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When Margins Become Centered: Black Queer Women in Front and Outside of the Classroom

Moya Bailey and Shannon J. Miller

This article revisits the authors' experiences as Black queer women teaching undergraduates and receiving graduate education, ultimately reflecting on these from their current professorial positions. It explores how graduate teachers and junior faculty who are Black queer women navigate the process of creating and maintaining feminist pedagogy in the college classroom while simultaneously negotiating universities that have very little space for queer women, Black women, and those at these intersections. The article asserts that feminist classrooms are arenas for discovery, liberation, and resistance of hegemonic structures, and attempts to construct these spaces both in- and outside of women's studies departments. This task is particularly challenging when the instructor holds the very marginalized identities that exist in the content of the class and their education. Ultimately, the article argues that their unique experience has been under-theorized, even by them, and necessitates specific strategies that would not be addressed by a focus on Black women who are assumed to be straight or queer women who are assumed to be white.

Keywords: academy / Black queer women / pedagogy / women's, gender, and sexuality studies

In 2008 we—Moya Bailey and Shannon Miller—were graduate students, scared of the potential impact of naming the challenges we faced in our departments and admitting those we faced in the classroom. Black women in the academy have been punished for less. By working collaboratively we were able to forestall some of that anxiety, and we produced a conference presentation that grew into a transcribed conversation and an article submission, which laid untouched for

five years until the call for this present special issue. Now we face new risks, as the professors who once seemed to hold our degrees in the balance are now our colleagues and potentially reviewing our work for publication and promotion. The risks are now connected to our promotion and tenure, but even these concerns seem less significant than what we risk when we discuss the ways in which the personal is political. Beyond our own fears regarding job security we risk being dismissed as sentimental and emotional, despite the best efforts of feminists who have gone before us. As Audre Lorde (2007a) reminds us, we cannot dismantle the master's house, or the Ivory Tower, with the master's tools of silence and individual success. We go there, discussing deeply personal experiences and relationships in an academic journal so that there can be even more of a record for those who come after us of what it means to be a Black queer woman in the academy. Here, we offer a bit of what we wanted in academic texts, a real, transparent conversation about the ways in which various facets of our identities intersect as Black queer women in the academy.

In this article we reflect on our experiences as Black queer women teaching undergraduates while receiving graduate education in the South, a region much maligned for its reaction to people with identities such as ours, but in actuality a great incubator for our burgeoning senses of self. We address how these early experiences connect to our current teaching contexts as postgraduates. We explore how graduate teachers who are Black queer women navigate the process of creating and maintaining feminist pedagogy in the college classroom while simultaneously negotiating graduate schools that have very little space for queer women, Black women, and those of us at these intersections. We assert that feminist classrooms are arenas for discovery, liberation, and resistance of hegemonic structures, and attempt to construct these spaces both in- and outside of women's studies departments in a region of the country represented as (and sometimes accurately) harboring beliefs antithetical to these aims. This task is particularly challenging when the instructor holds the marginalized identities that exist in the content of the class. We reflect on our experiences as doctoral students from two universities in the same southeastern state, one the flagship public institution and the other an elite private institution, and share how our experiences connect and diverge in the classroom and the institution. Ultimately, we argue that our unique experiences have been under-theorized, even by us, and thus necessitate specific strategies of archiving that would not be addressed by a focus on Black women who are assumed to be straight or queer women who are assumed to be white (Harris 1996; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Melancon and Braxton 2015; Williams 2000). We hope this collaborative article serves as archival evidence that demonstrates our queerness as integral to our experience as Black women in the academy, and that our transparency can be a touchstone for Black queer women to come.

Shannon

While in a graduate course on teaching I listened as my peers discussed how they might encounter anti-feminism in the classroom and map out their possible responses to resistant students. We sat at a conference-style table and many looked around the circle for support. Meanwhile, I contemplated how my identities—Black, queer, woman—would lead to very different teaching experiences from my colleagues and my professor, all who were either straight, white, or even other Black straight women. I felt a combination of marginalization, isolation, anger, fear, and loneliness in this classroom. To work through my feelings and for my own survival I reached out across university institutions to find someone who connected to my experience. I found Moya.

Moya

My initial conversation with Shannon blossomed into much more than commiserating over teaching experiences as Black queer women. We began our discussion with the goal of collaborating for a presentation at a women's studies regional conference in the South, but as we began to talk, one hour turned into two and then three and it became clear that what we were discussing needed more investigation than a conference presentation could provide. We worked diligently on organizing our thoughts for the conference, but our words, thoughts, and experiences threatened to overwhelm the twenty-minute time allotment, and we knew we had to save some for later. This article became our "later."

This early conversation morphed into an ongoing engagement with these issues that was more than just a way to expand on our presentation. As students of feminist theory and praxis we wanted our writing to reflect a dialogic relationship, founded on a horizontal friendship—as opposed to a more formal collegial hierarchy. We transcribed and edited, identifying major themes that emerged in our conversation. After having the cathartic experience of processing these feelings, we left our interview alone, consumed by our efforts to graduate and navigate our new positions as newly hired faculty. This article incorporates pieces from that conversation in 2009, but also reflects new perspectives informed by hindsight and new experiences that impress on us the need to highlight the unique challenges faced by Black queer women in the academy. By revisiting this conversation six years later, PhDs conferred, postdoctoral fellowships and tenure achieved, we are less afraid to name our experiences.

When researching this article and examining Black queer women's explorations of their feelings and experiences in the academy, we primarily found information that assumed that Black women were straight or offered no insight into the ways that sexuality impacted the research findings.¹ For example, Sherée Wilson's "They Forgot Mammy Had a Brain" lists seven common problems

that Black women have reported in studies about their engagement as faculty and administrators at predominately white institutions:

1. The constant challenges on being viewed as “other” and therefore believed to be inferior;
2. the lack of professional support systems;
3. the excessive scrutiny by peers, superiors, and students;
4. an unstated requirement to work harder to gain recognition and respect;
5. the assumptions that positions were acquired through affirmative action and that therefore the faculty members lacked the necessary qualifications;
6. the “tokenism”—that is, being viewed as a symbol of race rather than as an individual; and
7. the denial of access to power structures normally associated with their position(s) (qtd. in Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012, 65).

Wilson’s sentiments were echoed throughout Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs and colleagues’ *Presumed Incompetent’s* (2012) other chapters, as well as in several other texts, including *When and Where I Enter*; Deborah Gray White’s (2009) *Telling Histories*; Irma McClaurin’s *Black Feminist Anthropology* (2001); and in several articles authored or coauthored by Juanita Johnson-Bailey (Johnson-Bailey 2013; Johnson-Bailey and Lee 2005; Smith and Johnson-Bailey 2011). In addition to these challenges, as Black queer women we experience another set of issues that this list does not capture. We could find no chapters in this landmark collection on women of color faculty that featured a queer woman of color writer. When all the queers are white and all the Black folks are straight, what is a Black queer woman to do (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1993)? Fortunately for us we had a large community of Black queer and gay friends outside of the academy. This sense of community outside of our institutions kept us fortified.

Being Out, But Not Out Enough, in Academia

Since our initial conversation we have graduated from our programs and are now employed at institutions outside of the South (much to our own chagrin), necessitating a shift in our focus. We are negotiating new norms regarding the ways in which race, gender, and sexuality are discussed in our new academic environments and find ourselves even more isolated than we had felt before. Despite the South’s reputation as a fundamentally racist, sexist, and homophobic space, it was in the South that we had access to a large Black queer community. We realized that while clearly calling forth our identities as Black queer women in the title of this article, our initial conversations as graduate students reflected limited analysis for our lives at these intersections. We identified three major reasons why this oversight occurred: those who came before did not discuss it;

we were still working through our feelings about our sexualities; and we had Black queer community outside of the academy.

First, we have internalized lessons from Black women academics both queer and straight who have taught us that the best way to negotiate the academy is to conceal and not try to feel our emotions; by not engaging our sensual sides in a space that is generally hostile to affect, we can protect ourselves (Buck and Lee 2013). Even though we presented our paper on our experiences as Black queer women graduate instructors at the 2008 Southeastern Women's Studies Association Conference (SEWSA), the intersections of race and gender were the primary focus of our analysis, not sexuality and sexual orientation. This is not surprising, and we attribute this to our unconscious acceptance and participation in Black respectability. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) asserts, "respectability politics" are the self-policing practices of marginalized communities enacted through the belief that if groups conform as much as possible to dominate social and moral codes of behavior, they will be regarded as equal citizens. We adopted this strategy as Black queer women graduate instructors, as the majority of our Black women role models in the academy did not share information about their intimate relationships.

With the notable exceptions of bell hooks (1989) and Lorde (2007b), few of our Black feminist foremothers in the academy talked about their relationships. While children make appearances in the texts of their work, Black feminists tend to leave this bit of the personal outside the purview of academic writing. Both of us recognized silences among Black queer faculty at our undergraduate institutions. We know of Black women and men faculty who were lesbian and gay and not closeted, but their relationships were never discussed. Shannon recalls a Black woman professor who identified as a "political lesbian." This made the word *lesbian* more respectable and less sensual. Moya remembers the late, great professor Rudolph Byrd as an informal mentor who did not discuss his personal life.

Moya

No doubt connected to his impeccable Southern etiquette, we never discussed his love life or mine. Our conversations about queerness were limited to identity and theory. I so wanted to know more about Professor Byrd and his experiences making his way through the academy as a gay Black man, in coursework before queer theory was in vogue. Like many faculty of color he had a large group of students that I was not quite a part of, so our interactions were limited and professional.

Both queer and straight white students felt comfortable discussing partners and even having them present at events, but rarely did Black students or faculty do the same. The clear message from those who came before was that you deal with the emotions associated with your queer identity in nonacademic spaces.

Despite this tenet, our queer feelings and the responses of others to our queerness always leached through the walls of the Ivory Tower.

Second, we were working through our own challenges related to our queer selves that reinforced for us the reason that our Black mentors kept sexuality private. In the following section Shannon reflects on the changing relationship dynamics with her mother during and after coming out. Subsequently, Moya discusses the departmental conversations regarding her queerness.

Shannon

I came out to my mother at least twice during graduate school. The period leading to my first sexual-identity disclosure was filled with sleepless nights. My mother raised me as a single parent and I was her only child. She worked as a secretary, and I grew up with an awareness that she sacrificed in order for me to climb out of the working class. I was also raised with an acceptance that my mother lived vicariously through me. For example, she was so excited when the letter arrived from my top-choice college that she opened it and drove to my high school to share the good news with me. She told me that when *I* went to college, *she* went to college. I loved my mother—she was the closest person to me, and being able to fulfill her dreams was a source of pride for me. Unfortunately, the momentous achievements in my life also included the promise of marriage—to a man. I first came out as bisexual to my mother. At the time I had a boyfriend, a Black man also enrolled in a doctoral program. He was my trophy within heteropatriarchy. I co-opted a bisexual identity for both my mother and myself. Surprisingly then, but not so much now, my mother was not noticeably angry after my bisexual-identity disclosure. She instructed me not to tell anyone, and explained that a lot of women (assumably heterosexual) were attracted to women. I later disclosed my lesbian identity after dissolving what was to be my last heterosexual relationship. I told my mother that I would date and love women exclusively. It was only then that she responded with anger.

I would be lying if I did not admit that I was dealing with my own feelings of sexual shame. My mother and I sat on the same church pews and internalized messages that same-sex relationships were sinful. I had a growing Black queer community that helped me combat and subsequently heal from my own internalized heterosexism. However, at the time I often battled with my mother's voice in my head, especially her comments that “all everyone would ever see was me having sex with a woman if I came out to them.” Thus, it would take a while for me to develop an activist voice on campus.

Moya

My queer identity is the piece that seems “okay” to bring into academic settings. As a first-year graduate student I never introduced my girlfriend to my university

community; but we lived together, and anyone who saw me off-campus likely saw us together. Instead of asking me about her, there was a lot of speculation that I only learned about well after our relationship ended. I never elaborated to the department because I learned early on that as a Black person in academia you do not volunteer that sort of personal information. Additionally, my girlfriend and I were never really on the path to permanent partnership, something that separated me from peers and professors alike who had long-time partners. My relationship was not taken seriously via my own self-policing and its relative impermanence. In the academy traditional modes of partnering are expected, even within queer and ostensibly feminist and queer-friendly departments.

Finally, because we, Shannon and Moya, had the great fortune to live and work in the greater Atlanta area we were intimately connected to a vibrant community of Black queer people outside of the academy. We did not expect nor need the academy to create that safe space for us because we had it outside. There was a time while Moya was writing her dissertation that she didn't have a conversation with a white or straight person in days! This community that we engaged with outside of our institutions made it easier to deal with what we were experiencing on the inside.

Luckily, we have grown through these self-silencing issues and are now ready to share a truth that is grounded in theory, and with the perspective that only time can give. Our naiveté and fear have been replaced by analysis and candor. We feel newly charged to investigate this liminal space of feelings and queerness that we did not fully investigate before. We have categorized our discussion in several ways: what happens inside the classroom and out; our experiences dealing with students as out Black queer faculty; and our experiences as out junior faculty. We conclude with our strategies for navigating this terrain both inside the classroom and out, and our return to reaching across institutions for support.

Being Out as Black Queer Women in the Classroom

Feminist pedagogical literature, as informed by Paulo Freire's (2000[1970]) critical work, often suggests that instructors can democratize teaching by sharing power with students (Gore 1993; Kenway and Modra 1992; Shrewsbury 1993; Tisdell 1998; Weiler 1991). As hooks (2003) notes in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*: "Teachers who have a vision of democratic education assume that learning is never confined solely to an institutionalized classroom . . . we see teaching and learning as taking place constantly" (41). Unfortunately, the power structures of the classrooms often mirror those of the society, in that women of color who teach have limited power in affecting the classroom (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1993). Therefore, when students perceive us as having less authority and power than they do, to what extent should we share power with them? What purpose does sharing power serve when students are privileged by

social structures and hence have more power than women of color professors (Johnson-Bailey and Lee 2005).

Paradoxically, it is this same heartfelt longing that underlies the persistence of the false assumption that racism has ended or that this is not a white-supremacist nation. In our culture, many understand *white supremacy* as extreme conservative fanaticism: Nazi skinheads and the like who preach all the old stereotypes about racial purity. Yet, such fringe groups rarely threaten the day-to-day workings of our lives; it is the less extreme white supremacist beliefs and assumptions, easier to cover up and mask, that maintain and perpetuate everyday racism as a form of group oppression (hooks 2003, 29). Interestingly, living outside of the South, we encounter (well-meaning) white colleagues and students who refer to the region as a geographically isolated space of racism.

Resistance to antiracism represents itself in the classroom in a variety of ways, taking aim at the course content, instructor, lectures, and/or pedagogy. It appears in particular kinds of behavior in the classroom, such as “body language conveying silent dismissal, angry outbursts, caustic remarks, disruptive questions, loud whispers, and so on,” and quite frequently as comments in course evaluations (Gotell and Crow 2005, 298). In this section we discuss our different strategies for dealing with the unique students at our institutions. Moya discusses the way she unpacks the privileges her students have in an effort to help them understand more fully what they believe they already know (McIntosh 1989). Shannon confronted homophobia and racism among her students. We use the unpacking/confronting terminology to explain our varying institutional setups.

Moya: Unpacking White Privilege

I taught feminist theory (at a small liberal-arts women’s college) and an introduction to women’s studies (at an elite, private research-one university). I taught at schools where students are very privileged, although they expressed it a little differently in each classroom. The intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class definitely inform how students take in material, and how they respond to what we are talking about in the classroom. I had students who exerted their privilege in different ways. So my (elite-school) students’ responses were “I already get this” or “this is clear to me” or a polite engagement with it, without really wanting to deal with the actual issues being addressed. It was a surface-level appreciation; their apathy had been a real challenge to try and unpack.

I tried to get them to see that even though things are alright for them, this does not mean that they are alright for other people. I asked them questions like: “Do you have a responsibility because other people are not faring well in the way that society is set up?” I think my students have had those conversations before and at least know what they are supposed to say or not. Hence, we could have this conversation: “I know about Tuskegee. I learned about that in another class. That was really awful, but the systems that we have in place, I mean you

cannot change the economy. You cannot change it. It just is what it is.” This outlook is disheartening. If we think about the history of students as the ones who started and sparked movements, then to have students be complacent and apathetic is disturbing.

Conversely, when I was teaching (at the small liberal-arts college) there was a way that students thought they could take advantage of me. As opposed to taking my presence as an opportunity for shared power in the classroom, they saw it as an opportunity to exploit the situation, which they would not have done if I had been an older professor or one from a different racial background. I am often assumed to be a student, which is equal parts my actual age and the combined anti-aging properties of Blackness and queerness (see “Black Don’t Crack” 2015). Other Black women academics note that both in- and outside the classroom our (perceived) youthfulness creates problems that can undermine our authority (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Johnson-Bailey and Lee 2005).

On the first day of class my teaching assistant and I met the gendered and racialized assumptions of a student who assumed that I was the teaching assistant and not the professor, although we were both dressed professionally. When teaching at the liberal arts college I had a student try to invoke her queerness as a way of explaining her uninformed comments in our queer theory class. Because she was queer she felt no need to do the reading. This student tried to use her identity as a proxy for actually engaging the material of the class. I believe she felt confident in expressing this belief to me because I had introduced myself as a queer professor on the first day of class. Although I have taught both African American and women’s studies courses, this was the first time that I experienced a student using their identity to claim knowledge of the subject matter. Again, the combination of my youthfulness, Blackness, and queerness worked to make my student feel comfortable in saying this to her professor, something that I believe my straight colleagues do not have to encounter.

Younger generations of students are encouraged to view their education as a consumable good and themselves as the consumer (Cheney, McMillan, and Schwartzman, 2010; Hill 1995; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). This neoliberal relationship to education raises larger pedagogical questions about just what it is we are doing as women’s studies instructors (Giroux 2002). As Freire (2000[1970], 224) notes, our goal is to create students that are “no longer docile listeners . . . [but] now critical co-investigators in dialog with the teacher.” Are we now also charged with trying to create in these students a love of learning so that they can critique the world around them? I try to address these concerns by employing new practices that use the classroom as a place for experiences and experimentations that go beyond the grade-oriented consumerist model, but I have received some negative feedback in students’ evaluations. For example, one evaluation read, “the teacher didn’t teach, the teacher made the students do everything, we taught ourselves.” I asked students to provide summaries of their

reading before we discussed the subject as a class, and I in turn provided them with my notes. This attempt to create more equity between my students and me was borne out of my desire to bring feminist theory into praxis. For me, it was a way to render them invested in the material, which they may not have been if we were simply operating on the “banking model” where I pour information into them and thus they do not have to be responsible for doing the reading. If a student’s grade depends on presenting the material and responding to it on the course’s website, you can be pretty sure the reading gets done.

I try to incorporate the tools that I have gained from feminist spaces outside of the classroom, as well as from disability studies and feminist theory, to come up with ways of engaging in the classroom that support diverse learning practices among my students. These strategies have been codified and lauded by white queer academics, but in my class are represented less favorably in evaluations—as less successful than I actually experienced them being in the classroom (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012, 186) even though students seemingly enjoyed and engaged them during class time. Despite studies that show that student evaluations show clear biases along the axes of race and gender and even attractiveness, they are still an important part of the tenure and promotion process (Andersen and Miller 1997; Baker and Copp 1997; Nast 1999).

Similarly, mentioning race, class, and gender in the classroom does not constitute a critical engagement with these issues. I remember a graduate-student instructor friend of mine who invited a trans woman of color to class. Students had to struggle with their own issues in a way that they would not have done if they had only read about transgender identity. One of the students who had been very dismissive about the issues that trans women face went up to the instructor afterward to share that the speaker’s personal narrative and patience with the class’s ignorance transformed her thinking. Students cannot simply project their thoughts onto an *imagined* “other” when someone is actually in the room. And I think that this is also true of us as instructors.

I always use myself as an example when students want to say that things cannot change or that our society is incapable of transformation. I am evidence that they do—I, a young, Black, queer woman, am their professor. My presence as an instructor of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at a predominately white institution would not have been possible forty years ago. Our identities in front of the classroom are visible and inform the ways in which our students view us. In *Contemporary Black Female Sexualities* (2015), Mel Michelle Lewis’s chapter “Corporeal Presence: Engaging the Black Lesbian Pedagogical Body in Feminist Classrooms and College Communities” presents the case study of “Dr. Mariposa,” who, “[a]llways dressed in a freshly pressed oxford button-down shirt, dark slacks, and leather loafers or lace-up leather dress shoes, she saunters in the classroom with confidence.” Mariposa and the other women of the chapter provide additional evidence of what it means to be a Black queer woman in the classroom, and how others read our bodies both in- and outside

the classroom (443). As a gender-nonconforming professor I struggle to negotiate the gendered forms of dress that signal professional attire in an academic environment, often confusing students with my gender fluidity. We have to address the ways in which our students encounter the issues that our very bodies bring forth. Shannon and I realized that we had two different strategies for dealing with these issues: while I (Moya) *unpacked* them, Shannon had to *confront* racism and homophobia in her campus environment.

Shannon: Confronting Racism and Homophobia

As a graduate-student instructor I taught women's studies introductory courses at a large research university. These courses drew in students from various disciplines because they meet the university-mandated multicultural requirement; often, these courses became students' first introduction to women's studies and feminism. This was a large, sports-centered school. I was used to having student-athletes in the classroom, who were mostly hardworking, with extremely demanding schedules. One semester I had a group of baseball players enrolled in my class. Usually, students are open to learning new ways of thinking; this group of six white males dismissed the course content and seemingly relied upon one another to affirm the kind of hyper-masculine identity that was often challenged in course readings. Most of them disengaged from the course by physically demonstrating a lack of interest through avoiding speaking in class, while two were more verbally confrontational. This led to what remains one of my most challenging classroom experiences; the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of one of these students made me afraid in the classroom. In a discussion on hate crimes, he said that Black people kill white people more than whites kill Blacks. He then turned to a Black woman student and said "So, if I kill her, is that a hate crime?" He would wait for me after class under the guise that he wanted to learn more about racism, but he really wanted to articulate his own beliefs that were challenged in the class. He contested the grades I assigned. Once, after explaining the grading process, I concluded that his grade was final. I cannot describe the look on his face, but I felt his internal voice scream "How dare this young Black woman tell me my grade is final!" He then actually screamed "This is bullshit!" as he exited the classroom. He sent an e-mail shortly afterward, demanding "I'm going to need you to explain to me why I got this grade."

I was able to discuss this situation with my program director. She, a white lesbian woman, was very aware of the race and gender dynamics at work in my interactions with this student. She talked me through it and asked if I wanted to meet with him one-on-one or have her present. She explained that she did not want to impact my already-tenuous authority in the classroom, and even though I wanted her to be present during the meeting, she asked that I lead the meeting and indicated that she would support me.

At the time I did not voice my fear of physical assault to her. I might have worried that admitting this feeling would question my ability to teach the course. In hindsight I too believe I had not fully accepted fear as my reality; I was not equipped to consciously know that I went into my own classroom afraid. Without the program director's support there could have been another outcome. I later would return to her with feelings of sadness that I also disguised as simply asking for advice and direction.

This same feeling of sadness emerged from interactions with another student in a different women's studies introductory course. I recall a class discussion on LGBT rights and inclusion when a young, Black woman student from the back of the room said that it was not right or fair that I, as a queer woman, was in the classroom, explaining that this fact made it uncomfortable for her and others who disagreed to openly express their feelings. In that moment my heart dropped and I could not speak. It is difficult to hear that someone does not "agree" with your kind of existence. Noticing my absence of voice, other students responded that her comment was homophobic. After class, I sat in my car and panicked. I had not established a foundation of relationships to support me through this process. I feared further retaliation from an unknown homophobic collective. I thought about others who considered my visible lesbian self as inappropriate—my mother, for one. Once a strong source of support, once the first person I would call, all I could hear from her was "I told you so." As I had done after the challenge with the white male student, I telephoned the women's studies program director. She assured that I had done nothing wrong and that we would work together to develop a response. I was advised to contact the director of the LGBT Center for my own support. We worked to develop a class response that I would offer during the first ten minutes of class; I was then to move on with class as usual. My heart racing, I entered the classroom. Afterward, two young, white women students approached to share with me how sorry they were about what happened, going on to say that they had never witnessed homophobia before and how it was now real to them. They acknowledged that their increased awareness happened at my expense. While my temporary silence must have clued students into my feelings, I was also uncomfortable that this Black student became the antagonist in the story. I was confronted with my feelings of allegiance to her because she was, like me, a young Black woman. I remember occasions in the classroom when she was thankful for my presence, thankful to have a Black woman professor willing to talk about race. She was not tokenized; she was able to talk about her racialized and gendered experiences without feeling pressured to do so. The multiplicity of my feelings did not go unnoticed by me. I still cared about her. In a later conversation I told her that I was okay with what happened in class and expressed my hope that she would not feel excluded. I shared my confidence that she would continue to participate, as she had done before. She thanked me, but did not apologize. My classroom experiences at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality

activated my campus activism and organizing. I became a board member of the LGBT Center. I joined and was elected to office in the faculty and staff LGBT organization. I was also active in the Black faculty and staff's organization. I went on to organize an antiracism workshop for whites in the LGBT organization, and simultaneously organized a workshop, open to all people of color, on LGBT inclusion for the Black faculty and staff organization.

Observations from the Other Side:

When All the Queers Are White and All the Blacks Are Straight

Upon completing our graduate education we encountered new challenges as we negotiated the academy from the other side. As a postdoctoral fellow (Moya) and as someone on the tenure track (Shannon) we were trying to establish ourselves within a network of peers. In the spirit of Zora Neale Hurston's (2006[1942], 237) oft-quoted expression: "all my skinfolks ain't my kinfolks." Cathy Cohen (1997) extrapolates this when discussing the ways in which her queerness set her apart from Black women, with whom she would otherwise want to be in political solidarity. In the following sections Shannon discusses the impact of feelings of being de-racialized by white queers and feminists while simultaneously feeling ignored by straight Blacks, and Moya reveals the challenges of creating community with straight-identified Black women.

Shannon: Deracialized, Othered, and Ignored

I entered a department where I knew I could be out. The department chair was an out white lesbian, and during my interview I was welcomed and met with the director of the LGBT Center. Even though my sister-scholar friends warned me about the challenges of Black women moving from metropolitan cities to teach at predominately white universities in rural areas, I felt comforted by being on a campus where I knew I could be out. After all, I was familiar with navigating institutional racism in a higher education; I taught majority white students and worked with majority white faculty and staff. However, I was not prepared for my queerness to "other" me in the minds of Black faculty and staff.

I entered my tenure-track position with the expectation that Black faculty and staff would find me. I had inquired about the presence of a Black faculty and staff organization in my offer response letter to the dean, and found it mildly alarming when the response came that the university was invested in the success of *all* faculty members, regardless of race. Still, I waited for Black faculty to come; I did the head-nods of recognition in the hallways, but they never came. Instead, a feminist community consisting of white women professors, some of whom were queer, welcomed me. I remember my partner and I attending our first home social and looking around for another person of color. I recall the presence of an Asian man and light-complexioned Latina. Someone mentioned that there

was a group of lesbians on the lower level of the house—which I thought was a joke, but it was true. We made our way to the basement and discovered a group of white lesbians who were faculty and staff, as well as community members. This encounter was both refreshing and ironic. The person who mentioned the presence of lesbians recognized that this might be important to me as a lesbian myself; at the same time, I wondered if they considered the absence of people of color and how this might feel for me.

I started to hear stories that would shape my understanding of what was happening to me in the Black faculty and staff community. First, that there was a (straight) Black woman candidate whom Black faculty members thought should have been hired for my position. Next, that a professor of color said that I was a “carbon copy” of my white lesbian chairperson. This felt like a stripping of my Black identity. My complexion became hyper-visible to me because my Midwestern university is located in a state with some of the highest rates of biracial children in the country. Although my parents (and both their parents) are Black, my complexion is light. I considered that my skin tone could make my Blackness less threatening to whites, at the same time that it put my Black politics into question. I noticed that many of the biracial people I encountered had Black fathers and white mothers, meaning that they were mothered by white women. I recognize that the growing absence of my own mother in my life during this time magnified my feelings of anger and sadness that I had been referred to as the chair’s “carbon copy.” This lack of a welcoming Black community created a void and took psychological and emotional tolls on me. Although one Black woman professor invited my partner and me to her home, I imagined a larger group of them having dinners together and not inviting us. I was hurt.

I felt “othered” by (straight) Blacks and de-racialized by (white) queers. Rhonda Williams (2000) examines her experiences as an out Black lesbian on campus where most of the queers are white. She identifies feelings of rejection from a larger Black community and reflects on the seeming centrality of heterosexuality and patriarchy in Black family and communal life. Williams goes on to explain that Black women are often the barriers of racialized pathologies of Black family life, and those who do not visibly engage in the uplift of Black men and families can be viewed as betrayers of such families and communities. I was committed to the well-being of all Black people at the same time that I challenged heteropatriarchy. I was partnered with a Black woman while some of the Black male professors were married to white women. Despite partnering with a Black person, her womanhood made my Blackness suspect. I wanted to wear T-shirts that proclaimed “I’m Black and I’m Proud.” I wanted to scream my evidence. I was deeply rooted in loving Black women, deeply rooted in loving Black people, and I was from Atlanta, sometimes referred to as the “Black queer Mecca.”

It would take a Black male graduate student to provide my initial entry into the Black faculty and staff community. He was in ethnic studies and enrolled

in my graduate Black feminisms course. He later shared with me that he told Black faculty and staff—*his* community—that I was nothing like what they thought: I was (really) “Black.” Soon after, two Black faculty professors stopped by my office to chat.

It took me almost three years to recover from the isolation I felt during my first couple of years on campus. Only recently have I been able to share these feelings with a few Black faculty. They listened and I listened. I have concluded that although my queerness did contribute to my “othering,” there were other important factors at work, such as their feelings that forming close relationships with me would negatively impact my chances for success and tenure because Black people who spent time with other Black people were viewed as more threatening than fully assimilated (isolated) Black individuals. For example, I once knew a faculty member of color who, passed over for a tenure-track position, shed tears as he explained that a senior faculty (feminist) white woman told him that he should not be defined by Black faculty on campus. I continued to witness and experience racism both blatant and subtle.

Moya: Policing My Voice

It can be a very isolating experience to be the only Black queer woman in a department mostly comprised of straight white women. Our—Shannon and my—friendship during graduate school allowed me to speak about some of these structural inequalities and disappointing interpersonal experiences. We shared observations about our home departments, and I could share things with Shannon in ways that were not possible with other graduate instructors, professors, and administrators. Having attended an historically Black college after growing up in a predominantly white town, I have always been interested in seeking out Black people at the institutions where I was employed, but it has felt a bit as though my queer identity is not part of the narrative I share.

As noted in *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), there can be pressure from white colleagues to share details of your life outside of work. What I experience with Black women is different: a general interest on the part of my Black women colleagues about each other’s well-being. These well-intentioned inquiries occasionally hint at their own desires and assumptions. I am sometimes (though not often) presumed to be straight if my work is unknown, thus prompting questions about my marital or partnership status. The slight awkwardness this occasions is usually quickly dissipated, but further pleasantries can be strained. Once, while attending a potluck dinner with other Black women academics, the conversation turned to sex, but it was clear that sex for the group at large meant *heterosexual sex*. I am sure I could have interjected, but rather than risking more awkwardness I opted to stay silent so as to avoid alienating potential comrades. In this sense what I experience is not the blatant homophobia of being denied access to community, but a much more passive

decoupling of queer identity from the queer desire from which it springs, both on my part and that of my straight Black women colleagues. It seems that as long as my sexuality is an identity and not an action I can be a part of the group.

My sexuality and gender presentation do not conform to a binary, which sometimes elicits a confused curiosity. However, as someone who is “gender-queer” I am often desexualized. I negotiate these competing ideas about my gender among both students and faculty when either group pushes the envelope a little bit further with me than they otherwise would. I had a student say, at the end of the semester, that he did not know anything about my personal life, saying it in such a way that implied he should. I note this reaction to emphasize the thin line existing between desiring a community I am open with and maintaining my boundaries within the academy.

I found myself silencing the queer part of me while in spaces with both Black women and people. However, this proved a bittersweet prospect because it did provide connection, but at the expense of not presenting my entire self to my colleagues; it also prolonged my obtaining my degree because I was engaged in many queer projects outside of the academy that competed for my time and attention. One of the dangers we face in our educational system is the loss of a feeling of community—not just the loss of closeness among those with whom we work and with our students, but also the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness with the world beyond the academy. Progressive education—that is, education as the practice of freedom—enables us to confront feelings of loss and restore our sense of connection; it teaches us how to create community (hooks 2003). Black women are often socialized to believe that we can do it on our own, while Black feminism teaches us that we both need and have the ability to heal one another. We have learned to challenge our former narratives of success.

Conclusion: The Transformative Power of Connection

As doctoral students we wanted to secure positions in the academy. We thought this achievement would bring happiness, and did not consider the feelings of loss and isolation that we would experience in being removed from our Black queer community in Atlanta. We continue to reach across institutions, and now states, to build connections. We make inroads in our classes and consider our growing institutional power as a new arena in which to continue the conversation about realities for Black queer women in the academy.

We want to know what Cathy Cohen, Beth Ritchie, Evelyn Hammonds, Cheryl Clarke, Angela Davis, and others have experienced or are experiencing now in their leadership positions at their respective institutions. Whether formally in scholarship or informally in conversation, we need more connection to those who have gone before and who are coming after us. Black queer women literary scholars like Nikky Finney, Lorde, and June Jordan have contributed to an archive of our experiences within the academy, particularly at the

intersections of these identities. We hope that this article adds to the archive that Lewis, Laura Harris, and others are continuing to build. We know that the realities for Black queer women navigating different disciplines are disparate, and we want to know more about them. We are nosy and ask for more, knowing the risks and real barriers within our institutions for creating the kinds of spaces necessary to safely bring our concerns to the fore.

Black women's success in gaining positions of authority has produced new opportunities to use bureaucratic resources toward humanistic ends. This insider resistance tries to capture positions of authority within social institutions in order to ensure that existing rules will be fairly administered, and if need be to change existing policies. Once inside, many Black women realize that much more than simply getting hired is required to bring about change; they find themselves searching for innovative ways to foster bureaucratic change (Collins 2000, 281). Perhaps the silences from those Black queer women who have come before us are strategic in that they allow for the kinds of institutional changes that can only manifest in secret. We need all the strategies available to us to shift the realities in our academic spaces.

Black queer women bring uniquely situated knowledges to their fields of study, which have truly shaped the academic feminist enterprise. As Lorde notes in her classic 1984 essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," "[t]he absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third World women leaves a serious gap" in academic discussions, and not just the ones where their identities are expressly called forth (2007a, 332). When you embody and live at these intersections you have the potential to provide insights that might otherwise be overlooked. Our experiences in the academy are just a small piece of what can be found at this juncture of Black queer women's identities.

We are glad that we found each other again through a virtual writing group and this article. We encourage institutions to financially support queer women of color students and faculty who are building community and collaborating, even if that means cross-university pollination, particularly in ways that do not tokenize, organize, or use our networks as evidence of campus diversity. Are there conferences, reading groups, and mentorship opportunities that can bring this critical community together? If we have women's studies faculty and programs in other places we should view ourselves not merely as departments in institutions, but as being committed and aligned in ways that other disciplines do not necessarily see themselves. As Black queer women in the academy we are working together to create the changes we want to see in our academic world.

As we go forward in the academy we look to the work of the Black feminists who have insights about navigating this space successfully. Crystal Feimster's chapter "Not So Ivory: African American Women Historians Creating Academic Communities" (2009) outlines her pathway to building community among other Black historians. She closes this chapter by quoting the words of

Nell Painter, who welcomed her into a community of Black women academics. We see it fitting to do the same:

Those people will try to make you feel unwelcomed, weird, not-good-enough, lucky, . . . and insufficiently respectful to your historiographical elders for as long as you remain productive. Needless to say, this gets pretty old pretty fast, but once you start to recognize the patterns and learn to protect yourself somewhat, you won't be so vulnerable. But I don't know anyone who has completely overcome such vulnerability. The only way I know to deal with it is through sharing, as you have done. Then your buddies can tell you how [wack] your assailants were and how something similar (but worse) happened to them somewhere else. Every Black woman academic I know has stories after stories as well. We survive by supporting each other and getting together on a regular basis to celebrate our survival. (284)

We are reminded and encouraged to keep supporting one another along our collective and individual journeys in academe. We no longer delude ourselves into thinking that the academy or women's, gender, and sexuality departments are immune to the racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism in our world. It is a continuous struggle to challenge these systems of hegemony at the structural level while simultaneously working to liberate ourselves. As Black queer women in the academy this task is inflected with multiple challenges and opportunities, both inside the classroom and our institutions and outside in the communities to which we feel accountable. We endeavor to make our progress transparent and collaborative as we continue on our way.

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Note

1. See Lois Benjamin (1997); Angela Davis (1994); Signithia Fordham (1993); and Sheila Gregory (1999) "publisher?": University Press of Florida, 15 N.W. St., Gainesville, FL 32611-2079; phone: 352-392-1351 (\$49.95).

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