DEI planning and programming and begin reimagining academic spaces for people of color, namely and especially Black women.

Just this year, the nation watched as Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and *The 1619 Project* author, Nikole Hannah-Jones, promotion and tenure process was put on public display. Unlike most reviews which are organized internally and reviewed confidentially, Hannah-Jones' process was anything but conventional. After having experienced tremendous professional success, Hannah-Jones was offered the distinguished position as the Knight Chair at her alma mater, the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill (UNC)—a PWI located in the South. After receiving overwhelming support at the department and university level, Hannah-Jones' tenure was approved. The final stage of the review process required Hannah-Jones' tenure decision to be put to a vote by the Board of Trustees. Following a prolonged waiting period, Hannah-Jones was notified that the Board had pulled her tenure application without explanation. When offered a five-year contract instead, Hannah-Jones accepted and said nothing publicly (Hannah-Jones, 2021). Still, some local conservatives were unsatisfied with her hire and rallied to push her out of the institution entirely. A white investigative reporter, Joe Killian was the first to break Hannah-Jones' story. From there, the news of Hannah-Jones' promotion and tenure process went viral, and the opposition to her hiring was framed as a national scandal. Although the Board eventually approved Hannah-Jones' tenure as a result of public pressure; it was too little, and much too late—the damage had already been done. Hannah-Jones declined UNC's tenure offer and

accepted a faculty role at Howard University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU).

Offering this recap of Hannah-Jones' experiences is deeply unsettling for many reasons. Though not in public view, many Black women faculty in higher education have had very similar experiences with their tenure and promotion process. Knowledge of Hannah-Jones' case, for many, sparked a sense of linked fate among other Black women faculty; many of whom Hannah-Jones has since publicly acknowledged and expressed her deepest gratitude for their support and advocacy. Alongside Black women, Hannah-Jones also named others who played a key role in advocating for the reconsideration of her tenure dossier. Of this long list of acknowledgements, was a cross-racial coalition of students, colleagues, alumni, university administrators, community activists, and political officials who worked tirelessly to petition the Board to reverse their original decision to reject Hannah-Jones' tenure application.

The implications of cross-racial coalition building are vast and extend beyond higher education. Black women, as a whole, can accomplish so much more when others join their cause and actively leverage their power and privilege to reimagine policies and practices that speak to Black women's humanity, value, and endless contributions. Unless we can start to imagine things not as they are, but as they could be (Greene, 1995); history tells us that, Black women's fight for freedom and justice will remain an elusive quest at best.

The Urgent Call for Greater Cultural Responsiveness: A Summary

Like Nikole Hannah-Jones, Black women are finding the strength and courage to tell our stories in an effort to find hope and facilitate healing daily. In the current issue, the contributors use varying methods of (counter) storytelling to "shatter complacency and challenge the status quo" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2414). Narrative and autoethnographic accounts of the experiences of Black women faculty and students on college and university campuses are the focus of this issue. The articles center topics on: health and wellness (Blackshear); program redesign (Welch and colleagues); academic persistence (Leath); labor and racial equity (Porcher and colleagues); online teaching (Wilson and Primus); and identity construction (Allen-Handy and colleagues). Across each article are points for reflection and clear recommendations for action. More implicit, but nonetheless present, is a collective and urgent call for greater cultural responsiveness in higher education.

Now more than ever, serious attention must be given to culturally responsive practices within the academy. Beyond strategies, these practices require college and university leaders to act responsively to the needs of Black women and other marginalized groups (Gay, 2018). These leaders must shift and transform their mindsets to think differently about the outdated policies and practices that perpetually privilege certain groups over others. Reimagining admission requirements, promotion and tenure review processes, workload assignments, and what constitutes impactful and high-quality research—among the other countless ways that Black women are evaluated and assessed—should not be optional, but absolutely mandatory. The physical, emotional, and mental health of Black women demands it. Institutions that push a DEI agenda without directly attending to systemic oppression cannot claim to be culturally

responsive. For institutions to authentically embrace cultural responsiveness in their policies and practices, people of color in general—Black women specifically—need to have a seat at the table where high-level decision making takes place. While seated, our voices should be heard, our recommendations implemented, and our contributions valued. As presidential hopeful and first Black Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm, once eluded: until we get our seat at the table...we will just continue to bring our folding chairs.

In loving memory of bell hooks (1952-2021)

A distinguished educator, artist, poet, feminist, social activist, and scholar.

A true beacon of light who showed us how to embrace Black womanhood unapologetically. May you rest well, while your writings continue to live on—breathing life into present and future generations of Black feminists.

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