

Chapter 64

Voices in the Desert: Black Women Faculty in the American Southwest

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Black women educators are important, and yet their personal and professional experiences are rarely included as part of the faculty narrative at most North American higher education institutions. The continued normalization of White Supremacy and androcentricity, within North American higher education, maintain systems of oppression that perpetuate the systematic marginalization of Black women within the faculty ranks. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Black women educators in New Mexico's higher education institutions. With a grounding in Black Womanist and Critical Race Theories, this qualitative research study employed snowball sampling as a means to engage ten Black women faculty members, via semi-structured interviews, in critical inquiry about their professional experiences with higher education. Study participants testified about experiences with microaggressions, discrimination, and racial battle fatigue as well as feeling intellectual, campus, and community isolation.

INTRODUCTION

Racism, classism, and sexism are structural foundations within the North American educational system, from preschool through higher education (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Yosso, 2002). White supremacy, the inherent belief that Whites are superior to minorities, is at the heart of this institutional bias. Spring (2004) talks about this long-standing historical bias reaching back to European settlers who, when seeing Native Americans, “rationalized the enslavement of other humans by classifying them as an inferior racial and cultural other” (p. 57). The impact of this form of othering in educational settings is visible in everything from gaps in educational achievement (Howard, 2015), to exclusionary and oppressive

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curriculum (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Woodley, Mucundanyi, & Lockard, 2017) and even in exclusionary practices in hiring of faculty (Arnold, Crawford, & Khalifa, 2016).

Foundational research studies like those conducted by Benjamin (1997), Gregory (1999), Turner & Mayer (2000), and Thomas & Hollenshead (2001), and have addressed the concern that there remains a lack of Black women within the faculty ranks at most predominantly White institutions (PWIs) across the country. Since the 1980s, there has been an increase in research studies that examine the lived experiences of Black women faculty including Benjamin (1997), Gregory (1999), Moses (1989), and Thomas & Hollenshead (2001). However, there is still a gap in the research on the experiences of Black women faculty members especially at Hispanic-serving Institutions (HSIs), like most of New Mexico's higher education institutions. Black women account for less than 1% of faculty in New Mexico's Higher Education Institutions (Woodley, 2014). Those Black women faculty who do manage to make it into faculty positions in New Mexico experience various forms of gendered and racial hostility. It is these types of microaggressive situations that leave Black women faculty feeling attacked, isolated, and drained of their energy (Turner, 2002). This lack of representative voices is even more pronounced when we begin to look at the lack of research on the experiences of hidden populations of Black women faculty like those working at for-profit institutions, community colleges, and public higher education institutions in New Mexico.

This article provides findings from a qualitative research study that sought to understand the experiences of Black women educators in higher education institutions in the State of New Mexico. Ten (10) Black women educators, who worked at universities, community colleges, and for-profit higher education institutions at the time of the study, were interviewed to gain an understanding of their experiences. Participants shared about their ways of knowing, believing, and acting as they navigated systems of oppression within institutions of higher education in New Mexico.

BACKGROUND

The presence of Blacks on the faculty at predominantly white higher education institutions (PWIs) is not commonplace, especially among Black women in the professoriate (James & Farmer, 1993; León & Thomas, 2016; Sulé, 2014; Turner & Myers, 2000). When Black women are hired to work at PWIs, they continue to fight to be fully included within the academy (Thompson & Louque, 2005). Black women faculty are stereotyped as tokens (Moses, 1989; Turner, 2002) or an "angry Black woman, whose value is in her ability to constantly fight racism and sexism with one stroke of her pen or one lash of her tongue" (Woodley, 2014, p. 47). Thompson & Louque (2005) spoke of an "interesting phenomenon" that happens when students attend class on the first day and see a Black professor: "Unless they have met the professor ahead of time, become familiar with the professor's background via an Internet search or spoken to former students, many students are surprised to learn that they have a Black professor" (p. 1). This phenomenon speaks to the underrepresentation of Blacks in the professoriate at PWIs (Stanley, 2006; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Thompson & Louque, 2005; Turner, 2002; Turner & Myers, 2000; Zambrana, Ray, Espino, Castro, Douthirt Cohen, & Eliason, 2015). It also is a manifestation of the lip service higher education institutions give as they "make ambitious claims about the value of diversity" (Stanley, 2006, p. 2) while continuing to exclude Black women from the professoriate. PWIs continue to adopt initiatives around diversity and *inclusive excellence* as they "work toward parity and inclusion

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