Some Notes on Being a Black Woman in the Academy in the United States

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Introduction

I came of age during the watershed of changes in access to higher education that emerged during and after the U.S. Civil Rights Movement (CRM). These changes yielded broad financial support of higher education for previously excluded populations. Mid-twentieth CRM gains opened the way for Black people from all social class settings to take advantage of educational opportunities at a rate unprecedented by any prior time in the nation's history. During the generation of my youth, in my community – as was true in many Black communities across the United States – education was lauded as the most certain way to improve one's chances and station in life, despite realities of anti-Black racial discrimination. My community's affirmation of education and the post-CRM educational opportunities intersected to open the academy as a vocational context for me. My journey to becoming a Black woman in the academy in the United States derived significantly from these two realities. In addition to shaping my vocation, the Black community of my youth and the Civil Rights Movement also shaped my world view. The civic commitments of my parents and the justice orientation of the CRM, inform my interpretations and imaginings of the world, orient my teaching, and enliven my scholarly work. What follows are some notes on interpretations of my journey as a Black woman in the academy that

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emerge from my world view. I begin with a limited discussion of the role of education in defining class within the United States. This discussion is complexified with some brief reflections on class in African American communities. Next, I consider three theoretical contributions for understanding U.S. Black women academics' experiences. I selected these three theoretical contributions – the Black woman's body out of place; critical thinking, care, and justice; and critical thinking, identity, and pedagogy – because they are useful for exploring some of my experiences as a Black woman in the academy. Finally, I narrate glimpses of my story, taking into account some ways class, my Black woman embodiment, critical thinking and self-care, and critical thinking and pedagogy have shown up in my journey.

Class and Education

In several essays of *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*s, as well as elsewhere, Alice Walker describes growing up working class in Eatonton, Georgia, and her experience as a daughter of working-class parents. When I read Walker's book, especially her definition of "womanist" as a riff on the term 'womanish," which I grew up hearing and understanding, for the first time in my academic career I encountered a text that resonated with my life. I was a doctoral student when this occurred. I celebrated (kind of pledged my allegiance to) Alice Walker for helping affirm the epistemological disposition from which I entered the academy. Although I did not know it at the time, Walker also validated for me the significance of me, a daughter of working-class parents daring to enter the academy as a teacher and scholar.

For many persons in the United States, having advanced education is a significant (though not the only) factor that determines income level, class privilege, and access to contexts through which one can acquire experience and connections that maintain or enhance life and opportunities. Being an academic generally is viewed as a middle to upper class social situation. As a result, academics have persistent interactions with and within middle-class realities. CRM era changes encouraged and ushered many working-class persons from all racial and ethnic groups into the academy as a vocation.

Because of the reluctance to truly discuss class in the United States, the term "working class" refers to persons situated within a range of income levels, experiences, and educational attainment. In general, working class refers to families with consistent income and housing stability, even though they may not have sufficient income and/or educational attainment to enable their entrance into decision-making levels of society. The term "working poor," sometimes considered a sub-category of the working class, generally refers to families who work and/or persistently seek work but whose income is both inconsistent and insufficient to stabilize and enhance their lives beyond the precarious and sometimes disastrous realities of living with meager resources. As a result, experiences of the working poor include having to change residences with some frequency as well as sometimes experiencing food insecurity. The working poor also may have the emotional experience of being left out of society. Michelle Tea observes that working poor and working class families often operate "without a net" referring to "the way the stress of being poor or working class can rip apart a family or destroy its members [which] often means there's no family to call, period. Sometimes the net you're surviving without is that simple emotional

support."[2] While those in the working class also experience "stress," consistency of work generally stabilizes family experience, notwithstanding their often also being left out because of economic and/or access challenges.

Interestingly, working class also refers to persons whose semi-professional and manufacturing jobs provide significant income. In many such cases, however, lower educational attainment compromises the ability to regularly engage middle- and upper-class social and cultural life and, therefore, to participate in shaping or take advantage of opportunities and privileges the engagement would provide. This limited access contributes to gaps[3] experienced by these families' adult children who become professionals (including academics); professional adult children of working-class families must learn to fill the gaps in order to survive and thrive. In the case of navigating the academy, growing up working poor and working class also may mean some persons (i.e., Black women) experience intersectional alienation because of race and gender as well as gaps of knowledge and practice. The additional emotional work as well as the loss of familiar communities also should not be underestimated.

A Word about Social Class within Black Communities

In the United States, enslavement and its legacy of free labor and exclusion from education shaped the early 20th century class location of

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[2] Michelle Tea, "Introduction" in *Without a Net: The Female Experience of Growing Up Working Class*, ed. Michelle Tea (California: Seal, 2003), xiii.
[3] Katie Geneva Cannon often used the term "gaps" to describe the absence of knowledge and practice that might provide insights to navigate unfamiliar classed contexts for who are not from privileged classes.

most Black citizens of the nation as working poor or working class. During enslavement, most Black persons lived in desperation, as compared to the White population of the country. In spite of this generalized reality, there were "class differences" within Black communities even in the era of enslavement. Based on proximity to White persons, the class differences included distinctions between enslaved persons who worked in fields and those who worked in the homes of enslavers, distinctions between persons who had two Black parents and those who had one White parent, distinctions between persons whose ancestry yielded darker pigmentation and those whose ancestry yielded lighter pigmentation, and so on. There also existed a small group of free and propertied Black persons with some educational attainment (some of whom enslaved other Blacks). Consequently, there also were distinctions between Black persons who were free and those who were enslaved.

Because educating African Americans generally was illegal during the period of enslavement and often limited to primary and inferior education during the century-long Jim Crow era, educational opportunities provided through Civil Rights Movement gains significantly changed the meaning of being Black in the United States and complexified the meaning of social class among African Americans. One reality contributing to this complexity was the opportunity for persons from a variety of contexts among the working classes to enter college, attain baccalaureate degrees, and complete terminal degrees. My story of being a black woman in the academy in the United States is the story of someone who grew up working class and pursued the highest level of education because, in my day, education was the most certain route to

advance and position oneself to contribute to the community and the society.

Some Theoretical Considerations

As I reflect on my experiences as a Black woman in the academy, three foci rise to the top for consideration. These are the physical reality of my Black woman body as a scholar, my use of critical tools I gained through graduate study to advance a social justice and scholarly agenda, and the significance of using critical thought reflexively using for intra- and extra-academic pedagogies.

Barbara Combs' "Body out of Place" (BOP) theory helps interpret many negative experiences Black women academics face. In spite of the steadily growing numbers of Black women entering the academy, there remains a legacy of viewing authority and intellectual acumen present in academic space as the possessed only by men, especially White men. This legacy suggests Black women are unprepared for occupying roles as academics. As a result, Black women may have a variety of oppositional experiences because they are seen as "bodies out of place." "BOP theory is relational," Combs writes. "Bodies need not be, per se, out of place as much as they are out of place relative to the individual position of the person opposing (sometimes called "the opposer") the heightened (i.e., seemingly "out of place") status of the black or brown body." Black women in the academy may encounter covert and overt challenges to their presence in the academy, but because they are seen as occupy positions of authority and intellect some hold to be solely posts of men or Whites or both. "Additionally," Combs continues, "the opposition may come about because the black or brown body seems displaced relative to

the position of an individual in a group to which the opposer belongs or is affiliated with through strong kin or friendship ties."[4] In sum, Combs asserts, "BOP posits that marginalized group members' occupation of social space is not problematic as long as minority group members do not occupy spaces and places the dominant members of society perceive as their own. In sum, black and brown bodies are acceptable but only as long as they 'stay in their place.'"[5]

During an address at the first U.S. Black Women in the Academy conference, Angela Davis offered challenged negative and demeaning perceptions of Black women in the academy by advocating use of educational tools to advance well-being of Black women, Black communities, and the society. "[L]et's try to take critical thinking seriously, Davis said, "not just narrowly in relation to scholarly projects, because a lot of us can be very critical when we are doing our research – but [let's use critical thinking] in relation to the ideologies that inform our ideas and our lives. And critical thinking, while revered in the academy, is not the academy's exclusive property."[6] There are wide-ranging implications of Davis' statement. Using critical thinking "in relation to ideologies that inform our ideas and our lives" could orient scholarly work toward social justice as well as toward what it means it means to be a thriving Black woman academic. Doing this need not necessarily jettison long-term scholarly conversations, since it is possible to exercise creativity by bringing these discussions into relationship with real issues of our lives and our communities.

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[4] Barbara Harris Combs, "No Rest for the Weary: The Weight of Race, Gender, and Place inside and outside a Southern Classroom" *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, 4 (2017): 494-95.

[5] Barbara Harris Combs, "No Rest for the Weary: The Weight of Race, Gender, and Place inside and outside a Southern Classroom" *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, 4 (2017): 494.

[6] Angela Davis, "Black Women and the Academy" *Callaloo* 17.2 (Spring 1994): 426.

Echoing Angela Davis, Beverley Burke, Andrea Cropper, and Philomena Harrison write, "The promotion of critical thinking is crucial to the development of an anti-oppressive teaching environment, which is supportive and nurturing of individuals, or groups who do not reflect the accepted norm." Black women in the academy have an opportunity to not only attend to themselves, but also to transform and humanize environments of learning over which they have control. They may make room for excluded epistemologies, ideas, and expressions and use these in their pedagogical practices. "The interdependence between thought and action is an important factor within Black feminist thought and is a theme that permeates" our thinking,[7] Burke, et al, continue. For this reason, they note that intersectional challenges Black women academics face come not only from anti-Black racism of Whites, but also from the White-allied[8] persons, as well as from purveyors of patriarchy in the academy and in Black communities. Each of these realities broaden the meaning and context of using critical thinking. This requires reflexivity, Burke et al write: "Reflexivity refers to the process by which individuals need to acknowledge their own role and position in any social interaction, and the effects this has upon the interaction itself, upon themselves and upon the people with whom they are interacting."[9] The multifaceted nature of Black women academics' interactions means analyzing various sources from which their bodies are viewed as out of place: "It is thus

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[7] Beverley Burke, Andrea Cropper, and Philomena Harrison, "Real or Imagined—Black Women's Experiences in the Academy" *Community, Work and Family* 3, 3 (2000): 299-300.

[8] I use the term "the White-allied" to describe those persons of color who affirm White supremacy through a variety of collaborations with White persons against peoples of color and in favor of White supremacy. I am indebted to Nicole Truesdell for prompting my constructing this term to capture a statement she made in a 2018 lecture: "White people have allies. All of the allies are not white."

[9] Beverley Burke, Andrea Cropper, and Philomena Harrison, "Real or Imagined—Black Women's Experiences in the Academy" *Community, Work and Family* 3, 3 (2000): 302.

important to be engaged in a reflexive dialogue in all situations. Indeed, we need to be mindful that we are part of a system, which is institutionally racist. However, working within the academy it is essential to be clear about one's ideological perspective, how one may be perceived by others outside the academy and how one can work effectively and honestly with Black communities."[10]

My Journey to and through becoming a Black Woman in the U.S. Academy

Mine is the story of a working-class Black family. My parents were deeply supportive of me throughout my life and throughout my educational attainment. However, the gap between their life journeys and the professional reality I entered as a Black woman academic meant I did not have parents whose life experience could help me navigate the politics of the profession, although they remained proud and loyal throughout my educational and professional journey. I grew up on a family farm in South Carolina. In addition to farming, my father worked full time as an unclassified laborer at an oil refinery which was a 45-minute one-way commute from our home. My mother was a homemaker. Born and living most to their early adulthood during the Jim Crow era in the South, my parents completed secondary school after they had their family. Although several of my fathers' siblings attended college, I was the first member of my immediate family to complete a baccalaureate degree.

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[10] Beverley Burke, Andrea Cropper, and Philomena Harrison, "Real or Imagined—Black Women's Experiences in the Academy" *Community, Work and Family* 3, 3 (2000): 304.

As a younger daughter of CRM gains, I entered the academy as part of what may be called the second generation of U.S. Black women academics. Although in the second generation, I was partially among the trailblazers, that in most cases meant our determining how to be black women academics without having had a Black woman doctoral teacher or mentor in graduate school and usually beginning with no Black women colleagues at work. Many Black women of this era also did not have other Black women peers as they studied. As a graduate student, I was admitted into a program in the university's doctoral studies in religion among a class that included one Asian and two White male colleagues. One other Black woman was the lone person of color admitted into a different program in the study of religion. The BOP dynamic with male peers in my class included my Asian colleague not wanting to be seen as the same type of "minority" as me, my White colleagues sometimes talking over and interrupting me during class discussions, dismissal of my ideas, and refusing to participate with me in study group. These experiences resulted in intensifying my determination to perform well. While they remained in the program, I excelled above each of these three men, two of whom did not complete the doctoral degree. The perspective of these male colleagues that my body was out of place foreshadowed that of some higher education faculty and administrators. The director of an agency from which I received a doctoral fellowship once said: "Women of color women are not capable of attaining PhDs."

I entered my career as an academic with clear awareness of the "publish or perish" refrain and a healthy sense of the importance of guild participation. Unfortunately, the specifics of how relationship-building prevailed over performance was lost on me as I began my career because

the idea that high-performance-conquers-everything had been drilled into me from my youth.[11] The result was my developing a significant track record of published material, teaching acumen, leadership, and service without significant understanding of how to negotiate the best measure for making my performance in each of area work to my benefit. I learned to accommodate the exhaustion I felt almost constantly. In belated reflection on this practice, I acquired the skill of translating my critical knowledge into my own life. Developing skill in doing so enhanced my ability to use my knowledge in relation to my ideological commitments beyond the academy. Some of the lag in my acquisition of this skill has to do with negotiating the meaning of my working-class origin on my academic identity. Working class Black women must come to terms with the meaning of intellectual labor as a value that is both consistent with as well as a departure from the meaning of labor in which their psyche's likely were formed. As a Black woman academic within a social and institutional context of heteropatriarchy, it is essential to analyze the interaction of personal, communal, and social implications of my labor. The means recognizing and integrating analysis of the intersectional relationship between critical self-care, community care and justice work. This self-reflective analysis has impacted my pedagogy. For example, no matter my institutional context, my experience and experiments in teaching have shown me that student development and learning are enhanced through validation of their communal epistemologies. As a result, I integrate a variety of strategies that allow students to recognize

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[11] Noting that this fallacy often is used rhetorically against peoples of color, Barbara Combs observes, "society wrongly perceives that hard work and merit are the only factors limiting what individuals can achieve." See Barbara Harris Combs, "No Rest for the Weary: The Weight of Race, Gender, and Place inside and outside a Southern Classroom" *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, 4 (2017): 494.

the significance and relationship of knowledge they bring to the new knowledge they are encountering in my classes.

I have taught in predominantly white institutional (PWI) as well as historically Black college and university (HBCU) contexts. Some challenging PWI experiences included White students' lack of experience with Black women teachers and, as a result, challenging my authority or seeking to avoid having to take required courses from me altogether. I have experienced both allies and opponents among my White colleagues. One interesting experience was team teaching a course with a colleague who saw themselves as "liberal," but who learned the limits of their liberalism as I asserted my agency during our interactions of preparing for class and teaching. Early in my career, the experience of being few Black women in a space that had been predominately White and/or male provided some level of camaraderie because of the shared reality that we all were presumed incompetent or to have some other deficit, on the basis of our race and gender. As it became less exceptional that Black women were populating the academy and as our experiences and contributions became less scarce, class "differences" embedded in Black communities, in some instances became more evident, as did a variety of alliances evincing these "differences": sometimes middle-class Black women collaborated with each other against working class Black women, sometimes middle class Black women collaborated with White colleagues against working class Black women, sometimes of working class Black women collaborated with White colleagues against all other Black women, and so on. Unfortunately, my Black woman's body in the PWI "white" space with another Black woman sometimes meant that a Black woman colleague saw my body as out of place and sought to undermine my presence. In my HBCU experiences, students generally

anticipate my competence. Additionally, there was more easy collaboration with some colleagues as well as a generalized experience of institutional fit with my ideological commitments. However, my experiences with colleagues have presented a similar mixture of allies and opponents that have included White, Asian, and Black men as well as Black, White, and Asian women.

I conclude my notes on being a Black woman in the U.S. academy with recognition of my indebtedness to women who trailblazers as innovators and creators of Black womanist and feminist identities in the academy. I am grateful to Audre Lorde, Barbara Christian, Angela Davis, Patricia Bell Scott, Katie Geneva Cannon, Gloria Hull, Barbara Smith, Dolores Williams and others. It honors me to stand in the legacy of these women whose identities as intellectuals was unlikely and even thought of as impossible or unreality. They represented the first wave of Black women who engaged the "collective struggle to define themselves and claim space at the center of an academy challenged and changed by the process."[12]

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[12] Kathleen C. Berkeley, "Review of *Black Women in the Academy: Promises and Perils* by Lois Benjamin, *The Journal of Southern History*, 65, 3 (Aug., 1999): 660-661.