

The trek for a sense of belonging

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In this piece, I present the journey I have taken in opposing the trend in British academia to marginalise black women. I discuss the impact of black feminist perspectives and practices upon my quest for self-knowledge by referring to Patricia Hill Collins' notion of the "outsider within". Yearning for an imagined sense of home, I have a desire to discover African identities and cultures. I am increasingly aware that the empowering inclusion that I have searched for in British society is not determined by my abode; rather, I can feel acceptance only from within. The celebration of my African and Caribbean heritage has been a vital means of challenging my subordinate status in Britain. My visions of Africa and the Caribbean invigorate a sense of self-respect that revitalises my pride, purpose and direction. Through different debates about what it means to be "black", "African", "Caribbean", female and feminist, I renegotiate the ambiguities and contradictions of my evolving identity as a black British woman of Barbadian descent.

Patricia Hill Collins' standpoint argument (1990), that feminist knowledge generates collective consciousness that transforms socio-economic and political relations among African-American women, has had an important impact on my teaching and research. Black British feminist thought also interrogates the historical and cultural commonalities, as well as the diversity, among women of African descent. Grounded in the development of agendas for liberation, black British feminism examines the intersection of power relations in black women's lives. Collins states that:

Afrocentric feminist thought offers two significant contributions toward furthering our understanding of the important connections among knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. First, Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance.

Second, Black feminist thought addresses ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory and in the sociology of knowledge concerning ways of assessing "truth". Offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering. But revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications (1990: 222).

Collins contends that black women's subjectivities defy negative self-perceptions, and that this has the potential to change power inequalities. She maintains that black feminism constitutes political activism that resists the oppression of black women by negative, Eurocentric, bourgeois and patriarchal ideologies. Collins maintains that black feminist standpoints share four main criteria. The first is based on the understanding that shared subordination and concrete experience is the foundation of wisdom and well-being. The second principle is based on a holistic perspective that encompasses dialogue about black women's subjectivity. Thirdly, the ethic of caring for local communities involves personal expressiveness, empathy, unification and sharing of mutual interests. The final criterion of personal accountability refers to black women's responsibility for claiming knowledge, ethics, personal empowerment and societal transformation.

According to Collins, black women occupy an "outsider within status" in the academy that allows them to recognise injustices that those who are part of the dominant culture are unable to comprehend. The widespread repudiation of black women's knowledge and lives leads to significant radical insight. Black feminists have the advantage of a unique feminist standpoint to examine black women's contradictory experiences of dealing with dominant social structures. Marginalised scholarly black women creatively use the "insider outsider" approach to research the familiar world from the perspective of the unfamiliar.

My "outsider within status" is characterised by my experiences of racial and sexual discrimination as a student, researcher and lecturer in British universities. Institutionalised racism, sexism, heterosexism and elitism underpin the segregation of black women within the British educational system. It took me many years of lecturing to create effective coping mechanisms to confront exclusion and ensure that my black students faced fewer obstacles than I did. As a black woman in British academia, I opposed alienation and oppression with the support of black feminist intellectuals. Lecturing in Britain, I criticised conventional teaching of sociology, gender and race relations courses, which

failed to probe satisfactorily the interconnections between different forms of subordination. I often queried my ability to educate white students to really understand and challenge the variety of ways in which they benefitted from their racial position of privilege. Nonetheless, I encouraged these students to debunk notions about the superiority of white identity, Euro-American cultures, Western prestige and morality. Despite my misgivings about the implementation of constructive equal opportunities policies, I was able to ensure that the distinct knowledge, shared experiences and demands of black people were also central to my curricula.

Amina Mama (1989) addresses the ways in which black women deal with their dual status as researchers in the Western academy and as members of communities that are subordinated by racism. Sharing common experiences of marginalisation by white societies with other black people is often in conflict with their roles as researchers trained by a Eurocentric educational system. This is complicated by the problems of trying to both step out of, as well as draw on, their personal understanding of the exploitation of black communities. There is tension between researchers' ethnocentric training, which encourages academics to disassociate themselves from black female subjectivity, and their experiences of socio-economic and political inequalities. Such contradictions are often resolved by developing holistic, historical and community-oriented approaches that challenge dominant ideas and give credibility to issues that are defined by black women.

While doing a Masters degree in the interdisciplinary arena of Women's Studies, I conducted research on 17 black women's organisations in Britain. I wanted to examine my training in Western models of sociology, women's studies and race relations in order to prioritise the ideas of black women. Although I was cognisant of academic interpretations of black feminist thought, I believed that it was important to determine the extent to which these reflected the aims of grassroots mobilisation. Interviewing women who worked in black women's groups, I discovered their varying perceptions of the meanings of the term "black". For some, being black was viewed in relation to being of African descent. Others defined blackness politically by considering similar historical struggles against racial subjugation. It became apparent in debates over the relevance of feminism that many black women regarded it as a racist ideology, even though the strategies of their organisations demonstrated feminist principles. Several women maintained that this confusion about the merits of feminism arose because it was viewed as inherently racist. This misconception

frequently precluded black women from identifying with feminist ideology even while adopting feminist methods. Despite different opinions about how to categorise these groups by virtue of their racial and gender politics, it was obvious that they were providing vital socio-economic and political services that the majority of black women would not be able to gain access to elsewhere. These investigations allowed me to connect black feminist theories and action by improving my knowledge of the different interpretations of black identities, feminist politics and the activism of women's organisations.

I was aware that in general, these groups did not prioritise sexuality as a critical issue, in view of wider community struggles. This silence around the issue of sexuality motivated my doctoral investigation; I conducted research on the historical and social construction of black female sexuality in England in order to ascertain the significance of derogatory representations of hypersexuality. In particular, I interrogated the effects of representations of black women as lascivious, prone to prostitution and rampant breeders on the self-concepts and relationships of 21 interviewees. Participants explained that they created self-definitions that enabled them to retaliate against their depiction as sensuous, bestial and Sapphires. bell hooks asserts that the Sapphire stereotype represents black women as evil, manipulative and predatory sexual temptresses (1982). Respondents maintained that they were able to transcend such lewd and reductive portrayals by constructing positive self-images and alternative models of sexual freedom. They articulated the need to combine agency, independence and self-love within the context of broader structural changes.

I adapted Western social scientific research methods, mainstream feminist methodology and black feminist frameworks to examine the concerns of my interviewees. Black feminists create historical and analytical frameworks that transcend the limitations of Western models and concepts, which limit our potential to examine our own positions. The emphasis on action-oriented research strategies within black feminism is beneficial to implementing public policies that meet the varied and complex needs of our black communities. I was able to ascertain interviewees' challenges to stereotypes, as well as the degree to which they rejected male control of their sexuality and enhanced their own erotic empowerment.

Institutionalised racism and sexism restricts the access of black female scholars to tenured academic posts and promotion. The marginalisation, under-employment and unemployment of black female academics often constricts their ability to achieve their potential. Research funding councils often contribute to

racial inequity in the academy by failing to develop greater representation of black female intellectuals. Frequently sited in the lowest echelons of academic hierarchies, black female lecturers and researchers struggle to reconcile the pressures of publishing, teaching and research within the constraints of unequal opportunity structures. The absence of a critical mass of black women in British academia makes it extremely difficult to negate racist paradigms, with white scholars unable to appreciate the situated knowledge of black female academics. Moreover, the dominance and monopoly of anti-racist studies by white intellectuals means that black women's ideas as well as their resources, are frequently stolen. It is difficult for subordinated black female academics to prevent senior lecturers and professors from benefiting from their research, leading to the compromise of their rights of authorship or even wholesale academic theft. For instance, black women who have conducted research with the assurance of authorship of papers often discover that their names are not listed on the final report. Instead white and largely male researchers are awarded the bulk of the funding, and are cited as authors even though their input into the research process might have been minimal.

Structural barriers to career advancement and the conservative environment in the academy lead many black scholars in Britain to migrate to countries that offer better opportunities to pursue their goals. Faced with the additional challenge of racialised sexual discrimination, increasing numbers of black female scholars abandon their homes in Britain to seek employment in the United States of America, Canada, Africa and the Caribbean. After years of temporary lecturing and research posts, and frustrated by the constraints to my personal and academic progress, I decided to leave Britain and applied for lectureships in Africa and the Caribbean. I wanted to stop lecturing in the British educational system because I felt unable to address effectively the ways in which it undermines, silences and ignores black people and their histories, politics and cultures. In 2004, I accepted a lectureship in Jamaica at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, hoping that I would have greater influence there than in Britain, as well as access to greater opportunities for lecturing, research and outreach work.

I have found that my journey of self-awareness, discovery and acceptance in Jamaica is influenced yet again by my new "outsider within" position here. Certainly I am not fighting against the same racial and gender biases as I was in Britain, but the need to recreate survival mechanisms to overcome isolation is still paramount. My continued self-actualisation has been limited by lack of

adequate mentoring, guidance and support. I intend to find out more about local women's groups in Jamaica, just as I did in Britain, when I stepped out of the ivory tower and conducted interviews with black women's organisations there. By linking my experiences as a lecturer to a deeper understanding of Jamaican feminism, I believe I can contribute to progressive dialogue that reconciles a rich diversity of complex female identities. I hope to support and work towards advancing the priorities of Jamaican women beyond the confines of lecture theatres.

Jamaica is plagued by different divisions (on the basis of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, disability, age and marital status) to those I encountered in Britain, but they are still pervasive. For instance, in Britain, a white male student told me that he "did not mind being taught by a nigger". To him, all black people were racially inferior, and he felt quite liberal in asserting that he was not opposed to being taught by one. Feeling that I had left such racism behind it was a shock, when I arrived for my interview at Mona, to be asked by a black male professor why, as "an English Bajan nigger", I wanted the post. The implication was that by virtue of residing in Britain and having Barbadian parents, I was inferior to him, a Jamaican. I mention this incident because many Jamaicans erroneously claim that racial divisions do not exist in their society.

Linnette Vassell (2004) maintains that since the 1980s, the political connections among exploited groups have not been truly appreciated by Caribbean feminists. The decline in women's organisations and the increase in professionalism contribute to problems in gaining and maintaining equality for poor women. Vassell examines the rivalry and favouritism that prohibit radical thought and progress. She argues that new gender sensitive programmes dedicated to "lifting as we climb" are essential. Vassell states:

We have to get our own house, our own organisations and movements in order against the bad-minded competitiveness, the long-run malice-keeping, the 'judgementalism', the gate-keeping that lets in our friends and keeps out others ... (2004: 702).

In our endeavours to fight against male domination, we often have difficulties with acknowledging the ways in which we are in positions of status and authority over other women. Audre Lorde (1984) argues that patriarchal ideologies and practices can not be used to liberate women. Academic feminists who use masculinist methods have to leave "the master's house" if gender equality is to be achieved. When we reject patriarchal power and privilege

to overcome our fear of difference, the advancement of self-discovery and recovery will transform gender relations. Lorde proclaims:

... For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support (1984: 112).

I would like to increase my awareness of the ways in which African and diasporic feminists can unite and mobilise to implement social changes for black women. I want to extend my initial analysis of African women's groups in Britain to assess the similarities and differences of feminist activism in Africa and the Caribbean. Although I understand that I would still be an "outsider within", I believe that I have learnt from my experiences in British and Caribbean academia in ways that will enable me to embark on this important enterprise. This will allow me to build upon my commitment to liberating politics that empower black women to regain control of all areas of their lives.

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