

Advancing Women In Leadership

**Making the Familiar Strange: Inclusion, Exclusion,  
and Erasure  
Luncheon Address  
Given at the  
29th Annual Fall Conference  
of the  
AERA SIG: Research on Women in Education**

by  
Dr. Olga M. Welch,  
Professor & Interim Department Head, Educational Administration & Policy  
Studies  
October, 2003

She was preparing an assignment for her graduate research course and experiencing extreme writer's block. It just seemed as if nothing of substance was occurring, and finally in frustration she decided to leave her cubicle and wander through the library stacks. Her steps took her to the section marked "African American Studies" where she began to scan the shelves. Not long after, she found herself drawn to a book with the title, *The Contributions of Blacks to the American Military: A Retrospective*. Intrigued by both the text and the promise of narratives and faded photographs, she removed the book and began to turn the pages. Casually moving through pages that documented black men's combat contributions from the Revolutionary War to World War II, she found herself drawn to the accounts and faces of "free men," stoic foot soldiers, aviators, marines, and army battalions—and, quite unexpectedly to a picture of what appeared to be a ship's hold with thirteen black officers seated on graduated steps. Since there had been few photographs of blacks in the Navy, she stopped to look more closely at the picture and to read the names. Suddenly, her eyes widened with astonishment as she recognized the face

of her own father. For the first time, at age 23, she was learning that he had been one of the first blacks commissioned as officers in the United States Navy. In that moment, his/story had become her/story too.

## Making the Familiar Strange

“By the fall of 1943 the number of black enlisted men within the Navy was increasing rapidly, but the V-12 program to commission the first black officers was not scheduled to begin until March 1944” (Stillwell, 1993, p. xxii). According to Stillwell (1993), in 1943, Secretary of the Navy Knox responded to external pressures from Adlai Stevenson, then serving as his Assistant, and other individuals by reluctantly agreeing to commission twelve black enlisted men as officers. These were the men who would in time come to be known as the “Golden Thirteen.” The men who did become the first officers do not know how they happened to be chosen. The best guess is that they were men who had distinguished themselves by their performance and attitude as enlisted men.

In the conference’s opening speech, Nell Noddings admonished us to “find a way to work on something that matters.” That is, to hold explicit conversations with ourselves in order to identify the research topics that have meaning for us. Further, in welcoming us to this conference, Barbara Thayer-Bacon quoted bell hooks’ discussion of theory and its meaning for women theorists as a means for achieving praxis by finding ways to make the pain of unresolved questions go away. Yesterday, Candace Carawan reminded us how important listening to music, stories and poetry was to forming partnerships with the men and women who came to the Highlander Center to develop activist strategies for advancing social justice.

Therefore, the task I have set myself in this speech is to utilize the lens of Hill Collins’ work on Afro-American feminist thought and Greene’s notion of making the familiar strange to provide one lens on my father’s experience as a member of the Golden Thirteen. I selected this focus because discovering this component of my father’s past is, in a real sense, a reclamation of my own in that both illustrate how erasure of any person or group’s story profoundly affects the reliability of “those taken for granted truths” that inform our collective history. You should know up front that I am situating my discussion squarely within my own epistemological standpoint as an African American feminist. For, as Gloria Ladson Billings (2000) reminded us, “An epistemology is a system of knowing that has both an internal logic and an external validity” (p. 267). This distinction between epistemology and ways of knowing is not a trivial one. Indeed, epistemology is linked ultimately to worldview, as Shujaa (1997) argued in the same article:

worldviews and systems of knowledge are symbiotic\_ that is, how one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by one’s worldview. Thus the conditions under which people live and learn shape both their knowledge and their worldviews. [Moreover,] the process of developing a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview requires active intellectual work on the part of the knower, because schools, society, and the structure and production of knowledge are designed to create individuals who internalize the dominant worldview and knowledge production and acquisition processes. [Indeed,] the hegemony of the dominant paradigm makes it more than just another way to view the world—it claims to be the only legitimate way to view the world. (p. 258)

This is an even more invidious process in the history of this nation, where manifest destiny became the rationale for dispossessing Native peoples of their lands, the need to link the east and the west provided an imprimatur for the import of thousands of Chinese railroad laborers, and the biblical story of Ham

rendered perfectly acceptable the enslavement of thousands of Africans in the name of Christianity and civilization.

For me, then, discovering my father's military past marked an important milestone in my growing recognition of the interrelatedness of theory and practice. After all, I had been trained as a historian and, as such, realized the compelling primacy of first-person accounts over secondary interpretations. Yet, I stood in the library stacks holding a part of my own and my father's history that had been effectively omitted from my training in American history. The irony was inescapable. Consider I had studied at Howard University, arguably this country's premier HBCU with one of the most prestigious and extensive Black literary and historical library collections in the United States. And, yet in four years of preparation, I'd never read or seen anything about those men's contributions in World War II. In a very real sense, their stories had been rendered "visibly invisible." Without theory I would lack an important "healing mechanism"—an important weapon in the struggle to both validate and reclaim my father's place in American military history.

As bell hooks and Cornell West (1991) observed:

Theory is inescapable because it is an indispensable weapon in struggle, and it is an indispensable weapon in struggle because it provides certain kinds of understanding, certain kinds of illumination, certain kinds of insights that are requisite if we are to act effectively. (p. 34-35)

In addition to theory, understanding the achievement of the Golden Thirteen requires both care and fidelity. As Nottings (1986) noted, "fidelity connotes on the one hand a state or quality of faithfulness and on the other exactitude or high degree of accuracy" (p. 496). Both meanings are important to my understanding of the Golden Thirteen because when we are reflectively faithful to someone or something we try to refine or fine tune our faithfulness. In this sense, we are in good faith when we know to what or to whom we are faithful, when we have reflected on the reasons and the emotions involved in our faithfulness, and when we are committed to fresh affirmations of faithfulness at ever finer and truer levels. We are, in essence, making the familiar strange by acknowledging inclusion, exclusion, and erasure. In offering this lens on the Golden Thirteen, I want to "make strange" their experiences by using three key themes articulated by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) in her paradigm of Black Feminism. The themes are a) self definition and self-valuation; b) The interlocking nature of oppression; and c) the sociological paradigm of the "outsider-within."

Knowing Your Place: Public Spheres and Private Realities

### *Self Definition and Self-valuation*

Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. In contrast, self-valuation stresses the content of Black women's self-definitions—namely replacing externally-derived images with authentic Black female images.

Black feminists have questioned not only what has been said about Black women, but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. "When Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for-granted assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyze reality are entitled to do so" (Hill Collins, 1986, p. 517). I believe that this theme of "self-definition and self-evaluation also can be illustrated in the experiences of the Golden Thirteen.

According to interviews by Stillwell (1993), in 1943, those men who became the first officers did not

know how they happened to be chosen. Moreover, despite repeated requests for information dealing specifically with the selection and training of these first Black officers, no documents have emerged from official sources such as the National Archives, Bureau of Naval Personnel, and the Naval Historical Center. Lacking such documentation, one can make several observations after reviewing the oral recollections of those who successfully completed the program. Here is how some of them prefaced their stories, “The importance of inspiration,” “A More Democratic Navy than the Nation It Serves, and “Living a Respectable Life.” In these descriptions and others, the men talked about how important it was for them to “carve out” an identity that both defined and validated them as they went through their training at Great Lakes. One officer began:

Soon after [arriving] we began this routine, we gathered as a group in our barracks and held a meeting. We came to the conclusion that we were involved in an experiment, and we determined that we were not going to fail. It was then that we vowed to follow the motto of the Three Musketeers: “All for one and one for all...” We decided not to compete with other members of the group. (p. 57)

Thus, from the beginning, they were aware that they were “trial cases,” and that some possessed stronger backgrounds or educational experiences in mathematics or science than others, they decided to pool their knowledge so that all would graduate or none would graduate. To make sure this occurred, they waited until night fall, placed blankets on the windows, and held night study sessions to prepare for every class. Officer Samuel Barnes described these sessions to Stillwell (1993):

We were determined to succeed in spite of the burdens that would be placed on us... ..What we had in class that day, we would go back over. That reinforced the things we had learned that day and prepared us mentally for the next day. The subjects we studied dealt with professional Navy topics such as navigation, gunnery, aircraft recognition, naval history, Navy regulations, signaling by flags and Morse Code, seamanship, and survival techniques. We learned all of these subjects in classroom lectures. We rarely left the barracks and never went aboard ship. We did receive rifle-range practice and leadership duties with assigned recruit companies. For the most part, though, we had to learn vicariously rather than through actual experience. (p. 57-58)

By this pact and the activities associated with it, these men engaged in a process of self-definition, “We knew that we were the foot in the door for many other Black sailors, and we were determined not to be the ones who were responsible for having the foot removed” (p. 57).

Self-definition and self-valuation for these men, as for Black feminists, involved developing a counter hegemonic strategy of naming. Thus, in this private reality, the Golden Thirteen’s saw themselves as ALL good officer candidates, without exceptions. In the public sphere, these men learned the effectiveness of this strategy when, after their separate graduation from the Great Lakes Training facility that would one day be re-named in their honor, they were told by the commanding officer that they had been subjected to a harder curriculum than their white counterparts; one that should have taken twelve months rather than the six months they were given (Stillwell, 1993).

When the program was over, one instructor, Lieutenant Richmond, admitted to us that he had not asked to work with us but had been assigned to do so. He said, “I deliberately made the course work difficult for you. When you finished the courses, you actually had

completed the equivalent of a semester at the Naval Academy. I want to congratulate you for the way you have handled the pressure and did so well under the circumstances.” (p. 58)

These men also learned that they had scored higher on every test than their white peers had, but that they would not enjoy the same placement opportunities.

### *The Interlocking Nature of Oppression*

Attention to the interlocking nature of race, gender, and class oppression is a second recurring theme in the works of Black feminists. While different socio-historical periods may have increased the saliency of one or another type of oppression, the thesis of the linked nature of oppression has long pervaded Black feminist thought. Another construct, described by Hill Collins as “the construct of dichotomous oppositional difference” involves the categorization of people, things, and ideas in terms of their difference from one another. As Hill Collins (1986) noted:

The terms in dichotomies such as black/white, male/female, reason/emotion, fact/opinion, and subject/object gain their meaning only in relation to their difference from their oppositional counterparts. Moreover, another fundamental characteristic of this construct is that difference is not complementary in that the halves of the dichotomy do not enhance each other. Rather, the dichotomous halves are different and inherently opposed to one another. (p.51)

Stillwell (1993) depicted how the Golden Thirteen were not expected to be as good as their white counterparts. Once they graduated, this fact became even more of a reality:

After we settled into a routine as ensigns, the honest-to-goodness reality set in. In a number of instances we were embarrassed and made to feel that we weren't bone fide naval officers. We were denied the privilege of going to the officers' club on the main side of Great Lakes. We were also denied the opportunity to become officers of the day. In our initial assignments, we acted as junior officers of the day; the officers of the day were white... We junior officers just trailed around behind the white officer while on duty; it was a demeaning position to accept. We also learned that the Negro sailors were unhappy to see Negro officers not being treated with the same respect shown white officers. (p. 62)

Thus, the Golden Thirteen were viewed in opposition to their white officer colleagues. Despite having successfully completed the same training, they were positioned in a dichotomous relationship intended to emphasize their inferiority, rather than highlight their strengths.

We felt that we were certainly capable of handling more responsibility, so we pressed for recognition. Finally, the naval authorities decided to advance us to full-fledged officers of the day with complete authority while on duty. But we never were permitted to visit the officers' club (Stillwell, 1993, p. 62)

Despite this concession, then, the men remained Outsiders –Within.

## *Outsiders/Within*

As Merton (1972) observed, “white male insiderism...has largely been tacit or defacto. It has simply taken the form of patterned expectations about the appropriate” (p. 13). In contrast, a good deal of the Black female, and I would add Black male, experience has been spent coping with avoiding, subverting and challenging the workings of this same white male insiderism. The Golden Thirteen were no exception.

As McFadden and Dill’s work (2003) illustrated, it could be argued that these men developed forms of insider elasticity, accommodation and dissembling behaviors to carve out and reinforce the choices they made as both officers and officer candidates. They knew they were an experiment, they knew that the then Secretary of the Navy Knox did not believe Negroes should be officers, and they also knew that after graduation their power would “migrate” in some situations. “Rather than have to salute us, white seamen would cross the street to avoid contact with us or detour to cross paths instead with our white counterparts, whom they then saluted” (Stillwell, 1993, p. 89).

In the poem *Marginalized*, by Renard Harris (2002), we can sense the situation created for The Golden Thirteen by people like Knox:

I don't like being in the margin:  
It is like the corner of a room.  
I'm caged,  
My freedom is fenced with barbed wire,  
I wake up with ideas  
But go to sleep with rejections.  
I shout out dreams  
And I am hushed by reality,  
A reality that controls my choices,  
Choices measured by someone else's vision.  
What they cannot see  
Cannot be my choice.  
I choose to have a voice,  
I choose to be heard!  
But I am in the margin.  
No one listens (Harris, 2002, Academic Exchange, . *Used by permission of the author*).

## Conclusion

In opening the textbook of this portion of my father's life, I want to make clear that I do not gloss over the emergent complexities that Noddings, Carawan, and your own presentations at this conference have underscored. Rather, by offering this abbreviated lens into the history of the Golden Thirteen, I have sought to support Joan Scott's (as cited in Olsen, 2000) comment that “Experience is at once already an interpretation and in need of interpretation” as well as Olsen's assertion that “there remain a number of unrealized agendas within the feminist qualitative research realm. Foremost among these is the deeper exploration of how meanings of race, class, and gender emerge and interlock, as well as their various effects.” (p. 235). As your conference presentations in concert with Noddings' and Carawan's speeches highlight, “The range of problems is too great, and the issues are too urgent, for feminist researchers to do

otherwise.

## References

Harris, R. (2002). *Marginalized*. University of Tennessee, Knoxville: Academic Exchange.

Hill Collins, P. (1986) Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought. *Social Problems*, 33(6), 514-532.

Hill Collins, P. (1998). *Fighting words: Black women & the search for justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hooks, B., & West, C. (1991). *Breaking bread: Insurgent black intellectual life*. Boston: South End Press.

Ladson-Billing, G. (2000). Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 257-277). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

McFadden, A., & Smith, P. (2003, Fall). *Tripping at the tipping point: Why more female superintendents might not change our schools*. Paper presented at the 29th Annual Fall Conference of the Research on Women in Education SIG, Knoxville, Tennessee.

Merton, R. K. (1972). Insiders and outsiders a chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *Varieties of Political Express in Sociology: An American Journal of Sociology Publication*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press

Noddings, N. (1986). Fidelity in teaching, teacher education, and research for teaching. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(4), 496-510.

Olsen, V. L. (2000). Feminisms and qualitative research at and into the millennium. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.215-256). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications

Stillwell, P. (Ed.). (1993). *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the first black naval officers*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press.

**Copyright** Advancing Women in Leadership holds the copyright to each article; however, any article may be reproduced without permission, for educational purposes only, provided that the full and accurate bibliographic citation and the following credit line is cited: Copyright (year) by the Advancing Women in Leadership, Advancing Women Website, [www.advancingwomen.com](http://www.advancingwomen.com); reproduced with permission from the publisher. Any article cited as a reference in any other form should also report the same such citation, following APA or other style manual guidelines for citing electronic publications.

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Employment](#) | [Resumes](#) | [Communication](#) | [Write](#) | [Successful Women](#) | [Business](#) | [Home Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Loan - Credit](#) | [Web](#) | [Network](#) | [Balance](#) | [International](#) | [Book Store](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Content, Reprints](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Sitemap](#)

**AdvancingWomen Web site Copyright © Advancing Women (TM), 1996 - 2005**

**For questions or comment regarding content, please contact [publisher@advancingwomen.com](mailto:publisher@advancingwomen.com).  
For technical questions or comment regarding this site, please contact [webmaster@advancingwomen.com](mailto:webmaster@advancingwomen.com).  
Duplication without express written consent is prohibited**