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Advancing Women In Leadership

Intersections On the Border Crossings of Black Women's Standpoints

Janet K. Pilcher, Ph.D.

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As feminists, we interconnect race, class, gender, and other oppressive structures to highlight the diversity of experiences.

In our local communities people are suffering from exploitation, oppression, and social injustice. Places for sharing one another's differences are scarce. Therefore, we are facing a crisis where hearts and minds remain closed to pains and joys of social diversity. All the while, multiple standpoints shape people's experiences in daily lives within our local communities. How we choose to value or de-value these standpoints determines individual oppression or privilege. Thus, creating spaces for border crossing experiences on the feminist terrain promote new understandings of our histories and futures as women living in interlocking systems of oppression.

Four of my students who are black women and I intersected race, class, and gender as we talked and read about black women's experiences and standpoints in the world and how these standpoints interacted with existing "white" feminist perspectives. As their teacher and a white woman, I understood that I possessed a privileged position in this space. Thus, my goal was to follow Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) advice to place the black women's experiences at the center of our discussions hoping that it would help me broaden mine and others' insights on feminist perspectives. To write about border crossing, I knew that de-centering white female privilege would be an essential struggle for the black women and me. I also wanted to offer the black women new knowledge through black feminist readings about how their experiences could be empowering as they began to define their own realities (Collins, 1991).

bell hooks (1994) tells us that "contemporary discussions of relationships between black women and white women (whether scholarly or personal) rarely take place in integrated settings. White women writing their impressions in scholarly and confessional work often ignore the depth of enmity between the two groups, or see it solely as a black problem" (p. 101). Four black female students and I worked to break these barriers that are referred to by bell hooks. Together we remained committed to create social spaces for connecting our identities and collective struggles that crossed boundaries of race, class, and

gender.

We kept the matrix of domination at the theoretical forefront of our discussions and interactions to combat overgeneralizations and examined how regulatory structures of society and culture define our multifaceted identities. We, thus, explored time and time again the ways “some peoples voices get authorized to get their way more often than not and [black women] learn that their preferences don’t much matter” (Rogers, 1998, p. 31). These four black women show how those more victimized than privileged within the matrix of domination express themselves with tentative voices, while the more privileged express words freely. Their words speak to how black women living in oppressed situations come to accept their own subordination because their daily realities get institutionalized and normalized. Finally, they help us recognize that “voice is the key to understanding the lived realities of hierarchy, domination, and oppression” (Rogers, 1998, p. 33).

To promote opportunities for alleviating silenced voices and breaking existing hierarchical boundaries, teachers and their students must work through their own privileged positions within the matrix of domination. Using the theoretical positions of black feminist thought I encouraged these women to embrace “border crossing dialogue” that fosters a paradigmatic shift on how we define power relations. Our dialogue provides an example of how students and instructors can reconceptualize the social relations of domination and resistance by promoting a paradigm of interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and other social injustices (Collins, 2000).

Silence and Conformity on the Border

Listening to Paula, Anita, Drucilla, and Roslyn over the past few years, I understood that first they needed to define and re-define their identities and standpoints. I first met these women in a graduate qualitative research class of 30 students in the Spring of 1999 where I used a thematic approach to teach concepts aligned to a book chapter in Patricia Hill Collins (1991) work on black feminist thought. The chapter was titled, *Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images*. Knowing that many, if not all, of my graduate students had yet to experience black female writers’ voices, I shared with them selected works of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Audre Lorde. The goal was to give students a sense of these writers’ thoughts and perspectives on systems of domination, patriarchal hierarchies, and relations of ruling. We used the writings to engage in “talk,” creating a learning community based on “an interest in one another, in hearing another’s voices, and in recognizing one another’s presence” (bell hooks, 1994, p. 8).

During the semester, these four black women predominately remained silent. Their silence made me question whether my actions inhibited the flow of ideas and feelings. I feared that they felt isolated within our learning community. At times, I doubted that I created a social space where everyone’s voice was heard and valued.

Through their small amount of dialogue, the women spoke cultured, bourgeois, institutional talk. In most instances, their interactions in class did not differ from those of their classmates. Like their classmates, the four women were highly concerned with traditional modes of classroom activities. They joined the class in ensuring that they met “my” course expectations. They, along with many students, expressed frustrations with me not telling them exactly how to structure, reflect on, and write their papers. The black women and their classmates expressed discomfort with my encouraging them to think creatively about their dialogue, actions, and reflections.

The black women seemed to talk as if the women’s voices in black feminist writings were about “types” of women unlike themselves. They struggled with seeing their own voices and lacking privilege and authority. One black woman wrote,

I think that this class made me more aware of people who are oppressed. I guess I can say I had been going about my day somewhat oblivious to the oppressed. This was not done intentionally. My mind and energy had been focused elsewhere...I do not want to be an oppressor, nor can I sit by and let the oppressed continue to be voiceless.

Talk, when it occurred, seemed distant and impersonal. The black women seemed to be sitting back, watching, listening to the interactions of the community of learners talking about black women, that is, themselves. Although black women writers' voices focused our class, students neither asked questions nor directed comments to the black women in their learning community. Nor did I. This territory seemed too risky and uncomfortable. It was a place where we all needed to go, but could not travel. Together we feared entering this dialogue, crossing a community border awaiting transformation.

At the end of class, the black women and the rest of our community left with little uncertainty about where we could go from this class in order "to make a difference" to undermine oppressive practices in the world. The black women referred to these uncertainties and lack of assurances. One stated,

I'm not all too sure if I learned what I should have learned in this class but I can say it had given me the opportunity to think about the way I view the world and not just my little world. I never realized how important it was to ensure that voices that were traditionally silenced be heard.

Notice how she continues to skirt the issue of how her black female voice gets oppressed in patriarchal social structure. This same sort of voice shows up again in another voice.

I am not sure what I can do, but I know that as a black, educated female who has been entrusted with a leadership role, I have an obligation to help those less fortunate. Through the reading of Collins and other Black Feminists, I have come to better understand, and appreciate the plight of African Americans, I realize that I am only one generation from the "mammy image."

The black women in this learning community have been entrenched in a Eurocentric, bourgeois educational system. They felt uncomfortable with an engaged pedagogical approach even when that approach within our class laid the groundwork for privileging their voices. Ironically, in class their actions and reflections failed to indicate that their voices needed privileging. Their relative comfort prevailed within the educational system where they had over the years learned how to conform in order to succeed.

Black Feminist Standpoints Across the Border

During the month following the end of class, I received emails from the black women sharing readings and other works of black feminist writers. As our dialogue continued, I realized that the learning needed to continue for me and the black women. It was at this point that we formed a black feminist reading group that has met twice a month for the past year. Listening to the four black women's voices who participated in the small group, I understood that their standpoints shifted as they moved interchangeably from oppressed to oppressors living within interlocking systems of race, class, gender, and other destructive hierarchies. Collins (1991) claims that black women possess and share a unique standpoint as a group. Beyond this historical and cultural perspective, the black women talked about being oppressed and oppressing others when conforming to the bourgeois structures.

This new and smaller learning space, at first, felt uncomfortable. Moving through my fears with the black women, I initiated intensified discussions by risking disharmony and tension. By choosing to be part of this informal learning community, I trusted our ability to create “honest talk.” Through our “honest talk,” interweaving notions of engaged pedagogy with our personal stories, we used “theory as a location of healing” (bell hooks, 1994, p. 59). We sought to shape theory to educate ourselves and, eventually, the public. At the end of the year, together Anita, Roslyn, Drucilla, and Paula defined their standpoints by sharing common understandings as they continued to struggle with themselves, each other, and with me. Authenticated in their lived experiences during the year, they wrote through a lens of difference. Writing their reflections when participating in the black feminist reading group, the black women spoke of empowerment, transformation, eros, and morality.

Standpoint of Empowerment

Anita wrote,

When I entered the qualitative research class and saw that the theme was African-American women, I was unsure of what to expect. I still held on to the standards and systems that have always been the status quo. I was very skeptical about what was expected. I can be very verbal in my classes but I had no idea what I should say in this class. I had no idea how my thoughts and expressions would be viewed by the other members of the class. Would these thoughts be held under close scrutiny by these other members of the class (especially those most unlike me)? Would I be perceived as fitting one of the typical stereotypes that we focused on in class? By using my “voice,” would it be somehow taken away from me through the negativity that sometimes came through our discussions?

I must admit that some of the conversations that came out stunned me, but how was I supposed to react? Pretty much in the same way that I always do, talk about my feelings after class with others who may (or may not) feel the same way I do. I had a problem with some of the statements and comments arising during class. Many of the members (who are in the majority) had problems with allowing others (African-American women) to even feel as if we could (perhaps) express our voices.

My first reactions to the class included amazement and suspicion. I wondered if the professor had a hidden agenda. Several other students and I discussed why we felt she had a “need” to discuss African-American women. I wondered what she wanted from me. Through the research class (and our group), I feel that we have all grown and found different values in ourselves and others that we may not have known about or been able to express.

Empowerment involves resisting a system of domination. It is created with an emerging praxis characterized by self-determination as opposed to coercion, intentionality as opposed to reaction, creativity as opposed to homogeneity, and rationality as opposed to chance (bell hooks, 1989). Anita moved through these oppositions by listening to her voice, voices of classmates, and the voices of the black feminist reading group. She recognized our abilities to act in a manner that fosters the creation and evolution of humane order by referring to chaotic questions of uncertainty and skepticism about her classmates and me. Anita continued to remain the most doubtful of the four women. However, the social space with other women encouraged further dialogue that transcended differences among us.

Standpoint of Transformation

Roslyn wrote,

Society has never recognized the voice of blacks or women.
Society/education has never glorified the voices of blacks or women.
No one has ever told them to be proud of the black or female voice.

At the beginning of the learning process I felt that I had a voice.
Now as think through this
Do I really have my own voice? Or have I been using the voice that they assigned me?

Maybe that's why I didn't feel oppressed. I seemed to have found comfort in the voice they so graciously, but slyly gave me.

Where is my true voice?
The voice of me as a black woman?
I must find my voice.

In my Qualitative research class, I learned about those who do not have a voice in society or in education (schools). As a result of our small group meetings, I began to question "my voice." I thought that I had a voice, but I was actually using the voice that society had given me. Throughout the class, I did not believe that the instructor was referring to me. I sat like all the other non-black students having empathy for "the oppressed black women." Now that I have had an awakening, I know the importance of having a voice. I now know the importance of valuing each individual's voice. I believe that one must see his/her voice in print, in oral work, and in the opportunity to share lived experiences. I feel that we must continue to empower black women.

I have learned the importance of dialogue and reflection.

Dialogue begins within
Confronting my own biases
My prejudices
My oppressive behaviors

I have had to work through some of my fears, and I have had to examine my ownership of the oppressor's voice. This process has been uncomfortable at times. My professor wrote to me, "Fear is what holds us back from transforming and changing." She has provided a safe place for us to share our thoughts, our anger, our frustrations, and our guilt. She wrote to me in an email, "Take pride in your voice and yourself- You deserve that feeling." This is the first time that anyone has said that my voice, as a black woman is something to be proud of. As I struggled with "my voice," and my guilt, my professor wrote, "As painful as it is now, this revelation will be very healing for your soul as you move through life. Doing it alone without a collective effort is not good enough." I am thankful for the support and encouragement that I have received from our group. I will continue to work through my fears, I will continue the healing process. Society/education must seek to provide safe places where collective groups can work through their fears and their guilt, and thereby facilitate transgression.

Roslyn experienced a revelation as she assumed responsibility for oppressing others. She understood that "women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well as victims" (bell hooks, 1989, p. 457). She examined - indeed scrutinized - her role in perpetuating and maintaining systems of domination. As Roslyn participated with the group she resisted her oppressive reactions and rescued her inner voice. She concluded with what bell hooks (1989) suggested "must be the foundation of feminist movements" (p. 468). Solidarity stems from our collective work to confront difference as we approach interlocking systems of domination and choose to cross borders to feel others' pains and sufferings.

Standpoint of Eros

Drucilla wrote,

As a participant of this group, one of my eye-opening experiences was the lack of “true communication” and “understanding” that exist between black and white women. Although there are many books, publications, articles, etc., that have been published by white women attempting to address issues for black women, the need for communication is still great. It is my belief that there is a lack of effort from both sides (black and white women) to communicate openly, honestly and effectively. Therefore, due to this lack of communication we as women are not in the position to offer a normative platform to help better issues surrounding “all women.”

I read an article the other day written by a white educator who was facing struggles and challenges with difference and diversity. Brady, the educator explains, “We are all white. We seriously question if we have the right to speak "for" others while attempting to find ways to speak "with" others. Many of us lack the practical experience of teaching to difference." The story goes on and on. As a participant of this group, I have enjoyed the experience and believe that it has been beneficial to me both professionally and personally. Outside the group I have on occasion shared with my African American colleagues some of the group’s discussions and articles. Repeatedly, I noticed that their responses about the group’s facilitator, who happens to be a white female, validated the opinion of Brady and questioned her motives.

We are all aware that many differences exist between white and black women. However, there are also great similarities and many of our struggles are the same. Today, although we may or may not agree on the differences that exist between women across all races, we must agree that when any woman is educated, trained, motivated and encouraged, she is then empowered and has the ascendancy to change a new generation, i.e., her children, her family.

Drucilla continuously expressed compassion for our group members and for those individuals who experience domination. bell hooks (1989) labels this growth the “politicization of love” or people working to be loving, creating a culture that celebrates human and other life to move against dehumanization and domination. A feminist crisis that stems from privileging hierarchical, feminist positions over others begs us to “draw upon this love to heighten our awareness, deepen our compassion, intensify our courage, and strengthen our commitment” to each other (bell hooks, 1989, p. 27). Drucilla’s thinking evolved as she crossed the borders of commonalities among white and black women. She sustained a mediating force of love to face the domination of black women in a racist society. Drucilla found a way to confront differences constructively and successfully. Because her life is fuller and richer from this experience she changed and grew politically to end domination.

Standpoint of Morality

Paula wrote,

Whiteness is not about skin color or race. Instead it is about position, oppression, and power. Frankenberg defines 'whiteness' as a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. 'Whiteness' has also been described as a standpoint, a place from which white people look at themselves, others, and society.

Our professor exposed, disrupted and interrogated whiteness in our qualitative research class. She experienced resistance (voiced and silently) from students immediately when she introduced African-American women as the focus of the class. This class was powerful because members were forced to examine their own 'whiteness' (including black members of the class whose 'whiteness' stemmed from their level of education). After looking at individual 'whiteness', the need for change was recognized. This realization brought with it much resistance as well as resentment. Despite the anger expressed, particularly by white males in the class, and the fear surely felt by black women, our professor forged ahead by continuing to cross boundaries never experienced by most (if any) of the students in any other academic or professional setting. Her sincere interest in the lives of black women was the first step in interrupting whiteness. She was successful because of her ethic of care and respect, which was communicated in the first session and throughout the semester. Students who entered our classroom left changed no matter how hard they resisted it.

As a result (or an extension) of the qualitative class, we formed a focus group with the black female students of the class. This group works to interrupt whiteness by exposing 'blackness'. Our professor is the only white member of the group. Group members are encouraged to share the influence that whiteness has had on our lives. I realized that whiteness had been interrupted for me in the group when a group member made a comment about white people and I was alarmed when she used the phrase, "you all" (referring to whites) directing the statement to our professor.

Paula referred to applying an ethic of care to disrupt 'whiteness.' She discovered others' voices joining her own voice of blackness to cross foreign boundaries. Gilligan's feminist ethic of care supports that people's lives connect to one another in subtle and not so subtle ways. The catalyst for this breakdown is what we labeled "honest talk," the basis of moving out of one position to another by appealing for social change and border crossing. Collins (1991) asserts that for black feminist writers, empathy is a component of the ethic of care. Paula felt that the group created a social space for promoting an ethic of care where "honest talk" transpired to transform relationships from the way that all of us live in a patriarchal structure.

Summary

While participating in the black feminist reading group, the black women defined their unique feminist standpoints with one another and with me. My place was to listen and understand their views about their histories and experiences. While listening, from time to time I was moved to de-center white feminist privilege to make room for their voices to be written and spoken. At one point I felt a need to break barriers and explore fears that are seldom examined. I began my talk:

Through my life I consciously and critically reflect imprints on me of others' talk about black women. My ancestral roots embedded in rural America paint a picture of black women's place within the historical context discussed by bell hooks and others. Thankfully, I am young enough to not have witnessed the acts of rape and coercion by white men within my family line. My childhood interaction with black women was one of relating to a black woman caregiver whom as a family we continue to love and adore. Within my small, three member family we don't speak of hate for racial and gender difference. In essence, we do not speak of difference at all. Most of what I have learned has been what I have heard from other white members of the world. Consciously, I strive to unlearn portrayals of lived experiences of this outer world's influence. Each and every day, I now hear words that have always been spoken, that I used to not hear. These words are hurtful and unjust. What saddens me most is

within white presence I am “privileged” to hear expressions that black women never know are spoken. It is a language that white some people speak among their own in the workplace, at home and in social settings that they dare not speak within the presence of black people.

I was thankful that the women did not ask me to share this hurtful language with them. That is, they accepted my small, but significant step across the border. They seemed to trust that I wanted our encounters to be enriching and empowering.

Paula, Roslyn, Drucilla and Anita did not give up their identities as black women, but crossed borders with each other and with me to inter-connect their new awareness to other oppressive structures. Together we have produced a collective work that sends a revitalized message to the feminist movement while supporting bell hooks suggestions for “creating a context where we can engage in open critical dialogue with one another, where we can debate and discuss without fear of emotional collapse, where we can hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of our experience” (p. 110). By doing so, political solidarity will emerge (bell hooks, 1994) inviting border-crossing politics, transformational politics (bell hooks, 1989), and localist politics (Ackelsberg, 1996). Notions within these politics create spaces for “honest talk” to confront difference within communities, explore ways difference divides us, and brings us together to understand the pains and sufferings of daily lived experiences in our own local communities.

Patriarchal systems remain intact unless feminist writers and scholars impart an ideological foundation. This foundation implies that we share common experiences of unique oppressions, which encourage our coming together. As feminists, we inter-connect race, class, gender, and other oppressive structures to highlight the diversity of experiences. Listening to black women’s standpoints reinforces feminist thinking. The black women’s standpoints teach us that we must avoid giving lip service to the idea of diversity by creating social spaces for collective discourse and critical feedback to change our efforts and renew ourselves, to raise our critical consciousness. Anita, Paula, Drucilla, Roslyn and I collectively struggled to cross unfamiliar borders by embracing and valuing each other while breaking down white feminist privilege and empowering black women’s standpoints.

Despite the significance of this collective work, our contributions can only serve as guidelines because what works in one setting may not work in others (Collins, 2000). With any attempt to use feminism to cross borders from one social injustice to another, we must invigorate consciousness and undercut hierarchy, challenge domination, and temper oppression (Rogers, 1998). In our academic environments, we can use the social margins embedded in formal educational organizations as a place of resistance and a location to raise feminist consciousness. Crossing intersecting borders on the social sidelines reinforces us to grow our feminist consciousness with our students. To do this, we must link alienation and neglect to the matrix of domination to emphasize that various dimensions of systems of domination interplay and intersect within certain circumstances of our social lives.

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Author

Dr. Janet K. Pilcher is Interim Dean for the College of Professional Studies at the University of West Florida.

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